

Report of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Review of school absence in North Lincolnshire

February 2010

The council's scrutiny panels examine in detail selected areas of the council's work, responsibilities and policies.

The aim is to find out if there are ways in which the council could be doing things better, and to influence national issues.

This report is the end result of a review into a particular subject. It sums up how the review was carried out, its findings/considerations, conclusions and recommendations for any improvements which could be made.

SCRUTINY REPORT

School Absence in North Lincolnshire

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INTRODUCTION BY THE CHAIR OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY PANEL

This review was carried out by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel to assist all those involved in educating our children to reach a common understanding of the problem of absence from school, and to clarify the situation in regard to holiday absences. Although parents appeared to be confused as to the rules over holiday absence and felt the schools were inconsistent in their interpretation, the panel was informed that, in fact, the rules were clear and concise.

It seems that Head teachers are more concerned with the problem of persistent absentees than holiday absence.

Getting children to attend school and avoid absence is crucial to their future, and what they learn or fail to learn will affect the rest of their lives. We hope this review will make a contribution towards lessening school absence in North Lincolnshire.

We have consulted head teachers, parents, governors, council officers, PCSO's and others and they have all shown concern over the problem and enthusiasm to tackle it.

My thanks go to all of them for their contribution and to the members of the panel and our scrutiny officers for their input and interest.

I look forward to our recommendations being pursued and implemented and urge the council and the Cabinet to acknowledge the importance of ensuring that our children make the best use of their educational opportunities. I also hope that a clear and consistent approach to absence for whatever reason can be adopted across all schools in North Lincolnshire.

Councillor Wilson
Chair of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

**MEMBERSHIP OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY
PANEL**

Councillors: Wilson (Chair)
 C Sherwood (Vice-Chair)
 Bromby
 Cawsey
 Simpson
 P Vickers
 Whiteley

Co-opted Members: A Dunkerley (Parent Governor Representative)
 P Bacon (Parent Governor Representative)
 W Witter (Diocesan Board of Education Representative)
 W Egan (Diocesan Board of Education Representative)

ABBREVIATIONS

This report is written as far as possible in plain English with the minimum of jargon. All acronyms are spelt out in full when they first appear but for the sake of clarity their meanings are repeated here.

EWS	-	Education Welfare Service
EWO	-	Education Welfare Officer
SAO	-	School Attendance Order
ESO	-	Education Supervision Order
DCSF	-	Department for Children, Schools and Families
GCSE	-	General Certificate of Secondary Education
SATS	-	Standard Assessment Tests
SIMS	-	Schools Information Management System
SEAL	-	Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning Approach
PA	-	Persistent Absence
SERCO	-	Management information system for schools to create a single database system
PFSS	-	Practical Family Support Service
PCSO	-	Police Community Support Officer
LA	-	Local Authority

1. **THE SELECTION AND SCOPE OF THE REVIEW**

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel is responsible for carrying out the relevant overview and scrutiny functions relating to services being delivered by the council and its partners to achieve the 'Every Child Matters' framework, namely - improve health, keep safe, enjoyment and achievement, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well being for children and young people in North Lincolnshire.

At its meeting held on 1 June 2009, the panel agreed the brief to conduct a review to examine levels of school attendance in North Lincolnshire and the policies and procedures that exist to support it.

The aim of the review was to: -

- 'Explore good practice relevant to improving and maintaining school attendance across North Lincolnshire'.

The objectives of the review were to: -

- Increase awareness and understanding of issues pertinent to school attendance;
- Ensure the policies and procedures currently in place are working effectively with regard to authorised absence and to reduce unauthorised absence;
- Explore the trends in school attendance data in North Lincolnshire as evidenced by an increased awareness of the local work being undertaken to improve attendance.
- Produce recommendations to support the work in North Lincolnshire to continue to progress and maintain improvements in school attendance.

The panel felt it was a very important review to undertake as attendance at school is important for a number of reasons; namely because absence increases:

- The possibility of leaving school with no qualifications
- Failure to obtain employment
- The risk of being a victim of crime/abuse
- Likelihood of being drawn into crime or anti social behaviour.

2. HOW THE REVIEW WAS CARRIED OUT

The council's Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel agreed to carry out a review on school absence in North Lincolnshire. During the process they interviewed the following: -

Date of Meeting	Witnesses
13 July 2009	Head teachers Workshop
5 October 2009	Simon Batt, Principal Solicitor, North Lincolnshire Council
19 October 2009	Claire Wilkinson, Practical Family Support Service (PFSS)
16 November 2009	Clair Dolby, Attendance Officer & Cover Manager, Frederick Gough School
16 November 2009	Ruth Comerford, Inclusions Officer, Frederick Gough School
16 November 2009	Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) Trudi Robinson, Humberside Police
30 November 2009	Dave Basker, Head of Safeguarding and Practice, North Lincolnshire Council
30 November 2009	Mary Mayfield, Principal Education Welfare Strategy Manager, North Lincolnshire Council

Desktop Research

Documentation including -

- Questionnaire sent to all parents, Head teachers and School Governors across North Lincolnshire
- Data on school attendance in North Lincolnshire and England
- Current best practice locally and across the UK
- Investigation and data relating to the extent and impact of family holidays taken in term time

- Improving attendance initiatives
- Local and national articles
- A wide range of websites and national journals were also used as part of the information collection process

FOCUS GROUPS

The scrutiny panel wrote to all Head teachers across North Lincolnshire and invited them to attend workshops with the members to discuss school absence, problems, best practice, items for the future etc. Thirty three Head teachers/school representatives welcomed the opportunity to attend the workshop, and were split into three workshop groups. This enabled all attending to have a fair representation and opportunity to present their views.

QUESTIONNAIRE DETAILS

The panel invited all parents, School Governors and Head teachers from 81 schools across North Lincolnshire to complete a questionnaire on school attendance. The aim of the consultation was to establish the number of children absent from school, the reasons why children are absent and to find out what can be done to help both families and schools to address some of the issues. Results from the questionnaires helped in collating the report's findings/conclusions and recommendations. In total responses were received from 320 Governors, 36 Head teachers and 1433 parents.

PANEL MEETINGS

A series of public meetings were held for witness interviews and presentations, together with planning and evaluation meetings to consider information collated and presented to members.

3. THE PANEL'S FINDINGS/CONSIDERATIONS

This section outlines the main evidence considered by the panel in relation to school attendance.

Parents and carers have the principle responsibility for ensuring that children of compulsory school age receive a suitable education, either by regular attendance at school or through alternative provision. It is a duty of the local authority to ensure parents meet this responsibility. Schools have a duty to promote regular attendance and are assisted in this by the Education Welfare Service (EWS). As a last resort schools and local authorities have legal powers to deal with poor attendance.

A child who is registered at a school can legally miss school only in very limited circumstances. These include: -

- When the child is too ill to attend, or
- When the school has authorised the absence beforehand

3.1 FACTS

During a performance review meeting, the panel was provided with the following national statistics and facts -

- *90% attendance = ½ day missed every week.*
- *1 school year at 90% attendance = 4 whole weeks of missed lessons.*
- *90% attendance over 5 years of secondary school = ½ a school year missed.*
- *17 school days missed a year = GCSE drop in achievement.*

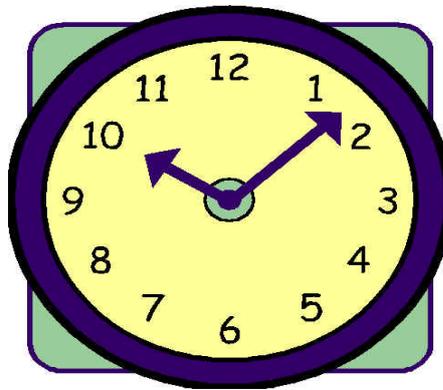
During school hours: -

- - 40% of street crime
 - 25% of burglaries
 - 20% of criminal damage
 - One third of car theft
- } is carried out by 10-16 year olds

- Home Office research found that: -
 - 75% of boys + 50% of girls who just truant once a week have already committed offences!
- If a school can improve attendance by 1% they will see 5 - 6% improvement in attainment!

'WHY IS EVERY SECOND AT SCHOOL SO IMPORTANT?'

EVERY MINUTE COUNTS
LATENESS = LOST LEARNING



(Figures below are calculated over a school year)

5 minutes late each day	3 days lost!
10 minutes late each day	6.5 days lost!
15 minutes late each day	10 days lost!
20 minutes late each day	13 days lost!
30 minutes late each day	19 days lost

EVERY SCHOOL DAY COUNTS

365 days in a year	190 school days in total	Absence
100% attendance	190 days attendance	0 days
95% attendance	180 days attendance	2 weeks absence
90% attendance	171 days attendance	4 weeks absence
85% attendance	161 days attendance	6 weeks absence
80% attendance	152 days attendance	More than half a term
75% attendance	143 days attendance	9+ weeks absence

Most parents think a 90% attendance rate is good. The panel was told that if a pupil has only 90% attendance and continues this over a five-year period (for example between year 2 and year 6) then that pupil would miss the equivalent of about **ONE HALF OF A SCHOOL YEAR**.

This is the reason the panel felt it was so important to carry out this scrutiny review. It is vital that children and young people receive the best possible outcomes in life and as the above facts and figures indicate, school attendance plays a major factor in this.

If parents are having trouble getting their child to school, the school and local authority can support them in several ways. One option that may be suggested is a parenting contract.

Parenting contracts are a form of support, rather than a punishment - they are intended to help parents and the school or local authority to work together to improve the child's attendance.

Parenting contracts are voluntary. However, if a child is missing school regularly and parents refuse to agree to a contract - or do not keep to its terms - this can be used as evidence if the local authority decides to prosecute.

If a child is missing school without good reason, schools and local authorities have a number of legal powers that they can use.

3.2 SCHOOL ATTENDANCE ORDER (SAO)

A School Attendance Order is issued if a child is not enrolled at any school and the local authority is worried that arrangements have not been made to provide an alternative, suitable, full-time education. SAO's are used to direct parents to send their child to a specific school. The local authority has not had the need to issue any SAOs in the last two years.

3.3 EDUCATION SUPERVISION ORDER (ESO)

As well as, or instead of, prosecuting parents the local authority may apply to the Magistrates Court for an ESO. This Order means that a supervisor will be appointed to the family to give help and advice on getting the child back into education. No ESO's have been implemented in the last two years by the local authority.

3.4 PENALTY NOTICES

As an alternative to prosecution, authorised local authority staff, Police Officers and Head teachers can issue penalty notices to parents of children who are not attending school regularly. The penalty is £50, rising to £100 if not paid within 28 days. Failure to pay a penalty fine will lead to prosecution.

The number of penalty notices issued across North Lincolnshire schools in 2007/08 was 306 and for 2008/09 it was 432. The panel was informed that the increase in penalty notices, especially for parents wishing to take children on holidays in term time, was not necessarily due to the recession, but came as a result of the local authority providing clearer legal advice to all head teachers.

The advice emphasised the need for all head teachers to follow the national guidance, to be more strict and firm in implementing the law with regards to families taking holidays in term time, especially for those that are not due to special circumstances.

3.5 COURT

Finally, the local authority may prosecute parents (a Penalty Notice does not have to be issued first) and this could result in a more severe penalty. The panel was advised that the local authority emphasis is not on prosecution, but is to ensure the best outcome for the child concerned.

Parents can get a fine of up to £2,500, a Community Order or, in extreme cases, a jail sentence of up to three months. If the Court thinks it will help stop the child missing school, it may also impose a Parenting Order. The number of prosecutions for North Lincolnshire in 2007/08 was 30, and 2009 - to present date was 80. These are very low figures in comparison to the 21,439 pupils currently attending North Lincolnshire schools.

The panel was also informed that: -

Prosecution of parents does not necessarily result in a change of behaviour and improvement in attendance. It was perceived during interviews held that parents who had a poor experience of education often have low expectations of the value of education for their children.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) indicated the priorities for local authorities in 2008/09 were to: -

- Continue the drive for schools to reduce overall absence rates;
- Continue to reduce the levels of persistent absence in all schools.
- Keep on target to meet the Children's Plan Delivery Goal, which states that by 2011 no local authority will have more than 5% of its secondary school pupils who are persistently absent.
- Ensure that everyone working with children and their families recognise the links between absence and:
 - attainment; and
 - safeguarding pupils' welfare

From September 2006 the DCSF introduced a set of national absence codes using the Capita Sims System which North Lincolnshire schools are using. However four secondary schools in North Lincolnshire continue to use the SERCO information system.

The panel was concerned that schools across North Lincolnshire were using two different systems for the recording and management of school data.

Unfortunately, the two systems being used are not compatible and therefore the Education Welfare Officers (EWO's) visiting the schools cannot manage statistics and problems from their office; they can only request the information from certain schools who are not on the main system.

This means that totals across all North Lincolnshire schools are monitored only through the school census that is required three times per year and is collected two terms in arrears. This meant that the four SERCO schools were not included in some figures provided to the panel, and this made some comparisons difficult to measure.

Schools and the Education Welfare Service work to emphasise the importance of attendance at school. DCSF research suggests that if a young person misses 17 days per year of school they can drop a grade at GCSE. Therefore absence from school is acknowledged by the panel as potentially having a detrimental effect on achievement.

3.6 NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE

It was evident to the panel that there were some good areas of work being carried out across North Lincolnshire to increase school attendance and safeguard children and young people.

The senior representatives from the National Strategies Board (working on behalf of the DCSF) regard North Lincolnshire as a 'light touch' local authority, which means they offer the minimum support because they judge the authority's systems to be at least good, based on their priorities in the Behaviour and Attendance Plan. This plan is designed to help schools develop policies, procedures and practices regarding out-of-class behaviour that are specific to their context and current stage of development.

When Ofsted Inspections take place there are separate judgements for Behaviour and Attendance. There are four ratings of provision: -

- 1 = Outstanding
- 2 = Good
- 3 = Satisfactory
- 4 = Inadequate

The outcome for North Lincolnshire schools from the current 3 year cycle of inspections is detailed below: -

	PRIMARY	SECONDARY
Outstanding	4 (6.5%)	1 (6%)
Good	37 (55%)	9 (56%)
Satisfactory	25 (37%)	6 (38%)
Inadequate	1 (1.5%)*	0

*The one inadequate judgement for an infants school was prefaced with the comment that the school was doing everything it could to improve attendance but the impact was slow.

3.7 ABSENCES

Absences are generally categorised 'authorised' or 'unauthorised'. Authorised absence is absence authorised by a Head Teacher.

Unauthorised absence is absence without permission. This can include unexplained or unjustified absence and also late arrival at school after the end of registration period. Reasons for unauthorised absence are often complex and can be through social factors such as:

- Poor relationship with peers and teachers
- Bullying
- Family Pressures
- Financial constraints at home
- Holidays in term time
- Unspecified illness
- Peer pressure
- Truancy
- Condoned absence

3.8 How North Lincolnshire Compares

2007/08	Authorised Absence	Unauthorised Absence	Overall Absence
North Lincolnshire	5.36%	0.79%	6.15%
England	5.28%	1.01%	6.29%
2008/09			
North Lincolnshire	4.85%	0.52%	5.37%
England (Yet to be collated)			

As can be seen from the above table, North Lincolnshire has reduced both its absence rates, taking overall absence in 2007/08 from 6.15% down to 5.37% in 2008/09.

3.9 TERM TIME HOLIDAYS

Family holidays taken during term time are currently an issue of national debate and was highly contentious issue during the course of this review. Holidays can be either classed as authorised or unauthorised absences.

Applications for a holiday in term time should only be made if there are special/exceptional circumstances. In accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006, Head teachers can only authorise up to 10 days leave of absence (in any one academic year) due to holidays in term time and only if the head teacher considers that there are special circumstances relating to the application. Any absence taken without the permission of the head teacher will be recorded as unauthorised absence in the school register. A Penalty Notice may be issued under Section 23 of the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 as an alternative to prosecution.

The figures provided to the panel for the Autumn and Spring Term 08/09 - the total number of full days lost through holidays in term time across the authority (excluding 4 SERCO Schools) amounted to 17,257 days.

During discussions held with head teachers, the majority were in agreement that a blanket policy was needed on what absences should/should not be authorised. Without a generic policy, the discretion lies with the head and can result in an inconsistent application across all schools, which is causing numerous problems. Members were told that the lack of a policy by the local authority is exacerbating a school versus parents' conflict over authorised absence. The panel was informed that in June 2009, all schools were issued with a new set of forms, which the Local Authority suggests are used together with guidance notes on the legislation issued by North Lincolnshire Council's Legal Services.

Head teachers indicated that they had noted a significant increase in the number of requests for term time holidays.

More significantly, requests were being received from parents who had not previously considered term time holidays. Most heads agreed that this was possibly due to the current economic climate.

North Lincolnshire Council issued 432 holiday penalty notices during 2008/09. However, some heads were of the opinion that parents are happy to pay the fine as the financial savings made by the parent booking a holiday and removing their child during term time outweighed the cost of the fixed penalty notice.

Heads reaffirmed that family holidays were a valuable part of a child's upbringing, and in some cases the holiday benefits the child by being within the family unit far more than could be achieved at school. When parents were questioned on this issue and asked 'do you feel it is acceptable to take your child/children out of school during term time'? 65% responded and said yes they did, and 30.5% said no it was not acceptable. 50 % of the School Governors questioned felt it was acceptable to authorise holidays under special circumstances, and 63.9% of Head teachers who responded also felt that parents should be able to take their children out of school during term time for holidays.

Other issues mentioned on numerous occasions on the questionnaire forms included: shorter summer holidays with more half terms, and that all schools across the country should have the same term dates.

The general consensus throughout the review was that the penalty system was not targeting the families of children with persistent absence that it was aimed at. In many cases it was the families of children who had excellent attendance throughout the year and not high levels of absence that were being targeted through term time holidays penalty system. Heads felt that hardcore non-attendees are the main cause for concern, followed by sickness absence. Heads would prefer that this be targeted rather than the term-time holidays that became insignificant against some of the truancy and sickness records. There was a plea for consistency across all schools and the backing and support of the local authority. However, the authority's legal representative who was interviewed stated those holidays in term time was a separate issue and runs alongside all of the other legislation that has to be adhered to.

The panel was informed that the local authority had developed a revised 'Code of Conduct', which should be used by ALL schools for ALL absences, but was currently out for consultation with stakeholders.

3.10 SICKNESS

The total number of days in North Lincolnshire schools lost to pupil illness (not medical or dental appointments etc) during the autumn and Spring Term 08/09 was a staggering 153,929 days. Heads and the panel felt that this issue was of greater significance, and it appeared that parents were keeping their children off school for mild illness/sickness or a slight sniffle.

Advice given to the panel with regards to sickness absence statistics from the authority's representative was that if a school is not convinced that the sickness is justified or genuine it should be recorded as 'unauthorised' and the parents should be notified of this by the school. Schools can request evidence or involve the school nurse and/or refer/discuss with the EWS.

If a child is receiving home tuition from the Hospital Tuition Service they are marked in the register as 'educated off site' i.e. a 'present' mark, otherwise, children who cannot attend school for illness reasons are unauthorised absentees – as decided by the head teacher.

Home visits were highlighted as a form of good practice and an excellent way of managing pupils who are absent from school as a result of ill health.

3.11 TRUANCY

Truancy is also an issue that needs to be tackled within schools and it was noted throughout the review that the work of the Education Welfare Officers (EWO's) is vital to this and is widely regarded locally as an excellent service. The panel heard that one of the most successful tools for tackling truancy was the 'text message alert system', which enables schools to inform parents/carers that a pupil has not turned up for school/class etc. The panel was informed it was proving very successful but unfortunately not all schools were using it. Head teachers said they would like to see more truancy patrols being carried out, as they seem to have disappeared. Due to resources and availability within the EWS these are now being carried out only occasionally and in targeted areas of North Lincolnshire.

It was felt during this review that truancy was getting worse and was an area that schools, police and the local authority should be concentrating more of their efforts on.

3.12 EXCLUSIONS

During the period of 1.9.2007 - 31.8.2008 the numbers relating to pupils on Fixed Term Exclusions were as follows: -

Total number of pupils	=	721
Total number of exclusions	=	1,489
Total number of days	=	3,683

3.13 LATENESS

Another area for concern during this review was the issue of pupils turning up late for school. Pupils are given various time limits before registers are closed but this is different across all schools. Some heads feel that persistently late pupils are more of an issue than pupils missing school as a result of a holiday. The total number of pupils that arrived late across North Lincolnshire schools during the Autumn and Spring Term 08/09 was 49,414. Schools should investigate why the child is constantly late and if the school cannot resolve the issue the lateness should be referred to the EWO.

There is a whole raft of reasons that pupils and parents' use for lateness, and the schools are not always sure what to do under various circumstances. There seems to be a requirement from the head teachers for the local authority to provide guidance on when registers should close, and where circumstances dictate that a pupil is not recorded as late i.e. school bus arrives late etc. The Local Authority commented on this and stated that the guidance to schools from the DCSF is very clear. Schools can keep registers open for up to half an hour after the start of the school day, however some schools choose to close registers more quickly than others.

The Capita Schools Information Management System (SIMS) has helped schools enormously; it is less labour intensive and the results are excellent. The panel was told parents respond much quicker and appreciate the two-way dialogue it creates between themselves and the school. Unfortunately as mentioned previously not all schools are on this system.

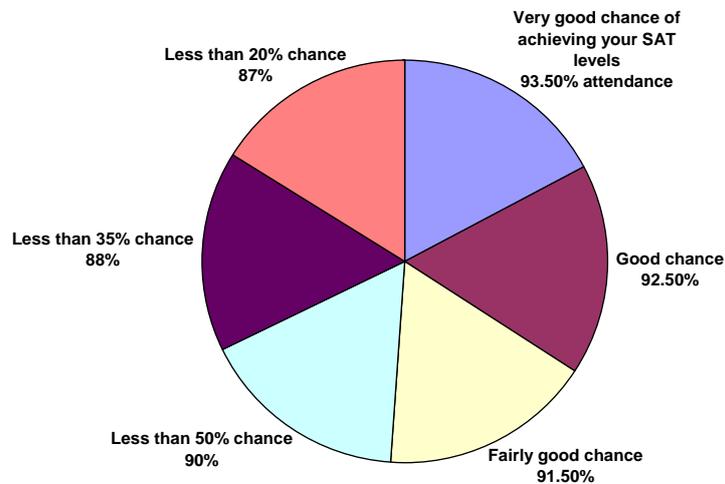
3.14 OVERSEAS VISITS - RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL ABSENCES

The panel was concerned that the overall attendance figures for North Lincolnshire may not truly reflect the challenges being faced in particular schools and areas.

Head teachers were particularly concerned with the number of children that are taken out of school on extended family visits overseas. Such absences can have an adverse impact on overall attendance figures.

All these forms of absence discussed so far can affect a child's performance at school. The graph overleaf illustrates how a pupil's attendance levels can affect their chances of achieving SAT levels: -

HOW ATTENDANCE CAN AFFECT A PUPILS GRADES



(Information provided by the DCSF)

Taking into consideration the chart above, the panel felt that the statistics should be used as a tool to provide information to parents of children in all schools.

3.15 GOOD AREAS OF PRACTICE

Members were particularly impressed with some good areas of work that had been carried out with a number of schools across North Lincolnshire. The panel was told that the following areas of early intervention are based on the premise that students that are engaged and thriving in school will attend more regularly. The Buddies, Peer Mentors and SEAL programme all seek to achieve this i.e: -

- Key Stage 3 SATS attendance - This included strategies to raise awareness of the importance of the exams both with pupils and parents. A scheme of rewards was initiated. During the exams a 'Breakfast Club' was established and a systematic appraisal and identification of vulnerable students was carried out. The result was over the following three years the school had 100% attendance.
- Reading Buddies - Year 6 pupils were trained as buddies who supported identified pupils with reading issues. The support had been in place for a year and the panel saw data that showed that there had been an improvement in reading age, self esteem, behaviour and attendance.

- Attendance Buddies - In one school, buddies specifically contributed to improving attendance and punctuality by introducing early morning playground games and rewarding classes with a good weekly attendance. During the 2008/09 autumn to summer term overall attendance at that school rose from 86% to 96% attendance.
- Peer Mentor Programme - All secondary schools are engaged with this programme, and some of the 'best practice' schools produce termly evaluations. The helpful intervention by the mentors over a term has been seen to improve vulnerable students' feelings of well being and safety, both factors that impact directly on attendance.

Other areas of good practice that impressed the panel included -

- School Attendance Officers (SAO'S) – SAO's have the responsibility within schools to take care of the administration of the registration records, monitoring of persistent absenteeism, contacting parents to advise them of their child's absence and also refer to the inclusion team for mediation process. They use the data management SERCO system, so once the registers have been input and closed by a teacher, any absence is flagged up to the attendance officers for the necessary action to be taken. The system is also linked to the Keep Kids Safe web based texting service, which also alerts parents of their child's absence via text. The panel was advised that this does dramatically cut down on the amount of time that would be spent speaking to parents on the phone.
- Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) - As part of the evidence gathered, the panel met with a PCSO who explained that since April 2009, Frederick Gough School was the first school in the region to have a PCSO in house at certain times during the week. Having this resource available through the Safe Schools Partnership provides the pupils with the opportunity of speaking to someone else about issues, other than the teachers. The panel was informed that it was a good initiative and encourages the sharing of information, highlights anti social behaviour, legal consequences and where the individual is heading if they continue to persistently offend. Frederick Gough School confirmed that introducing a PCSO into the school site had been beneficial. Improvements had been seen in attendance and behaviour and also the school had forged better community relationships as a result. It was hoped that this initiative would be rolled out to more schools in North Lincolnshire.

- Practical Family Support Service (PFSS) - is available for parents or carers who want to access support for a wide range of concerns. It is also for people who are not receiving high-level support via a social worker. The PFSS helps with a situation before it escalates to a crisis. This is done by offering practical support and assistance to families who have at least one child aged between five and sixteen years.

The PFSS takes an holistic approach to families' needs. It gives support by creating individual action plans with the family concerned. The panel was told how they support parents in becoming actively engaged in their children's education preparation and routines, and work with children solving issues around non-attendance at school. During the workshop events held with head teachers this service was very highly regarded, and members were informed of the success of the service working with families who are experiencing difficulties. Unfortunately, it was also brought to their attention that the demand for the service was far greater than could be provided within the current resources.

Members also learned that a promotion has been introduced in Leeds whereby parents are discouraged from taking their children on holiday in term time. Education Leeds, the private contractor responsible for providing education services for Leeds City Council, teamed up with a local travel agent to offer a seven percent discount on family holidays taken out of term time.

3.16 PERSISTENT ABSENTEES

Introduced through government priorities and targets was 'Persistent Absence Status'. A Persistent Absence (PA) is defined as secondary school pupils who miss 64 or more sessions of attendance across five half terms.

School are put into the PA status if they fall within the following percentages:-

- Secondary schools with 7% or more persistent absentees.
- Primary schools with 2.4% or more persistent absentees.

Authorities are also measured on their schools' attendance performance and how they are meeting the above government priorities and targets. When measured they are put into one of the following categories for 'level of support'.

- Universal Support - Aimed at local authorities in which no schools have high levels of persistent absence
- Targeted Support - Aimed at local authorities in which at least one school has high levels of persistent absence but the level across the authority's area is not high
- Intensive Support - Aimed at local authorities with high levels of persistent absence

In 2008/09 North Lincolnshire Council was placed in the category of 'Targeted Support' due to the following statistics, which highlight that in 2007/08 the PA level was higher than that recorded for the current year -

- Secondary schools in North Lincolnshire with more than 7% Persistent Absence

2007/08	-	4 schools
2008/09	-	2 schools

- In the primary sector the PA is judged by the DCSF as being above national average for persistent absenteeism.

2007/08	-	12 schools
2008/09	-	5 schools

The local authority has notified the DCSF of its success in decreasing the number of schools they have in PA status, and the panel was pleased with the progress reported.

In 2009/10 North Lincolnshire has 2 secondary schools in PA status and 5 primaries, which remains above the national average. As a result of the reduction in absence figures for 2008/09 the type of support has been reduced to 'universal' because of the improvement.

The EWS continues to support schools in prioritising and targeting persistent absentee pupils for more intensive intervention, which in turn has helped to reduce the number of schools in PA status.

The very latest attendance figures given to the panel as of December 2009 were still improving and indicated that the current absence rates were as follows: -

Unauthorised Absence	Total Absences	Total Attendance
0.52%	5.37%	94.63%

The panel noted the progress made to increase school attendance across North Lincolnshire during 2008/09 seeing attendance increase to 94.63% from 93.85% on the previous year 2007/08.

4. THE PANEL'S CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence presented during this investigation, as detailed in the panel's findings and considerations, the conclusions and recommendations of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel are as follows: -

4.1 LATENESS, REGISTRATION AND TERM TIME HOLIDAYS

The panel supports the view that developing and encouraging student and parental aspirations will improve attendance and attainment. The panel found some good examples of this where schools effectively promote the importance and legal requirement of good punctual attendance to pupils and their parents/carers. A few minutes late every day, or one term time holiday can have a detrimental effect on a pupils learning as seen in the findings. It was also evident that schools were implementing different time/reasons for late registration across the authority.

RECOMMENDATION 1

That effective use of communications and media by the Local Authority and schools is used throughout the year to send a strong message on attendance to the wider community and parents/carers, publicising the consequences of failing to maintain the school attendance of their child.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That an in-depth yearly reminder be sent to all parents/carers at the beginning of term reminding them of school opening times, registration time, and at what time a pupil will be registered late. Also, to provide them with term time dates, a full explanation of authorised and unauthorised attendance, procedures for attending medical appointments and the legalities of term-time holidays.

RECOMMENDATION 3

That consideration should be given to standardising the closure of registers across the authority as outlined in the DCSF guidelines.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That the local authority examine the possibility of negotiating with travel agencies a North Lincolnshire wide holiday discount scheme for trips involving children during school holidays.

4.2 GOOD PRACTICE

The panel has seen evidence of some effective procedures to improve attendance, including School Attendance Officers, PCSOs on school sites, ongoing involvement of the EWS, the input from the PFSS, and the effective use of non-bureaucratic systems for monitoring attendance and this should be built upon and maintained.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That the provision of more opportunities to share and celebrate examples of good practice around the reduction of absence rates be introduced by the local authority and provided to all schools, along with continuous training to be provided by the authority on all aspects of absences to all teachers.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That further communication with Humberside Police be sought as a priority in order to reinstate the truancy patrols reinstated as soon as possible, especially with the help of the PCSOs who are designated to spend time in individual schools.

RECOMMENDATION 7

That all schools consider using the text messaging service to alert parents/carers when their child is late or absent from school without explanation.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That the local authority intensify steps to identify pupils who truant frequently and for extended periods, and focus effort and resources on tackling the underlying causes of their absenteeism.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That future funding and resources be investigated in order to increase the support and usage of the PFSS.

4.3 ELECTRONIC SYSTEM

The panel was impressed with the outcomes and mechanisms of the Capita SIMS system used within the majority of North Lincolnshire's schools.

It enabled the EWOs to monitor figures and provide relevant support where and when required. Unfortunately, as described in this report not all schools are using the same information system and this has therefore caused difficulties for the EWS when collecting data.

RECOMMENDATION 10

That the panel welcome the introduction of the SIMS system to most schools, however, they would like to ask that other schools be encouraged to use the same system to ensure the EWO's can easily collect and assess all attendance figures, which in turn would help them provide earlier support and assistance when required.

4.4 POLICY AND GUIDANCE

The local authority sets particularly challenging targets to reduce absenteeism and improve attendance and continues to make good progress. However the panel heard recurring evidence throughout this review for the requirement for blanket policies/guidance to be provided to schools on all aspects of absenteeism.

RECOMMENDATION 11

That the local authority's draft Code of Conduct and the DCSF guidance are issued to all schools immediately for implementation, and that training be provided where necessary.

RECOMMENDATION 12

That the local authority investigates the difficulties caused by non-attendance of children from the travelling community, and strategies be implemented for schools to be able to account for these situations.

RECOMMENDATION 13

That the 'request for absence form' for term time holidays be revised asking for details of other children within the family who are attending a different school within the area. This will enable the respective Head teachers to converse and agree on the same decision.

4.5 GENERALLY

Overall, the panel felt that this was a very important and interesting review. The panel welcomes the local authority commitment to raising the attendance levels of pupils in North Lincolnshire and would like to emphasise that identified priorities should be properly funded and resourced in order to ensure the continuum of improvement is maintained.

RECOMMENDATION 14

That the local authority gives strong, consistent and timely support to all schools by the appropriate use of sanctions such as Penalty Notices and prosecutions, especially in relation to persistent absences and truancy.

RECOMMENDATION 15

That the Cabinet Member for Children's Services monitors closely and regularly the data for schools and reviews local strategies to ensure that resources are directed to those schools needing to improve.

RECOMMENDATION 16

That this review be re-visited in 12 months time.

RECOMMENDATION 17

That everyone involved throughout this review be thanked for their participation and contributions.