

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

DATE	14/11/2024
REPORT OF	Jennifer Steel - Service Director for Education, Inclusion and Integration
SUBJECT	School Attendance
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

School attendance contributes both directly and indirectly to a number of areas of the Council Plan.

Education & skills and the future economy are impacted by the outcomes children achieve from their education and the jobs they go on to have in the local economy.

Safeguarding children by ensuring they are seen by professionals on a daily basis and reduces risk, which then impacts our communities.

Positive school attendance, if achieved in its entirety, demonstrates a high value outcome as it has positive impacts socially, economically, and environmentally; both in the present and in the future.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School attendance in the Borough has mirrored the national overall downward trend following the pandemic, prompting a multi-layered approach across the Education sector and other agencies to address at all levels, including Health partners, Police and the voluntary and community sector.

The new Working Together to Improve School Attendance statutory guidance came into effect on 19 August 2024 and appropriate actions have been taken including a suite of training to school leaders.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

Request for elected members to take an active stance in their respective wards, engaging with schools, and in their wider Council functions with wider promotion of school attendance as both a measure of safeguarding children, and ensuring the population of the Borough has the knowledge and skills to contribute to the local economy.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

School attendance, since the COVID pandemic, has regularly been in media headlines as a persistent problem faced across the nation. North East Lincolnshire has noted the same downward trend as the rest of the country, and is now taking a co-ordinated approach to tackle the issue, and respond to changes in statutory guidance. Review of the first half term of the 24/25 academic year indicates early signs of improvement.

School attendance is a key lever in social mobility (Sutton Trust, 2023), it ensures our children are safe, and provides the best opportunities for attainment, for which an abundance of research exists to corroborate the correlation.

A firm line on school attendance is essential to building stronger communities as well as economic prosperity. Both the DfE and NSPCC have classified poor school attendance as a matter of neglect. Where children have stronger attendance, their outcomes are better, offering them a wider choice of pathways for further study, higher education and employment. Further evidence links poor attendance during compulsory school age to an increased likelihood of being NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) after the age of 16.

The charts below demonstrate, from published research, the direct links between good school attendance and academic attainment by the end of compulsory school age.

Figure 6: Proportion of pupils who passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, by their absence pattern

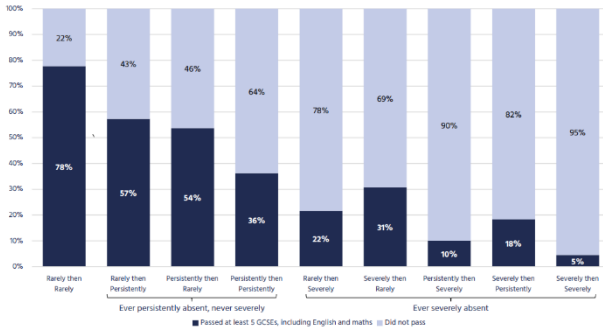


Figure 6: Overall attainment in stated qualifications at the end of KS4 by percentage of sessions missed over KS4

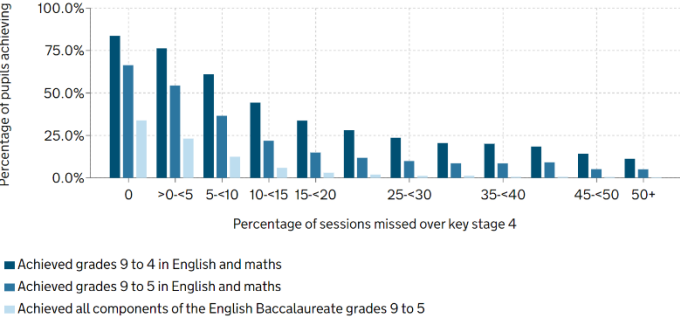


Figure 1 <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/11/CC-REPORT--Attendance-and-Attainment--Oct-23.pdf>

Figure 2 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/the-link-between-absence-and-attainment-at-ks2-and-ks4>

Whilst national absence figures worsened significantly following the pandemic, the rise was slightly less prevalent in North East Lincolnshire, especially when compared to statistical neighbours. Absence figures have seen minor improvements across the country and the Borough in the past two academic years, but have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Primary Schools in North East Lincolnshire have consistently performed more strongly than secondary schools each year, however early indications show that this gap is closing.

Year	Total School Absence
2021	5.36
2022	7.94
2023	7.74
2024 (Autumn & Spring Terms)	NEL 7.5% Yorks & Hum 7.3% England 6.9%

North East Lincolnshire’s school cohort is in line with the authority’s deprivation index, placing it in the bottom 20% nationally. This impacts the proportions of children eligible for Free School Meals and with SEND, for which attendance nationally is significantly worse than in North East Lincolnshire. SEND attendance in

the Borough, in particular, tracks above the national average.

In August 2024, new statutory guidance came into effect: Working Together to Improve School Attendance. This guidance takes a different approach to managing school absence based on political willpower for change and evidence gathered on attendance since changes to the DfE's reporting. It identified that parents taking children out of school for term-time holidays is an ongoing issue, as well as an issue with irregular persistent absenteeism.

To summarise key points from the legislative changes: term-time holidays cannot be authorised, including family events and birthdays etc.; fines for absences have been restructured and values increased; and schools must engage in multi-agency working to support families and remove barriers to attendance.

The report by the Children's Commissioner (Nov 2023) states "we must set a culture of regular school attendance. Since the pandemic, school absences have become pervasive across the education system." It highlights four key areas for its recommendations:

- Setting a culture of regular school attendance
- Tackling persistent and severe absenteeism
- Developing a multi-agency approach to attendance
- Putting the right support in place to sustain attendance.

The Local Authority agree with these focus areas, and are using them to assist in promoting schools embedding a positive culture of school attendance. Actions to date that straddle the above points include:

- Training for school staff on attendance and compliance with new legal framework – held in the summer term with ongoing support.
- Through positive relationships, establish a Borough-wide attendance hub support system run by two DfE-appointed National Attendance Hub schools.
- Targeted support meetings from an Education Welfare Officer to every school in the Borough to offer support with policies, procedures and practices in settings.
- Systems Leaders working group established to examine attendance at a Trust-wide level for schools in the Borough and wider region. The group are also scheduled to host a high-profile conference in the Spring term to promote attendance.
- Creation of a live NEL attendance data dashboard for Headteachers to access which provides up-to-date figures for their settings to benchmark against.
- Promotion of multi-agency support to tackle attendance on a family level through a Code of Conduct and template Notice to Improve letter emphasising support over punishment for those experiencing barriers to attendance.
- Contributions from each of the ten secondary academies was used to fund an attendance-promoting bus-stop campaign. This was a measure praised by the DfE.
- Promotion of school attendance through leverage in meetings attended by local authority officers with external agencies e.g. Health, Housing, Statutory Partners
- Identification of children who are attendance concerns as a priority for

mental health support through commissioned services

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

As this report is for information, there are no direct risks posed to the Council as a result of the details contained herein.

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

There are potential negative reputational implications for the Council resulting from central government changes to attendance legislation, particularly those around Fixed Penalty Notices. Communications have already been issued, endorsed by the portfolio holder and Director of Children's Services, to ensure that the public are aware of the changes to penalty notices around attendance.

There is the potential for reputational implications at the time when schools have exhausted avenues of support for families and provided notices to improve, as legal mechanisms to address attendance are a statutory function fulfilled by the Council's Education Welfare Service on behalf of schools requesting.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are no specific financial considerations to acknowledge. The statutory duties are funded from the Dedicated Schools Grant and, as such, are an essential service.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

An improvement in attendance is strongly correlated with stronger educational outcomes, improving the employability and wider life chances of a child.

Consistent attendance in school is also fundamental to the wider partnership's responsibilities of safeguarding children. Poor attendance is recognised by both the Department for Education and the NSPCC as a form of neglect.

From the perspective of corporate parenting, the children in our care who have experienced traumas and, often, significant historic barriers to school attendance, the Virtual School, in conjunction with the Education Welfare Team and through its extended duties, is taking a more in-depth strategic view of attendance of children in our care and those with a social worker.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no specific direct implications on climate change as a result of changing legislation around attendance, however improved school attendance will expose our children to this crucial agenda in education and will allow them to access the careers support to understand their role in the future workforce of a Green Borough.

7. MONITORING COMMENTS

In the opinion of the author, this report does not contain recommended changes to policy or resources (people, finance or physical assets). As a result no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer (Chief Legal Officer), Section 151 Officer (Director of Finance) or Strategic Workforce Lead.

8. WARD IMPLICATIONS

The national statutory guidance impacts all wards Borough-wide and the 2024 amendments have been clearly aimed at ensuring consistency of approaches to support attendance and in regards to legal consequences across the country.

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None relevant.

10. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

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JENNIFER STEEL – SERVICE DIRECTOR FOR EDUCATION, INCLUSION & INTEGRATION