

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE TASK AND FINISH REVIEW GROUP

FINAL REPORT

Introduction

1. This is the final report of the School Attendance Task and Finish Review Group, which was established by the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 11th April, 2005 to consider statistical information on attendance at school, including comparative data with other local authorities and projections for the future.
2. The report describes how the Review was conducted and the findings and recommendations to address the issues raised.

Membership of the Review Team

3. The Membership of the School Attendance Task and Finish Group was as follows:

Mr. B. Egan, Secondary Teacher Co-opted Representative; and
Councillor Mrs. E. Hart.

Mrs. B. Brannan was originally appointed to the Group, but resigned from her appointment as a Secondary Parent Governor Representative on the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny and took no part in this Review.

Acknowledgements

4. The Group acknowledges the support and assistance provided in the course of its investigations and would like to place on record their thanks to the following:

Julie Garnett, Team Leader, Education Welfare Officers, Children's Services Department
Anita Haymer, Co-ordinator Pupil Support Services
Christine Bates, Democratic Support Officer, Corporate Services Department.

Methods of Investigation

5. The Group met twice on 4th July, and 12th September 2005 to consider the statistics in relation to pupil absence from school and to discuss with Julie Garnett, Team Leader, Education Welfare Officers and Anita Haymer, Co-ordinator Pupil Support Services, the work that is being done to reduce absence levels in Darlington's Schools.

Aims and Scope of the Review

6. To determine the current position of attendance in Darlington Schools by considering statistics relating to the absences and to investigate the impact of the Authority's strategies to improve attendance.

7. To achieve the above the Group considered:

- a) statistics/other information relating to absences in Darlington Schools compared with neighbouring authorities;
- b) the strategies being implemented by the Authority to improve attendance; and
- c) the importance of good attendance in school in relation to performance and the effect on future life chances of pupils.

Findings

8. Statistical Information

a) School Absence:

2003/04	%	2004/05	%
Achieved Secondary (overall)	9.22	Provisional Secondary (overall)	9.31%
Achieved Primary (overall)	6.10	Provisional Primary (overall)	5.88%
Combined Absence (Primary and Secondary)	7.53	Combined absence (Primary and Secondary)	7.46%
National combined absence	6.57	National Combined absence	6.45%

Although statistics for 2004/05 are slightly worse for Secondary Schools, compared with 2003/04 18 primary schools out of 31 showed an improvement in their attendance levels; 5 secondary schools out of 7 showed an improvement in their attendance levels; and 1 secondary schools remained the same.

During 2004 – 2005 the stretch target figure agreed by Darlington was to achieve 7.4% Secondary Absence and 5% Primary Absence. Darlington failed to meet both targets. The Department of Education and Skills (DfES) target figure for combined school absence in Darlington was 7.37% the actual absence was 7.46% which means Schools came close to achieving the target. It may be that Darlington's stretch targets were unrealistic and consideration is to be given to adopting the DfES target as Darlington's target for 2005-2006. It is proposed to continue to work towards the stretch targets for unauthorised absence (0.25% primary 0.98% secondary). If DfES targets were adopted for 2005 –06 they would be:

Secondary Absence 8.8%
Primary Absence 5.6%
Combined Absence 7.18%

b) **Comparison with Tees Valley Authorities - 2004/05 Provisional Figures**

Local Authority	All Schools Total Absence	Primary Schools Total Absence	Secondary Schools Total Absence
Darlington	7.46	5.88	9.31
Hartlepool	6.22	5.30	7.26
Middlesbrough	7.24	6.16	9.13
Redcar and Cleveland	7.13	5.71	8.63
Stockton on Tees	6.27	5.22	7.42

Hartlepool has the best record for attendance and Darlington has regular dialogue with them, and the other Tees Valley Authorities about strategies and sharing of good practice. It is generally considered that Darlington is doing everything it can to reduce absences and its policies were generally in line with those adopted by Hartlepool. Although Hartlepool and some of the other Tees Valley Authorities qualify for additional funding which Darlington for which Darlington is not eligible.

c) **Authorised /Unauthorised Absence**

Schools must be open for 380 sessions a year, which is the equivalent of 190 days. At the start of each morning session and sometime during each afternoon session the school must take the attendance register. This register must show whether each pupil is present, attending Approved Educational Activity or absent. If the absent pupil is of compulsory school age, the register must show whether or not the school has authorised the absence. In practice, schools use a series of codes to record both the reason for the absence and whether it is authorised. This information helps them to provide timely support to pupils and tackle any emerging issues. There are, however, a number of sets of codes in use. The DfES is now planning to introduce a set of national codes to record the reason for a pupil's absence and whether it is authorised, from no later than the start of the Autumn Term 2006 **Appendix 1**. The DfES is also proposing to collect attendance statistics from schools through the School Census system, starting with secondary schools in January 2006 and all schools from 2007. Changing codes mid-year is not recommended.

A review of the Registration Regulations (which govern the registration of pupils in schools) is also currently underway. This document should help schools to clarify absences.

d) **Impact on Attendance Statistics of Travellers' children**

The Group considered the impact that travellers' children had on absence statistics and determined that there are approximately 350 compulsory school age children who identify their ethnicity as traveller. This represents 2.2% of the population of school age children in Darlington. Traveller absence for the 4 main traveller primaries was 0.8% (as a % of the overall Primary absence 2004 –05). This tends to affect attendance rates in a small number of Darlington's Primary Schools. A significant number of Traveller families and non-traveller families opt to educate their Secondary children at home. The education provision is monitored by the Local Authority.

9. *Educational Welfare Service Team*

The Education Welfare Officers Team consists of:

1 Team Leader (with case load).

8 Full-Time Permanent Education Welfare Officers (one has recently been appointed and another is due to start before Christmas)

1.5 Education Officers in Youth Offending.

10. *Strategies To Improve Attendance*

Strategies to reduce absence and raise attendance levels are set out in the Darlington Attendance Strategy, which is well established and provides a comprehensive action plan to help schools bring about a reduction in truancy levels and improve attendance rates. This Committee received a detailed report on the key strands of work in the strategy, i.e. publicity, preventative work and performance monitoring at its meeting held on 11th April, 2005. The report also detailed a package of 'generic' support which is given to schools by the Authority and in particular the Education Welfare Service. It is not proposed, therefore, to give in depth details in this report, but for any Members wishing to review the contents of this report it is on Council's Web Site under Political Management www.darlington.gov.uk. Below is a list of the initiatives which the Authority is adopting to reduce absence in schools.

Home visits/school visits/referrals to other agencies/prosecution work/ 1:1 sessions with young people/review meetings/case conferences/multi-agency meetings/case management/Child Traces/preventative work – assemblies, transition work, late gates, certificates, positive letters, liaison with other agencies etc/school attendance blitzes.

Comments on some of the initiatives are given below:

a) **Truancy Sweeps**

Regular truancy sweeps are undertaken of the Borough and on a sweep carried out on 21st September, 2005 39 pupils were challenged for being out of school; 22 were with parents and 17 without; and 4 pupils were returned to school. Some of the excuses given were unwell, sent home from school and medical appointments. These truancy sweeps are undertaken by Education Welfare Officers accompanied by either the Police or Uniform Wardens. The Council also participates in national DfES truancy sweeps.

b) **Parenting Programme** – There are currently 3 parents attending the parenting programme with another 3 pending. Parents attending seem to find these useful and also welcome the peer support of other parents.

c) **First Day Absence Calling** – Most Secondary Schools call home on the first day of absence, but not all Primary Schools.

d) **Education Management System** - An Education Management System has been purchased and is to be developed which will allow the Education Welfare Service to access and monitor individual pupil absence data in schools. This will hopefully provide more timely information and mean that intervention can be instigated earlier than at the moment.

e) **Warning Letters/Penalty Notices**

The Education Welfare Service issue warning letters and penalty notices for poor attendance in direct consultation with schools. Secondary Schools have agreed that holidays taken in term time will be recorded as unauthorised absences and will trigger a Penalty Notice within the constraints of the Local Code of Practice. During June and July 2005, 23 Penalty Notice Warning Letters were sent. 7 Penalty Notices were issued over the same period of time. This term 13 warning letters have been issued and 5 Penalty Notices issued.

11. ***Funding***

The attendance campaign has relied on pump priming funding which has been provided through the LPSA (Local Public Service Agreement). This has allowed an intense publicity drive to raise awareness about issues which relate to non school attendance and truancy throughout Darlington. There has been a rolling programme of radio adverts, bus banners, leaflet drops and headliners between 2004 to 2005. Another campaign is planned between 2005 to 2006. From July 2006 this funding will have been exhausted and there is uncertainty where future funding will come from.

12. **Importance of Good Attendance at School**

The Tables overleaf shows the result of a study undertaken by a Member of Staff at Longfield School on the achievement of pupils in their 2004 GCSE/GNVQ results based on their attendance at school which shows there was a direct correlation between attendance and results achieved. It is also statistically proven that a pupil achieving 5 A*- C Grades in GCSE will earn on average 30% more over a lifetime than somebody who has not. In addition they will only have 3% chance of being unemployed.

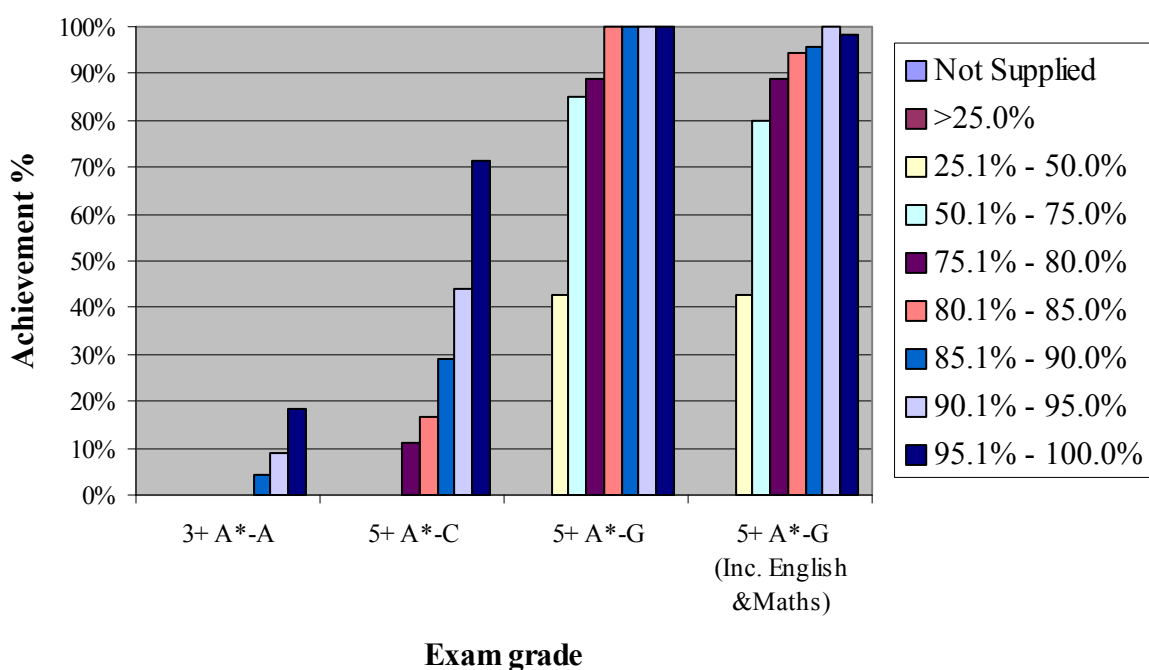
2004 GCSE/GNVQ Results

Longfield School

Achievements of Pupils Based on Their Attendance

Attendance	Pupil Numbers	3+ A*-A	5+ A*-C	5+ A*-G	5+ A*-G (Inc. English & Maths)	1+ A*-C	1+ A*-G	Uncapped Points Score	Capped Points Score
Not Supplied	0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0	0.0
>25.0%	0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0	0.0
25.1% - 50.0%	7	0.0%	0.0%	42.9%	42.9%	14.3%	57.1%	7.7	7.7
50.1% - 75.0%	20	0.0%	0.0%	85.0%	80.0%	25.0%	100.0%	19.1	18.6
75.1% - 80.0%	9	0.0%	11.1%	88.9%	88.9%	55.6%	100.0%	26.1	24.4
80.1% - 85.0%	18	0.0%	16.7%	100.0%	94.4%	88.9%	100.0%	31.2	29.1
85.1% - 90.0%	24	4.2%	29.2%	100.0%	95.8%	83.3%	100.0%	33.7	30.9
90.1% - 95.0%	34	8.8%	44.1%	100.0%	100.0%	85.3%	100.0%	43.5	36.5
95.1% - 100.0%	66	18.2%	71.2%	100.0%	98.5%	90.9%	100.0%	49.5	40.7
<=50.0%	7	0.0%	0.0%	42.9%	42.9%	14.3%	57.1%	7.7	7.7
<=75.0%	27	0.0%	0.0%	74.1%	70.4%	22.2%	88.9%	16.2	15.8
<=80.0%	36	0.0%	2.8%	77.8%	75.0%	30.6%	91.7%	18.6	17.9
<=90.0%	78	1.3%	14.1%	89.7%	85.9%	60.3%	96.2%	26.2	24.5
>=90.1%	100	15.0%	62.0%	100.0%	99.0%	89.0%	100.0%	47.5	39.3
Overall Cohort	178	9.0%	41.0%	95.5%	93.3%	76.4%	98.3%	38.1	32.8

Achievement of Pupils based on their Attendance



13. ***Publication Material***

Attached at **Appendix 2** is a sample of leaflets produced by the Education Welfare Services and also a one produced by Longfield School intended to publicise the importance of good attendance at School.

14. ***Conclusions***

- a) Although there has been no significant statistical improvement in attendance levels in the Borough Schools during 2004/05, the Council has adopted robust strategies to deal with pupil absence, which hopefully will have an impact in due course. There is also evidence that Schools are attempting to stress the importance of good attendance and instigate measures to reduce absence. It is only by both Schools and the Council being vigilant in attempting to reduce absences in Schools that targets will be achieved. It is also recognised, however, that to achieve substantial reductions in absence levels will require cultural changes particularly in relation to parental condoned absences. It is pleasing to note that, although Primary Schools failed to reach their stretch target in 2004/05 there was a reduction in the percentage of overall absences compared with the 2003/04 figures.
- b) Of particular concern to the Group was that with family holidays in term time now being counted as unauthorised rather than as authorised absence this will mean that stretch targets for 2005/06 will be even more difficult to achieve.
- c) It is suggested that all Schools should be encouraged to adopt a policy of first day absence calling. The recent murder of a primary school child in Scotland, when his parents only found out that he was not at school at the end of the school day, highlights the necessity for this to be done.
- d) Publicity/educational campaigns are very important in efforts to reduce absences in Schools and it is therefore vital that funding for such initiatives continues.

15. ***Recommendations***

- a) That the Education Welfare Service be congratulated for the work being done to reduce absence in Darlington Schools.
- b) That the 5 Secondary Schools and 18 Primary Schools who have achieved improvements in attendance during 2004/05 be congratulated.
- c) All schools should be encouraged to call home on the first day of absence.
- d) Attendance targets need to be challenging but realistic.
- e) Consideration should be given to the use of an alternative curriculum in certain instances as a way of reducing absence

- f) School Governors' training should include attendance/absence issues.
- g) That the use of parenting programmes be further developed.
- h) Consideration should be given to ways of ensuring funding for on-going publicity campaign/initiatives to reduce absence.
- i) That attendance figures be regularly reported to this Committee.

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Bibliography:

1. Report to Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 11th April, 2005.
2. Department for Education and Skills LEA School Absence Information 841 Darlington.
3. "School Attendance – Information for Parents – Is Your Child in School Today?" Leaflets produced by Darlington Borough Council.
4. Letter to Parents and Leaflet regarding Penalty Notices.
5. Longfield School – 2004 GCSE/GNVQ results – Achievements of Pupils based on Their Attendance.
6. Department of Education and Skills Proposed New Attendance Codes, Descriptions and Meanings (December 2004)
7. Department of Education and Skills – Pupil Absence in Schools in England 2004/05 (Provisional) – 21st September, 2005.