

Operation Atlantis – partnership working to reduce missing person incidents in coastal areas

A partnership approach to improve how emergency services respond to missing children incidents along the Lincolnshire coastline.

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8 June 2026

Key details

Stage of practice	Independently evaluated
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Public Protection, Safeguarding & Vulnerability Missing persons
Organisation	Lincolnshire Police
Region	East Midlands
Partners	Police Government department Private sector Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	September 2022
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Adults Children and young people Communities Disability Families
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Aim

The aim of Operation Atlantis is to:

- prevent children from becoming missing in coastal areas
- encourage partnership working with the Coastguard, Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), National Coastwatch Institution (NCI) and local businesses

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Operation Atlantis are to:

- reduce the number of lost and missing children reports along the Lincolnshire coastline
- reduce demand on emergency services, including the police, Coastguard, RNLI and NCI reduce the loss of life due to drowning
- strengthen partnership working through feedback and debrief processes

Description

The Lincolnshire coastline is a diverse landscape with 28 miles of public beaches, two sites of scientific interest (SSSI), two weapon ranges and over 250 caravan holiday parks. In May 2022, the Lincolnshire coastline received an estimated 3.5 million seasonal visitors.

Planning process

During the Winter of 2022/23, the neighbourhood policing team (NPT) in Mablethorpe and Skegness reviewed the calls to the service from the previous summer. The review revealed gaps in

the police recorded data. The force recorded 22 cases of missing children on beaches, while the RNLI data showed 56 reports. Out of the RNLI reports, 39 required a multi-agency search. The data revealed that Skegness central beach and Mablethorpe central beach were the two main hotspots for missing children reports. Further analysis showed that the highest demand for emergency services in these areas was between the hours of 13:00 and 19:00 hours, peaking being between 16:00 and 19:00. The majority of those who were reported as missing were under the age of 13 years and did not reside in the local area.

Public engagement by other agencies around the preventative messaging of beach safety and missing children was minimal. The review found that inter-agency communication was difficult and disjointed, often covering the same ground twice or not at all. Missing children searches were found to be resource intensive, requiring a number of officers to be removed from other core functions, which had a knock-on impact on wider policing operations. The force was also placing officers on a beach and near water without the correct level of safety and rescue equipment.

Operation Atlantis

In 2023, Lincolnshire Police launched Operation Atlantis to support the multi-agency approach to responding to missing incidents of children.

Sandi starfish

The Sandi starfish scheme provides free wristbands to families of children or vulnerable adults. The wristbands contain a starfish logo and emergency contact details, in case the person wearing the wristband goes missing. Initially, they were used by Lincolnshire Police, however they are now also distributed by partner agencies and local businesses. Additionally, the force have designed posters, flags and sails, which display the starfish logo to help missing children identify a safe place or a pre-agreed meeting point.

Multi-agency meetings

In preparation for the summer of 2024, the partner agencies met to plan and agree the formalisation of the group into an alliance which would manage Operation Atlantis. This resulted in an agreement of a weekly meeting to discuss the previous week, any lessons to be learnt and look ahead for pre-planned events.

Within the meetings, staffing is discussed to ensure there is sufficient resources and to pre-empt visitor numbers depending on the weather. To ensure sufficient resources, the force and Coastguard trialled a dedicated airwave terminal to aid inter-agency communication. The channel is used solely for missing person searches and is monitored by police staff, ground Coastguard staff and the control room.

It was agreed that a duty logbook should be used to record staff hours with start and finish times. Staffing at the two hotspot locations is consistent between the hours of 11:00 to 15:00.

Promotional literature

As part of Operation Atlantis, Lincolnshire Police have produced literature designed to inform and support a wide range of audiences. It covers:

- water and coastal safety - guidance for beachgoers, swimmers, and watercraft users on the importance of swimming between lifeguard flags
- environmental information – on local wildlife and information about the SSSI
- crime prevention and safety advice – on fraud awareness, caravan crime and caravan safety and how to report suspicious coastal activity
- public safety campaigns – including “Fatal 5” road safety, e-scooter and e-bike guidance and RAF information and unexploded ordnance awareness
- health and wellbeing support – including Dementia UK and dementia research and domestic abuse support resources
- community information – including domestic abuse support resources, a town map highlighting key locations and information on partner agencies
- family engagement - activity packs and crayons, bookmarks and stickers for children

Cost and funding

The wristbands, costing £300 for 10,000 units, were produced in three different colours featuring black text and the Operation Atlantis logo. The material used is a wax-based paper, selected for its durability in a water environment and environmental advantages over plastic. Funding for the wristbands was secured through the Police and Crime Commissioner’s Proceeds of Crime Fund.

The flags were funded by Haven Holidays, a significant supporter within the local community. The total cost was £1,600, which covered five 3-metre tall sail flags and five flagpole rope and toggle

flags.

Evaluation

An independent evaluation has been conducted by the University of Lincoln. The evaluation incorporated qualitative feedback, quantitative incident data and demand metrics.

The evaluation focused on assessing outcomes through the following measures:

- the number of incidents, including lost and missing person reports, across all agencies
- the time taken to resolve incidents that were reported
- a generalised assessment of cost savings to policing, based on reduced demand and fewer responses to incidents previously attended prior to the intervention

These measures were supported by the analysis of incident data and comparative demand trends before and after implementation.

The evaluation found that Operation Atlantis had contributed to reducing lifeguard-related incidents, thereby enhancing coastal safety and emergency response efficiency. The sustained effectiveness in critical services, such as saving lives and managing missing person cases, underscores the operation's success. This positive outcome supports the continuing and expansion of Operation Atlantis.

Overall impact

At the end of the summer in 2023, the partner agencies conducted a debrief of the season.

Feedback from partner agencies has been positive:

- “I would say, that in the 15 years I've been with the RNLI I think this is the closest I've ever seen our organisations work together in the planning/training stage which has certainly positively translated across into the incidents we have dealt with collaboratively. I think it has improved the way we understand each other's capabilities and I look forward to seeing the working relationship continue to grow in future seasons.”
- “By including the RNLI Lifeboat and Lifeguard teams in this multi-agency approach, we are improving the effectiveness and response of service launches, ultimately reducing service launches, injuries, and preventing deaths. This collaboration allows us to reach positive outcomes

for the public more efficiently than ever before.”

The weekly team meetings every Monday have been very positive and have continued over the winter months. Analysis from the weekly meetings revealed that the number of missing children reports had significantly reduced.

Questionnaire

An anonymous feedback questionnaire has been completed by frontline and control room roles. The questionnaire focused on the effectiveness of the dedicated airwave terminal and the impact it had on their roles. The feedback found that 79.16% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the dedicated airwave terminal had a positive impact on their work, with the remaining 20.84% saying they neither agreed nor disagreed.

Promotional literature

To date, over 22,000 pieces of literature for all age ranges has been distributed to the public across the Lincolnshire coastal towns. For the upcoming summer season, a review has been conducted to prevent duplication and ensure less waste.

Cost-saving analysis

The cost for an average investigation for low and medium-risk cases is £2,500, with a high-risk case costing £8,500. Since the launch of Operation Atlantis, based on the average investigation for low and medium-risk cases, the force estimates a minimum saving of £85,000 to Lincolnshire Police.

Learning

- It is important to secure partner agency buy-in at the earliest opportunity. While support has been provided by the partner agencies, staffing limitations has prompted a reliance on volunteers.
- Although there have been improvements on the recoding of missing children cases, there are still gaps that require further work. The force found that there has been a significant reduction in calls, resulting in improvements to allocating resources to other policing priorities.
- The force are currently exploring the idea of an interactive kiosk for members of the public who are unable to communicate through speech, hard of hearing or prefer to learn through quizzes.

- Staff have often found that communication on live incidents has been weak, and feedback indicates that it would be beneficial to have joint radio options.
- Members of the public have commented that they were having positive interactions with staff on duty and welcomed the Sandi Starfish scheme, however this feedback has not been formally recorded.

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