

Evaluation of Fast Track to Prosecution for School Non-Attendance

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and Kay Kinder

National Foundation for Educational Research

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to Prosecution for School Non-Attendance*

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report documents the experiences of 12 LEAs as they implemented the Fast Track to prosecution framework. The framework sought to ensure a faster approach to the implementation of intervention strategies for tackling school non-attendance. In cases where Fast Track was identified as appropriate, parents were given 12 weeks to ensure that their child regularly attended school, or they would face prosecution. The evaluation collected data over an 18 month period (between January 2003 and June 2004). The report draws on evidence obtained through face-to-face interviews with key players, a computerised case tracking system for logging the outcomes of Fast Track cases and various LEA documents relating to Fast Track implementation.

LEA approaches to Fast Track

The evaluation found different versions of Fast Track operating in the 12 LEAs. Several LEAs appeared to have taken the original prototype and ‘**domesticated**’ the framework to meet their own particular set of needs. Across the 12 LEAs, Fast Track variations were evident in: the scope of implementation (e.g. LEA wide or selective schools); the timescales (the original 16 week framework had been extended or reduced); the use of panels (variations in number and timing): withdrawal (some LEAs did not withdraw cases from Fast Track); the role of the EWO/school (the level of involvement at particular stages of Fast Track differed across LEAs) and timing of the summons (some issued early on in the process e.g. week one, others much later).

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between LEAs was the **intended purpose and target groups** of Fast Track. Two LEAs ran what could be termed ‘court focused Fast Tracks’ with the function of rapidly progressing difficult cases to court. Meanwhile, in nine LEAs, Fast Track could be classified more as an ‘early intervention’ strategy. Here, a wider range of cases would be targeted and through the processes of Fast Track it was hoped that attendance would improve and cases be withdrawn. One LEA operated a ‘whole school and community focused Fast Track’ where the overriding purpose was to raise awareness amongst all parents and pupils about the importance of good attendance.

Perceptions of impact

Overall, more interviewees gave positive assessments of impact a year on from Fast Track’s introduction, than had done so during the early stages of implementation.

Positive impacts on **pupils and parents** were cited as: making parents more aware of their responsibilities and cooperative with other parties; increased pupils’ attendance levels and changed pupils’ attitudes towards school attendance. It was notable that a reported lack of impact emerged mainly from interviewees in LEAs where Fast Track was targeted at more entrenched cases. In the final phase of the evaluation, a greater number of interviewees reported that generally attendance levels and attitudes towards attendance had improved since the implementation of Fast Track. However, the

importance of other attendance initiatives in this overall improvement was also mentioned.

A greater number of interviewees also stated that the impact of Fast Track on **schools** had been positive because, as well as improvements in attendance, it had resulted in a structured and ‘transparent’ system that assisted schools. In other instances, limited impact was cited due to schools lack of direct involvement. Reported positive impacts of Fast Track for **EWOs** included having: a more structured process to work within; increased professionalism; and access to another tool to improve school attendance. Three LEAs appeared to have procured **press coverage** in connection with Fast Track. The importance of **local** press involvement was cited as significant for maximising impact.

When asked about the main overall impact of Fast Track, responses focused primarily on EWS procedures and concomitant improvements in attitudes to attendance or attendance levels.

Evidence of impact from the case tracking data

Details of 484 cases were recorded on the case tracking system by 11 LEAs. However, these cases were not spread equally across the 11 authorities. A significant proportion, 30 per cent, came from a single LEA, whilst four LEAs provided data on less than 20 cases each. It must also be noted that the data provided was far from complete. Hence, any findings must be treated with caution.

The attendance of **51 per cent of cases increased** when they entered Fast Track. Similarly, the attendance of 49 per cent of cases improved between the first and last six weeks of Fast Track. Hence, during these early periods, attendance was more likely to increase than decrease. However, when cases exited Fast Track, 56 per cent showed a decline in attendance and 37 per cent showed an improvement. Despite this, over the entire 28-week period that was monitored (i.e. from four weeks prior to the intervention to 12 weeks post-Fast Track) **more cases showed increases** in the number of sessions they attended, than decreases.

Looking at actual attendance levels, this increased from an average of 53 per cent before Fast Track, to 64 percent during the second half of the intervention (weeks 7–12). However, this average increase of 11 percent (i.e the equivalent of a half a day each week back in school), was **not sustained** and attendance levels declined to an average of 58 per cent, after cases exited the intervention (weeks 19–24). Nevertheless, the proportions of pupils achieving an average of 90 per cent or more attendance rose from 11 per cent pre-Fast Track to 18 per cent post-Fast Track.

Meeting with parents, letters and pastoral support were found to increase the statistical probability of attendance improving in Fast Track. Attendance levels were also found to be higher for those cases that were **primary aged** and that had recorded **one panel** on the case tracking system. Cases that had home visits and phone calls (both before and during Fast Track) and had attended two panels registered a negative effect on attendance levels (possibly equating with non-cooperative families who progressed further into Fast Track).

Perceptions of effectiveness

Interviewees generally felt that Fast Track was **an effective strategy for tackling school non-attendance** principally because of the procedural improvements and efficiencies it introduced. For most interviewees, Fast Track represented considerable improvements on existing systems of prosecution, largely as a result of **increased efficiency and reduction of delays**. The profile of attendance issues was raised through Fast Track, and the speed of the process symbolised its importance to parents and pupils.

Fast Track was again primarily noted as being potentially most effective in cases of **less severe, newly emerging non-attendance** where the young person's family situation was not characterised by 'complex social issues'. Where non-attendance was deeply entrenched, where behavioural, family and social issues were prevalent, (often involving the input of other agencies), Fast Track was deemed to be less successful in terms of improving attendance, and also less appropriate. However, some LEAs did use Fast Track for these types of cases in order to move them quickly to court. In this context, Fast Track could be considered effective based on its procedural efficiencies.

Challenges

Many of the main challenges reported in association with the use of Fast Track were common to the key professionals involved in the process. Challenges about **record keeping/gathering evidence for court** were ensuring information was accurate and up to date so that appropriate cases were identified and it could be used as evidence in court. To resolve these challenges, interviewees suggested having robust school recording systems, appropriate school staff involvement and an effective EWS/school partnership. **Workload** challenges concerned the time entailed for meetings and the administration involved in preparing cases for court. Cited as resolutions were the provision of extra resources; advanced planning and prioritisation; effective inter-professional relationships; early identification and intervention; appointing designated 'Fast Track' professionals. **Timescale** challenges included keeping to the deadlines and sustaining the momentum of Fast Track. It was suggested that these difficulties could be alleviated by having clearly agreed deadlines, having designated 'Fast Track' EWOs and ongoing monitoring of Fast Track cases by EWOs and schools. Family challenges involved maintaining **positive relations with families** throughout the Fast Track process. Possible solutions mentioned included explaining clearly the role of Fast Track and the EWS and emphasising a partnership approach.

Delays in the court process was said to reduce the speed of Fast Track. Some suggested this issue could be addressed by having designated court time, prioritising Fast Track cases and negotiation between the EWS and court personnel. Challenges were raised in connection with a lack of understanding of EWS work by court personnel and the inconsistency and ineffectiveness of court outcomes. Training and education for court personnel was therefore recommended. Changes in the EWO role as a result of the Fast Track focus on prosecution was also raised as a challenge. Supervision and clarity of responsibilities for EWOs and improved communication between the EWS and other agencies were nominated as possible solutions.

Fast Track was considered to be a particular challenge for families where children were out of control or where there were ingrained problems because of the short timescale within which they were expected to effect change. Possible resolutions mentioned were conveying the seriousness of the situation to families; the EWS providing sensitive support; early intervention work on parenting skills.

The development and sustainability of Fast Track

With regards the future development of Fast Track at an LEA level, in half the authorities there were interviewees who believed that **primary schools** would benefit from the use of Fast Track. According to the data entered onto the case tracking system, however, only 12 per cent of cases concerned primary-aged children.

An LEA wide expansion of Fast Track, whilst considered desirable in three LEAs, was in practical terms, regarded as unfeasible based on current resourcing levels. Meanwhile, other interviewees questioned whether a blanket use of Fast Track was in fact necessary – they instead supported a more **targeted application**, employing Fast Track where it was most needed (e.g. in schools with poor attendance).

In order to secure the long term sustainability of Fast Track interviewees called for **more resources**, not just for the EWS but also for schools and the courts. Meanwhile, some interviewees highlighted the vital role that schools have to play, stressing that without their support and cooperation, Fast Track could not operate successfully. In an LEA with a high level of school involvement, it was felt that the continuation of Fast Track would benefit from training for school staff (to identify and assess possible cases).

Finally, some interviewees warned that whilst Fast Track may currently serve as a deterrent, low level penalties may, in time, reduce this effect and its value as an intervention may diminish. Similarly, interviewees advised capitalising on its potential deterrent function, by **using publicity** to inform parents about the legal consequences of non-attendance.

Conclusion and recommendations

Arising from this evaluation are the following four main recommendations:

- LEAs and schools need robust and rigorous attendance-monitoring systems, and, in turn, should maximise the information and insights such data can offer.
- All parties (schools, EWS, other agency and court personnel) need to subscribe to the ethos of Fast Track, appreciate its value and have received sufficient information and/or training to fulfil their particular set of responsibilities.
- For contributors to fully embrace the Fast Track system, some consideration needs to be given to the availability of resources to support its use.
- It is perhaps worth promoting the role of Fast Track as a preventative strategy, as opposed to one whose terminology might suggest a solely punitive function.

Chapter 1

Background to the evaluation

Introduction

This is the final report of the NFER evaluation of the Fast Track to prosecution framework for school non-attendance. The framework began as a Pathfinder in nine LEAs in January 2003 and was being implemented by more than two thirds of LEAs in England by the time this evaluation was completed. The policy intention behind the introduction of Fast Track was to ensure that schools and LEAs deal with attendance cases quickly and in the most effective way to get the child back into school. The framework has been described as a form of time-focused case management. The action advocated under Fast Track involves engaging the parent and specifying what improvements need to be made over a set time-frame (ideally 12 weeks). Where the parents fail to take their responsibilities seriously and no improvement is brought about in the child's attendance, within the specified time-frame, prosecution proceedings are initiated. The approach aims to ensure that appropriate action is taken to tackle attendance problems as soon as they become apparent. There are flexibilities in the Fast Track model outlined by DfES as the intention was to allow for local circumstances and local control.

In summary, the aims and objectives of the framework are to:

- ensure that intervention strategies are put into place early to tackle school attendance problems
- ensure that parents who fail to cooperate or are unwilling to work with the school/LEA are identified sooner and action is taken to make sure that they take responsibility for their child's school attendance
- bring consistency across LEAs to the prosecution process while still enabling local decisions

Since the framework was introduced and the evaluation began there have been a number of significant changes to the attendance landscape, in particular the introduction of parenting contracts and penalty notices for truancy in the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003. The policy is being developed to enable the framework to take account of these new provisions and of emerging good practice from LEAs.

Phase one of the evaluation was reported in May 2003 (unpublished), with a focus on the initial implementation period of Fast Track and the challenges encountered by LEAs. A second report (again unpublished) followed in August 2003 which included early indications of the impacts arising from Fast Track. This third report presents findings from the final stages of the research and builds on the findings of the previous phases. In particular, it considers further qualitative and statistical evidence as to whether and in what ways Fast Track is an effective strategy for improving school attendance.

1.1 Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation has been guided by five key aims:

Aim 1: The implementation of Fast Track – challenges encountered

The first aim will be to determine the systems previously used by each LEA in the prosecution process and to identify any changes in practice which have occurred since the introduction of Fast Track. In particular, the extent to which LEAs have modified their existing systems in order to accommodate the Fast Track model will be examined. In looking at how the model has been implemented in each LEA, the evaluation will pay particular attention to any difficulties that were encountered and how these were subsequently overcome.

Aim 2: A typology of Fast Track cases and links with effectiveness

By collecting background data on each individual Fast Track case, the evaluation will aim to determine for which type of case the strategy works best and in what particular circumstances (see also aim 5).

Aim 3: Outcomes – assessing the impact on attendance rates and attitudes towards attendance

This third aim will focus on the impact of Fast Track on both attendance rates and also on the attitudes of parents, pupils and the wider community towards school attendance.

Aim 4: Long-term impact – investigating the long-term effects of Fast Track

A year on from the first stream of Fast Track cases, the evaluation will examine families' experiences of the Fast Track process and whether it led to a sustained improvement in school attendance.

Aim 5: Linking outcomes to process

The last aim of the evaluation will be to investigate any relationships between the type of case/process and the final outcome (e.g. improvements in attendance, withdrawal from prosecution). This will determine under which conditions success is more likely.

Source: NFER proposal to evaluate the Fast Track to prosecution framework

It should be noted that aim one was largely covered in the first NFER report, although later data collection continued to elicit information on the obstacles and challenges encountered by those involved in Fast Track (see Chapter 3).

1.2 Sample selection

From the initial sample of 24 LEAs that contributed to phase one of the evaluation, 12 were invited to take part in further data collection. LEAs were identified with reference to certain selection criteria, such as type of LEA, scope of Fast Track, starting date, etc. Appendix 1 presents key characteristics of the 12 LEAs who continued to participate in the second and third phases of the evaluation. The table was compiled using data from two different sources – NFER/LGA research on prosecutions (Kendall *et al*, 2004) and from interviewees themselves. The 12 LEAs contributing to the evaluation can be described as follows:

Type of LEA: The sample included four new authorities, four metropolitan LEAs, three inner London LEAs and one outer London LEA.

EWS service structure: Of the 12 LEAs, two were devolved services.

Prosecuting body: In four LEAs, prosecutions were handled by a legal department. In seven LEAs, it was the Education Welfare Service (EWS) who took the case to court and, in one instance, the responsibility was shared by the legal department and the EWS.

Scope of Fast Track: By the end of the evaluation, five authorities had adopted an LEA-wide implementation of Fast Track, whilst the remainder chose to target specific schools (numbers ranged from between one and five schools).

Roll out of Fast Track: The sample included four LEAs who had started Fast Track in January 2003 and four LEAs who began in February, two in March and two in April of the same year.

EWOs/school population: The proportion of staff to pupil population ranged from 1:1800 to 1:5500.

Staff qualifications: Two LEA interviewees confirmed that their Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) were required to hold a social work qualification. For the remaining ten LEAs, this was not a requirement.

1.3 Methodology

Phase three of the evaluation employed three main methods of data collection:

- **face-to-face and telephone interviews**
- **a Fast Track case tracking system (excel spreadsheet).**
- **parent focus groups**

1.3.1 Face-to-face interviews

Repeat interviews were conducted with those individuals who participated in phase two of the evaluation. Initially, interviews with the following contributors were requested in each LEA:

- 2 school representatives (ideally one primary and one secondary)
- 2 EWOs (allocated to the schools)
- 1 PEWO
- 1 court representative (normally the clerk of the court)
- 5 parents (phase three only)

In three authorities, Fast Track was introduced selectively in just one school, which thus reduced the number of potential commentators. During fieldwork, researchers experienced other difficulties accessing interviewees, including:

- school staff who declined to take part in the research

- school staff who said they had no/limited knowledge of Fast Track
- EWS who were unable to secure involvement of court representative
- interviewees on long term sick leave
- a lack of response to multiple requests for an interview.

As researchers sought to contact parents, it became clear that this would be a difficult task. The following problems arose:

- incorrect telephone numbers were provided
- telephone numbers with voicemail facility only
- letters given to schools were not sent out to parents
- invitations to parents from the EWS to take part were declined
- no parents had completed Fast Track at the time of data collection
- EWS preferred that NFER did not contact parents.

Given these difficulties, it was agreed with the sponsor to continue efforts where there was a possibility of interviewing parents, but to concentrate more on obtaining case tracking data. As a result, seven visits were undertaken to those LEAs with larger numbers of Fast Track cases to assist with data entry. To supplement the parent interviews, interviews were also conducted with EWOs who gave second-hand accounts of Fast Track families (in some cases the parents were also interviewed).

Phase three visits took place between January and April 2004 and a total of 73 interviews were conducted. The number of interviewees per LEA ranged from three to ten. Table 1.1 gives a breakdown of those interviewed and their professional backgrounds.

Table 1.1: Interviews undertaken for phase three data collection

Type of interviewee	No. of interviewees
School representatives (including teachers, governors, home-school mediator)	16
EWOs	21
EWOs (family illustrations only)	6
PEWOs/Fast Track coordinators	12
Panel representatives	3
Court personnel (legal services/clerks)	6
Parents	9 *

** Section 6.5 on 'family illustrations' also uses six interviews conducted in phase two*

Interviews with professionals involved in the Fast Track framework included questions in the following areas:

- the challenges encountered
- suggestions for overcoming challenges
- views on impact
- assessments of effectiveness
- plans for development of Fast Track at an LEA level.

Meanwhile, families were asked to talk through their Fast Track experience, covering family background, history of attendance, initial reactions to Fast Track, impact on attendance and whether they felt it had been a positive or negative intervention.

1.3.2 Fast Track case tracking system

In order to gather data on individual families entering the Fast Track framework, a spreadsheet was devised by the NFER for each LEA to log information on a case-by-case basis. Data was collected under three broad categories. The profile section of the spreadsheet concerned the background characteristics of each case (e.g. age, number of siblings, etc). The second section was used to record process information, in terms of how the case proceeded through Fast Track (e.g. date of panels, reason for withdrawal, etc). The final section was used to enter the weekly attendance of each individual case four weeks before Fast Track, 12 weeks during and if possible, 12 weeks after.

An analysis of the above information will go some way to meeting Aims 2, 3 and 5 of the evaluation. Namely, it will provide a description of the types of families identified as suitable for Fast Track; document what the process has entailed for each family (e.g. other agency involvement, number of court appearances); ascertain whether attendance has improved as a result of Fast Track; and then finally, by linking profile, process and outcome data, it will ultimately establish under which circumstances (e.g. family background and type of process) successful outcomes are most likely to be achieved.

Given the potential value of this data to the evaluation, the research team offered considerable support to those LEAs with higher numbers of Fast Track cases. Several visits were made to assist with data entry and ensure that as much information as possible could be collected.

1.3.3 Parent focus groups

The evaluation also aimed to establish the wider effects of Fast Track and whether those not directly involved were aware of its existence. Opportunities for parent focus groups were investigated and three were subsequently held. The groups ranged in size from four to seven participants and were conducted in three different LEAs (two operating selective Fast Tracks in specific schools and one employing Fast Track across the whole authority).

The groups sought to ascertain the awareness of Fast Track amongst parents not personally involved in the intervention. In addition, during discussions, parents were encouraged to express their views on the effectiveness of the approach and their ideas for possible alternatives.

Questions included:

- Do you think it is right for parents to be prosecuted for school non-attendance? (under what circumstances is it right/wrong?)

- Are you aware of the new Fast Track to prosecution strategy that is being used in this area?
- Do you think the threat of court will make a difference to parents whose children do not attend school regularly? Does it work?
- Is there anything that could be done instead of prosecution to encourage parents to get their children to school?

1.3.4 The report structure

The findings from phase three of the evaluation are set out in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: LEA approaches to Fast Track

This chapter starts by providing a broad outline of the Fast Track process. It then highlights variations in how LEAs chose to operate the framework.

Chapter 3: Challenges

This chapter relays interviewee feedback on the challenges encountered during Fast Track, as well as suggestions for overcoming any difficulties.

Chapter 4: Perceptions of impact

The different outcomes linked to Fast Track are discussed, from the impact on school attendance to implications for the courts.

Chapter 5: Fast Track outcomes for 484 families recorded on a case tracking system

After considering interviewees' perceptions of impact, the report turns to evidence recorded on the NFER case tracking system. The backgrounds of 484 Fast Track families are presented, followed by the results of Fast Track intervention (e.g. court, withdrawal) and the impact that the intervention has had on pupils' subsequent attendance.

Chapter 6: Perceptions of effectiveness

The report then moves on to present interviewees' assessments of the overall effectiveness of Fast Track, in terms of improving attendance. It also considers interviewees' thoughts on the effective characteristics/stages of Fast Track.

Chapter 7: The development and sustainability of Fast Track

This final chapter contemplates the future of Fast Track, both in terms of its development at an LEA level and any issues connected with its long term sustainability.

Chapter 2

LEA approaches to Fast Track

Key findings

The evaluation found different versions of Fast Track operating in the 12 LEAs. Several LEAs appeared to have taken the original prototype and ‘domesticated’ the framework to meet their own particular set of needs. Across the 12 LEAs, Fast Track varied in the following ways:

- **Scope:** Five LEAs utilised Fast Track across the whole authority, whilst in seven authorities it was selectively introduced to specific schools.
- **Purpose:** Two LEAs ran what could be termed ‘court focused Fast Tracks’ with the function of rapidly progressing difficult cases to court. Meanwhile, in nine LEAs, Fast Track could be classified more as an ‘early intervention’ strategy. Here, a wider range of cases would be targeted and through the processes of Fast Track it was hoped that attendance would improve and cases be withdrawn. One LEA operated a ‘whole school and community focused Fast Track’ where the overriding purpose was to raise awareness amongst all parents and pupils about the importance of good attendance.
- **Timescales:** The framework originally proposed a 16-week Fast Track (four weeks of work before entry and 12 weeks after). Four LEAs were running ‘standard 16-week’ Fast Tracks, seven took longer than 16 weeks (they had either extended the ‘pre’ or ‘during’ Fast Track periods) and one LEA, took less than 16 weeks for the Fast Track process to reach completion.
- **Panel:** The use of panels as part of Fast Track ranged from no panels to two panels. Panels were also convened at different times during the process, some at the beginning, others half way through.
- **Withdrawal:** Nine LEAs would withdraw cases from Fast Track if attendance improved. Three did not withdraw, one because cases were permanently monitored until the child left school, and in two LEAs, Fast Track cases would always proceed to court, regardless of whether the attendance had improved.
- **Role of the EWO/school:** In some LEAs, schools played a major role in Fast Track (particularly during the pre-Fast Track stage), elsewhere the contribution of schools was kept to a minimum. EWO involvement also differed – some were involved at the pre-Fast Track stage, others waited until the case had been referred for entry to Fast Track.
- **Timing of the summons:** This varied from a summons being issued in week one of Fast Track to much later in the process, at week ten.
- **Post-Fast Track monitoring:** The time scale for monitoring ranged from four weeks to ‘ongoing’.

Introduction

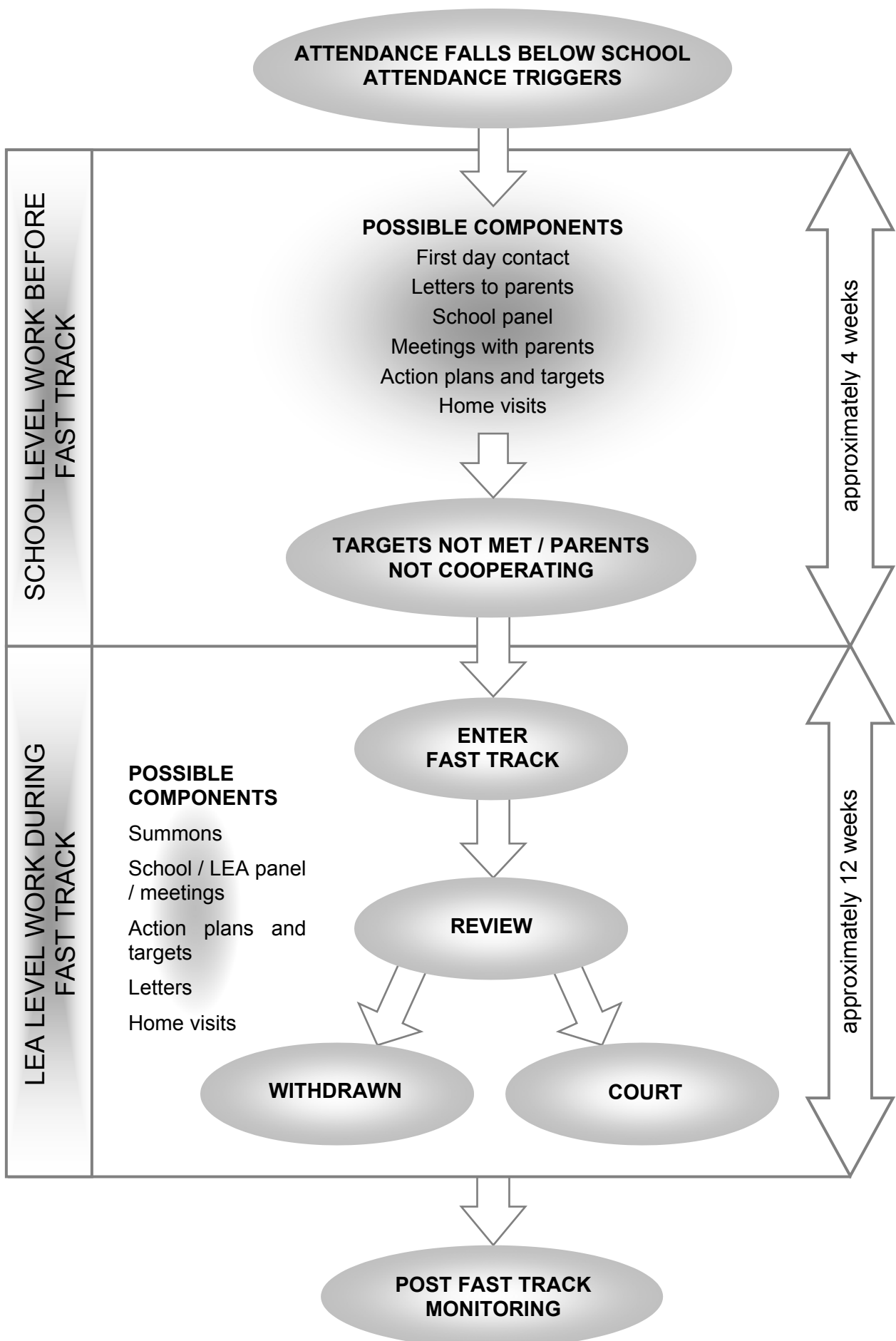
This chapter seeks to provide a comparative overview of the Fast Track process in 12 LEAs. During the course of data collection, it became apparent that there were variations in the procedures used for Fast Track, as well as its overall intended purpose. The chapter therefore begins by presenting a generic model of Fast Track, a prototype which LEAs took and to some extent made their own. It is important to highlight the distinguishing features of each LEAs chosen approach, as they will need to be considered when assessing the impact of the strategy and its associated challenges in later chapters. As well as summarising the different models of Fast Track, the chapter also reports on any alterations made by LEAs to Fast Track systems since the initial period of fieldwork. The chapter is organised under the following sections:

- **an outline of the Fast Track framework**
- **LEA variations in the implementation of Fast Track**
- **changes made by LEAs to their Fast Track systems.**

2.1 An outline of the Fast Track framework

The diagram below illustrates the possible components of a Fast Track to prosecution system, based on information provided by the 12 LEAs. A ‘generic’ model of Fast Track might be said to operate as follows. Attendance of a pupil falls below a specified level, which triggers action at a school level. This action may entail attendance monitoring, letters to parents, home visits, the convening of a school panel/meeting to discuss the attendance issues and the creation of an action plan accompanied by targets to be met. This work takes place within a specific timeframe (typically four weeks). If no improvement in attendance or parental cooperation is achieved, the case proceeds into Fast Track. During this second stage, the summons will be issued, school/LEA panels may be convened (again with action plans and targets), cases will be reviewed and a decision made as to whether the case should proceed to court, or be withdrawn. Again, this LEA-level work is conducted within a specific time period (typically 12 weeks).

Figure 2.1: The Fast Track process – a generic model



2.2 LEA variations in the implementation of Fast Track

As already indicated, the above system was not uniformly operated across LEAs. Significant variability existed in terms of timing, the exact procedures followed and the roles of those involved. Appendix 2 contains summary tables of the Fast Track process operated by each individual LEA, while Appendix 3 presents three LEA versions of the model. In the sections to follow, attention is drawn to the diversity of Fast Track by discussing specific elements of the process.

2.2.1 Prior experience of Fast Track systems

It must first be appreciated that the LEAs featured in this evaluation were implementing the framework from different starting points, in terms of their experience of prosecution systems. At the start of the evaluation, interviewees were asked why they had decided to introduce Fast Track. In five LEAs, it was because Fast Track bore close similarities to their existing systems, and its introduction would therefore not require any significant modifications to current working practices. By contrast, one LEA wanted to introduce Fast Track because they had not undertaken any prosecutions for two years. Thus, LEAs varied considerably in their prior knowledge and experience of Fast Track-type systems. Some were introducing a completely new way of working, whilst for other LEAs, it was more a continuation of systems already in place.

Extension of existing practices

To us, it's not something new and it's not something that we are all really excited about because we have been doing it for so long. The system has been in existence, very structured and well organised for a very long time. So it's just being aware that cases need to go very quickly, decisions need to be made very quickly and not to leave things too long (EWO).

Introduction of new practices

(Why did you decide to introduce Fast Track?) Because we hadn't taken any court prosecutions in two years! We had so many changes and re-organisations that court fell by the wayside. So, when Fast Track came, we thought this gives us an opportunity to try it and re-launch (PEWO).

2.2.2 Scope of Fast Track

The different starting points for LEAs may well have influenced the chosen scope of implementation. By the final stage of the evaluation, five LEAs were utilising Fast Track across the whole authority and three of these commented that the framework was indeed similar to their existing systems. Hence, an LEA-wide application may have appeared more feasible for those LEAs already familiar with the operational principals of Fast Track. The remaining seven LEAs used Fast Track in a selective number of schools ranging from one to five. During initial interviews, EWS staff from five of the seven indicated that they had opted for a selective implementation because they wanted to ensure the new system was manageable and/or that they lacked the resources to operate Fast Track on a wider basis. Furthermore, in six out of these seven LEAs, Fast Track arrived as a new initiative, one which they had little prior experience of, which in turn may have had some bearing on the extent of the implementation. The evaluation therefore reports findings on Fast Track operating on very different scales: an LEA trialling Fast Track in a single school compared to LEAs which used Fast Track across all schools.

2.2.3 Who is Fast Track for?

Perhaps one of the most fundamental distinctions between LEAs was the intended target group and thus, the function of Fast Track. Three different approaches were in evidence amongst the 12 LEAs. These could be described as:

- court focused Fast Tracks
- early intervention and court focused Fast Tracks
- a whole-school and community focused Fast Track.

Two LEAs appeared to adopt the system as a means of moving difficult cases towards court. Fast Track in these LEAs was thus more court focused, with the aim of processing the most intractable cases in a speedy and efficient manner. Because of this defined focus, the numbers of cases in these LEAs was typically low. For example, despite an LEA-wide use of Fast Track in one authority, just ten cases were entered onto the NFER case tracking system (this contrasted with a single school Fast Track where 64 cases were entered). The quotes below illustrate the particular ethos of these court focused Fast Tracks:

Court focused Fast Track

The only impact is that they go quicker into court. That's it (PEWO).

We don't have soul searching about our case work and constant reviews to try and determine the most appropriate way forward. We know the way forward. The way forward is the approaching court date (PEWO).

This court-based Fast Track contrasted with authorities (nine in total) where the strategy was applied to a much broader spectrum of attendance cases. Here, it was hoped that by following certain Fast Track procedures (e.g. letters, panel meetings, action plans), alongside the threat of a possible prosecution, parents would be spurred on to improve their children's attendance. Hence, Fast Track was seen more as an early intervention strategy (to encourage change), rather than purely a vehicle for prosecution. Although, for those cases that did proceed to court, again, the aim within Fast Track was that they should do so quickly. Where the goal of early intervention existed, LEAs tended to Fast Track more cases (often those with less severe non-attendance), with the expectation that many would respond to the intervention and only a small minority would actually reach the court stages. Indeed the quotes below indicate that, in reality, some LEAs preferred to steer away from the prosecution outcome of Fast Track (whilst using the explicit threat of prosecution to win the compliance of parents).

Early intervention and court focused Fast Track

In some cases, I have no intention of prosecuting, but the fact of monitoring makes a difference. The fact that I'm there and can see them on a regular basis helps keep the attendance level up. We keep the pressure up. To a certain extent, it's cheaper and better value than actually going to court (PEWO).

Whilst we do it formally and we do make parents aware of their responsibilities, we do it in a nice kind of way that makes them an equal partner in what we are trying to achieve. This was one of the reasons they chose to call it Fast Track to positive outcomes rather than Fast Track to prosecution. Court is the last resort, but we will do that if you don't work with us (EWS manager).

Rather than waiting until we have enough evidence to go to court we are able to intervene earlier. Schools and EWOs see the advantages of this and they work in partnership together working with the family (PEWO).

Another characteristic feature of the early intervention Fast Tracks was that they seemed to be working with families sooner than they would have done under the previous system. This was because their attendance had not deteriorated to such an extent that they warranted referral to the EWS. In effect, Fast Track was targeting a new cohort, one which would not normally have received attention from the EWS.

It has brought into our service those young people that would probably have never been referred to us because they weren't the absolute worse or the long-term ones. It's a completely different cohort (PEWO).

There also existed a third version of Fast Track (in one LEA) which was geared more towards the whole school and surrounding community, than individual cases. This Fast Track would 'spotlight' the locality of a school and seek to raise awareness amongst all parents and pupils about the importance of school attendance (for example, even those parents of pupils with good attendance would receive a letter through Fast Track, praising them for their achievement and encouraging them to keep this up). The focus was taken off individual cases and by targeting all pupils and parents in the school, it was intended that the status and importance of attendance be communicated throughout the entire community.

Whole school and community focused Fast Track

Spotlights are designed to increase awareness of attendance. So for those directly involved – targeted, and also for the wider targeted group – the whole school and whole community, Spotlight has the impact of raising the profile of attendance....I think that it can be very effective. I don't think that it should be used on its own and I wouldn't subscribe to the opinion that Fast Tracking cases individually is as effective as in doing it in a group (EWO).

2.2.4 Criteria for entry to Fast Track

During the early stages of the evaluation, PEWOs cited two main factors that would be taken into consideration when selecting families for Fast Track. These were:

- a failure to meet attendance thresholds
- a lack of parental cooperation.

The range of attendance thresholds used by LEAs again points to the heterogenic nature of the target group and therefore perhaps the different ways in which the framework was employed. Thresholds spanned from less than 90 percent (primary) to less than 60 per cent attendance. Other factors would also be taken into consideration when selecting cases for Fast Track, including failure of previous interventions and the presence of any mitigating circumstances, such as medical or serious social problems. It is also worth noting that the selection criteria were not inflexible and in most LEAs it was often left to the discretion of individuals who made the decision to prosecute.

2.2.5 Timescales

In the majority of LEAs, the operation of Fast Track can be divided into two distinct periods – work at the school level before cases were identified for Fast Track and work at an LEA level once cases had entered the system (in one LEA, a whole-school and community focused Fast Track, there were not distinct school and LEA stages). Under the original framework it was proposed that the initial period last for four weeks, with a 12-week lead up to prosecution in the second period. However, during the third phase of data collection a number of LEAs reported that these timescales had shifted. For example, two LEAs had extended the period of school level work from four to six–eight weeks (see Section 2.3). Timescales during Fast Track had also altered in some LEAs and it could take more than the planned 12 weeks for a case to reach court. Meanwhile, one LEA had decided to cut the 12-week Fast Track period to four weeks, if the parents failed to attend the LEA panel during week one. Given these variations in timescales, it is clear that some systems were more ‘Fast Track’ than others. To summarise, four LEAs were operating a ‘standard 16-week’ Fast Track, seven LEAs took longer than 16 weeks and one LEA, took less than 16 weeks.

2.2.6 Panels

A number of variations existed with regard the panels held within the Fast Track process. One LEA implemented Fast Track without the use of panels entirely (a court focused Fast Track). Five LEAs convened two panels and six LEA Fast Tracks involved one panel. The exact function of the panels was also seen to vary. In one authority the panel served as a forum for professionals to discuss cases and decide whether it was appropriate to proceed with prosecution. Parents were not part of this process, instead separate appointments were made for meeting with parents. Elsewhere, panels were seen as a mechanism for engaging with parents by emphasising the seriousness of the situation and drawing up an action plan to resolve the attendance problems. Panels were also held at different points within Fast Track – some would meet during week one, others would meet at the half way stage around week six. Table 2.1 shows the number and timing of panels across the 12 LEAs.

Table 2.1 Panels used for the Fast Track process

Number of panels	No of LEAs	When panel held
One panel during Fast Track	6	Week 1 (2 LEAs) Week 3 (1 LEA) Week 5 (2 LEAs) Week 7 (1 LEA)
Two panels, pre- and during Fast Track	3	During Fast Track panels held: Week 1 (2 LEAs) Week 7 (1 LEA)
Two panels, both during Fast Track	2	Weeks 3–6 and weeks 6–8 (1 LEA) Week 1 and week 3 (1 LEA)
No panels	1	N/A

2.2.6 Option to withdraw

Nine out of the 12 LEAs would withdraw cases from the Fast Track process. The main reasons for withdrawing were:

- improved attendance
- targets being met
- increased parental cooperation.

One LEA felt it was important to retain the option to withdraw at every stage of the process, as this would encourage parents to make improvements and thus remove the need for a court appearance:

The decision to prosecute is not cast in stone. There needs to be flexibility and the opportunity for parents to demonstrate that they can improve attendance. Some will improve after the court warning, others after the first letter or the first visit. The number you are getting shrinks all the time, through the process (EWO).

Three LEAs, however, did not exercise the option to withdraw. In two of these, once a case had been selected for Fast Track, a court appearance was the inevitable outcome (such LEAs have thus been described as operating court focused Fast Tracks). In these LEAs, only a small number of cases were entered into the Fast Track system, as Fast Track was used as a means of moving cases quickly to court. If improvements were made during the 12-week Fast Track period, the case would appear in court, but these improvements would be reported to the court and reflected in the disposals given.

The responsibilities of families have changed because they don't get a second chance. Once the assessment is that we go for Fast Track then that's it. The family can't dissuade us. All they can do is try and put it right. The disposal is more acceptable (PEWO).

A third LEA however did not withdraw because cases simply continued to be monitored until the child left school or moved out of the area. This happened for those cases that proceeded to court and for those that improved within the 12 weeks of Fast Track. It is worth pointing out that, in this LEA, Fast Track was not portrayed as a prosecution strategy, but as a positive intervention created to support pupils and parents.

What we've done is, once they're on Fast Track, they don't come off. We're still Fast Tracking the first group from over 12 months ago. The monitoring is never stopped. The only way they come off Fast Track is if they leave school or move out of the area (EWS manager).

2.2.7 Role of the EWO/school

The level of EWO and school involvement in Fast Track did not appear to be equal across the LEAs. In some authorities, the onus was very much on schools during the initial part of the process (i.e. pre-Fast Track) and EWOs did not become involved until cases had reached the panel stage. The comments below illustrate how some schools had taken on greater responsibility for attendance, since the advent of Fast Track. Indeed, in an LEA where Fast Track had been introduced into one specific school, the initiative was perceived as very much a school-driven intervention. Elsewhere, EWOs were involved from day one and school involvement was kept to a minimum (especially once the case had entered Fast Track).

School driven pre-Fast Track

I am very lucky because my school is great, behind Fast Track 100 per cent, but if the school wasn't willing to put in the time and effort, well I'm not sure that Fast Track would, I think Fast Track needs the full support of the school for it to work (EWO).

Schools are taking responsibility for some of the work themselves and actually tackling parents. There has been a bit of reluctance I think, quite often, to deal directly with parents about attendance. The first point of call has often been referral to the EWS (PEWO).

2.2.8 Timing of the summons

Within the original Fast Track model, a court summons would be issued during the first week of a case entering Fast Track. Parents would therefore receive official court correspondence early on in the process, twelve weeks before the court date. This pressure, combined with the prospect of withdrawal if parents made sufficient attempts to resolve the situation, was recognised by one interviewee as a significant change in working practice:

When you set a pre-court meeting, you're going to get a summons within a week. It's a bit of a wake up call to them. When we said in the past you're going to be prosecuted, the problem is there's always a time delay because of the court system, they don't get anything official until about two weeks before the court date. So it does seem to be a wake up call to parents [now they receive a summons 12 weeks before court date]. We are saying to parents that there is an option that, if the child is in school we will withdraw, which we've never said before (EWO).

However, during data collection, it appeared that half the LEAs were delaying issuing the summons until later on in the process (e.g. weeks six–eight, or week nine or ten).

2.2.9 Post-Fast Track monitoring

Once a case had exited Fast Track, either due to a court appearance or improved attendance, LEAs were asked how long they would monitor attendance for. The length of time over which attendance was monitored varied from four weeks to 'ongoing'.

Table 2.2: Duration for monitoring attendance post-Fast Track

Duration for monitoring attendance	No. of LEAs
'Ongoing'	4
Four weeks	2
Six weeks	2
12 weeks	2
24 weeks	1
Until the end of the next term	1

2.2.10 Common elements of the process

The variations highlighted above suggest that parents experience a localised version of Fast Track, depending on which LEA they reside in. However, there were some features that were common across the LEAs that perhaps needed to be recognised. During the early phases of the evaluation, interviewees were asked what had been the

greatest change to their procedures since the launch of Fast Track. The vast majority referred to the change in timescale. They felt that cases were now dealt with more efficiently, in a shorter period of time and that the system was now more structured. Hence, whatever the intended goal of Fast Track, a shared aspect of Fast Track was the shorter timescale over which cases were dealt with. Home visits, panel meetings and letters would all take place within a certain period of time. For those cases that then proceeded to court, this timescale had also been reduced.

The second shared feature across most of the LEAs, was that the threat of prosecution was now mentioned much earlier to parents than it had ever been previously. Rather than working for several months or even years before prosecution became a genuine threat, interviewees noted that after the initial referral, parents were now required to respond within a specified period of time or they would shortly embark on a prosecution pathway. Prosecution was being used less as last resort and more as a lever to encourage parental cooperation.

Early warning

They know from the very first moment [about the possibility of prosecution] and we're certainly starting to implement this in the letters we write to parents after we've done our first assessment. We send them a plan of what we've agreed with the parents, school and in that we tell them what the work with them might include, and that it might include going to court. So we warn them from the start and give them a leaflet about Fast Track, so they know all the way along, so it's not the surprise it used to be, when we'd been working with them a couple of years (PEWO).

Defined timescales

Previously, before Fast Track, even though we did have a good structure in place and we did have all these criteria for serving court warning notices and referral to the panel, we weren't working to a time frame. So I suppose the main thing is having a uniform rule for everybody in the borough and for every case (EWO).

2.3 Changes made by LEAs to their Fast Track systems

During the final phase of data collection (January–April 2004), interviewees were asked whether any changes had been made to the Fast Track procedures since its initial introduction. Four of the 12 LEAs had retained the same procedures throughout the evaluation period and reported no changes. The remaining eight mentioned alterations to the following aspects:

- **target group/attendance triggers**
- **scope of Fast Track**
- **timescale**
- **panels/meetings.**

2.3.1 Target group/attendance trigger

Three LEAs explained that they had re-defined the types/level of non-attendance that would be targeted for Fast Track intervention. One EWO said that she would no longer use Fast Track for blanket non-attendance. Such cases had previously been considered for Fast Track simply because they were referred by the head of year. This raises the issue of whether schools and the EWS share congruent views on the appropriate target group for Fast Track. A second LEA had increased the attendance triggers for entry to Fast Track from below 60–70 per cent to below 75–80 per cent.

This change had been made because Fast Track was now LEA wide and the triggers needed to be suitable for schools with higher levels of attendance (compared to the attendance of the pilot schools). In a third LEA, where Fast Track operated in a single school, two cohorts of pupils had been identified for Fast Track. The first strand included pupils with ‘*some very negatively ingrained attendance behaviours*’ who, as a result, did not all respond well to the intervention. Furthermore, the school found it ‘*extremely challenging*’ to manage the re-entry to GCSEs, of those who did succeed in improving their attendance. When selecting the second Fast Track cohort, therefore, the school decided to re-focus efforts towards those pupils with less serious non-attendance patterns. It was anticipated that this group would be more likely to benefit from Fast Track and that they would find it easier to re-engage with their educational studies.

My feeling was to get into Fast Track earlier and to tackle those groups who have been operating around the 70–85 per cent, who are seriously undermining the school’s attendance figures and equally undermining their capacity to achieve their targets academically, but offer a better chance to turn around, because they have an attendance pattern and enough contact with the curriculum for it not to be a totally alien new start (assistant headteacher).

2.3.2 Scope of Fast Track

Three LEAs had taken the decision to roll out Fast Track across the authority, whilst a fourth had expanded its use to other schools. Interviewees from two of these LEAs commented that an extension of Fast Track had stemmed from its success in the pilot schools. EWOs were said to have found the strategy effective, hence other EWOs had expressed an interest in using the approach and an analysis of case outcomes in one LEA revealed that Fast Track was generating better results, than previous working practices:

We get the child back into school faster and 50 per cent of our pupils were back in school the week after we went to court and they are still in school 24 weeks after with an attendance of 80 per cent and that is much more improved (PEWO).

2.3.3 Timescale

Three LEAs reported having moved away from the standard Fast Track model which entailed four weeks of school-level work proceeded by 12 weeks of LEA work. Two of these LEAs had extended the pre-Fast Track period to six weeks, for different reasons. In one case it was felt that pupils could too easily improve their attendance over four weeks in order to avoid entering Fast Track. However, six weeks of sustained attendance demonstrated a stronger commitment and the school felt happier in allowing them to exit the Fast Track process at this point. Interestingly, this same LEA had recently decided that, if parents failed to attend the LEA panel in week one, then the case would proceed to court within four weeks (rather than the normal 12). Another LEA extended the timeframe pre-Fast Track because they believed more time was needed for EWOs to assess cases – to determine the reasons for non-attendance as well as the level of parental cooperation.

The timescale during Fast Track had also changed in one LEA, who explained that it may take longer than the planned 12 weeks for a case to reach court. This was attributed to getting dates for various individuals to attend panel meetings and giving

EWOs sufficient time to prepare cases for court. In addition, it was also recognised that a certain amount of time was needed to see if parents would respond to each stage of the process.

Time to respond

There are certain things that you have to allow time for. You have to allow time for the impact of the first visit to sink in. You have to give time for plans to work. You have to see if the court warning notice is effective. You've got to demonstrate throughout that you've treated people equally and fairly. I think trying to take everything into account, we've probably pared it down as much as we can... I wouldn't like us to become gun hoe about it, where we're getting off on prosecuting people dead quickly just for the sake of it, or tripling our numbers. Your bottom line has got to be, what is in the best interests of the child (EWO).

Time to assess

The problem with the original DfES way that they originally put forward was there was no period of case work so it was very difficult to make an assessment about whether or not the parent was going to be cooperative or not. There can be a myriad of reasons a child is out of school so we have to be very careful about making decisions about prosecution and we have to ascertain that the parent is deliberately not fulfilling their duty to get the child to school (PEWO).

2.3.4 Panels/meetings

Three LEAs reported altering aspects of the panels or meetings that took place during Fast Track. An LEA operating a court focused Fast Track had ceased to use panels, because parents '*never turned up, anything official, they don't bother*'. This reflected the more entrenched cases that were targeted for Fast Track within this particular LEA. Another LEA had reduced the number of review meetings from three to two because it was said to involve too much paperwork. Lastly, an LEA which previously only held panels during the Fast Track process (as opposed to before), had now introduced a meeting in the pre-Fast Track stage. This meeting served as an early warning system for parents, highlighting their child's attendance problems and the possibility of entry to Fast Track.

Policy and practice implications

- This chapter has sought to illuminate the different ways in which Fast Track has been interpreted and operated by a sample of 12 LEAs. It would seem reasonable to conclude that a certain amount of ‘domestication’ has taken place, with the result of producing 12 individual Fast Tracks. This diversity needs to be acknowledged when considering the impact of the strategy, as success can only be properly judged with reference to LEAs individual approaches and intended aims.
- It is interesting that one LEA choose to re-name the framework, adopting the title ‘Fast Track to positive outcomes’. The original terminology does suggest that Fast Track is a strategy for accelerating cases quickly to court. However, most of the LEAs appear to be using Fast Track as an early intervention tool, to work with cases in a structured manner in order to generate improvements in attendance. Prosecution is indeed one of the possible outcomes, but so is withdrawal and, according to interviewees, the majority of cases are not destined for court. Elsewhere, Fast Track is very much a prosecution system, used for the more ingrained cases. In the light of these different interpretations, does the terminology of Fast Track require revision? How important is consistency across LEAs?

Chapter 3

Challenges

Key findings

Many of the main challenges were common to the key professionals involved in Fast Track:

- **Challenges about record keeping/gathering evidence for court** were about ensuring that information was accurate and up to date so that appropriate cases were identified and it could be used as evidence in court. To resolve these challenges, interviewees suggested having robust school recording systems, appropriate school staff involvement and an effective EWS/school partnership.
- **Workload** challenges concerned the time entailed for meetings and the administration involved in preparing cases for court. Cited as resolutions were the provision of extra resources; advanced planning and prioritisation; effective inter-professional relationships; early identification and intervention; appointing designated 'Fast Track' professionals.
- **Timescale** challenges included keeping to the deadlines and sustaining the momentum of Fast Track. It was suggested that these difficulties could be alleviated by having clearly agreed deadlines, having designated 'Fast Track' EWOs and ongoing monitoring of Fast Track cases by EWOs and schools.
- **Relationships with families** challenges involved maintaining positive relations with families throughout the Fast Track process. Possible solutions included explaining clearly the role of Fast Track and the EWS and emphasising a partnership approach.
- **Delays in the court process** was said to reduce the speed of Fast Track. Some suggested this issue could be addressed by having designated court time, prioritising Fast Track cases and negotiation between the EWS and court personnel.
- **Court challenges** lay in a lack of understanding of EWS work by court personnel and the inconsistency and ineffectiveness of court outcomes. Training and education for court personnel was recommended.
- **Prosecution focus challenges** related to the change in emphasis in the EWO role as a result of the Fast Track focus on prosecution. Supervision and clarity of responsibilities for EWOs and improved communication between the EWS and other agencies were nominated as possible solutions.

Fast Track was considered to be a particular challenge for families where children were out of control or where there were ingrained problems because of the short timescale within which they were expected to effect change. Possible resolutions included conveying the seriousness of the situation to families; the EWS providing sensitive support; and early intervention work on parenting skills.

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings on the challenges associated with the implementation of Fast Track. Interviewees were asked about the challenges for schools, EWOs, families, the courts and other agencies. They were also asked to nominate what they thought was the main overall challenge from their perspective. Since there was considerable overlap between the challenges identified for each of the professional participants in Fast Track, the challenges for professionals are discussed first, before moving on to examine the more distinctive challenges for families. The main challenges that were identified are then drawn together in a section at the end of the chapter.

3.1 Challenges for professionals

The areas of challenge for the professional participants in Fast Track centred on:

- record keeping/gathering evidence for court
- workload
- timescale
- relationships with families
- delays in the court process
- court disposals
- the prosecution focus.

3.1.1 Record keeping/gathering evidence for court

Record keeping and gathering evidence for court was one of the most frequently identified challenges for schools and EWOs throughout the Fast Track process. Apart from one LEA, where there was reported to be very low level school involvement with Fast Track, problems with record keeping and gathering evidence for court were evident in all of the authorities, regardless of the type of Fast Track which they operated. In nine authorities, this was cited as a challenge for both EWOs and schools. However, in LEAs where the early stages of Fast Track tended to be school driven or where the EWO was not directly involved until later in the process, record keeping was identified solely as a challenge for schools. Where there was reported to be limited school involvement, EWOs had found it difficult to obtain information from them.

By the latter stages of implementation, over a third of interviewees (only five of whom were school staff) continued to indicate that accurate record keeping had posed a challenge for schools. Whilst only a fifth of interviewees in the initial stages of implementation felt that EWOs' work with schools was a challenge, a year on, a quarter of interviewees (the majority of whom were senior EWS staff) felt that procuring evidence from schools had been problematic.

The primary concern was to do with ensuring that information was correct and up to date so that it could be used as evidence in court. One PEWO, for example, felt that schools had limited ability to ensure that information was accurate because their attendance systems were insufficiently robust:

It was amazing how much inaccurate information we had from the school. That needed to be put right and we needed to be convinced that they were going to be able to update that. We delayed Fast Track a month and I'm still not convinced that school has got everything up to speed (PEWO).

A senior EWO in another authority highlighted the problems that EWOs could sometimes face in obtaining information from schools:

The EWO identified eight cases to Fast Track. After badgering and badgering, the EWO only managed to get any evidence of activity on two of the eight, despite the fact that they've got a pro forma and all they have to do is fill it in, say that they sent a letter, date it and sign it. They can't do it. ... I think it's because there are so many people involved in running of the school ... It's the old story that everybody thinks that somebody else is doing it ... They can't bring it altogether (SEWO).

EWS staff felt that getting school commitment was vital for the process of gathering evidence and the ultimate success of Fast Track, but this itself was viewed as a challenge. Incidences were cited of Fast Track cases having to be 'let go' because school staff had not provided the necessary information.

The issue of unauthorised absences was often raised by EWS staff as a problem. Schools were reported to be reluctant to be involved in Fast Track because of the potential increase in unauthorised absence levels, which reflected badly on their attendance record. This concern was confirmed by one assistant headteacher:

If we give them an authorised absence, then we can't then decide to Fast Track it, so we have to show an unauthorised absence on our figures. The problem is that then it looks bad on our figures. In order to take it to a Fast Track situation, we can't condone any of the absences.

Linked to the issue of record keeping, the identification of appropriate cases was also felt to be a challenging aspect of Fast Track. Instances were reported of cases being identified that were not the 'right type of cases' or not having the 'right type of evidence'. One senior education welfare officer (SEWO), for example, stated that cases had been taken through the Fast Track system when there were genuine medical reasons for absence. Concern was expressed that school staff lacked the necessary skills to identify Fast Track cases or to understand the support that families needed. In three out of the four LEAs where this was highlighted as an issue, Fast Track was focused on the entrenched non-attenders, suggesting that it might be harder to identify appropriate cases at this end of the spectrum, where more complex issues may be involved.

Record keeping/gathering evidence for court: How resolved?

In seven LEAs, there was some indication from interviewees that the problems associated with record keeping and gathering evidence for court had improved as Fast Track had progressed. In three cases, this was due to the introduction or upgrading of electronic recording systems. The use of electronic registration, for example, had enabled one EWO to access attendance data on a daily basis without having to refer to school staff. A more effective relationship between schools and EWOs, regular meetings with schools to raise the profile of attendance or the appointment of school staff with responsibility for attendance were also considered responsible. In some cases, the commitment of schools was felt to have improved as Fast Track had

progressed as the positive results accruing from Fast Track were shared amongst headteachers. Other suggestions nominated by interviewees for improving record keeping and gathering evidence for court fell into three categories: school recording systems, school staffing and the EWS/school partnership:

School recording systems would be improved by:

- ensuring appropriate and rigorous recording systems are in place
- ensuring all school staff understand the attendance recording system
- schools being aware of the need for vigilance with recording
- schools understanding that absences must be unauthorised
- conducting an audit of schools' recording systems
- obtaining a clear undertaking from schools that information is accurate
- school access to, and training in the use of, electronic registration systems
- ensuring outputs from computerised registration systems are checked.

Challenges associated with school staffing would be helped by:

- commitment at senior management level
- the appointment of designated staff with responsibility for attendance
- appointment of appropriately skilled staff (e.g. home–school liaison staff)
- schools seeing the positive effect on attendance.

EWS/school partnership would be improved by:

- involving schools from the outset
- working in partnership with schools to ensure good systems of recording
- good relationships and negotiation between EWOs and schools
- advice and training for school staff
- attendance data being double checked by EWS staff
- giving schools warning of the information that is required
- local agreements and targets for attendance with schools
- the use of EWS support assistants to assist school record keeping
- earlier involvement of the EWO.

3.1.2 Workload

The workload associated with Fast Track was reported to be problematic for both school and EWS staff, for some personnel from legal services, and was also raised as a potential issue for staff from other agencies.

At the latter stages of Fast Track implementation, only a sixth of interviewees (including only three school personnel) from eight LEAs said that the workload for school staff was a challenge (compared to a quarter of interviewees in the earlier stages of implementation), supporting the view that perhaps, as time had progressed and schools had seen the benefits of Fast Track, they felt that the time in meetings was well spent (discussed below).

Where this was still reported to be problematic, the time for meetings appeared to be an issue regardless of whether one or two panel meetings were held and was a

particular difficulty where those involved were senior staff. However, the seriousness of the matters dealt with was also felt to warrant senior staff involvement: *'It is a step process and this is a high level so I think it has got to be [someone senior]'* (deputy headteacher). The time wasted when parents did not turn up for meetings was especially frustrating. The administration workload for school staff was also highlighted. According to the designated EWO for Fast Track in the LEA where the process had been conducted through a series of letters to parents, it was the time, resources and management of the administration involved for the school that was a problem. One particular EWO described how their school saw Fast Track as the sole responsibility of the EWS and was therefore very reluctant to take on any extra work:

The school seem to think it was more to do with our role and not schools, so they wanted it [Fast Track] but they didn't really want to do any of the work associated with it to get it up and running. When we asked them if they would write a letter to send out to their pupils explaining about Fast Track the reaction from the deputy head was "Well, you chose us, why can't you do the letter?" (EWO).

Over a third of interviewees (including five school representatives) from 10 LEAs cited the workload for EWOs as a challenge. However, over half of these interviewees were from three authorities, all of which focused Fast Track on early intervention and border line, rather than, entrenched cases. They included two authorities where Fast Track was LEA-wide and had processed a lot of Fast Track cases and one authority where Fast Track had been conducted with an additional cohort of pupils over and above EWOs' case work, thereby placing an extra burden on staff.

The additional paperwork involved, particularly in preparing cases for court, was raised as a concern. However, the time invested in ensuring that the paperwork was correct was considered vital if cases were to be viewed seriously and not dismissed in court by magistrates. According to a few interviewees, dealing with Fast Track cases had affected EWOs' other work commitments and *'cut into'* the time that could be spent on case work, thereby affecting the service received by schools in some instances. This was particularly noted in the LEA where Fast Track cases were over and above EWOs' normal case load.

A year on, the few interviewees (two legal services representatives and one EWO from two authorities) who felt that the additional workload for legal services had been a challenge in the early stages of implementation remained consistent. One legal services representative stated, for example, that, if there was a *'not guilty'* plea extra time was required to complete the necessary paperwork. Another felt that, if Fast Track was widened to other schools, this would be a significant *'drain'* on the legal services department. Linked to the increased workload for legal services was the issue of withdrawal of cases after the summons due to improvement.

In the early stages of Fast Track implementation six interviewees (none from other agencies) suggested that the intervention might create more referrals or increased pressure for other agencies. However, a year on, only three felt that this remained likely. One EWO, for example, felt that this would be particularly the case if the courts decided to issue more parenting orders as this would have particular repercussions for voluntary agencies like Barnardos. Two school governors suggested that other agencies might have difficulties attending the meetings required for Fast Track, one adding that this might also take them away from other aspects of their

work. It was also felt that agencies may struggle to act within the timescale for Fast Track, particularly given their limited resources. The increased demand placed on other agencies was seen as a positive aspect of the Fast Track process by one EWO as s/he believed that families would now receive the support they required.

Workload for professionals: How resolved?

There was some evidence from interviewees' comments that the extra burden placed on professionals by Fast Track in the early stages of implementation had been alleviated in the latter stages. In two LEAs, for example, the extra time required by school staff for Fast Track meetings was reported to have become less of an issue as schools were beginning to see its benefits. In another, the number of meetings had been reduced from three to two to help resolve this issue. The workload for EWOs had become less of a problem in some cases because attendance had improved without the need for court action or because schools had become more involved in the Fast Track process. This reiterated opinions voiced earlier in the evaluation by some EWOs that the initial increase in workload was part of the '*bedding in*' process.

Suggestions for alleviating the extra pressure created by Fast Track on professionals, in the main, fell into common broad categories, and included:

- increased staff resources
- prior planning and organisation
- having robust systems in place
- administration and IT support
- early identification and intervention
- giving Fast Track cases priority
- having a designated person with responsibility for Fast Track
- imposing limits on the number of Fast Track cases or schools involved
- maintaining relationships and discussion with other professionals involved
- inter-professional training
- recognising Fast Track as a valuable intervention.

3.1.3 The timescale of Fast Track

An essential element of the Fast Track system is the short timescale within which the process, from initialisation to court action, is conducted. However, over a third of interviewees, from all but two of the LEAs, (half of whom were senior EWS staff) considered this to be a particular challenge for EWOs. It was notable that one of the LEAs, where no challenges were reported concerning the timescale, had extended the during-Fast Track period beyond 12 weeks.

According to one EWO: '*It's very structured and quite pressurised ... You can't let time lapse.*' One PEWO reported that it had been difficult to speed up the process without alienating staff and, according to a SEWO:

They're not used to working in a tight time frame, for example, one EWO gave me a certificate of attendance after identifying a case for Fast Track, week six of our process, then it took me another month to get her assessment, by which time the certificate had run out of time.

It is also important to stress, that, despite the fact that they described this as a challenge, a number of EWOs commented that they liked the clarity of structure that the fixed timescale created, a factor reiterated by interviewees' comments on the impact of Fast Track on EWOs (see Section 4.7).

The timescale of Fast Track: How resolved?

Only one interviewee reported that negotiating the timescales and deadlines of Fast Track had become '*slightly easier*' for EWOs as time had progressed. At strategic level, it was suggested that it would be helpful if timescales were taken into account when allocating EWS staff time to schools. Where the limited availability of senior EWS staff for school attendance panels was said to be slowing down the process, it was felt that this could be improved by senior staff blocking time for attending school attendance panels and SEWOs, as well as PEWOs being involved. It was also felt by some that improved understanding and relationships with other professionals involved in the Fast Track process would also facilitate adherence to the deadlines. Since the availability of court times was also felt to slow the process down, it was also suggested that increasing the number of court dates might alleviate part of the problem (delays in the court process are discussed more fully in Section 3.1.5). It was considered important that EWOs should:

- have clear guidelines on deadlines
- be fully aware of the milestones involved
- be involved in discussions and agreeing deadlines
- prioritise Fast Track cases
- adjust their practice to allow for the timescales
- be vigilant with record keeping
- be involved in cases earlier
- engage in ongoing monitoring.

However, some interviewees felt that, as well as the above measures, it was important to recognise that, by using the Fast Track process, EWOs were not '*reinventing the wheel*' and that it was more about '*sharpening up existing procedures rather than doing anything brand new*'; and that, even if they did not entirely keep to timescale, the process was still a lot swifter than before.

3.1.4 Relationships with families

In the early stages of implementation concern was expressed about the negative impact that the Fast Track 'to prosecution' focus may have on professionals' relationship with families. It was therefore considered a challenge for school staff and EWOs to maintain positive relations with families throughout the process.

A year on, only five interviewees (two from schools) felt that schools' relationships with parents was an issue, compared to ten interviewees (five from schools) in the early stages of implementation. However, the number of interviewees who felt that relationships with parents were a challenge for EWOs remained relatively constant. Perhaps not surprisingly, the five authorities where the negative reaction of parents was not reported as problematic for schools or EWOs, had focused their Fast Track

endeavours on pupils with more borderline attendance problems rather than more severe ones.

The issues centred around the potential negative reaction of parents to the Fast Track system. It was felt that some parents may experience the Fast Track process as *'all happening incredibly fast'*, and that this would lead to them being less cooperative and even refusing to send their children to school. In one instance, for example, an EWS manager had had to allay school governors' fears that *'all the parents would be in prison'* and there would be *'no children left in the school'*. One PEWO talked about the reluctance of primary schools to get involved with Fast Track because they felt it might have a detrimental effect on their relationship with parents. A primary headteacher confirmed this view, noting that the formality of the school attendance panel was a departure from normal practice. This had raised concerns about the effect it may have on his/her relationship with parents and about appearing to be unsupportive. Another headteacher was worried that the school would get *'tied up'* with issuing fines and that parents would not be able to recognise the distinction between schools and the legal system.

Families with entrenched attendance problems were reported to be notoriously difficult to engage and the main concern of EWOs was that the negative reaction of parents to the speed of the Fast Track process may exacerbate this problem and potentially lead to aggression, as illustrated by this EWO comment:

They'd get quite upset ... they blame people and I think some of them, if you said 'Look, you've got this ten-week period to turn things around and if you don't do it ...', they could get quite stroppy with you (EWO).

Another EWO stated that some parents had responded aggressively to the court summons and *'personalise it against me'*. S/he felt that they acted as if the individual EWO was taking them to court rather than the LEA. Others were concerned that, as a consequence, this might harden attitudes towards the EWS and families would be less cooperative. However, it may be worth noting these were hypothetical and not actual cases.

Relationships with families: How resolved?

Whilst interviewees advocated a formal approach with Fast Track, in order to signal the seriousness of non-attendance to parents, they also suggested that a negative reaction from parents could be avoided by building positive relationships with families, particularly, for example, following a school or LEA attendance panel meeting. It was felt that EWOs could do this by:

- emphasising that it is a partnership process between parents and the EWS
- putting Fast Track across in a positive way
- explaining to them the role of the EWS and the Fast Track process
- making every effort to contact families at an early stage
- conducting vigilant groundwork to ensure no valid reasons for absence
- giving parents the opportunity to discuss any issues they may have
- ensuring that evidence of non-attendance was available

- ensuring that they plan in casework and review cases regularly
- focusing on the children
- balancing support with insistence.

From the school perspective, EWS staff felt that some schools would need time for ‘coming round to the idea’ of threatening court action and, as such, it was considered important to ensure that Fast Track was not over used.

3.1.5 Delays in the court process

A significant issue that emerged more in the latter stages of Fast Track were the delays in the Fast Track process imposed by the court system. Whereas about a fifth of interviewees (the majority of whom were PEWOs or staff from legal services) noted this as a potential challenge in the early stages, a year on, nearly a half of all interviewees (from all but two LEAs), including five school staff, identified this as an issue. The fact that the court process was slowing Fast Track down was inevitably highlighted more as more cases went to court and the two LEAs where no problems were reported were those where it was recognised that a limited number of cases had reached the court stage. Whilst one court representative and two legal services staff acknowledged court delays, there were conflicting views in two LEAs amongst EWS and court personnel, the latter maintaining that there had been no significant increase in the number of cases and, as such, this had not been a problem.

Interviewees stressed the importance of getting Fast Track cases to court quickly in order to achieve the required impact on families:

There’s too many [cases]. To me, if a court knows that there are 36 people that need prosecuting, that should be what happens whether there’s one court or two courts or three courts. I mean we’re working to first-day response, we’re trying to get all the systems in place and when we get to the final hurdle, it is just not happening. We were actually saying “Well if there’s a riot, courts are opened and people are seen there and then.” Well surely this is similar (school attendance coordinator).

In one instance, the courts were reported to be ‘totally swamped’. A further comment was that the time constraints within the court system had led to a ‘slowing down’ of the Fast Track process at the point where court action was taken, so that, according to one PEWO, getting a case to court was ‘still a lengthy process’. This was also reiterated by the solicitor interviewed in this case:

We’re probably looking at least two months for the first court date and, bearing in mind that’s the first hearing, so, if the parent pleads not guilty you will be looking at another two months or so.

According to school staff, delays in the court process could reduce the effectiveness of the Fast Track system. This emerged as more of an issue for schools later in the evaluation, perhaps because more cases had gone to court or were awaiting court action. Some school staff felt that, as a consequence, Fast Track was ineffective. A deputy headteacher described a sense of ‘frustration’ that so few cases were taken to court and that, when the decision was taken to prosecute, ‘how long-winded the process is ... By the time it gets to court, they’ve left and there’s nothing that can be done’. According to an attendance coordinator, ‘We could, say, nominate someone in

September and, if we're not top of the list, we could be in March, April and our turn could still not have come.'

Interviewees said that adjournments occurred when parents did not turn up in court and this was also felt to add to the length of the process and the time that children were not in school. One head of year stated that parents know that, if they do not turn up, the case is adjourned and the EWO has to apply for a new court date. It was also often the case that parents were advised to plead 'not guilty' by solicitors. Solicitors were reported to be increasingly used to represent parents in court. This appeared to be something that had arisen as more Fast Track cases had progressed to court, as reinforced by comments from interviewees:

I think it is because we are taking more cases, there's more media coverage of non-attendance and the legal industry. The solicitors have picked up on this and they have started to actually advertise their services (team leader).

One of the problems we are getting more and more frequently is parents pleading not guilty and then we're getting adjournments. I think the solicitors are finding they can get plenty of money through legal aid by doing it this way, so that has protracted the system more than anything else and that's not about the court, that's about being advised to plead not guilty (PEWO).

This again was reported to make the process lengthier and, according to one SEWO, made things 'drag on'.

However, on the contrary, some interviewees stated that there had not been the number of cases going through the courts because attendance had improved without recourse to court action or that the system was set up to deal with cases swiftly. There were sometimes conflicting views, where EWS staff felt that there was an issue with court time, but legal or court representatives indicated that this was not the case as there had not been any great increase in the number of cases.

Delays in the court process: How resolved?

It was felt that the courts could help alleviate the problem of court delay by:

- having designated courts for Fast Track cases
- increased flexibility with court dates
- greater frequency of court dates
- giving Fast Track cases priority over other prosecutions.

It was felt that the EWS could assist the courts by:

- providing figures for the expected number of Fast Track cases to the courts
- liaising and negotiating with magistrates and clerks
- developing a positive relationship with court personnel
- raising court personnell's awareness of Fast Track
- being more proactive in taking cases to court faster
- taking cases under the lesser offence.

3.1.6 Court disposals

The challenges associated with court disposals for EWS and school staff centred around their ineffectiveness, whilst for court personnel, this focused on the lack of understanding of the work of the EWS. In the final phase of the evaluation, about a third of interviewees (from 10 LEAs), half of whom were senior EWS staff, cited ineffective court outcomes or the lack of understanding by court personnel as a challenge. A similar fraction had highlighted the lack of understanding by court personnel and uncertainty about the value of court outcomes as issues earlier in the evaluation. Both the LEAs where this had not been a problem operated Fast Track as an early intervention initiative focused on border line rather than ‘hard core’ cases.

EWS interviewees talked about the inconsistency and ineffectiveness of court outcomes and court personnell’s lack of understanding and knowledge of the work of the EWS was an underlying concern. They felt that non-attendance was not taken seriously enough and, in particular, that there was a lack of appreciation of the work done by EWS staff prior to cases going to court. This is illustrated by the following comments:

The first prosecutions had a dozen cases. We had a zero tolerance of unauthorised absence after the final school attendance review meeting. So, some of them had only got one day off, and some of the attendance had been up to 80 per cent and after they’d heard three or four cases, the magistrates stopped us and said that they didn’t want to hear any more cases because they didn’t think they were serious enough, as we’d usually been going to court with 40 per cent cases. They really didn’t think this was a good use of court time. We objected to this, but they were going to put a formal complaint in to the DfES (PEWO).

It’s just the way it is – different benches in different areas, and even in the same area, consider cases differently ... Every opportunity I get to bend a magistrate’s ear I do. I would like them to dispose of these cases in exactly the same way as they dispose of cases where people haven’t got a TV licence, or haven’t paid their car tax. I don’t care if you’re unemployed, if you can afford to run a car, you can afford to tax it. Why isn’t it the same for education cases (SEWO).

Some school staff also expressed doubts about the benefits of likely outcomes and, as such, questioned the effectiveness of Fast Track. As well as the lack of ‘heavy penalties’, there were concerns about the reluctance of the EWS to take cases to court. School staff commented that they were disappointed with some cases where parents had been given a conditional discharge and that courts were often reticent to act at all. One assistant head interviewed felt more strongly and was adamant that school and EWS efforts were being undermined by the response of the courts:

I can foresee all sorts of problems because, ultimately, the credibility locally of the entire system will be determined by what happens to those that reach court. If that doesn’t produce the impact, than all these efforts are probably going to be undermined.

Court disposals: How resolved?

In three LEAs, the understanding of the courts was felt to have improved as Fast Track had progressed, as a result of ‘PR’ work that had been undertaken by the EWS and the provision of information to the courts. One court representative interviewed reiterated that s/he knew more about the system since more cases had reached court. In addition, in one LEA, the attitude of the courts was reported to be improving as

more cases were entering court. In the main, other suggestions centred on addressing court personnel's lack of understanding and included:

- the EWS taking a proactive approach to engagement with the courts
- training and education for court personnel
- meetings between the EWS and court personnel
- briefing notes and other communication with magistrates
- having regular slots for the EWS to work with magistrates
- talking with magistrates about sentencing
- having someone on the court user group from the local authority
- issuing guidelines and information to magistrates
- use of the DfES guidance to magistrates
- encouraging the courts to be stricter.

3.1.7 Prosecution focus

In some LEAs, involvement in Fast Track 'to prosecution' had meant a significant change in emphasis in role for EWOs. It was felt that this could pose a challenge for schools and other agencies, as well as EWS staff. Three interviewees in the early stages of Fast Track implementation talked about the loss of the welfare aspect of the EWO role in association with the use of Fast Track. By the later stages of implementation, the requirement for a significant culture shift for some EWS staff emerged as a more prevalent challenge, when it was highlighted by 11 interviewees (all but one EWS staff) in six of the 12 LEAs.

A PEWO reported once more that implementing Fast Track was against the principles of some EWOs who were used to working within a social work model and another that it had been '*a big change in practice*' for social workers in the team. It was felt to be more difficult to change the attitudes of those who had been in the job long term.

It was felt that the loss of the welfare aspect of the work might lead to a sense of deskilling by EWS staff and concomitant loss of job satisfaction: '*Just pushing people through the court process doesn't require the skills that fieldworking in people's home to make changes does* (PEWO).

The inevitable shift in focus towards prosecution meant also that there was a potential clash of priorities with the work of other agencies. Seven interviewees (from six out of the 12 authorities), none of whom were from other agencies, identified this as a challenge. Interviewees talked about other agencies not being supportive of court action, which meant that their work may not '*sit comfortably*' with the Fast Track process. However, as more concrete evidence of a priority clash, specific incidents with Social Services staff (detailed below) were described by interviewees in two LEAs:

There was a lot of pressure not to prosecute this family and Social Services actually turned up in court to act as the parent's witness, despite the fact they we'd kept them informed all the way along (head of EWS).

We had an LEA panel where the parent has two children on the child protection register, so a social worker attended the meeting. I felt that the social worker took a role that was council for the defence really. She was using mother's situation – living with an abusive partner and

having a substance abuse problem – as mitigating circumstances, whereas the EWS kept repeating that this child was being denied an education and this is what we're here for. I think there was a reluctant agreement from the social worker, but I still felt that she thought this woman has got enough to cope with without you giving her grief about attendance, but we saw it as our role, because otherwise we're just perpetuating a cycle (EWO).

In other LEAs, there had been no challenges to the decision to prosecute but concern about 'potential alienation' from other agencies was noted. According to one EWS manager:

Often the families we're dealing with are the ones where there is financial hardship, where there are social issues. I can understand how agencies could see it as us punishing the parents more by heaping legal sanctions on them. But equally, so we need to be able to show the agencies what we've done to try to bring about change within the family. Also, we need to be able to say to these agencies that, if we don't try and help these children, we're just recreating history because they will perform in the same way that their parents did.

However, in one instance, a senior EWO reported that the reverse was almost the case and that there had been conflict because the EWS had been accused of not acting swiftly enough:

They've done everything they can and they'll turn round in case conferences we have and they will basically say EWS – they are not doing what they are meant to be doing. Why aren't you serving a court warning?

Two EWS interviewees also felt that the change in focus of the work of the EWS was a challenge for schools and it was considered important for schools to recognise that the paperwork for prosecution was a valid use of their time.

Prosecution focus: How resolved?

There was some evidence from interviewee comments that EWOs had become more accustomed to their 'enforcement' role as Fast Track had progressed. It was felt by some EWS staff that EWOs for whom a more 'social work' approach had been the norm, would eventually see the positive results of Fast Track, recognise that it was a more consistent approach and would accept this in time. One PEWO stated that staff had become used to the focus on prosecution and that this was less problematic. It was also suggested that EWOs could be supported by:

- ensuring that there was a balance of court and welfare work
- ensuring they are clear about their responsibilities
- streamlining the process and prosecuting more quickly
- close supervision and monitoring
- support and training from senior managers.

Interviewees felt that a clash of priorities with other agencies could be avoided by:

- improved communication with the EWS
- increasing agencies' understanding of the EWS and the Fast Track process
- joint working
- explaining to families the role of different agencies

- recognition that raising the profile of attendance was valuable for the work of other agencies
- discussions about prioritising education and taking non-attendance seriously
- recognition of the work of the EWS for changing life chances for children
- vigilance in referring cases to agencies earlier
- being able to show that the EWS have tried to address families' needs.

It was also felt that schools would adapt to the change in the EWS role through better communication, working closely together, guidelines and schools taking more ownership of attendance issues.

3.1.8 Other challenges for the EWS

Two other challenges were identified that were unique for the EWS: the need for increased staff resources and the use of PACE cautioning. These are now discussed.

Although the need for **increased staffing** was highlighted as an issue in relation to the extra workload involved in the early stages of Fast Track implementation, it was raised as a significant issue a year on, specifically in relation to the future development of Fast Track. This was identified as a challenge by eight interviewees (half of whom were PEWOs), from six of the LEAs, who felt that lack of resources threatened further Fast Track development. These managers anticipated problems when they attempted to take Fast Track LEA-wide. One EWS manager (in an LEA where the Fast Track cohort of pupils were separate to the EWO's casework), for example, stated that s/he would like to roll Fast Track out to other schools but did not have the staff resources to do so. In another LEA Fast Track pilot area, the merging of the EWS with Social Services had led to staffing reductions which threatened the present LEA-wide Fast Track system. In a small authority, the limited resources were reported to make it difficult to introduce Fast Track to other schools. Inevitably, the main solution to the problem posed by limited resources for Fast Track development was the provision of extra resources. However, ongoing training for EWS staff, having a designated Fast Track EWO and the implementation of Fast Track one school at a time were considered to be alternative internal options. The introduction of alternative schemes to Fast Track which targeted specific parents without having strict time limits imposed (as reported in one LEA) was also suggested.

The specific issue of **PACE cautioning** (Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984) was raised by three PEWOs. Confusion over the use of PACE cautioning was evident and interviewees highlighted the need for national advice: *'Well, nobody said whether we need to and or don't need to, so we're just covering our back really.'* In one LEA, conflicting advice about the use of PACE cautioning had been received and EWOs were reported to be unhappy about using it. It was felt that the issues relating to PACE cautioning could be resolved by having guidelines on the use of PACE cautioning from the DfES, conducting cautioning by letter, gaining recommendations from legal services or the borough solicitor and training for EWOs. One LEA had got round this by issuing the PACE caution for the 441a offence but not for the first offence.

3.2 Challenges for families

The challenges for families were unique and were centred around:

- increased stress/pressure
- facing responsibility
- parents' lack of control over their children
- the short timescale
- relationships with EWOs and schools.

3.2.1 Increased stress/pressure

The extra pressure created and increased demands placed on families by the Fast Track process by the threat of court action was the most frequently identified challenge for families in the later stages of Fast Track implementation, whereas parents' lack of control over their children had been the most often cited challenge for families in the early stages of implementation.

Ten interviewees (including three school staff), from six LEAs, identified this as a challenge, compared with eight interviewees in the early stages of implementation. In the main, the LEAs were those which had opted to focus Fast Track on pupils with lower levels of attendance where they may have had more significant problems, suggesting that Fast Track may be adding to existing pressures. This was reiterated by interviewee comments. Most referred to the additional burden on top of social problems they might already have: *'We have families in a great deal of stress getting a little bit more stress added to them, and is that helpful?'* (PEWO). Three interviewees referred to the additional financial hardship created by fines, particularly for those such as single mothers who were already facing *'the poverty trap'*. A school governor, for example, felt that, *'Applying a sanction of a fine to somebody whose already on benefits and struggling to make ends meet is going to be counter-productive.'* Finally, one school representative mentioned the stress involved in parents having to face a room of professionals. Interviewees talked about parents having to face the consequences of not getting their children to school and some parents being anxious about going through the court process. According to a school governor, parents were more bothered about going to court than about their children's education. One interviewee, a team leader, for example, felt that families with ingrained attendance problems previously thought of court as a threat and were now finding that it was a reality. However, some expressed doubt as to whether the threat of court action impacted on parents at all.

Increased stress/pressure: How overcome?

Whilst one PEWO suggested that undue stress of families might be resolved by targeting appropriate families for Fast Track (i.e. not those with significant problems), a school representative said that it would be helpful to involve other professionals from the school to help address any additional problems families may have. In addition, a YOT representative suggested that conducting the process in a sympathetic manner and withdrawal of cases where parents were willing to accept support might help alleviate some of the stress for families. A senior EWS felt that it would help if Fast Track was put across to parents in a positive light and by stressing that they were there to work in partnership with them. This EWS decried the use of the term 'Fast

Track to prosecution’ on the basis that it gave ‘*a very negative message to parents*’. It was suggested that the issue of fines might be addressed by the use of other sanctions, such as community service. On a more strategic level, it was felt that raising the profile of attendance nationally and conveying the seriousness of non-attendance to families could help alleviate the problem.

3.2.2 Facing responsibility

Fast Track meant that families had to face up to their responsibilities or recognise the seriousness of their children’s non-attendance, and this was considered a challenge for parents. Seven interviewees (including two school staff), from four LEAs, identified this as a challenge later in the evaluation, compared with nine interviewees previously. Facing up to their responsibilities meant that parents had to act, whereas previously they had ‘*got away with it for years*’. Interviewees talked, for example, about the fact that, whilst threats of court action had been made in the past, Fast Track ensured that families knew that schools and EWOs ‘*meant business*’.

Facing responsibility: How overcome?

One interviewee stated that s/he was uncertain how families would resolve this, but that it had made them think about their attitude to education and to school. Others suggested that families could be helped to resolve this by:

- approaching the issue sensitively and supportively
- offering advice, support and guidance
- a partnership approach
- taking a positive attitude rather than focusing solely on court action
- helping families to address issues
- early intervention
- engaging parents in their children’s education
- working within framework and procedures.

3.2.3 Parents’ lack of control over their children

Later in the implementation of Fast Track, only five interviewees (four of whom were school personnel) identified parents’ lack of control over their children as a challenge for them, in contrast to 12 interviewees (about a fifth of the sample) in the early stages of implementation. Might this indicate a hardening of professional attitudes or greater expectations of families as professionals became more involved with Fast Track or perhaps a recognition that it may be inappropriate in such circumstances?

Interviewees suggested that the greatest challenge would be for parents whose children were out of control and who did not care whether they went to court. In these instances it was often felt that parents were cooperative and made every attempt to get their children to school, but without success. In some cases, parents thought that their children were in school when they were not. According to one headteacher interviewed:

My experience is that it has challenged the parenting skills of some parents. There are parents that are deliberately colluding with their kid’s absenteeism from school and those parents that

really can't cope with the problems that their children are presenting. Fast Track is certainly challenging for the first half and it's supportive for the second.

Parents' lack of control over their children: How overcome?

It was suggested by one school representative that some families do not have the resources to deal with children who are out of control, but other interviewees suggested that this might be addressed by:

- taking time to explain the consequences of Fast Track for children's parents
- focusing on parents' relationship with their children
- early intervention and work on parenting or assertiveness skills
- not using Fast Track with older children
- insisting that parents bring their children into school.

3.2.4 The short timescale

In the early stages of evaluation, nine interviewees indicated that the limited time within which families were expected to achieve change or '*get their act together*' would pose a challenge for them, particularly where there were entrenched attendance problems. However, a year on, slightly fewer (six interviewees) felt that this was the case, again, maybe indicating a hardening of professional attitudes or greater expectations of families as Fast Track had progressed.

According to one PEWO, '*everything happens quicker*' and one SEWO felt that it was a shock for parents because of the speed. A team leader, for example, described Fast Track as 'a wake up call' for some families because there was no time delay, with the only chance of withdrawal being if the child is in school. Some felt that this would be a particular challenge for those where non-attendance was an ingrained problem and where behaviour had gone unchallenged for years. Under these circumstances, they felt parents could not be expected to change this overnight. According to one EWO:

A lot of these families they're just entrenched in social problems and family history of non-attendance, just not valuing education. So I think if you gave them a timescale to try and improve in a way, this goes against that, it doesn't give them a chance.

In contrast, one EWO thought that the short timescale for improvement gave families a goal and helped them progress.

The short timescale: How overcome?

Interviewees talked about the difficulties involved in changing ingrained attendance problems and the fact that culture change would take time. They added that the problem of non-attendance needed to be addressed earlier when children were younger, for example, through the development of parenting skills.

3.2.5 Relationships with EWOs and schools

The potential breakdown of relations between families and the EWS or schools was considered a challenge for families, as well as for schools and EWOs (see Section

3.1.4). Six interviewees (all EWS staff), from five of the LEAs, identified this as a challenge later in Fast Track's implementation, compared with eight interviewees (four school and four EWS staff) in the early stages of implementation.

Interviewees referred to the potential negative reaction from parents and the detrimental effect this may have on their cooperation. According to one interviewee, a 'them and us' situation might develop. One EWO, for example, talked about the resentment court action might cause and the feeling that families had been singled out:

They might think "Oh, I thought you were here to help me and now you're doing this". It could create trust problems. At the moment I've got one girl that I'm making progress with. She is only coming into school so that she can talk to me. If she found out that I was prosecuting her parents, she might not feel that she could talk to me anymore (EWO).

One PEWO felt that Fast Track might harden families' attitudes to the EWS, although admitting that this was difficult to assess as so few cases had gone through the Fast Track process. According to one EWO, the short timescale could provoke an aggressive reaction in parents.

Relationships with EWOs and schools: How overcome?

Trust problems between EWOs and families were reported by one PEWO to have become less of a problem as families had got to know the system and what needed to be done to avoid court action. It was suggested that a negative relationship with parents might be avoided by EWOs:

- explaining to parents the EWO's role and the Fast Track process
- emphasising a partnership approach
- giving parents the opportunity to discuss any issues they may have
- putting Fast Track across in a positive way
- planning in casework and reviewing cases regularly
- focusing on the children
- ensuring they can provide evidence of non-attendance
- contacting parents at early stage and making them aware of Fast Track
- balancing support with insistence.

3.3 Main challenges of Fast Track

Table 3.1 shows the main challenges that were highlighted for all the key players in the Fast Track process, i.e. schools, EWOs, families, courts and other agencies, which have been discussed throughout this chapter.

A year on, when asked to reflect on the main challenges **overall**, perhaps not surprisingly given that they are the key players, Fast Track was considered to pose the most significant challenges for the EWS and schools. No main challenges for families were identified, probably reflecting the need to challenge families as an integral part of the process in order to provoke a change in behaviour in them and, ultimately, their children. Similarly, no main challenges were identified for other agencies, again, not surprisingly, given their reported lack of involvement in practice.

The main overall challenges for the EWS and schools reiterated the points raised in previous dialogue with interviewees. The ability to collate accurate information by schools and the ability of EWOs to maintain Fast Track 'on track' in terms of the imposed deadlines, were where the most significant threat to its efficiency and effectiveness lay. Indeed, it is therefore not surprising, for example, that significant variations in timescale have emerged as one of the features of Fast Track systems in practice.

Although not highlighted as main challenges overall as frequently as were timescales and school record keeping, the extra burden placed on EWS staff by the work entailed was raised. This may have implications for the long-term sustainability of Fast Track and its further development, particularly as, alongside this, the need for extra resources for Fast Track development was also flagged up by some PEWOs.

The problems associated with delays in the court process were also considered key by some interviewees. At the outset of Fast Track such issues may not have been anticipated, but they may now need to be addressed.

The 'symmetry' or overlap of operational-level challenges for school and EWS staff is quite apparent. It may suggest that the fulcrum of Fast Track can be identified as this relationship or partnership between schools and the EWS. Thus, the mutual commitment to providing accurate information and evidence, and the need to have a unified approach to raising the profile of attendance and changing the culture of non-attendance within some families, may be two key areas for ensuring Fast Track's success.

Table 3.1 The main challenges for the participants in Fast Track

Schools	EWOs	Families
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ record keeping ▪ workload ▪ delay in the court process ▪ court disposals ▪ relationships with parents ▪ timescale ▪ prosecution focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ timescale ▪ workload ▪ gathering evidence for court ▪ prosecution focus ▪ resources ▪ relationships with families ▪ PACE cautioning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ stress/pressure ▪ facing responsibility ▪ children who are out of control ▪ the short timescale ▪ relationships with EWOs and schools
Courts	Other agencies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ court time ▪ court disposals ▪ workload for legal services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ prosecution focus ▪ workload 	

Policy and practice implications

- The findings suggest that an effective relationship between schools and EWOs is key to Fast Track success. Hence, the ways in which improved relations could be promoted, for example, through the appropriate location of services and joint training, is also worthy of attention.
- Given that accurate information forms the essential basis for the effective delivery of Fast Track, consideration may need to be given to the effectiveness of school attendance systems prior to Fast Track being introduced.
- The extra workload Fast Track entailed for EWOs continued to be a problem after the initial establishment of the Fast Track process. This may have significant implications for long-term sustainability if extra resources (e.g. a Fast Track post) are not available to support the initiative; particularly as the EWS in some areas appear to be experiencing cuts in service. Alternatively, further examination of the EWO role may be necessary.
- It would appear that, in many areas, the availability of court time could pose a significant obstacle to the effectiveness and efficiency with which a Fast Track system can operate, particularly if there is a shift from a school towards an LEA-wide focus for Fast Track. This will again have implications for long-term sustainability unless designated time is addressed with the courts or a limit is imposed on the number of Fast Track cases.

Chapter 4

Perceptions of impact

Key findings

Overall, more interviewees gave positive assessments of impact a year on from Fast Track's introduction, than had done so during the early stages of implementation.

Positive impacts on **pupils and parents** were cited as:

- making parents more aware of their responsibilities and cooperative with other parties
- increased pupils' attendance levels
- changed pupils' attitudes towards school attendance.

Some interviewees suggested that while parents responded positively to the early intervention, the threat of court was removed too quickly and subsequently attendance deteriorated. This observation highlights the importance of ongoing attendance monitoring procedures and suggests that pressure on parents needs to be sustained once cases are withdrawn from the process, in order for regular attendance to be maintained. It was also notable that a reported lack of impact emerged mainly from interviewees in LEAs where Fast Track was targeted at more entrenched cases of non-attendance.

In the later stages of the evaluation, a greater number of interviewees reported that general attendance levels and attitudes towards attendance had improved since Fast Track's implementation. However, the importance of other attendance initiatives in this overall improvement was also mentioned.

A greater number of interviewees also stated that the impact of Fast Track on **schools** had been positive because, as well as improvements in attendance, it had resulted in a structured and 'transparent' system that assisted schools. In other instances, limited impact was cited due to schools' lack of direct involvement.

Reported positive impacts of Fast Track for **EWOs** included having: a more structured process to work within; increased professionalism; and access to another tool to improve school attendance.

Three LEAs appeared to have procured **press coverage** in connection with Fast Track. The importance of **local** press involvement was cited as significant for maximising impact.

When asked about the overall main impact of Fast Track, responses focused primarily on EWS procedures and concomitant improvements in attitudes to attendance or attendance levels.

Introduction

Having considered the challenges experienced in relation to Fast Track, this chapter moves on to present interviewees' opinions on the impact of Fast Track. Whereas during the earlier stages of implementation interviewees from five of the 12 LEAs spoke aspirationally about impact, a year on from its implementation all interviewees felt more able to discuss actual impact which had been clearly evidenced.

This section details individually the various areas of Fast Track impact, starting with the parents and pupils involved. The general impact on attendance figures and attitudes to school attendance is then considered. Following this, the chapter reflects on the perceived impact of Fast Track on the professionals involved in the process – schools, EWOs, other agencies and the courts. Finally, it considers the impact of press coverage focusing on Fast Track.

4.1 Impact on parents being prosecuted

When interviewees were questioned about the impact of Fast Track on parents being prosecuted, thirty-one individuals from 11 LEAs identified positive impacts. They noted that parents were:

- made aware of their responsibilities (25)
- compelled to cooperate (6).

Interviewees from 11 LEAs, noted that, since the implementation of Fast Track, parents were more **aware of their responsibilities** as far as attendance was concerned. In ten of these eleven LEAs, Fast Track was seen as an 'early intervention' strategy, while in the remaining LEA the focus was on moving difficult cases towards court. These interviewees, the majority of them EWS personnel, thought that entering parents onto the Fast Track system '*highlighted the fact that attendance is an important issue*'. The panel meetings had also provided a unique opportunity for the EWS and schools to convey to parents that, by law, they were required to ensure their children attended school and, if they failed to do so, action would be taken. This increased awareness was said to result in the targeted parents reappraising attendance:

I think Fast Track has focused parents' minds. I think parents are a lot more aware now of the importance of attendance and that the local authority are just not prepared to sit back and let children not attend school regularly (PEWO).

Six interviewees from five LEAs felt Fast Track had made parents **cooperate** with other parties involved in the prosecution process. From the outset, parents were advised that, if they engaged with their EWO, attended meetings and worked cooperatively with other agencies, the magistrate would be more likely to bestow a lesser penalty or, alternatively, prosecution might be averted. Consequently, some parents were said to be keener to engage with the services involved:

Parents have become more responsive. Parents have phoned EWOs. I've got a case going through Fast Track and one of the parents was on the phone yesterday saying, "I can't get my child into school, can you help me?" We'd had very little from her before but now, because

she's got a summons and she's in the 12-week system, she's suddenly phoning us up and asking for help (EWO team leader).

It is notable that the LEA where interviewees failed to report any positive impact on parents adopted the Fast Track system as a means of progressing difficult cases towards court. Hence, the Fast Track cases in this LEA typically had more severe attendance concerns than those in other LEAs.

Five interviewees from four LEAs believed that Fast Track had **no significant impact** on parents being prosecuted. These parents were '*unperturbed, not bothered*' by the threat of prosecution and failed to engage even on receipt of a court summons or formal PACE caution. Again, these parents were from LEAs where Fast Track targeted the '*harder core*' cases.

There is no impact really. The Fast Track ones I've done, they've not turned up to court and they're just real hard non-attenders. They generally just don't engage (EWO).

During the earlier stages of implementation eight interviewees believed Fast Track had exerted a **negative impact** on parents being prosecuted, remarking that they felt let down by the process and found the whole experience daunting. A year on from Fast Track's implementation there were no such comments. While interviewees acknowledged that Fast Track had a '*zero tolerance*' approach with parents, they highlighted that the process was intended to benefit them.

The remaining sixteen interviewees felt that the impact of Fast Track on parents had been:

- case specific (13)
- short term (3).

Thirteen interviewees from eight LEAs noted that the impact Fast Track had on parents being prosecuted **depended entirely on the case**. One EWO reported that, whereas '*some parents had been very grateful*', others resented the involvement of the EWS and subsequently made no effort to collaborate with their EWO:

I can cite cases where we've had varied effect. There was one, even before the mum was issued with the summons, the attendance had improved nearly 100 per cent. And then you have cases where you've prosecuted the parents second time, third time and it hasn't had any impact on the children's attendance (SEWO).

Two of these interviewees remarked that Fast Track was more successful with the parents of primary school pupils than their older counterparts. This is reinforced by the family illustrations in Section 6.5. One perspective here was that the parents of secondary school children had tolerated longer periods of irregular attendance and, as a result, were more resistant to any form of intervention:

By the time it gets to Year 11, if parents haven't got into a routine of encouraging their children to come to school regularly, then we've lost the battle really (assistant headteacher).

Three interviewees felt that Fast Track only had a **short-term impact** on parents being prosecuted. They believed that after parents attended a school attendance panel, or received a court summons, their child's attendance improved but the impact of Fast

Track on the family was not sustained and subsequently, attendance declined. This view is supported by evidence from the case tracking system (see Chapter 5). In these LEAs, Fast Track was seen more as an early intervention strategy, than purely a vehicle for prosecution. Consequently, more cases were entered onto Fast Track with the expectation that most would respond to the intervention and be withdrawn, with only a small proportion actually proceeding towards court. Some interviewees suggested that while parents in these LEAs responded positively to the early intervention, the threat of court was removed too quickly and subsequently attendance deteriorated:

I've noticed people that have been non-attenders come back in and then go off again [when their case is withdrawn]. So in the short term it's had an impact (deputy headteacher).

This revelation highlights the importance of ongoing attendance monitoring procedures and suggests that pressure on parents needs to be sustained once cases are withdrawn from the process in order for regular attendance to be maintained. It was suggested that this could be achieved by informing parents that, if attendance deteriorated, cases would immediately re-enter Fast Track and personnel involved would be less lenient under these circumstances.

4.2 Impact on pupils (of parents being prosecuted)

Thirty interviewees from ten LEAs felt that the impact of Fast Track on pupils, whose parents were being prosecuted for their poor school attendance, had been **positive**. The following effects were identified by interviewees:

- improved attendance levels (15)
- improved attitudes towards school attendance (12)
- enabled pupils to become acquainted with EWS, school and agency staff (3).

Fifteen interviewees from ten LEAs (compared with those from seven LEAs during the earlier stages of implementation) reported that pupils selected for Fast Track had started **attending school more frequently**. The fifteen interviewees had witnessed actual improvements in their Fast Track pupils' attendance and were clearly impressed. One EWO remarked that Fast Track had been '*very effective in achieving more attendance*' and a deputy head confirmed that in his/her school they had witnessed '*a vast improvement*' in Fast Track pupils' attendance. A few interviewees even chose to speak about the knock-on effects of improved attendance levels, in particular, citing pupils' enhanced attainment and social skills resulting in them being '*more settled and happier in school*'.

Twelve interviewees from nine LEAs felt that the main reason Fast Track pupils started attending school more frequently was because their **attitudes towards attendance changed**. Interviewees explained that, whereas previously pupils had given little consideration to the consequences of missing school, the Fast Track process highlighted to these pupils the importance of them being at school and the seriousness of not attending. One EWO explained that Fast Track '*really hit home to them that they need to be in school*'. In addition, interviewees sensed there was considerable fear in pupils that, as a result of their actions, their parents could face court action. This was a factor that interviewees felt had a profound effect on pupils'

attendance levels: *'I'd say three-quarters of the turn around has been because the child doesn't want mum or dad to go to court'* (attendance home–school mediator).

Three interviewees felt Fast Track had resulted in pupils **becoming acquainted** with EWS, school and agency staff. Interviewees explained that, through pupils' presence at school attendance panels, they became familiar with a range of adults who would subsequently be accessible to them if they had any concerns they wished to discuss:

The upside of the school attendance panel is that they have been able to identify their Connexions PA, they all know their police person . . . the most recent case we did was a Year 7 and before [the school attendance panel] he'd never met his headteacher because he'd been away so much (PEWO).

One case where the student was able to talk to me after the LEA panel about the reasons he was not attending school. We were able to put together a very special package to maintain that attendance. It improved communications in that case (deputy headteacher).

Again, in the two LEAs, where interviewees failed to report any positive impact on pupils, Fast Track had been employed to progress difficult cases to court quickly or had a 'reprisal' rather than 'remediating' intent:

The head of year chose the families because she was thoroughly fed up with them and we'd tried various things and it hadn't helped. I don't think they were chosen with the aim that it might improve attendance or anything like that, it was more like a bit of a punishment (EWO).

Thirteen interviewees commented that they had not seen a 'typical' response from the pupils selected for Fast Track. They explained that the way pupils reacted depended very much on how their parents responded to the possibility of court action. If parents were unperturbed by the threat of prosecution it was deemed highly unlikely that their children would be affected by this: *'The situation begins at home. If they are not taught to respect the education that they need to get, the kids don't think it's a big deal'* (EWO).

4.3 Impact on pupils' siblings

Nine interviewees from eight LEAs reported that Fast Track had impacted **positively** on siblings and they cited siblings' improved attendance levels as evidence of this. The interviewees believed siblings' attendance at school increased because parents were obliged to take a more responsible attitude to educating one child and this evidently affected other children in the household: *'I think it does have an impact because if they know that one is being monitored then the other will be taken into school with that child as well'* (head of year).

A similar number of interviewees to those who asserted a positive impact on pupils' siblings, believed the impact was **case specific** *'depending on the individual family and the family dynamics'*.

When questioned about the impact Fast Track had on the siblings of targeted pupils, four interviewees stated that, in their experience, Fast Track had generated **no change** in siblings' attendance levels. Notably, over a third of interviewees were **unaware** of Fast Track's impact on siblings. This was largely due to the fact that their involvement with families was restricted and so they had no knowledge of siblings'

attendance patterns; in fact, most were unaware whether the pupils had siblings. In instances where interviewees did work closely with families, the number of youngsters with siblings of school age was often minimal.

4.4 Impact on non-Fast Track cases: general attendance levels

During the earlier stages of implementation over half of the interviewees, at least one from each LEA, responded that **general attendance levels had improved**. However, interviewees from five of these LEAs spoke about anticipated improvements because Fast Track had only recently been introduced. Again, a year on from Fast Track's implementation, interviewees from all LEAs reported improvements in general attendance levels, though noticeably on this occasion the 38 interviewees spoke about actual evidenced impact. The 38 interviewees were from both LEAs where Fast Track was seen as an 'early intervention' strategy and those where the process was more 'court focused'. In addition, the interviewees came from a range of professions with over two-thirds of all the EWS employees and school staff reporting improvements in attendance levels. Where quantification of improved attendance levels at school level was offered there were several instances of reported increases of around 10 per cent:

We've created, at times, more than ten per cent increase in attendance over the whole school. That's unheard of in all the time I've worked in Education Welfare. Of all the other initiatives, the most we've ever achieved is three or four per cent (EWO).

Attendance in the school is much improved. Our attendance for the first term and a half is over 90 per cent, which for a school in special measures ... This time last year it was 87 per cent, the year before that, around about the time Fast Track was introduced, it was about 81 per cent (deputy headteacher).

One particular year group, we started it in March. The overall attendance was 85 per cent. This is when they got the first initial letters regarding spotlight. We did the recording from April to whenever, it went up to 95 per cent, and then again in June it went up to 96 per cent (EWO).

It is important to note that generally it was schools and LEAs targeting less entrenched attendance problems who reported these greater increases:

I thought we should use Fast Track for the middle of the road group, the chance takers, the odd-dayers, the ones that people don't get round to because they're busy dealing with the chronic non-attenders. Personally, I think that's why we've been successful, because we did that group (EWO).

When discussing the impact of Fast Track on general attendance levels, seven interviewees from five LEAs stated this was where they felt Fast Track had been most beneficial. These interviewees, who were all from LEAs where Fast Track could be described as an 'early intervention' strategy, explained that, while Fast Track had not been successful with all the cases it targeted, these cases had acted as a deterrent to others:

You are taking 11 people to court, but I don't think you'll get anything from them. It's the ones that don't get to court who see that they are being taken to court, that's the main thrust

of what you're going to achieve. The people who are not necessarily prosecuted, but are aware of people that are (school governor).

One EWO explained how the impact of Fast Track on non-targeted families could contribute to a notable improvement in a school's overall attendance level:

If you target 50 [pupils] in a large school, then there are another 100 who, if they improve their attendance by one per cent, reduce their absence by just a few sessions a term, it has a huge impact. It is a very efficient way of doing it (PEWO).

However, all but three of the interviewees, who reported particular improvements in general attendance levels, felt Fast Track was **not solely responsible** for this. LEAs and schools tended to nominate a number of different initiatives aimed at increasing attendance levels operating concurrently and hence it was felt wrong to attribute improvements in attendance entirely to one aspect:

I would say that it [Fast Track] was one strand and only one strand. I've never subscribed to the view that this is the answer to it all. It is the bottom line. I think there are lots and lots of other things that contribute to it [improved attendance] (PEWO).

I wouldn't put it all down to Fast Track ... but Fast Track has been part of a bigger strategy to improve attendance .. it's been an important part of that (deputy headteacher).

It would seem there was some correlation of accounts of considerable increased attendance with those LEAs and schools who saw Fast Track as part of a range of strategies to address the problem.

Seven interviewees, from four LEAs, reported that Fast Track had **no impact** on attendance levels, one deputy head confessing '*the impact has been negligible, nothing has happened*'. However, interviewees in each of these LEAs remarked that '*in individual cases there has been a vast improvement*' in attendance. There had been minimal publicity surrounding Fast Track in these LEAs and interviewees felt there was little awareness of the intervention. This may explain why, although these LEAs had individual success stories, they had not witnessed improvements in overall levels of attendance.

4.5 Impact on non-Fast Track cases: general attitudes towards attendance

When interviewees were questioned about whether Fast Track had impacted on the attitudes of parents and pupils not directly involved in the process their responses were, in rank order, that it had:

- changed attitudes towards attendance (32)
- a limited impact on attitudes towards attendance (9)
- a short-term impact on attitudes towards attendance (2).

Two-thirds of interviewees, compared with half of the respondents during the earlier stages of implementation, noted that Fast Track had **changed general attitudes** towards school attendance. These interviewees, at least one from each LEA, commented that Fast Track had created '*much more awareness*' of attendance issues.

I got a letter yesterday for the first time saying 'Thank you very much for giving my child permission to take a certain amount of holiday during term time'. I think there's a change of attitude as a result of Fast Track and some other things. People now understand far better that it's not their right to have this time off ... there's certainly a change in levels of understanding of where the responsibility for children's attendance lies (headteacher).

Eight interviewees from five LEAs asserted that, while Fast Track had failed to change the attitudes of many targeted parents, they believed the attitudes of other parents, those not involved in Fast Track, had been influenced substantially. Corresponding to earlier remarks that the main impact had been on general attendance levels, as opposed to the attendance of Fast Track cases, interviewees felt that the intervention had exerted a more notable impact on general attitudes towards attendance than those of the targeted group:

I suppose it may be that the real benefits to accrue from Fast Track are not specific to the group of kids who are listed, especially when they are from intransigent families that aren't going to change, but the fact that there is a public arena in which it takes place, focuses everybody's mind that something will happen and it's no longer a case that you can just stay off (assistant headteacher).

Interviewees commented that improvements in attitudes towards attendance and indeed, general attendance levels, were the result of Fast Track conveying to parents that attendance is a serious issue. This message was spread through 'word of mouth' among parents and pupils, as well as publicity surrounding Fast Track and prosecutions in general:

I think it's the attention on attendance that has impacted on parents' views, so attendance has improved. Fast Track has highlighted the importance of attendance by raising the profile. It's made it really serious and we have a system in place to deal with it, so attendance has become much more of a hot issue (EWO).

Interviewees felt **publicity** was imperative in improving general attendance levels because without this most parents would be oblivious to Fast Track and its implications. Although positive press coverage relating to Fast Track was typically out of interviewees' control, several schools and EWOs arranged their own publicity in order to increase Fast Track awareness. In addition, several interviewees suggested schools should inform parents about Fast Track, as this alone would deter some from tolerating their children's absence from school:

Every pupil in the school gets a letter explaining to every parent exactly what the process is ... In reality, we are looking for every single parent and pupil in the community to understand that attendance is important and that we're not going to stand around and let people do what they want (PEWO).

We did a big launch and wrote letters to every single parent in the school informing them about Fast Track (deputy headteacher).

There's a newsletter in the school ... it said about how many cases had gone to court and said that so many had been fined ... They put it all up on a big board as well, it was like an advertisement that this can happen (EWO).

The remaining interviewees questioned whether Fast Track had any impact on general attitudes towards attendance. Nine interviewees, from seven different LEAs, reported that the impact on attitudes had been extremely **limited**. Interviewees from six of

these LEAs reported that ‘*parents not in Fast Track are not aware of the process*’ due to very little, if any, press coverage surrounding Fast Track. However, some interviewees found publicity an inappropriate strategy:

I don't think it is fair to talk to parents about Fast Track who are going to be sending their children everyday. I don't think I need to ...We have got a very mixed catchment and some would not dream of not sending their children to school and I think you can be a bit heavy handed (headteacher).

Limited awareness of Fast Track amongst parents was confirmed during the parent focus groups. It found that the majority of parents had not previously heard of the new Fast Track to prosecution framework. One parent, who worked in the school and knew an attendance worker, was aware of its existence. On the whole, this sample of parents lacked any knowledge of Fast Track prosecutions at a local level, although they could recollect cases which had appeared in the national media. (Appendix 5 provides a full report on the views expressed during parent focus groups).

The final two interviewees felt Fast Track only had a **short-term impact** on general attitudes towards attendance. They noted that, although parents appeared worried about Fast Track when a case appeared in the news, they soon forgot about these incidences:

We had a dramatic effect the week after the local paper put it on the front page, ‘Parents being taken back to school for Fast Track if their children don't attend.’ That's what it said, but it's worn off (PEWO).

4.6 Impact on schools

Half of interviewees, at least one from each LEA, reported that Fast Track’s impact on schools had been **positive**. They believed the impact was positive because it had resulted in:

- a structured prosecution system that assists schools (14)
- more attendance responsibility for schools (6).

Fourteen interviewees from nine LEAs cited that Fast Track had impacted positively on schools because of the **structure of the process**. Interviewees, two-thirds of these EWS personnel, reported that schools favoured the Fast Track approach because it was ‘*consistent*’ and ‘*transparent*’:

The way we work is very structured now, so they know that every six weeks there will be a consultation and some cases will be given back to school or some will be moved on to prosecution (SEWO).

In addition, interviewees explained that Fast Track’s ‘*short, effective result*’ with cases meant more families could be targeted. A few interviewees highlighted this particular element of the process as having enhanced the morale of school staff concerned with attendance issues:

The heads of year and office staff who work hard on attendance feel that there is something in the background that won't take as long as it did in the past and I'm sure that has improved their morale (deputy headteacher).

Six interviewees, all from different LEAs, felt Fast Track had given schools **more responsibility** for attendance. Interestingly, only one of the 15 school representatives mentioned this outcome. EWS interviewees felt that by schools having greater responsibility for attendance, they took some ownership for these issues, and in doing so, benefited both the EWS and parents:

Schools are being encouraged to take greater responsibility and ownership of attendance and attendance problems, not just handing problems over to the EWS. We are encouraging them to be more proactive and have greater involvement in the process – like sending letters out, arranging meetings and ensuring that staff attend the initial meetings (PEWO).

Nine interviewees, from eight different LEAs, felt the impact of Fast Track on schools had been **limited** (nearly double those taking this view during the earlier stages of implementation). A year on from Fast Track's implementation, these interviewees commented that Fast Track's impact on schools was limited because schools were not particularly involved in the process, questioning the organisation of Fast Track at a school level:

I wouldn't say it's had any impact. They are probably not really aware of it until the pre-court meeting ... So I wouldn't say it's had any impact on the school but the heads of year do say it's an interesting initiative and they are quite pleased about it (EWO team leader).

In several instances where a limited impact on schools was reported, the schools were cited to be heavily involved in Fast Track. However, these schools had 'good procedures for attendance monitoring' in place before Fast Track was implemented and thus the intervention had instigated little change in procedures. A few interviewees, however, did remark that, although schools had attendance monitoring systems in place prior to Fast Track, 'they didn't use them as efficiently as they could'.

No interviewee asserted Fast Track had had a negative impact on schools. A year on from Fast Track's implementation, eight interviewees acknowledged that the process demanded extra staff time (see challenges section), these respondents still considered the additional time worthwhile:

The only extra time the schools had to provide was for the panels ... which meant the headteacher's time, the head of year's time and chair of governor's time for a morning every two months, so it's not a great effort. And if something comes out of the parents that the school needs to be involved in they have to accept that there will be more demands on their time (EWO).

4.7 Impact on EWOs

A half of interviewees, compared with a third during the earlier stages of implementation, reported that the impact of Fast Track on EWOs had been **positive**. When discussing this positive impact the following factors were mentioned:

- the structured approach of Fast Track (22)
- the raised status of the EWS (3)
- EWOs having access to another tool to improve school attendance (2).

Twenty-two interviewees, from nine LEAs, reported that the **structured approach** of Fast Track had benefited EWOs. Interviewees favoured the fact that EWOs now had formal procedures and criteria for decision making in place as this meant *‘they knew what it was they were supposed to be doing’* and consequently there was consistency across the LEA. In addition, the shortened timescales for completing procedures meant EWOs could *‘see a beginning and an end to something that used to drag on a long time’*, although, it should be noted that sticking to the tight deadlines was also considered one of the major challenges of Fast Track for EWOs.

Three interviewees noted that Fast Track had **raised the status of the EWS**. Interviewees felt that, as a result of Fast Track, the EWS was viewed as a *‘more professional service’* that took school non-attendance seriously. One school governor felt that it was *‘good for them [EWOs] to find that this sort of spotlight had been placed on it [attendance]’* as a much wider group of people came to appreciate the attendance issues they had been *‘battling away with for ages’*.

Finally, two interviewees felt Fast Track had benefited EWOs because it had given them **another ‘useful tool’** that could be employed to improve school attendance. Interviewees explained that, although they would not use Fast Track with all non-attendance cases, it was an option they had not had access to previously, which would be effective with certain cases.

Sixteen interviewees, from seven LEAs, felt the impact of Fast Track on EWOs had been **negative**. This proportion of interviewees is comparable to the proportion that identified a negative impact on EWOs during the earlier stages of implementation. Specific concerns were expressed about:

- increased workload (12)
- difficulties working effectively with parents being prosecuted (4).

Twelve interviewees remarked on the **heavier workload** for EWOs whereas, during the earlier stages of implementation, half this number of interviewees cited this as an outcome. At that stage, the majority of interviewees presumed a lot of the work was part of the ‘bedding in’ process. A year on from Fast Track’s implementation, interviewees suggested EWOs’ heavier workload was due to a combination of the greater number of prosecution cases being generated through Fast Track and the more rigid timescale within which Fast Track operates. Notably, although these interviewees highlighted the amount of extra work Fast Track created, they generally felt this was worthwhile for the results evidenced.

Four interviewees highlighted the difficulties EWOs experienced trying to **work effectively with families being prosecuted** within the short Fast Track time frame. These interviewees, interestingly all of them school representatives, felt that the *‘zero tolerance’* approach of Fast Track meant that it was not always possible for EWOs to maintain an effective relationship with targeted parents:

I suspect that it’s been quite difficult for her [EWO] to maintain a good working relationship with some parents when she’s having to threaten prosecution over a much quicker timescale than she was before ... I think for all EWOs it must be an issue because part of their success is with parents that work with them and I think that if they alienate parents as they sometimes do through this process then it’s hard (deputy headteacher).

The challenge for both EWOs and school staff of maintaining positive relationships with families throughout the Fast Track process, despite the focus on prosecution, is discussed more fully in Section 3.1.4.

4.8 Impact on other agencies

Twelve interviewees from seven LEAs were **unaware** of Fast Track's impact on other agencies. They commented that, as they had minimal contact with agency personnel, they were unable to assess the intervention's effect on their daily practice. In a few instances, interviewees commented that, although at present they had '*not really had the time to identify the agencies that may be involved with families*', this was an area they would explore in the future.

Over a quarter of interviewees felt that Fast Track had **no impact** on external agencies. The majority of these interviewees, from seven LEAs, implied this was because other agencies '*don't have any involvement*' with prosecution cases. Interviewees frequently mentioned that, if other agencies were working with a family, this would be a reason not to select that particular case for Fast Track.

The remaining seven interviewees who implied that there had been no impact on other agencies worked in four different LEAs. These respondents commented that external agencies were involved with Fast Track cases when they had worked with the family prior to the intervention. However, agencies' involvement was identical to that with prosecution cases prior to the implementation of Fast Track. Hence these interviewees agreed that Fast Track had no impact on external agencies:

Not really made any difference. Agencies will be invited to meetings if they have an involvement with the family, but it hasn't led to more work for them (PEWO).

Interestingly, one EWO hinted that in their LEA, even when it was felt a Fast Track family might benefit from agency support, this was not always pursued:

We do involve other agencies if they are working with the family. We can invite them to the initial review meeting, but if you know that you're taking them to court straight away – especially with the Fast Tracking, I don't think there's any point inviting them. It's going to happen anyway. Nothing much is going to change within the six weeks (EWO).

Seven interviewees from four LEAs commented that Fast Track had impacted **positively** on other agencies. They felt that, as a result of agency workers attending Fast Track panel meetings, these personnel, in particular those from Social Services, Youth Offending Team and Connexions, were **more aware** of the severity of school non-attendance: '*We do get Connexions and social workers at the LEA panel, so they are increasingly becoming aware of what it is we're doing*' (PEWO).

A further impact of Fast Track, reported by four interviewees from two LEAs, was that cases requiring multi-agency working were **identified earlier** and subsequently families received the support they required sooner:

You might decide from Fast Track meetings that Social Services should be involved so you'd get in touch with them ... you might pick up on something earlier that needs Social Services (head of year).

Six interviewees, from three LEAs, felt Fast Track's impact on other agencies had been **negative**. Four of these interviewees, notably none of them agency personnel, explained that Fast Track '*highlighted more cases*' for other agencies and required them to stringently record any work they undertook with families or young people. As acknowledged in Chapter 3, Section 3.1.2, interviewees explained that this increased workload intensified the **pressure** on agencies already overstretched resources.

A further negative effect, identified by two interviewees in the same LEA, was Fast Track's impact on the **workload of medical practitioners**. As a result of schools demanding medical notes in order for an absence to be authorised, this had resulted in extra paperwork for some doctors:

I've had lots of doctors ringing me up and complaining about me sending parents to them for doctor's notes and parents complaining that doctors won't give them notes. Some quite angry doctors on the phone, until I've been able to explain what the purpose is (EWO).

4.9 Impact on courts

When questioned about the impact Fast Track had on the courts, 19 interviewees from ten LEAs felt unable to comment. In around half these instances this was because the interviewees were from LEAs where a limited number of Fast Track cases had appeared in court. Although the remaining interviewees were from LEAs where a number of Fast Track cases had been to court, their involvement in the intervention was restricted to the early stages: '*I don't know. Once it gets beyond the school level, I don't ask too many questions*' (deputy headteacher).

Nine interviewees from seven LEAs described Fast Track's impact on the courts as **negative**. The majority of these interviewees remarked on the '*higher through volume of cases*' going to court under Fast Track and felt that the courts could not cope with this demand for extra court time, as raised earlier in relation to challenges (see Section 3.1.5). Interestingly this increased workload was not mentioned by any of the seven court personnel, at least not in a negative sense:

To have the number we've had on one hearing was unusual. We normally have two or three in dribs and drabs coming from different schools ... so the number was unusual but that isn't necessarily a bad thing because they are not too time intensive and it means we can get through a lot and it means that the magistrates can be more consistent (court clerk).

An EWS interviewee also recognised the benefits of an increased number of Fast Track cases appearing in court:

I think the courts have been very accommodating by giving us a day a month in court. It does work well now, whereas a few years back there was no kind of system to it. So if you had three new cases, you might have one in the morning, two in the afternoon, so you had to stay the whole day (SEWO).

Five interviewees from four LEAs, all EWS personnel, felt Fast Track had exerted a **positive** impact on the courts. Interviewees commented that, as a result of Fast Track,

magistrates were more aware of the seriousness of school non-attendance and had started to bestow penalties reflecting this:

I think they have become more aware of the issues of attendance and find it easier to make decisions. They are dealing with them much more effectively and equally. That's because they are hearing more [cases] and they know more about it and I think they are more understanding. Certainly a few years ago when you took a case to court you would feel you were persecuting a parent whereas now I think they are very supportive, but they are very fair as well (PEWO).

Eighteen interviewees from ten LEAs, including four of the six court personnel, felt Fast Track had **no impact** on the courts. In LEAs where few Fast Track cases had proceeded to court, interviewees deemed this the reason, one SEWO asserting *'I don't think it's had any impact on the courts because of the low numbers we've had'*. However, personnel in LEAs where a considerable number of Fast Track cases had appeared in court remained adamant that the impact was negligible, suggesting that court personnel were *'less interested in processes than they were in the human story'*.

When questioned whether Fast Track had resulted in any changes in the evidence presented at court, interviewees felt that it had not, one legal assistant stating *'with regards the evidence for the offence, that's not going to change'*. However, a few court personnel suggested there had been an increase in parental representation since Fast Track was introduced. Typically, interviewees felt it was the possibility of imprisonment and hence *'the aggravated offence spurring them on to get legal representation'* rather than Fast Track itself. However, in turn, increasing solicitor representation had negative implications, since this was cited as one of the reasons for delays in the court process and ultimately a *'slowing down'* of the Fast Track process, rendering it less effective (this is discussed more fully in Section 3.1.5).

4.10 Impact of press coverage

Interviewees in three LEAs were aware of local press coverage relating to Fast Track. These were the same three LEAs that reported publicity during the earlier stages of implementation. A year on from Fast Track's implementation, the majority of interviewees' from these three LEAs felt that press coverage had a **positive** effect on parents, children and the local community. In particular, interviewees believed media coverage of cases where parents received substantial fines or prison sentences deterred other parents from allowing their children to miss school, leading to improvements in overall attendance levels:

We know anecdotally that if we have a parent in court and we have a successful prosecution and it's highlighted in the press, the attendance generally will rise and when an EWO visits, parents will start to talk about the parent who was prosecuted and they'll say to their children, you don't want me to be like Mrs ... Yeah, we know definitely it has an impact if we can get a good spread (EWO team leader).

Four interviewees from two of the three LEAs that had witnessed local publicity felt the impact of this had been **short lived**. They noted that, although parents appeared worried about Fast Track when a case was publicised, they soon forgot about these instances. Consequently, unless press coverage relating to Fast Track was sustained, any impact on the local community diminished:

Initially, when it first came out a year ago, the local paper did quite a lot, a front page article, which was great. I haven't seen anything since which I think is a pity ... that [the initial press coverage] was great and I used that quite a lot when I was doing my assemblies at the beginning, but nothing recently (assistant headteacher).

Only two interviewees, from the three LEAs reporting press coverage of Fast Track, felt this had exerted **minimal** impact on parents and pupils. These EWS personnel believed there had been little impact because the court disposals were insignificant, e.g. low fines, conditional discharges.

Twenty interviewees, from all nine LEAs where press coverage was negligible, believed some form of publicity in their area would be **advantageous**. They explained that publicity would enhance the profile of school non-attendance and raise awareness that it is the parents' responsibility to ensure their children are in school:

I think they need to spend more money publicising Fast Track. There's been one article about Fast Track. There should be more publicity. Parents need to know that they will be prosecuted. We need to spend money to say, "If you don't go to school, you'll go to court" (EWO).

Interestingly, six interviewees from four LEAs were particularly eager for **local press coverage** relating to Fast Track because they felt that '*someone somewhere being sent to prison for a couple of days doesn't impact*', declaring national publicity entirely ineffectual:

I think that with that case that was publicised, the woman, she was in the South wasn't she? So maybe people think, "Well that's got nothing to do with us" (head of year).

Five interviewees, from four of the LEAs where there had been no press coverage, were unsure as to whether publicity would be helpful. In two instances they felt this would be '*a bit punitive*', with one assistant headteacher asserting that, although it might make good news, it was not necessarily '*the right way to do it*'. A further EWO felt that by publicising prosecutions they would not be depicting their service accurately:

The danger would be that we would be portraying ourselves as a service that is here just to prosecute whereas we're not. We're sort of a balance between law enforcement and social care ... I'm not sure that it would be the best advertisement because we are a service for the people in the city (EWO).

Two EWOs were concerned about how the press would report Fast Track, remarking that '*papers are not there to represent the council in a good light, they're there to sell papers*'. They explained that reporters were '*notorious for distorting things for their own advantage*' and hence they could not guarantee Fast Track would be portrayed accurately.

Finally, two interviewees from the same LEA explained that they could only pre-warn journalists of a Fast Track court appearance, as it was '*the LEA's policy not to inform the media after a case had been to court*'. The PEWO remarked that this made things difficult as they did not want to pre-warn of an appearance when there was a chance the parents would not attend or would receive an inadequate penalty.

4.11 Main impact

In response to the question *'From your perspective, what would you say has been the main impact of Fast Track?'*, interviewees from all LEAs responded. This differs from the earlier stages of implementation, when interviewees from five LEAs felt unable to comment because their Fast Track cases were still relatively early on in the process.

Responses to the question fell into two main areas: those focusing on the way the EWS itself had been affected, and those who identified the effect on attendance.

A number of comments, particularly from EWS interviewees, highlighted how Fast Track's main impact was the creation of more *'structured'*, *'formalised'*, *'tighter'* or *'sophisticated'* procedures, with the result that *'..[Fast Track] has sharpened [EWS] practice'* and provided *'a clearer focus.. a very definite process to follow'*. The corollary of this was that the main impact had been the *'profile'* of the EWS being raised, and that it *'..made the EWS appear well-organised and extremely professional'*. Other EWS interviewees chose to identify that Fast Track had resulted in changes in terms of *'more analysis and examining our practice'* or simply that *'we've learnt a lot from Fast Track'*. Nevertheless, accounts of main impact being EWS-related did reaffirm the variation between LEAs, both in terms of base line starting points and the targeting adopted. Thus, one PEWO simply noted that *'Fast Track made us do prosecutions again ...it highlighted that this was an issue we weren't addressing'*. Another highlighted how Fast Track had meant *'a sharpening of practice.. instead of rolling along and keeping your fingers crossed, having endless meetings where you talk the same thing.[Fast Track's] been about pushing things on, so that there are decision-making points along the way'*. However, in another LEA, the PEWO described the main impact in terms of a reappraisal of the target group:

Fast Track has made us drill down to look at which would be the most beneficial group ... a self-analysis in a deeper way than we would usually have done. It has brought into our service those young people that would probably never have been referred to us because they weren't the absolute worst or the long-term ones. It's a completely different cohort.

It was also notable that, in the two court-focussed Fast Track LEAs, EWS responses to the question of main impact tended to be less effusive, with comments from senior EWS staff stating *'I don't think there's been an impact. it's because there's only been a small number of schools and a few cases'* and *'It gets to court quicker – that's about it'*. EWOs in the latter authority did highlight *'clearing the backlog of cases'* and *'making sure things are acted on a lot more quickly than they used to'* as Fast Track's main impact. Equally, in response to the main impact question, the PEWO from the LEA that targeted the lowest attendance rates (60-70 per cent), stated *'I think it is helping us in terms of having focused case work, but I don't know about the impact on school attendance levels'*.

Nevertheless, just under half of interviewees responding to the question of Fast Track's main impact highlighted how awareness of attendance issues, and in some instance, actual attendance levels had been positively affected. Thus, the main impact was *'raising the profile of attendance'...* *'attendance being taken more seriously'* *'.. changed perceptions of students and parents about their responsibilities'*. These types of comments were particularly from EWS interviewees. Others, including some school staff, noted the main impact as *'.. stopped attendance slipping'*, *'..had impact*

on specific parents’, ‘more children are attending’, ‘rescued a small number of children’ and ‘attendance has improved quicker’.

Only four respondents reported no impact in response to the question. Notably, three of these were from the one LEA where the targeted group was more serious non-attenders, and there had not been a consensual view on Fast Track’s implementation and scope.

Policy and practice implications

- With a few exceptions, the overarching view was that Fast Track has had a positive impact, particularly with improvements to EWS procedures and concomitantly, attitudes to attendance and even attendance levels. This may need promoting as a finding. Importantly however, main impact was reported around the processes leading to prosecution and not court proceedings or outcomes.
- Again, the significance of the target group for Fast Track emerged through the perceptions of impact. Policy makers at national and local level might want to consider the difference in perceptions accruing from the different models.
- Equally, some responses to the question of impact suggest the value of encouraging better monitoring of cases and outcomes by LEAs themselves. Where this has been done, views on Fast Track seemed particularly positive.
- The impact on the EWS as a professional body may also usefully be given a higher profile in any future promotion of Fast Track.
- The perceived value of local press coverage might also be worthy of further consideration.

Chapter 5

Fast Track outcomes for 484 families recorded on a case tracking system

Key findings

The sample: In total, details of 484 cases were recorded on the case tracking system by 11 LEAs.

Changes in attendance: The average attendance levels increased from 53 per cent before Fast Track to 64 per cent during the second half of the intervention (weeks 7–12). However, this average increase of 11 percent (the equivalent of an extra half a day a week back in school), was not sustained and attendance levels declined to an average of 58 per cent after cases exited the intervention (weeks 19–24). The level of unauthorised absence decreased from an average of 32 per cent before cases entered Fast Track, to 27 per cent during the post intervention period.

The stages at which attendance changed: The attendance of 51 per cent of cases increased when they entered Fast Track. Similarly, the attendance of 49 per cent of cases improved between the first and second six weeks of Fast Track. Hence, during these early periods attendance was more likely to increase than decrease. However, when cases exited Fast Track, 56 per cent showed a decline in attendance whilst just 37 per cent showed an improvement (compared to their attendance during Fast Track). Despite this, over the entire 28-week period (i.e. four weeks prior to the intervention, 12 weeks during and 12 weeks post-Fast Track) more cases showed increases in the number of sessions they attended.

The extent of improved attendance: When comparing attendance changes over the five periods, analysis revealed that the most notable increase in attendance occurred between the pre- and post-Fast Track periods (weeks 13–18). For the 146 cases where attendance after Fast Track was higher than it had been prior to the intervention, attendance improved by 1.4 extra days a week. Looking across the three Fast Track periods (pre, during and post), the proportions of pupils achieving an average of 90 per cent or more attendance rose from 11 per cent to 18 per cent.

Factors influencing the impact on attendance: Meetings with parents, letters and pastoral support were found to increase the statistical probability of attendance improving in Fast Track. Attendance levels were also found to be higher for those cases that were primary aged and that had recorded one panel on the case tracking system. In the statistical models, cases that had home visits and phone calls (both before and during Fast Track) and had attended two panels registered a negative effect on attendance levels (possibly equating with non-cooperative families who progressed further into Fast Track). Lastly, LEAs which reported ongoing monitoring after Fast Track appeared more able to maintain the percentage of pupils with improved attendance, than those LEAs which monitored over a shorter period of time.

Introduction

As part of the Fast Track evaluation, the NFER asked the 12 case-study LEAs to provide profile, process and attendance information for all cases entering their Fast Track systems. A spreadsheet was devised to enable LEAs to enter this data. Table 5.1 below gives a complete breakdown of the data requested under each of the three main categories.

Table 5.1: Data requested in the case tracking system

Type of data	Information requested
PROFILE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ year group of pupil ▪ gender ▪ ethnicity ▪ SEN issues ▪ free school meals entitlement ▪ number of siblings ▪ parent/carer being prosecuted (e.g. mother/father) ▪ whether absent parent being prosecuted ▪ other adults in household ▪ whether family convicted previously in past five years
PROCESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ date of school and LEA panels ▪ type of intervention undertaken before and during Fast Track ▪ other agency involvement before and during Fast Track ▪ date of court appearances ▪ outcome of court appearances ▪ level of offence (1 or 1a) ▪ type of disposal (e.g. conditional discharge, fine) ▪ if withdrawn – date of withdrawal ▪ reasons for withdrawal ▪ if re-entered – date of re-entry
OUTCOME	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ attendance four weeks before entry to Fast Track ▪ attendance during the 12 weeks of the Fast Track process ▪ attendance 12 weeks after Fast Track

This chapter reports on the findings to arise from this data collection under the following four headings:

- A profile description of 484 Fast Track cases
- The Fast Track process as recorded for 484 cases
- The impact on attendance
- Factors influencing the impact on attendance.

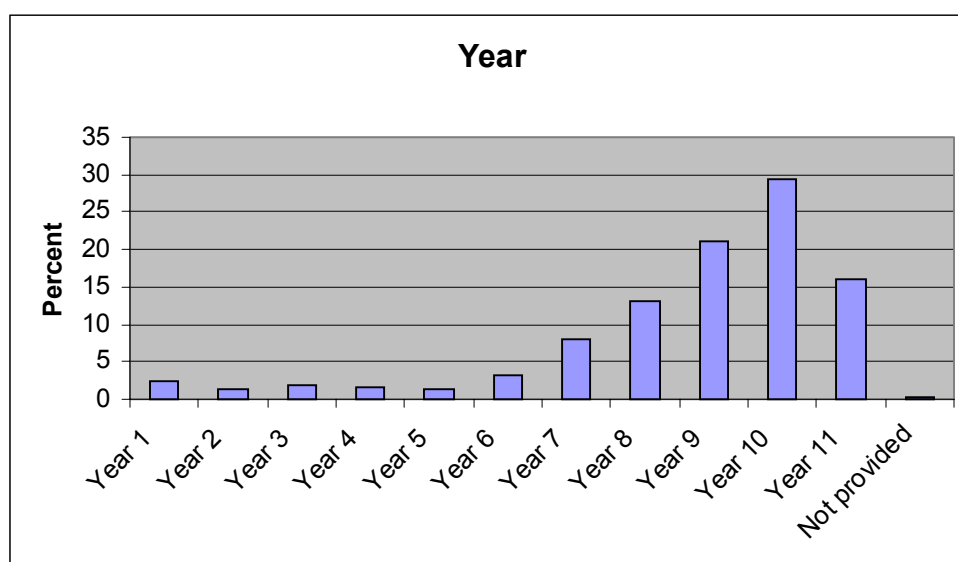
5.1 A profile description of 484 Fast Track cases

In total, 484 families from 11 LEAs were recorded on the case tracking system. However, these cases were not spread equally across the 11 authorities. A significant proportion, 30 per cent, came from a single LEA, whilst four LEAs provided data on less than 20 cases each. The following section describes all 484 cases using data entered into the profile section of the case tracking system.

Gender: Slightly more male pupils were identified for Fast Track intervention than female (259 males, 223 females and in two cases this information was not provided).

Year group: Just 12 percent of the cases involved children attending primary schools, whilst 88 per cent were secondary pupils. Pupils in Year 9 (21 per cent) and Year 10 (30 per cent) constituted half the sample and a sizeable proportion of cases concerned pupils in Year 11 (16 percent). During interviews EWS personnel sometimes mentioned that the speed of Fast Track now made Year 11 prosecutions viable.

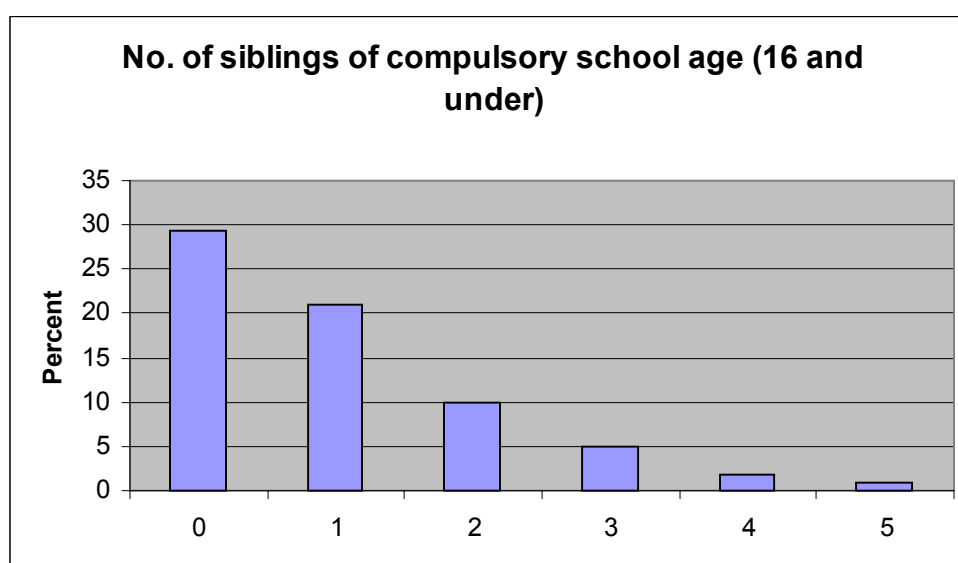
Figure 5.1: Year group



Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system

Number of siblings: Almost a third of Fast Track cases involved only children, with no siblings (this reflects national trends). The next most common sibling profile was one brother/sister (21 per cent of cases).

Figure 5.2: Number of siblings



Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system

Ethnicity: 89 per cent of cases were classified as white UK heritage. The remaining 11 per cent of cases were recorded as three per cent Bangladeshi, two per cent Pakistani and two and a half per cent ‘unknown’. A further seven ethnic groups represented less than one per cent each of the sample.

Free school meals entitlement: Slightly more Fast Track cases were said to be eligible for free school meals (53 per cent) compared to 40 per cent who were not entitled (in seven per cent of cases this information was not provided). The proportion of cases thus qualifying for free school meals was found to be considerably higher than the national average (17 per cent of primary-aged pupils and 15 per cent of secondary-aged pupils¹).

Special educational needs: One in five Fast Track cases were recorded as having special educational needs reflecting national trends. This comprised five per cent with a statement for SEN (compared to a national figure of three per cent²) and a larger proportion, 16 per cent, recorded as having unstatemented SEN.

Parents being prosecuted: Table 5.2 lists the individuals identified for prosecution. As can be seen, in nearly half the cases (49 per cent), the mother alone was held accountable, whilst in a quarter of cases both a mother and father were identified for prosecution. Figure 5.3 indicates that in a third of cases, families were headed by a single parent, as no other adults were listed as living in the household (nationally, 22.9 per cent of children live in lone parent households³).

¹ www.dfes.gov.uk/trends/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.showChart&cid=3&iid=9&chid=173

² www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000155/tab001.shtml

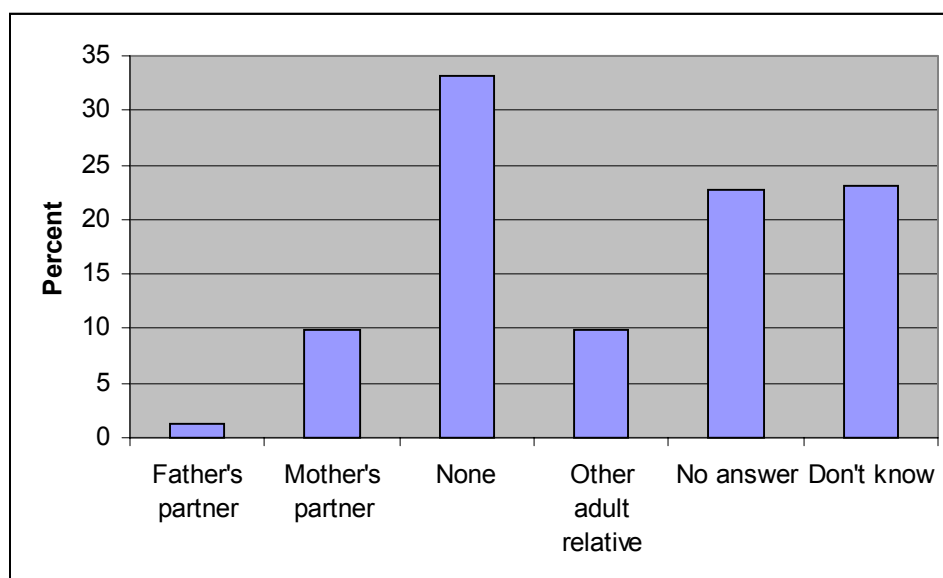
³ www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=348

Table 5.2: Individual identified for prosecution

Relationship to pupil	Number of cases	Percentage of cases (%)
Mother	238	49
Mother and father	127	26
Father	33	7
Other carer (relative)	10	2
Mother and partner	7	2
Other carer (not related)	2	<1
Not known	65	13

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system

Figure 5.3: Other adults in household



Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system

Families previously prosecuted: In the main, Fast Track was applied to those families who had not yet been prosecuted for non-attendance (although in 28 per cent of cases this information was recorded either as not known or was missing). Just five percent of cases were known to have been prosecuted previously (in the last five years).

5.2 The Fast Track process as recorded for 484 families

Chapter 2 provided an overview of how Fast Track operated in the 12 LEAs. It is now time to consider how this applied to 484 families registered on the NFER case tracking system.

5.2.1 Interventions used before and during Fast Track

Each of the LEAs were asked to indicate the interventions used before and after a family entered the Fast Track framework. Table 5.3 below illustrates their

responses. The interventions recorded most commonly **before** entry to Fast Track were home visits (63 per cent), letters to parents (57 per cent), and first day contact (53 per cent). In a quarter of cases, no data on interventions was provided.

During Fast Track, the main method of intervention was letters to parents, occurring in 65 per cent of cases. At this stage, 11 per cent of cases were also referred to other agencies. Meetings with parents was seen to increase slightly as a recorded intervention during Fast Track, whilst the proportion of cases receiving home visits fell from 63 to 44 per cent. Section 5.4 examines how different interventions and their timing (i.e. before and/or during Fast Track) may have influenced the outcome of Fast Track in terms of attendance.

Table 5.3: Interventions recorded before and during Fast Track

Type of EWS intervention	BEFORE Fast Track		DURING Fast Track	
	Number of responses	Percentage of cases (%)	Number of responses	Percentage of cases (%)
Letters to parents	274	57	312	65
Home visit	305	63	215	44
First day contact	256	53	29	6
Meetings with parents	148	31	177	37
Phone calls to parents	140	29	103	21
In school support	21	4	10	2
Attendance report	16	3	N/A	N/A
Referral to other agencies	12	3	51	11
Other intervention *	29	6	18	4
None given	132	27	131	27

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system

NB: More than one response possible, therefore percentages do not sum to 100

* includes: transport to schools, home-school liaison, mentoring, multi-agency support work, truancy patrol, medical checks, detention, part-time timetable.

5.2.2 Other agencies involvement before and during Fast Track

LEAs were also asked to list any agencies involved with the families both prior to and during Fast Track. Most frequently recorded both **before and after** entry to Fast Track was input from pastoral support staff (in 18 and 16 per cent of cases respectively). Analysis will later show how their involvement may contribute to a positive impact in the Fast Track process. Before and after entry to Fast Track, 13 and 15 per cent of cases respectively recorded involvement with just one agency, five and seven percent recorded involvement with two agencies, whilst five and three percent recorded involvement with three agencies. Finally, seven per cent of cases recorded involvement with four or more agencies.

It should be noted that in 70 per cent of cases, no other agency involvement was recorded. This corresponds with the selection criteria used by some LEAs when identifying Fast Track cases, in that Fast Track would not be considered where other agencies were likely to be involved. Other agency involvement implies that families are experiencing difficulties which may reduce their ability to ensure school

attendance (as opposed to families who can provide no legitimate reason for their child’s non-attendance). It is also worth highlighting that six LEAs did not report any other agency input for any of their cases. This may be for the reasons outlined above, or it may be that they were unable to complete this section of the spreadsheet.

Table 5.4: Agency involvement before and during Fast Track

Agency involvement	BEFORE Fast Track		DURING Fast Track	
	Count	Percentage of cases (%)	Count	Percentage of cases (%)
None given	345	71	355	73
Pastoral support staff	88	18	75	16
Social Services	43	9	17	4
Connexions	32	7	28	6
Police	24	5	14	3
Special educational needs support	24	5	18	4
Learning mentors	20	4	21	4
School nurses	15	3	6	1
Health agency	13	3	9	2
Youth Offending Team	15	3	8	2
Education psychology	12	3	3	<1
BEST teams	10	2	13	3
Home visitors	7	1	6	1
Voluntary agencies	5	<1	10	2
Young carers	4	<1	2	<1
Surestart	3	<1	N/A	N/A
Multi-agency support team	2	<1	5	<1
Local court user groups	2	<1	N/A	N/A
Other agency (various) *	33	7	18	3

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system

NB: More than one response possible, therefore percentages do not sum to 100

* includes: inclusion team, housing, pupil referral unit, parent partnership, child and family unit, youth counselling

5.2.3 The process outcomes of 484 Fast Track cases

In order to gauge the impact on all cases within the 11 LEAs, the case tracking system included a section for LEAs to record process outcomes, such as whether a case was withdrawn or appeared in court.

Forty-two per cent of cases (205) registered on the case-tracking system were later **withdrawn** from the process and hence did not reach the prosecution stage. Table 5.5 illustrates the reasons for withdrawal. Overall, in 71 per cent of withdrawn cases, improved attendance was reported. This figure combines the responses of ‘improved attendance’, ‘attendance targets reached’ and ‘improved attendance and improved cooperation’, see Table 5.5.

Table 5.5: Reasons for withdrawal

Reason for withdrawal	Number of cases (n=205)	Percentage of withdrawn cases (%)
Improved attendance	69	34
Mitigating circumstances	44	21
Attendance targets reached	34	16
Improved cooperation and attendance	18	9
Moved out of area	15	7
Improved cooperation	8	4
Other	11	5
Not provided	6	3

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system.

Twenty-one percent of cases (101) continued through to the last stage of Fast Track and were presented in **court**. Forty-two (nine per cent) of these were recorded as having made a final court appearance (39 were found guilty, three not guilty). The following disposals were recorded: 27 parents received fines (sometimes including court costs). Fines ranged from £30 to £550 (the average fine was calculated as £166). The next most common disposal was a conditional discharge reported in eight cases. One of these was also accompanied by a parenting order. Two cases were said to have been given a community punishment and the remaining outcomes were recorded as warrants (two cases), adjourned (one) and a parenting order.

Of the 59 who had not reached the final court date, four cases had recorded a fourth court date (hence had been to court on four occasions). The outcome of the most recent court date was recorded as two cases being adjourned (no show) and two cases provided no information as to the outcome. Seventeen cases provided a third court date (in 15 cases the outcome was not recorded and two were adjourned – no show and pre-trial report required). Meanwhile, eleven cases had made just two court appearances but the outcome was not entered. Finally, 27 cases indicated only one court appearance and of these, 12 were adjourned (seven – more evidence required, three – no shows and two – pre-trial report requested) and 15 gave no information.

The remaining 37 per cent of cases did not have a date of withdrawal entered, nor did they have any court dates provided. It must therefore be assumed that this group were ‘ongoing cases’ at the time of data collection.

In only 11 cases, the option to **re-enter** Fast Track was used because of a decline in attendance.

5.3 The impact on attendance

In terms of the attendance information, LEAs could potentially provide figures for 28 weeks. For each week, data was requested in the following format:

- 1) number of sessions attended (a maximum of 10 half days)

- 2) sessions of authorised absence
- 3) sessions of unauthorised absence.

When considering the evidence from the case tracking data, it is important to recognise that the evaluation can only assess the results of Fast Track based on the data provided by LEAs. Some LEAs were able to give relatively full details of all their Fast Track cases, other LEAs entered very few cases onto the system. Whilst this may be linked with a more selective implementation of Fast Track, it may also be that they have not in fact entered every single case. Hence, the data will not necessarily be representative of all Fast Track cases in the 11 LEAs. Furthermore, in perusing the data that has been provided it became clear that there were considerable gaps in some sections. It will only be possible to fully gauge the impact of Fast Track if a sample of LEAs is able to readily provide detailed and accurate attendance data on all cases that enter the system, including those that are withdrawn at an early stage and those that continue through. The findings presented here therefore give some tentative indications of Fast Track’s impact, but it would require further comprehensive data sets to reach a final and totally conclusive assessment.

To ascertain the effect of Fast Track, the attendance data was divided into five periods of time:

- four weeks pre-Fast Track
- weeks 1–6 (during Fast Track)
- weeks 7–12 (during Fast Track)
- weeks 13–18 (post-Fast Track)
- weeks 19–24 (post-Fast Track).

Two hundred and thirty-seven of the 484 cases entered onto the NFER case tracking system provided some attendance information for all five periods. However, it should be noted that no LEA provided a complete set of data (i.e. full figures for attendance, authorised and unauthorised absence for four weeks before, 12 weeks during and 12 weeks post-Fast Track). The remaining 247 cases gave data for some, but not all, of these stages. During the evaluation, LEAs were told that, if they envisaged any difficulties in returning data, a researcher would be happy to visit and assist with data entry. Three LEAs requested assistance and researchers undertook seven separate visits to help with data entry.

Table 5.6 outlines the number, and percentage, of cases that provided information for each period.

Table 5.6: Number and percentage of cases providing data for pre-, during and post-Fast Track periods

Period of Fast Track	Number of cases (n= 484)	Percentage of cases (%)
Pre-Fast Track	324	67
During Fast Track (weeks 1–6)	449	93
During Fast Track (weeks 7–12)	454	94

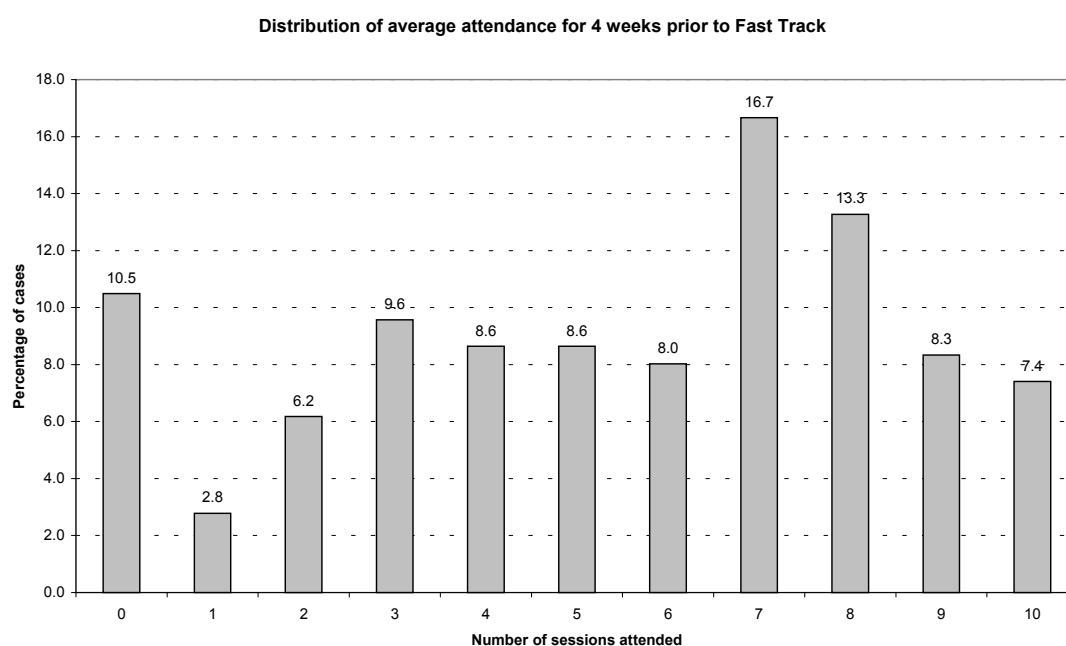
Post-Fast Track (weeks 13–18)	429	89
Post-Fast Track (weeks 19–24)	376	78

The figures presented in Table 5.6 show that most data was available for the 12 weeks during Fast Track and the six weeks immediately succeeding this (weeks 13–18). Only three-quarters of cases gave data for weeks 19–24. In many instances, this was because cases had not yet reached that stage of the process. The table also indicates that information relating to the four weeks preceding Fast Track was available for less than two thirds of cases, many LEAs stating that they did not have access to data for this period.

5.3.1 Attendance before Fast Track

When considering the attendance analysis detailed below, it is important to appreciate the range of attendance levels with which the cases entered Fast Track. Figure 5.4 shows the distribution of cases average weekly attendance, in half-day sessions, over the four weeks before they entered Fast Track.

Figure 5.4 Distribution of average attendance, in sessions per week, prior to Fast Track



Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system.

It should be noted that 324 cases provided attendance information for the pre-Fast Track period.

For the 324 cases that provided information for the pre-Fast Track period, mean levels of attendance ranged from no sessions a week to all ten sessions. Most frequently, pupils attended between six and eight sessions a week. In addition, a considerable number (11 per cent) of pupils averaged zero attendance over this period and a surprising, seven per cent were recorded as having 100 per cent attendance. Cases that registered 100 per cent attendance in the four weeks prior to Fast Track, may have

exhibited lower attendance in the lead up to this period and were hence identified for Fast Track. The spread of non-attendance may also reflect the different attendance thresholds used by LEAs and the intended target groups for Fast Track. Further analysis will investigate whether the starting point of a pupil’s attendance has any influence on the overall impact of the intervention.

5.3.2 Changes in attendance, authorised and unauthorised absences

To determine the impact of Fast Track on attendance, authorised and unauthorised absence levels, averages of each were calculated for the five periods covering pre-, during and post-Fast Track. To calculate the mean for a particular stage, all cases providing some attendance information for that period, were included in the analysis (see Table 5.6). Table 5.7 illustrates the average percentage attendance, authorised and unauthorised absence, pre-, during and post-Fast Track. It should be noted that attendance was recorded on the case tracking system as the number of sessions attend per week, rather than a percentage. To obtain a percentage, the average number of weekly sessions has been multiplied by 100.

Table 5.7: Average percentage of attendance, authorised and unauthorised absence, pre-, during and post-Fast Track

	Pre-Fast Track (%)	During Fast Track (%)		Post-Fast Track (%)	
		Weeks 1-6	Weeks 7-12	Weeks 13-18	Weeks 19-24
Average attendance	53.3 (29.8)	60.5 (29.6)	63.9 (31.8)	60.1 (31.6)	57.9 (33.6)
Average authorised absence	14.4 (22.7)	10.7 (14.7)	9.3 (15.4)	12.5 (19.9)	14.5 (23.4)
Average unauthorised absence	32.3 (32)	29.5 (30.3)	26.7 (32.3)	27.3 (31.7)	27.6 (22.5)

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system.

It should be noted that 324 cases provided information for the pre-Fast Track period, 449 cases provided information for the first six weeks of Fast Track, 454 cases provided information for the second six weeks of Fast Track, 429 cases provided information for the first six weeks post-Fast Track and 376 cases provided information for the second six weeks post-Fast Track.

Averages are based on the number of valid sessions converted into a percentage: for example if a case only provides 6 weeks of data out of a possible 12, average attendance = weekly attendance/6 weeks x100.

Number in brackets refers to the standard deviation.

The data presented in Table 5.7 shows that average attendance for the whole sample increased from 53 per cent before Fast Track to 64 per cent during the second half of the intervention (weeks 7–12). However, this increase of 11 per cent (the equivalent of an extra half a day a week), was not sustained and attendance levels fell to an average of 58 per cent, after cases exited the intervention (weeks 19–24).

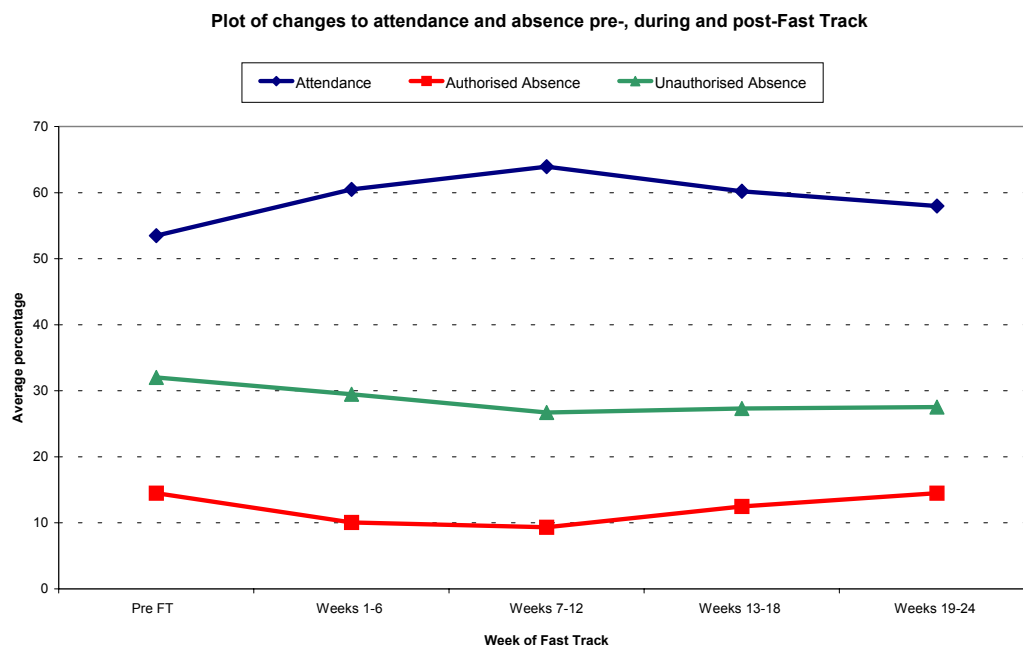
The level of authorised absence decreased from 14 per cent prior to Fast Track, to nine per cent during the final part of the process. Again this improvement was not sustained, with the level of authorised absence increasing in the post-Fast Track period. In fact, the authorised absence level for six weeks after cases left Fast Track was identical to that recorded in the four weeks before the intervention. This pattern of authorised absence may relate to the fact that schools are urged not to authorise any ambiguous absences for pupils while they are in Fast Track, as this would hinder the chances of a successful prosecution. However, when pupils are no longer in the process, it is possible that schools may feel more able to authorise absences.

The level of average unauthorised absence decreased from 32 per cent before cases entered Fast Track, to 27 per cent sessions per week in the post intervention period.

Additional analysis of this data was undertaken using only the 237 cases where data had been provided for each of the five periods. This analysis disclosed similar mean scores for attendance, authorised and unauthorised absence levels, as those revealed when all cases with some information were incorporated.

Figure 5.5 below is a plot of the information provided in Table 5.7. The figure shows graphically the changes in cases attendance, authorised and unauthorised absence over the entire 28 week period.

Figure 5.5 Changes to the percentage of average attendance, authorised and unauthorised absence, pre, during and post-Fast Track



Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system.

It should be noted that 324 cases provided information for the pre-Fast Track period, 449 cases provided information for the first six weeks of Fast Track, 454 cases provided information for the second six weeks of Fast Track, 429 cases provided information for the first six weeks post-Fast Track and 376 cases provided information for the second six weeks post-Fast Track.

Figure 5.5 shows that, as revealed in Table 5.7, improvements in average attendance, authorised and unauthorised absence during Fast Track were not sustained when cases left the intervention. Looking specifically at cases that were withdrawn from Fast Track, 70 of the 205 actually showed a decline in attendance, when comparing figures for the last six weeks of Fast Track with the first. It may be that a decision was made to withdraw these cases at a mid-way point (e.g. week 6 of Fast Track) after which attendance subsequently declined. This suggests that once the threat of prosecution is removed, some parents and pupils are not always able to maintain attendance patterns.

5.3.3 The stages at which attendance changed

In order to determine at which stage Fast Track had most impact on cases, the average attendance levels from different periods were compared and the frequency of increases or decreases in attendance recorded. It was considered more effective to compare means for similar periods of time. Thus when attendance levels prior to Fast Track were contrasted with those during Fast Track, the mean attendance for the first six weeks, rather than the entire 12 weeks, was used. Similarly, the mean for the four weeks prior to Fast Track was compared with that of the mean for the first six weeks, not 12 weeks, post-Fast Track. All cases which included some data for the comparable periods were included in the analysis. Table 5.8 shows the percentage of cases where attendance increased, decreased or stayed the same across the different periods.

Table 5.8: Percentage of cases where attendance increased, decreased or stayed the same across the different periods

	Pre and weeks 1–6	Weeks 1–6 & weeks 7–12	Weeks 1–12 & weeks 13–24	Pre and weeks 13–18
Increase	51.4	48.7	36.5	49.3
Decrease	41.7	42.6	56.1	42.9
Stay the same	6.9	8.7	7.4	7.8

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system.

It should be noted that 324 cases provided information for the pre-Fast Track period, 449 cases provided information for the first six weeks of Fast Track, 454 cases provided information for the second six weeks of Fast Track, 429 cases provided information for the first six weeks post-Fast Track and 376 cases provided information for the second six weeks post-Fast Track.

It is apparent from Table 5.8 that the attendance of 51 per cent of cases improved when they entered Fast Track. Similarly, the attendance of 49 per cent of cases improved between the first and second six weeks of Fast Track. Thus, during these early periods attendance was more likely to increase than decrease, however, when cases exited Fast Track, 56 per cent showed a decline in attendance compared to 37 per cent who showed an improvement. Despite this, over the entire 28-week period (i.e. four weeks prior to the intervention, 12 weeks during and 12 weeks post-Fast Track) more cases showed increases in the number of sessions they attended, than decreases.

5.3.4 The extent of improved attendance

In order to determine the scale of these increases in attendance, analysis was undertaken exclusively with cases showing improvements across the different periods. The average increases in attendance evident between these periods were converted into days and are displayed in Table 5.9 below.

Table 5.9: Average changes in attendance, in days, for those cases that improved across the different stages of Fast Track

	Pre and weeks 1–6	Weeks 1–6 & weeks 7–12	Weeks 1–12 & weeks 13–24	Pre and weeks 13–18
Increase of	1.1 days	0.98 days	0.82 days	1.4 days

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system.

It should be noted that of the cases that provided attendance information for the different periods of Fast Track; the attendance of 165 cases improved between the pre and during periods, the attendance of 214 cases improved between the first and second six weeks of Fast Track, the attendance of 163 cases improved between Fast Track and post-Fast Track and the attendance of 146 cases improved between pre and post-Fast Track.

NB: Range of improvement = 0.1 to 4 days

Table 5.9 reveals that the most notable increase in attendance occurred between the pre-Fast Track period and weeks 13–18 after Fast Track. In effect, for the 146 cases where attendance after Fast Track was higher than it had been prior to the intervention, attendance improved on average by 1.4 extra days a week, (a 27 per cent increase). The increases in attendance when cases initially entered Fast Track, and as cases progressed though the intervention were also noteworthy, both equating to one extra day in school a week.

The impact on attendance can also be assessed by looking at the proportions of pupils achieving ‘acceptable’ levels of attendance, i.e. 90 per cent or more attendance across the three periods of Fast Track. Pre-Fast Track, 11 per cent of cases achieved this figure, during Fast Track this rose to 18 per cent and in the post period, the proportion of pupils achieving 90 per cent plus was maintained at 18 per cent. Considering other levels of average attendance (from 0 to 100 per cent), Table 5.10 shows how the distribution of average attendance changed across all three Fast Track periods.

Table 5.10: Distribution of average attendance

Average percentage of attendance (%)	Percentage of cases		
	Pre-Fast Track (%)	During Fast Track (%)	Post-Fast Track (%)
0–9	12	9	11
10–19	4	3	4
20–29	9	5	4
30–39	8	5	6
40–49	8	6	8
50–59	9	9	10
60–69	11	10	11
70–79	17	21	16
80–89	12	14	13
90–100	11	18	18

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system.
Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

5.3.5 Impact on attendance by case outcome

It is also possible to compare attendance according to the outcome of each Fast Track case – i.e. case withdrawn, case presented at court or case on-going at the time of data collection. Table 5.11 below shows the average attendance across three stages of the Fast Track process – four weeks before Fast Track, during (weeks 1-12) and post-Fast Track (weeks 13-24). Sample sizes are reduced, as a limited number of cases included data across all three stages.

Table 5.11: Average percentage of attendance by case outcome

	No. of cases	Attendance (%)				
		pre-Fast Track	Weeks 1-6	Weeks 7-12	Weeks 13-18	Weeks 19-24
Withdrawn	147	59.8 (27)	64.9* (24)	71.7* (26)	64.3 (28)	58.7 (34)
Presented at court	44	41 (27.8)	42.9 (29)	42.5 (31)	37.6 (31)	46.3 (38)
On-going	90	43 (28)	47 (28)	52.1* (32)	46.1* (33)	50.4 (37)

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system
Sample sizes are reduced, as a limited number of cases included data across all three stages.
* indicates a statistically different value to that of the previous cell.

For cases that were withdrawn from Fast Track, it can be seen that average attendance was higher than for those cases presented at court, or categorised as ongoing. There is also a noticeable drop from 72 per cent in weeks 7-12 to 59 per cent in weeks 19-24, which corresponds with the post-Fast Track period (indicating that gains in attendance were not sustained after withdrawal). Meanwhile, those cases that were presented in court showed little change in average attendance over the 28 weeks. Amongst those cases that were classified as ongoing (no withdrawal or court date recorded), the

average attendance, did become significantly higher during the last six weeks of Fast Track (weeks 7-12) but then fell post-Fast Track (weeks 13-24).

5.4 Factors influencing the impact on attendance

In an attempt to determine whether experience of particular interventions, or different profile characteristics affected attendance outcomes within Fast Track, a range of factors were examined using regression modelling (both logistic and linear).

5.4.1 Factors affecting whether attendance improved or not

Two logistic models were run comparing different periods of Fast Track. The first model looked at the probability of whether average attendance would improve between the first six weeks of Fast Track and the last six weeks. The second model then compared 12 weeks of attendance post-Fast Track, with 12 weeks of attendance during Fast Track. In this modelling, no account was taken of the extent of change i.e. how much attendance increased or declined. The role of the factors below was only considered in relation to whether the average attendance improved or not. Cases were thus categorised as ‘yes, attendance improved’ or ‘no, attendance did not improve’. Indications of when the intervention took place were also entered in the model e.g. before and during Fast Track. The low numbers of cases in four LEAs meant that they were excluded from this piece of analysis.

Table 5.12 Factors examined

Type of case: profile characteristics	Type of process: interventions
Gender	Home visits
Free school meals	Meetings with parents
Ethnicity	Letters to parents
SEN	Pastoral support staff involvement
Year group	Number of panels
Prior attendance	Phone calls
	Withdrawn or not

During earlier phases of the evaluation, no statistically significant effect was found on attendance for any of the above factors. However, with increasing numbers recorded on the case tracking system, some factors have now emerged as influential in terms of Fast Track’s impact on attendance.

When comparing average attendance of the last six weeks of Fast Track to the first six weeks, the average attendance was more likely to increase for those cases that were recorded as having had **a meeting with parents during Fast Track, but not before**. This corroborates the views of professionals and parents, who, during interviews, pointed to the value of meetings in terms of sharing concerns, clarifying the legal responsibilities of parents and formulating an action plan to improve attendance. An increase in average attendance was also more likely to occur for those cases that received **letters before Fast Track, but not during**.

When comparing average attendance post-Fast Track to the average attendance during, attendance was more likely to improve for those cases that received **pastoral support both before and during Fast Track**. This implies that school input remains important even after the case has been referred onto Fast Track. In the original model of Fast Track there was a division between school level work pre-Fast Track and LEA level work once the case entered the framework. Interviewees, in some LEAs, suggested that schools have very little involvement once the case is Fast Tracked, with responsibility being passed to the EWS. This analysis shows that cases may in fact benefit from both EWS and school support during the Fast Track process.

5.4.2 Factors that influenced the level of attendance

It is also possible to examine the data using linear regression modelling which takes into account the level of attendance (and not just whether it had improved or not). The first model looked at the impact of different variables (e.g. type of intervention) on the average attendance during Fast Track and the second model, considered the effect on average attendance post-Fast Track.

Controlling for other factors, the average attendance during Fast Track was likely to be greater for cases recorded as **female** (i.e. a girl's attendance during Fast Track would be 0.7 per cent higher than a boy with the same level of prior attendance). Attendance was also found to be greater for pupils in **primary school** (one per cent higher). Turning to the second model, primary school pupils again showed a higher level of attendance post-Fast Track than secondary pupils (by one per cent). This suggests that Fast Track may prove effective with the parents of younger children (given the same levels of prior attendance), as mentioned by interviewees. However, 83 per cent of all primary-aged children recorded on the case tracking system originated from just two LEAs, hence these findings may be explained by an LEA effect. Curiously, whilst girls' attendance showed a higher average attendance during Fast Track, after Fast Track, being a girl was seen to have a negative effect (i.e. girls' attendance post-Fast Track was 0.4 per cent lower than boys with the same attendance levels during Fast Track). This implies that girls are more likely to improve attendance during the intervention, but once Fast Track is removed they are less likely to sustain these improvements.

In terms of type of interventions, **home visits both before and during Fast Track** appeared to exert a negative effect (by -1 per cent) on average attendance during Fast Track. Meanwhile, **phone calls to parents both before and during Fast Track** had a negative effect on the level of post-Fast Track attendance (by -0.6 per cent). It is possible that these findings equate with families who are not responsive to Fast Track's earlier stages and thus represent more difficult cases.

The case tracking system also collected details of the panels held during Fast Track. Analysis was undertaken to determine whether the timing of the LEA/during Fast Track panel had any significant impact on attendance rates. No significant differences were found between the date of the panel and the level of attendance. As well as panels being held at different points within Fast Track, LEAs also varied in the number that were held. For average attendance during Fast Track, having one panel was found to have a positive effect on attendance, over those cases that did not have a panel and those that had two. For average attendance post-Fast Track, having two

panels was shown to have a negative effect on average attendance. As with home visits before and during Fast Track, a negative effect may simply be due to the fact that families who reach a second panel are those who have not responded to the first meeting and may be characterised by higher levels of non-cooperation and hence, non-attendance.

5.4.3 The effect of attendance levels pre- Fast Track on subsequent attendance

Interviewees suggested that Fast Track was more successful with borderline cases of non-attendance as opposed to those pupils exhibiting much more serious non-attendance behaviour. This factor was therefore investigated further with reference to the attendance entered onto the case tracking system.

Pre-Fast Track attendance was entered into a linear model to explore its effect as an independent predictor of attendance during Fast Track (dependent variable). That is, does a pupil's attendance before entry to Fast Track have any influence on their attendance during? Similarly, average attendance during Fast Track was entered as a predictor of average attendance post-Fast Track. Linear modelling indicated that there is a statistically significant positive relationship between prior attendance and the outcome of interest (either attendance during or attendance post). That is, if attendance is lower before Fast Track, it is likely to remain lower after and if attendance is higher, it is likely to remain higher.

5.4.4 Impact of Fast Track by LEA

The data also allowed consideration as to whether the success of Fast Track differed by LEA. Four LEAs were excluded from the analysis because they provided less than 20 cases each (in one instance just four cases were entered onto the system). The table below shows, by LEA, the percentage of pupils who registered an improvement in attendance during and post-Fast Track.

Table 5.13: Percentage of cases showing improvements in attendance by LEA

LEA	No. of cases recorded	% of cases with improvements during Fast Track *	% of cases with improvements post-Fast Track **
LEA 5	53	65	23
LEA 12	146	56	39
LEA 2	56	52	41
LEA 1	87	45	39
LEA 4	64	25	23
LEA 10	23	18	27
LEA 8	25	0	55

Source: Data recorded on the NFER case tracking system

*Comparing first six weeks of Fast Track with the second six weeks

**Comparing 12 weeks during Fast Track with 12 weeks post

It is notable that the two LEAs (1 and 2) which demonstrated improvements for a sizeable proportion of their pupils and who almost managed to maintain these proportions post-Fast Track, were LEAs which reported ongoing monitoring after Fast Track. Indeed one authority (LEA 1) kept pupils on Fast Track until they left school or moved out of the area. By contrast, the LEAs which initially generated the largest percentages of improved pupils (LEAs 5 and 12), followed by a substantial decline in percentages post-Fast Track were the two LEAs which reported the shortest timeframes for monitoring (four and six weeks). This underlines the vital role that monitoring has to play once a case has exited Fast Track.

Looking at the LEAs that fall into the bottom half of the table, interviews with staff in LEA 4 revealed some explanation for the lower proportions of pupils showing an improvement. Here, the first cohort of Fast Track cases included those with more serious attendance concerns. The school involved subsequently chose to re-define the target group to focus on those with more borderline non-attendance patterns, a group which was felt to be more responsive to Fast Track intervention. These pupils however did not start Fast Track until later in the year and hence were not entered onto the case tracking system. Finally, pupils were more likely to increase attendance post-Fast Track than during Fast Track in LEAs 8 and 10. This may be linked to the fact that these two LEAs only provided data on cases that went to court – hence, a rise in attendance may have followed a court appearance towards the end of the 12 week Fast Track period.

Further details on how these LEAs implemented Fast Track can be found in Appendix 2.

Summary

To recap, the following features were found to have an effect on attendance of those cases recorded in the NFER case tracking system.

The **probability of attendance improving** during the last six weeks compared to the first weeks of Fast Track was higher for cases that had meetings with parents during Fast Track, but not before and letters before Fast Track, but not during. The probability of attendance improving post-Fast Track compared to during Fast Track was higher for cases that had pastoral support both before and during the intervention.

Attendance levels during Fast Track were likely to be higher for cases that were female. Attendance levels during and post-Fast Track were likely to be higher for cases that involved primary-aged pupils and cases that had attended one panel.

A **negative effect** on attendance during Fast Track was found for cases that had home visits and phone calls both before Fast Track and during. A negative effect on attendance post-Fast Track was found for cases that had attended two panels.

Evidence from the NFER case tracking system would suggest that Fast Track can lead to improvements in attendance, whilst families are under the umbrella of Fast Track. However, once the intervention has reached its conclusion or is suspended, attendance levels may not be maintained. This finding, however, relates to a specific sample of

cases and it must be acknowledged that the data provided by LEAs was not always complete. Hence, the impact of Fast Track on attendance levels has yet to be fully established.

Policy and practice implications

Overall statistical data shows that Fast Track does not turn the poorest attenders into good ones. With the constant caveat of this data set not always being fully robust, it nevertheless does imply the need for additional strategies for this type of non-attender.

The decline in attendance post-Fast Track highlights the importance of ongoing monitoring procedures. All LEAs reported arrangements for monitoring attendance once a case exited Fast Track. However, those LEAs which monitored for longer periods of time seemed more able to maintain attendance improvements. It may be that this period of monitoring needs to be extended and/or that parents need to be aware that their child's attendance is still under scrutiny.

Chapter 6

Perceptions of effectiveness

Key findings

- Interviewees generally felt that Fast Track was an effective strategy for tackling school non-attendance principally because of the procedural improvements and efficiencies it introduced. The addition of time-limits to the prosecution process was also seen as a key feature.
- For most interviewees, Fast Track represented considerable improvements on existing systems of prosecution, largely as a result of increased efficiency and reduction of delays. Fast Track was felt to have raised the profile of attendance issues and the speed of the process symbolised its importance to parents and pupils.
- Effective elements or stages of Fast Track processes were identified as: meetings, letters, visits, issue of caution under PACE, issue of court summons.
- Effective characteristics of Fast Track processes were identified as: speed, limited time-frames and a structured process, based on consistency, clarity and transparency.
- Fast Track was seen as being potentially most effective in cases of less severe, newly emerging non-attendance where the young person's family situation was not characterised by '*complex social issues*'. Where non-attendance was deeply entrenched, where behavioural, family and social issues were prevalent, (often involving the input of other agencies), Fast Track was deemed to be less successful in terms of improving attendance, and also less appropriate. However, some LEAs did use Fast Track for these types of cases in order to move them quickly to court. In this context, Fast Track was considered effective based on its procedural efficiencies.
- Suggestions for improving Fast Track included the provision of additional resources, principally staff, in order to accommodate the demands associated with Fast Track (especially those arising from the time constraints). Disposals, in terms of consistency and level of fines imposed, were also identified as possible areas which could contribute to improvements in the overall effectiveness of the process.

Introduction

This chapter considers the perceived effectiveness of Fast Track as a means of raising attendance at school. Views on five key areas are considered:

- overall thoughts on the effectiveness of Fast Track
- the effectiveness of Fast Track when compared to previous or other prosecution systems
- the most effective component, element or stage of Fast Track
- identification of the contexts or types of cases in which Fast Track was deemed to be more, or less effective (with reference to family illustrations)
- thoughts on the ways in which Fast Track could be improved.

6.1 Overall thoughts on the effectiveness of Fast Track

Interviewees generally expressed positive sentiments towards Fast Track, reflecting a general agreement that it **can** be an effective strategy for addressing non-attendance at school.

Across the sample, 22 respondents suggested that Fast Track was **effective**, 18 suggested that this process had so far, or was predicted to have, **mixed, or qualified effectiveness**, and six contended that it was **not an effective** strategy for improving school attendance. Similar views and comments were made by both EWS and school personnel – there were no particular distinctions between EWS and school perspectives. Furthermore, the negative comments regarding Fast Track mainly originated from interviewees in two LEAs. In one, the implementation and experience of Fast Track had been subject to certain difficulties and challenges and in the other, Fast Track was used for cases that could be described as more entrenched.

6.1.2 On what basis is Fast Track an effective strategy?

Fast Track is effective because of procedural improvements, in terms of ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • streamlining and increased efficiency • targeted delivery • increased clarity and definition • time-limitations
Fast Track is effective because of its increased power, in terms of ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • legal sanction • symbolic message

The main explanations for the potential effectiveness of Fast Track centred around **procedural improvements** although, several interviewees also highlighted the effect of **increased power/sanction** and the **symbolic function** associated with Fast Track prosecutions.

Fast Track was seen, by some, to be effective as a result of the **streamlining and increased efficiency** that had been brought to the prosecution process. The frameworks and systematic nature of Fast Track processes provided the capability to involve higher volumes of cases, so increasing their impact: *'you can go through a lot more pupils and help a lot more families if you stick to this system'* (EWO).

Targeted delivery was also identified as being a particularly important aspect of Fast Track, and the appropriate selection of cases was a key factor in facilitating success. *'It's getting in at the people you absolutely need to target'* (governor). Fast Track's success in one LEA had prompted the EWS and the school to include cases that would ordinarily not have been considered for court-related intervention because their attendance levels did not warrant intervention at that stage. Hence, early identification and intervention through Fast Track was seen as being highly desirable and effective:

Because we've looked carefully at the group we've fast-tracked, I think we've been quite successful (EWS manager).

Fast Track processes were associated with increased **clarity and definition** of the aims and focus of prosecution as well as of the roles and responsibilities of all involved:

It clearly defines my role, the school's role and it clearly defines parental responsibility. The focus is much clearer and the fog is beginning to lift (EWO).

The **time-limited nature** of Fast Track processes was specifically highlighted as a core principle underpinning effectiveness for two main reasons. Firstly, it was said that this characteristic could be used to communicate to parents that improvements in attendance had to be immediate and sustained in order to avert court action. Secondly, some strategic level EWS staff noted that the imposition of time constraints could impact positively on EWS working procedures, (although this might not always be readily accepted by some practitioners).

I've constantly been saying to team leaders that you need to start to take the timelines for these cases and not let them drag on ...knowing that they've had to do [Fast Track] gave them the ability to grasp that and say to the EWOs, 'this is the time that we will work with the family'. We've just been OfSTEDed and our court results showed really effectively that our way of working has got these families back into school (PEWO).

Several interviewees attributed the effectiveness of Fast Track prosecutions to the **increased power/sanction** they carried and in the **symbolic function/role** they could fulfil. For example, it was noted that Fast Track had provided opportunities for increased pressure on parents, and this system had provided more 'bite' in terms of tackling attendance issues. *'I do think that most people don't like going to court and they don't like receiving summonses'* (EWS team leader). An assistant headteacher suggested that Fast Track had provided the school with *'an enormous lever'* in working with parents towards improving their children's attendance. Fast Track was also seen to **symbolise** the importance of raising attendance, reflecting broader political and legislative support: A senior school representative suggested that *'it shows that the government will support schools with attendance'* (assistant headteacher).

6.1.3 On what basis is the effectiveness of Fast Track variable or mixed?

In addition to these fundamentally positive orientations towards Fast Track, other interviewees identified the potential effectiveness of the system, but also expressed some reservations and highlighted limitations to its success.

Fast Track is effective, but ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it is just one strategy • its effect is hard to quantify • it is subject to variations by case • it is subject to variations by scale • it leads to short-term improvements • only where appropriate • there is scope for improvement
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Whilst being generally supportive of the principal and implementation of Fast Track, 18 interviewees, offered a range of explanations for its ‘mixed’ or variable effectiveness.

Principally, it was suggested that Fast Track was just **one particular strategy or approach** that could be employed alongside others as a means of addressing non-attendance. Consequently, it was claimed that there was a need to assess and evaluate it as such. Within this, variations were evident in interviewees’ views on the role or place of Fast Track, and its individual contribution within overall attendance strategies:

It’s another link in the chain ...it has given us one more option (governor).

It’s one of the strategies that we’ve used. We’ve used prosecution as well as proactive strategies (SEWO).

As part of a multi-strategy approach, it’s very effective. If there was a school with very bad attendance and you said, ‘Fast Track will solve all the problems’ it wouldn’t. You need the rewards as well. Fast Track works as part of a continuum (deputy headteacher).

Difficulties were expressed regarding the extent to which Fast Track’s effectiveness could actually be **gauged** – how far was it possible to attribute an increase in attendance to Fast Track, or any other initiative or combination of strategies? Impact was thus seen as being hard to quantify, and it was suggested (at managerial and operational levels) that more could and should be done to address this issue. These comments were restricted to EWS personnel. A PEWO, for example, suggested that there was anecdotal evidence that the implementation of Fast Track had improved attendance, but that there was a need to systematically collect and analyse data at an aggregate LEA, and even national level as a means of verifying this.

In two LEAs, there were interviewees who reported that Fast Track had brought about **short-term improvements** in attendance, so as such, was seen to be partially effective. Some senior school representatives indicated that Fast Track could lead to initial improvements in attendance, but these were prone to decline over time, as illustrated in the analysis of the case-tracking data. The issue raised here was how could these improvements be sustained once the influence, or pressure of Fast Track was removed?

I think it is a good strategy, but it’s had some slippages (deputy headteacher).

It might improve [attendance] short term, and then it deteriorates (deputy headteacher).

The effectiveness of Fast Track was also regarded by some EWS practitioners and school staff, as being subject to **variations** arising from the inherent differences associated with individual cases: *'It works in some cases, not in others'* (EWO). **Appropriateness** was thus identified as a key determinant of effectiveness of Fast Track.

It's not appropriate to use Fast Track with every case that we deal with, but for those cases that are ultimately going to proceed to court, I think it's the most appropriate thing (EWO).

I think it has been effective, but like everything, it's not the answer to everything. It hasn't solved everything, but it has helped (attendance support worker).

Several also suggested that the effectiveness of Fast Track could be tempered by specific problems, weaknesses or omissions in the system and that these required addressing. For example, some felt the process could benefit from more home visits in the initial stages. Others felt greater awareness of Fast Track prosecutions as a whole was needed, with one headteacher commenting that the process of Fast Track would not be effective *'unless it is seen to be effective'* (headteacher).

Similarly, impact and effectiveness could be influenced by issues of scale. One senior school representative suggested that in terms of individual pupil's attendance, the introduction of Fast Track had been successful. However, on aggregate school, and LEA levels, *'its impact on attendance overall has been minor because it's only targeting a few'* (deputy headteacher).

6.1.4 On what basis is Fast Track an ineffective strategy?

Fast track has been ineffective because ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it did not lead to improvements in attendance • it contained nothing unique or contributed nothing new
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Of these, two (from the same LEA) suggested that there had not been improvements in attendance. This particular authority, however, had adopted a more court focussed approach, targeting cases with higher levels of absence, which would inevitably prove harder to turn around.

It's not made any difference to the students who have been through it. With one, I knew it wouldn't make any difference from the beginning, but for the other, I thought it might, but it didn't (EWO).

If you look at the results of the few that we've had, it's not been effective. None of them have been back to school (SEWO).

The low numbers of pupils involved in Fast Track and, the lack of cooperation between those involved were also identified as leading to its ineffectiveness. Thus, a key issue raised related to the need for schools, EWS and other agencies, where relevant, to work together as a partnership, with each meeting its requirements and fulfilling its responsibilities:

It's awful because I thought it was a really good concept. Had the school worked with me on it, I think it would have been effective, but they didn't, so it hasn't been effective (EWO).

A final respondent suggested that Fast Track had not achieved anything that other processes, procedures or initiatives would not have brought about:

I would say that speeding up the process of court is probably effective, but you can do that without the formal Fast Track (PEWO).

6.2 How does Fast Track compare with previous or other prosecution systems?

Despite possible reservations about Fast Track, respondents overwhelmingly reported that it was more effective than previous, or existing arrangements for bringing prosecutions in their LEAs. Others qualified such views, suggesting that there were still limits/constraints on the effectiveness of Fast Track, whilst a small number noted that this process had not represented a positive change.

6.2.1 Fast Track as an improvement on previous prosecution arrangements

<p>Fast Track represents an improvement because of ...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased numbers of prosecutions • procedural improvements • improved speed and timescales • raised profile of attendance and prosecution • improved efficiency • strategic and ideological developments
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The majority of interviewees reported that the implementation of Fast Track represented an improvement over existing, and alternative prosecution frameworks. In one LEA, it was even contended that prosecutions were more likely to be brought simply because of the introduction of this framework. Fast Track, in this LEA, was said to represent a 'sea change', and the introduction of new orientations and attitudes towards the role and value of prosecuting parents.

There were no prosecutions previously, so [Fast Track] is an improvement (deputy headteacher).

In the past, prosecution was not done very often and was seen very much as a last resort. There was a reluctance to do it (EWO).

Fast Track's perceived superiority over existing systems of prosecution was largely attributed to improvements inherent in its **procedural characteristics**. EWS, school, and some court representatives expressed the view that Fast Track was the vehicle through which LEA prosecutions could be 'tightened up' as a result of the imposition of structural frameworks and increased case-targeting. A senior school representative noted that Fast Track was *'far more effective than the dithering that had been going on'* (headteacher). Fast Track was seen to represent a significant move away from the reliance on the discretion and judgement of EWS personnel.

We were all over the show before. We're more strategic now and we're directing the resources at the right kids (EWO).

A major component of these procedural improvements centred on the **speed and timescales** involved in bringing prosecutions – from both school and EWS perspectives – and was apparent in prosecution-focused, and early-intervention-focused Fast Track approaches. Hence, increased speed and efficiency was identified as a benefit common to all Fast Track types. The **time-limited** element of Fast Track necessitated streamlining, so speed and procedural improvements were seen as complementary facets of the process:

The time-limited aspect is an important element as it makes things happen. People have to work to known deadlines, so things are tightened up (PEWO).

Far superior – it's faster. In a lot of cases, there is no need for it to drag on for ages and pursue every avenue which we did in the past. This process gets out of the way a lot of cases that just need to be dealt with, where there's no real reason why they shouldn't be going to school (attendance support worker).

The increased speed and simplicity of Fast Track provided some of those involved in the process with a renewed impetus and support, as well as increased belief in the value in prosecuting cases.

[Fast Track is] much better because it's faster. The time that was taken before, and the number of reprieves that parents got made it almost not worth, in our view, schools pursuing things (deputy headteacher).

Several interviewees contended that under previous systems, prosecuting the parents of children nearing the official end of their school careers would have been problematic, if not almost impossible. The potential swiftness of Fast Track had thus opened up new avenues for such cases and also assisted in conveying to parents, the importance of attendance, and the likelihood of legal consequences should improvements not be forthcoming. Hence, the increased speed carried with it symbolism and power that could also act on families as a means of improving attendance:

You are saying to parents 'It is important, and because it is important we are going to do it over a short space of time because we want to get your child back into school' (PEWO).

I think the fact that it's called 'Fast Track', even though when we worked it out, it wasn't actually that fast, it's made it higher profile with the parents and that's been positive (EWO).

Other interviewees also referred to this **raised profile** of attendance issues consistent with the implementation of Fast Track, but without highlighting the timescale factor. It was argued, by one senior school representative, that Fast Track had increased the credibility of the school and the EWS in relation to prosecution and attendance, when compared with the situation prior to its implementation:

The whole system is slicker and it makes us look more professional, because in the past people kept saying [to parents] 'you will be [prosecuted] and it didn't happen, or it happened years later. I think that makes us look unprofessional. If we say we're going to do something we need to do it. This system probably has more impact (deputy headteacher).

Increases in **consistency** were associated with the introduction of Fast Track processes – consistency in terms of the way in which cases were dealt with by schools and EWS, and also by the courts. The increased volume and concentration of non-attendance cases since Fast Track was said, by a clerk to the court, to have allowed magistrates the opportunity to develop greater understanding of cases and improve the consistency of their deliberation and disposal through comparability of concentrated cases. Meanwhile, court representatives contended that Fast Track cases were likely to be more consistent, been approached more systematically and were thus more appropriate for legal action.

It was a nightmare before it was so woolly. There was no timetable to it, there was no scale to it. It was left very much to the EWOs' discretion, so that some EWOs wouldn't do any prosecution at all whether they were needed or not, so it was really inconsistent (PEWO).

Having a uniform policy for everybody in the service ... and for every case (PEWO).

Fast Track processes were seen as generally more **efficient** than previous methods of prosecution. A solicitor noted that one particular Fast Track process was more effective than the previous system as non-cooperative parents were identified, warned, and if improvements were not forthcoming, proceedings were instigated. This short, direct process was seen as being far more cost, and time-effective for those involved:

EWOs don't waste time sending letters when parents are never going to cooperate – they just identify those parents not cooperating and give them their final warning (solicitor).

This view was echoed by the PEWO in the same LEA, who noted that, under Fast Track, *'EWOs don't waste lots of time with continuous visiting'* (PEWO).

Fast Track was identified as bringing **strategic** or **ideological improvements** to the prosecution process. One PEWO suggested that Fast Track represented a change in attitude towards prosecution and the way in which EWS would consider and work with cases. An intrinsic part of the perceived benefits of Fast Track was the speed and the timeframe in which it operated, coupled with the shift in emphasis of EWS approach towards increasing the responsibility of parents for addressing their children's non-attendance.

We changed the system because we could have been stuck with working with a family for one, two or three years. Realistically, it's either a can't or won't behind them getting their kids into school.

[Casework that runs on for too long] is effectively condoning that absence. We now just peel all the excuses away. How many times do you have to stand there and take excuses from these people? I think that good social work is about empowering parents to do it themselves. Paying an officer to collect excuses for two years is crazy. So, when Fast Track came in, we were up for it (PEWO).

Similar views were expressed by EWS staff in another LEA:

It's a big improvement on how we work, it focuses the mind, takes some of the work away from the EWO, puts more responsibility on the parent (EWO).

Hence, Fast Track was not just celebrated for its speed, but for the attitudes and orientations on which it was based.

6.2.2 Fast Track as a qualified improvement

Fast Track is an improvement but ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intrinsic elements of process require refinement – addition of stages or elements • extrinsic elements of process require addressing – court issues/disposals
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Six respondents from three LEAs suggested that Fast Track represented an improvement, although certain limitations and problems still existed. Modifications and improvements were still required in terms of procedural factors, such as the addition of more visits, and a reduction in the timescale of the process, as well as extrinsic, court related issues, such as delays and low, or inconsistent fines.

It's better than it was before because it's faster and there's a schedule to work to, but it still takes too long in my view (EWO).

6.2.3 Fast Track as no improvement

Fast Track represented no change because ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it had not brought any changes • it was not a comparable system
Fast Track did not represent an improvement because ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it had not added anything new to the previous system • attendance was not improving
Fast Track represented a negative change because ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it imposed new constraints

Four interviewees suggested Fast Track represented no change from the system of prosecution previously employed, whilst three others contended that it was not possible to make comparisons or that it was still too early in the process to be able to make an accurate assessment.

Four interviewees suggested that Fast Track did not compare favourably with existing or previous systems of prosecution. Of these, two were EWS practitioners and one was a senior school representative from the same LEA. The EWS perspective was that speeding up the process of getting to court could have been achieved outside the 'formal' process of Fast Track, whilst the school representative suggested that prosecution numbers were still low and the potential opportunities to fast-track cases to court were frequently missed.

There hasn't been a prosecution here for four, or five years. When you tot up the number of children who are out of school on one day, we've got 300 [out of 1600] who are not in school (deputy headteacher).

One EWS manager suggested that Fast Track was less effective than previous strategies as it imposed more limitations and restrictions on EWS in combating non-attendance.

I don't think it is more effective and I do think that it reduces our options. We get 'there' and then it's court (PEWO).

Furthermore, it was suggested that the rigidity of the timescale of Fast Track could be used by 'a smart lawyer' to challenge a prosecution on the grounds that there was not sufficient scope for considering alternatives – such as education supervision orders – within the system. However, other EWS practitioners felt that the process leading up to the decision to instigate proceedings allows for this to be considered.

6.3 What is the most effective element of Fast Track?

In addition to overall perceptions of the effectiveness of Fast Track, and comparisons with other systems/procedures, interviewees provided their insights into the underlying causes of this particular system's effectiveness.

Intrinsic elements or stages of the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meetings/panels • letters • visits • PACE caution • summons
Characteristics/nature of the process (ethos)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speed • timeframe • structure

6.3.1 Intrinsic elements

Meetings/panels, as intrinsic elements of the Fast Track process, were most frequently cited as effective, mentioned by 14 interviewees representing strategic and operational level EWS staff as well as senior school staff and governors.

Meetings were effective because they offered opportunities for engagement and increased dialogue between all involved parties, as well as conveying messages to parents of the seriousness of the situation and the reality of legal proceedings. Meetings thus provided opportunities to formulate possible resolutions to attendance problems without ultimate recourse to court proceedings. A school governor, for example, highlighted the importance of the opportunities for information exchange provided by panel meetings:

I think a lot is achieved in the panel meeting – the face-to-face contact with everybody concerned with that child's education and welfare. It also helps identify things in the family that haven't come out before (governor).

Others noted that in addition to providing parents with a final opportunity to explain non-attendance, and accept the help and support on offer, panel meetings fulfilled a more enforcement-orientated function:

They understand that they have had opportunities to make a difference, 'so here you are, at a panel now'. It is another opportunity to say 'right, we can work together to improve it, but what you have to understand is that this is a step towards court' (EWO).

Meetings therefore served to reinforce parent's legal responsibilities for their child's attendance and also formalised the legal content of the Fast Track process. An attendance support worker, for example, highlighted the additional value of the legal connotations of such meetings, especially when compared with non-Fast Track attendance panels:

This is effective because it has the backing of the court and it means that it's not just the school bringing them before the head – there is an aim to all of this and there is a backing to it. I think that's where it makes the impact (attendance support worker).

School and EWS representatives also located effectiveness in the character of the meeting: *'the intimidating panel ... a room full of people judging you'* was seen by an EWO as being key to the success of Fast Track (EWO).

It's the quasi-legal nature of it ... the way it's set up. The school panel is not a friendly place. The parents are hauled in and held to account. The LEA panel even more so. In one or two cases, that has been the reason why they've come to school. They haven't wanted any more of this (deputy headteacher).

Several interviewees illustrated the degree to which panel meetings could be effective. One PEWO, for example, noted that that as a result of 540 referrals, 99 pre-court meetings had taken place, leading to just 23 cases proceeding to court.

The **letters** sent to parents as an intrinsic part of the Fast Track process were specifically identified as effective elements by three interviewees because they communicated and formalised the seriousness of the situation. Two EWS practitioners (from different LEAs) even suggested that letters often proved more effective than panel meetings in effecting change:

It's the initial letters. Not the issue of coming in for the initial meeting or the review meetings. It's communication with the parent in a hard format. We found that the improvements start from the point of receiving the initial letter until the time of the review meeting. If we can get them with the letters, that's what we'll continue with (EWO).

The issuing of warning letters, directly informing parents of the level of attendance and the possibility of legal action were regarded as being effective because of the **threat** they transmitted to parents, by a senior school representative. This interviewee suggested that once action proceeded beyond this stage, there was little chance of a successful outcome. Furthermore, the students with borderline attendance levels were identified as being the most likely to be influenced by such warning letters.

Often in a school there'll be a rump of students, who, whatever strategies you use, they seem immune to it. It's those students who are 85 per cent. We send a warning letter out to them – their parents will phone up and say 'what's all this about?' That's the response we're looking for. I feel it is the warning letter that is going to work – they receive that and think 'we need to sort out our child's attendance (assistant headteacher).

One senior EWS practitioner identified the inclusion of an **assessment visit** as a highly effective aspect of good practice – one seen as universal to education social

and welfare work and not just applicable to Fast Track prosecutions. This included an assessment form as a means of conducting standard assessment of cases. This was seen as beneficial because it ‘*encourages people to actually think about the issues ... it’s asking officers to think about what they are being told*’ (SEWO). That is, it acted as an information gathering exercise whereby EWS practitioners could develop understandings of the details of particular cases and work with them appropriately. This was seen as particularly important because it represented a critical stage for interaction between families and EWS within the prosecution process.

Similarly, issuing parents with a **caution under PACE**, had been a highly effective aspect of Fast Track, according to one EWS practitioner, because it increased the potential for, and the reality of, interaction with parents. It was argued that the two occasions when a caution could be administered – the first at EWS offices, the second at the parent’s home if the previous appointment had not been kept – allowed EWS staff access to parents. In this way, contact would be made and efforts made to resolve the non-attendance issues without further recourse to law.

PACE cautioning has given us access to parents that we don’t necessarily have. Without Fast Track, cases would have gone to court without us having done a PACE caution ... and the first time I would have seen [parents] would have been in court. So this has given me a chance to help [parents] turn it around (EWO).

The **receipt of a summons** was regarded as being an effective element of Fast Track on the basis that it made it real to the parents – previous stages – meetings, letters, communications with parents had centred around the school and the EWS – it was thought by one interviewee that such interventions were, in many cases, not taken seriously by parents. Once the summons was served, however, parents became noticeably more communicative:

Once you present a summons to a family, the majority of cases, you can sit back and wait for them to contact you, even though the whole year before, you’ve been trying to contact them. You can literally sit back and wait (SEWO).

Interestingly, holding meetings and issuing letters were identified as the major key features of the success of Fast Track, but these were not unique to this particular process – they generally formed intrinsic parts of most non-Fast Track prosecution processes. The issue then raised is what is it about the Fast Track processes themselves that was specifically beneficial?

6.3.2 The ethos, nature and character of Fast Track

Interviewees suggested that **ethos, nature and character of Fast Track** could underpin its effectiveness. Principally, it was contended that Fast Track prosecution processes were characterised by improved communication or statement of intent, clarity, structure and consistency.

Effective Fast Track processes contained clear messages and informed parents, from the outset, that the process would culminate in court action unless significant improvements in attendance occurred within a specified time. Effectiveness stemmed from this **articulation of intent and certainty of outcome**:

I think that alerting parents early on in the process what is going to happen is actually a useful part because it is not just an empty threat that this could happen. It is setting out very clearly what the stages are going to be (SEWO).

Other interviewees also suggested that the **firm and direct approach** of Fast Track was a key factor of its success, frequently drawing on comparisons with previous ways of working – suggesting that Fast Track was effective because it represented a change in the way of working and a change in the way of considering non-attendance. For example:

Previously, you'd knock on doors and be flowery and nice and make three or four visits before you'd realise that the family might be conning you or pulling the wool. By the time legal action was considered, you'd be six months on. You put them on Fast Track because their attendance is unacceptable and they'll stay on it unless they can account for that attendance, or improve it. I have always been against prosecutions, but [Fast Track] has clearly changed my ideas and attitudes about responsibility (EWO).

Fast Track processes were also regarded as effective because they were **systematic and sequential**, providing a staged approach to prosecution. In addition, each stage of the process was highly **transparent** so that all parties were aware of possible outcomes:

Having a clear process that is known to all ... you act in this way, then these are the consequences (EWO).

It's like a staircase, the way you go up it; start very supportive, and then the next visit it goes a bit further, then it's caution, then it's court (EWO).

The presence of pre-determined and known dates when particular stages of the process would take place – especially court dates – was seen as being a significant development of Fast Track, especially when compared with previous situations:

[The previous system of prosecution led to] stupid situations where we were sending five final warnings. Now, we've got the court dates well in advance, and [EWOs] can say to parents, under caution ... that on a particular date, they will be in court. They then talk to their neighbours, and word gets round (PEWO).

Clearly laid down and known systems thus provided prosecution processes with improved **structures**, contributing to improvements in **consistency** in the way that cases were considered and treated. An attendance support worker, for example, characterised Fast Track as a:

regulated system that has to be stuck to and is not subject to the vagaries of different people's views and interpretations. That helps everybody – it's clear how it has to be done (attendance support worker).

The advantages of its **time-limited nature** were mentioned in relation to the procedural improvements associated with Fast Track:

The time-limited aspect is an important element as it makes things happen – people have to work to known deadlines, so things are tightened up (PEWO).

Hence, effectiveness was seen to stem from the increased efficiency consistent with the introduction of time limitations to the process. This particular aspect was also

identified as a means of increasing the wider impact of Fast Track as it served to counter local perceptions that prosecutions never actually happened. A senior school representative thus suggested that the time-limited nature of Fast Track assisted in boosting public awareness of prosecution and raising the profile of attendance.

Fast Track was also seen as effective because of the contexts in which it was applied and the way that it **targeted** particular groups and individuals, especially cases where attendance had not yet become too deeply entrenched. In these cases, Fast Track provided a rapid response to a developing situation:

Before it's endemic, before they've got too disaffected, which is why I think we need to start in the primary sector (PEWO).

Other effective elements of Fast Track identified by interviewees referred to the **support and assistance** available to families alongside the legal element of the process.

The **entirety** of the Fast Track process was identified by seven interviewees as key to its effectiveness and all its elements and stages represented good practice:

Getting that summons through the door, as well as putting the onus onto the schools to be involved and to support the child, and the regular meetings as well help to iron out what the difficulties are. Knowing that you've got twelve weeks – that's your deadline (EWO).

Others, however, suggested that the key element of effectiveness varied on a case-by-case basis:

For some, just the first letter from the EWO would be enough, and others still wouldn't sit up and notice when you're actually taking them to court, so it varies immensely (deputy headteacher).

Two interviewees, a senior school representative and an EWS representative, suggested that there were no effective elements associated with the implementation of Fast Track – possibly reflecting tensions between the two perspectives in this particular locality.

had it been used properly ... and the school had cooperated ...it would have been more effective (EWO).

6.4 When is Fast Track effective, and when is it not effective?

Interviewees identified the types of cases, situations and contexts in which Fast Track could be more, or less effective.

Fast Track is more likely to be effective ...	Contexts, conditions, circumstances	Fast Track is less likely to be effective ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borderline attendance levels • Less entrenched non-attendance • Newly emerging non- 	Attendance level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrenched non-attendance

attendance		
• Simple cases – no major reason for non-attendance	Complexity of case	• Complex cases, social service and other agency involvement
• Parental influence	Family dynamics	• Low parental influence • High levels of pupil disaffection
• Significant and effective cooperation between family and school/EWS	Relationships between the family and EWS/school.	• Poor cooperation between family and school/EWS

In discussing when and where Fast Track was more, and less likely to be effective, most interviewees identified dichotomous pairs of contexts, the most common ones pivoting around the **level of attendance, the complexity of cases, family dynamic, and the relationships between parents and EWS/schools**. Hence, the degree of success that Fast Track was likely to have, depended, to a great extent, on external factors beyond the direct control of school, EWS and other agencies.

6.4.1 Attendance levels

Thirteen interviewees reported that Fast Track was most likely to succeed in cases with ‘borderline’ levels of non-attendance (this response was given by interviewees across the LEAs, regardless of their particular Fast Track target group). In addition to the absolute numerical level, others referred to the type of non-attendance, suggesting that Fast Track would be more effective in tackling sporadic and emerging non-attendance problems. This was largely attributed to the contention that pupils exhibiting this type of non-attendance had not yet become too detached from school, and not missed out on too much education. Hence, effective Fast Track depended on early implementation and appropriate targeting, with several interviewees noting that they specifically targeted the cases that they thought would be successful.

Fast Track is effective in cases of ...	
Low-level non-attendance	<p><i>The borderline students where attendance is deteriorating but there is still hope. It would probably be beneficial for those. The short sharp shock element brings them back into line (deputy headteacher).</i></p> <p><i>We’ve selected the middle cases – the ones that would probably respond to this approach (EWO).</i></p> <p><i>Kids whose attendance is not too drastically low, 60-80 per cent ... where you would possibly get a response from the parent and some encouragement and support – there is a chance of raising it (EWO).</i></p> <p><i>Targeting a group with better, but unacceptable attendance – 70-85 per cent attendance (EWO).</i></p>
Sporadic non-attendance	<p><i>For ones that have just slipped into this pattern of a day off a week – erratic attendance. It’s worked well for those ones where the parents hadn’t quite realised how bad it was (EWO).</i></p> <p><i>Erratic attenders with no real reason not to be in school</i></p>

	(deputy headteacher).
Emerging non-attendance	<p><i>The ones that are just going off the rails – no major difficulties or issues, those down to 70 per cent (PEWO).</i></p> <p><i>It's much more effective if you've got a child that's just starting to drop behind, rather than one that's been out of school for two years ... need to get into primary schools and work with this in an effective way (PEWO).</i></p>

Accordingly, many interviewees stated that Fast Track was less likely to be effective in cases where attendance was low, and non-attendance was well established (16 interviewees). Terms such as 'hardcore' and 'entrenched' were often employed to describe such non-attendance cases, and it was often stated that there was no effective solution in these situations. Similarly, the level of non-attendance was linked with other issues and contexts, including cases where there was a family history of non-attendance prosecutions. Many interviewees indicated that such cases were excluded from prosecution under Fast Track as it was believed that there was little hope of effecting change.

Fast Track is not effective in cases of ...	
High level non-attendance	<p><i>The ones that show serious attendance concerns ... for a lot of those cases, it's too late (EWO).</i></p> <p><i>Blanket non-attenders – but then, nothing would have worked for them (EWO).</i></p> <p><i>The kids that are on 30-40 per cent we're fighting a lost cause anyway (deputy headteacher)</i></p> <p><i>For our very resilient families. Targeting people with 50 per cent attendance, the chances are that it is not going to work ... it's gone too far down the line (PEWO).</i></p>
Entrenched non-attendance	<p><i>Long term non-attenders – there are so many issues with children that have been out of school for a long time. They've got out of the habit, and the parents have got out of the habit and you need to give more support than we can give them under that twelve week Fast Track (PEWO).</i></p> <p><i>I think there are a few hardcore, long term, historic cases that it actually doesn't make any difference to at all. It's just another thing that they've got to go through (EWS team leader).</i></p>

6.4.2 Complexity of cases

Cases where non-attendance could be easily proven, and for which statutory defences were not applicable, were thus seen as suitable for Fast Track as more involved casework was seen as unnecessary. Such cases were often described as 'simple' or 'uncomplicated'. Conversely, Fast Track was seen to be less effective when the cases demanded a greater level of input from school, EWS and other support agencies, making the time-limited framework less appropriate.

Fast Track is effective in ...	
Simple cases	[Fast Track is effective] <i>where there aren't other complicating issues. Where it is just parents not getting their act together (EWO). The low level non-complicated, non-involved cases (EWO).</i>
Fast Track is not effective in ...	
Complex cases	<i>It's not going to work where there are unmet social needs, where there's a parent who's a drug user, a manic depressive, on medication. Fast Track is a waste of time and we need to be thinking about how we can help them (SEWO). It doesn't work if there are complex family matters ... lots of illness or stress or something within the family, Fast Track doesn't work, it only adds more stress. You need to work with these families in different ways (assistant headteacher).</i>

6.4.3 Behaviour and family dynamics.

A key influence on the potential effectiveness of Fast Track related to issues of the child's behaviour and the level of parental control within the family. Fast Track was seen as only having the potential to positively impact on cases in which parents retained some degree of control over their children. Where these family relations had broken down, it was deemed that Fast Track would, in terms of improving attendance, fail.

This observation was echoed by participants in the parent focus group discussions. Most of the parents in this sample possessed no prior knowledge of Fast Track, however, once the intervention was described, they were asked to comment on whether it would make a difference – could it influence parents' behaviour and would attendance improve? Several expressed reservations as to the overall effectiveness of prosecuting parents on the grounds that parents are not always able to exert any control over their children's behaviour. Where this had been lost, they suggested that parents would struggle to make any impression on attendance, even under the threat of a prosecution.

Returning to the main sample of interviewees, relationships within the family - family dynamics – were also thought to influence the likelihood of a successful Fast Track outcome. Cases in which parents were not acting to support their children's attendance, (or at least, were not challenging their non-attendance), were deemed more likely to fail. This could also include parents actively colluding with their children to avert a prosecution, reflecting anti-authoritarian orientations and contexts in which legal proceedings were relatively unimportant or held little in the way of incentive/pressure to address non-attendance issues. Hence, parents' own orientations towards non-attendance were likely to influence the potential success of Fast Track prosecutions. For example, this process was said to be ineffective for *'families who have legal sanctions for no TV licence, non-payment of fines'* (EWS manager).

Fast Track is effective where ...	
Parents have influence over their children's behaviour	<i>It's the parents that still have some control that are able to make a difference (attendance support worker).</i>
Fast Track is not effective where ...	

<p>Parents have no influence over their children's' behaviour</p>	<p><i>It's very hard to re-engage disaffected pupils back into school, and I don't think that with these types of pupils that court work is necessarily the answer. If a parent has lost control over their child, what more can you do? (SEWO).</i></p> <p><i>The cases where the pupil is the one in charge at home (attendance support worker).</i></p> <p><i>Where the child is responsible themselves for deciding whether they are going to go to school or not (EWO).</i></p>
<p>Family dynamics are not supportive</p>	<p><i>The ones where parents are not supportive of their children, are not interested in their child's education (EWO).</i></p> <p><i>It hasn't worked well for parents who are canny enough to look for an excuse for their child's absence ... people who are prepared to play the system ... (deputy headteacher).</i></p> <p><i>That's just the nature of their lives, education isn't important for their children. Whatever you did wouldn't help them to get their children into school (headteacher).</i></p>

6.4.4 Relationships between the family and EWS/school.

The nature of **relationships between the family and the EWS/school** were thus seen as crucial to the success of Fast Track. Parental engagement and **cooperation** was often a key factor in determining whether or not a case ultimately proceeded to court. The level of parental cooperation was seen as an indicator of parents' willingness to help the EWS in supporting their child's attendance, so non-cooperation was often equated with unsuccessful Fast Track outcomes.

Really and truly, there's only one standard for the Fast Track process – people that are not engaging (EWO).

We don't want to spend weeks and weeks trying to engage with a family that won't engage with us. [Fast Track] is great for grabbing the attention of a parent who's failing to engage with the school or EWS (SEWO).

6.5 Family illustrations: impact and effectiveness

Following on from the previous section, the chapter now takes a closer look at the issue of effectiveness by examining the specific circumstances and outcomes for a sample of 30 families. The evaluation had originally set out to interview up to five families per LEA who had passed through the Fast Track system. However, it proved difficult to gain access to this number of parents, for the reasons discussed in Section 1.3.1. The stories of 30 families, however, were obtained (this figure combines parents interviewed during phases two and three of the evaluation). Fifteen accounts came directly from parent interviewees and 15 families were discussed by the EWOs connected to the cases. These 30 cases were not distributed evenly across LEAs, for example, one LEA provided five family accounts, another highlighted a single case (and no family case studies were obtained from two of the LEAs). Researchers had requested family case studies representing a range of different outcomes (i.e. cases that had been withdrawn, those that had gone to court, where attendance had improved and where there had been no change). It was therefore never intended that

this element of the evaluation serve to ascertain whether Fast Track works or not. Rather, the aim was to elicit illustrations of different Fast Track experiences. In addition, using the accounts provided, it is possible to examine the particular circumstances under which Fast Track generated positive results compared to those cases where no impact was achieved.

6.5.1 A description of 30 Fast Track cases

Before discussing the effectiveness of Fast Track, it is first necessary to provide a picture of all 30 families in terms of the stage reached within Fast Track, age of the children concerned and reasons for non-attendance. Appendix 4 presents an overview of all 30 cases. Table 6.1 shows, at the time of data collection, the stages of Fast Track reached by each of the 30 cases.

Table 6.1 The stages reached by each of the 30 Fast Track cases

Stage reached in the process	Number of cases (n=30)
Court	15
Withdrawn	6
Ongoing	5
Monitored	4

The four cases that were being monitored came from a single LEA that did not withdraw any cases from Fast Track (although this did not mean that all cases would proceed to court). Instead pupils' attendance was monitored until they left school.

In terms of the type of cases identified for Fast Track, 19 parents were being prosecuted for the non-attendance of a secondary-aged child, eight for a primary-age child and three parents for a combination of primary and secondary school children. The most common year group in this sample was Year 9 (eight cases in total).

The complexity of non-attendance issues is highlighted when examining the reasons given for school absence (by both parents and professionals). Occasionally, non-attendance was attributed to a single factor, but more often it arose from a set of circumstances. Table 6.2 presents some of these factors and the number of cases where these issues were reported. It should be noted that some of the reasons given by parents were not always perceived to be genuine by EWOs. This doubt is illustrated in the quotes below:

It was also illnesses. I mean, he did have a broken arm, but after that it was lots of different things, it was always a medical reason. So I did think that, as much as [the grandmother] felt it was genuine, the illnesses were never bad enough that he shouldn't be in school. I just think she is an overprotective grandmother, who, if he coughs, will keep him at home (EWO).

There have been lots of allegations of bullying. That's one of the reasons [mum] uses. It has been investigated on many occasions but never really substantiated. My thought is, it's a historical thing because older sister has attendance problems. I think mum herself wasn't enamoured with education, so it is quite an ingrained, historical problem (EWO).

Cases were therefore referred on to Fast Track because EWOs felt the excuses were not legitimate or that they did not warrant absence from schools. In the majority of LEAs, where genuine problems were uncovered, these cases would be dealt with by other means (e.g. referrals to another agency). However, it is worth presenting the reasons reported as this hints at the nature of the non-attendance issues dealt with by Fast Track.

Table 6.2 Factors linked to non-attendance of children in 30 Fast Track families

Attendance issue	No. of cases	Description
Health related	7	Parents who suffered from a variety of physical and mental health problems (e.g. depression) which reduced their ability to ensure school attendance. Cases where children's health was also an issue (although not always substantiated).
Lack of parenting skills	6	Parents who found it difficult to control their children and enforce attendance.
Long standing history of non-attendance	6	Families who were known to the EWS for a number of years and pupils whose older siblings were non-attenders.
Over protective parents/carer	4	Parents who preferred to keep their children at home for a variety of reasons (their own loneliness, depression, to protect children from bullying).
Peer-related truancy	4	Cases where the non-attendance was linked to the influence of friends/relatives.
Claims of bullying	3	Cases where bullying was given as a reason for non-attendance (sometimes proved, sometimes not).
Family separation	3	Parents who were struggling to cope with parenting after a family break-up.
Transport problems	3	Cases where re-location of the family home presented problems travelling to school.
Child who is not complying	3	Cases where the parents were trying to enforce school attendance, but it was the child who would not cooperate (older children).
Disorganised parents	2	Parents who lacked routine, unable to get up in the morning and take children to school.
Cultural factors	1	Absence due to attending family events, e.g. funerals and wedding. Such events were perceived by the parents as the families' cultural responsibility.

Having looked at the sample as a whole, it is now time to consider the different ways in which these 30 families responded to Fast Track.

6.5.2 The results of Fast Track

In 16 cases (over half) Fast Track yielded a positive improvement in attendance. For a further seven cases the impact was either partial (e.g. improved for one child in the family, but not another) or temporary (attendance improved for a limited period of time). The remaining seven cases did not respond at all to Fast Track, and no improvements emerged. This section considers the outcomes for 30 families categorised into the following groups:

- no impact: attendance failed to increase
- positive impact: attendance showed clear improvements
- some impact: partial or temporary improvements

Let us first examine those cases where Fast Track failed to make an impression and the factors that may have stood in the way of a successful outcome.

No impact: attendance failed to increase

Of the seven cases, five had appeared before court and two were ongoing (one because of complex family problems and one case was waiting to proceed to court). All seven cases concerned secondary-aged children and two were in Year 11, a stage at which attendance habits can be difficult to alter. Prior to Fast Track the attendance of the seven pupils was described as:

- 45 per cent
- 70 per cent
- ‘*very poor*’ (2 cases)
- ‘*dire in Year 10*’
- ‘*a long-term non-attender*’
- ‘*a school refuser*’.

Hence, this particular group comprised pupils with significant attendance difficulties which, in line with other evaluation evidence, may account for a lack of response to Fast Track intervention. The effectiveness of Fast Track may also have been tested by other aspects of these particular cases. For example, five out of the seven parents were said to lack sufficient parenting skills to enforce school attendance. In some instances, the parents were thought to have lost control of their children and thus felt unable to demand that they attended school. Hence, even if these parents expressed a desire to improve school attendance, the parent–child relationship may have broken down some years before and under such circumstances, it may prove very difficult to re-establish the necessary level of parental discipline.

I think we need to support her with her parenting... she has no parenting skills, sets no boundaries, [her daughter] walks all over her (EWO).

Mum is a single mum and she has no control over her. The previous court outcome was that she had to attend a parenting course, which she did, but this didn't really make any difference. It hasn't really helped her to have any control over the behaviour (EWO).

The EWS was also faced with parents in this group who were totally unresponsive to any forms of communication or offers of help. In three cases, parents were said to ignore all telephone calls, home visits and did not attend panel meetings. Without some form of contact, Fast Track will inevitably struggle to make a difference. Furthermore, there were also parents who had been to court for non-attendance matters in the past, who were familiar with the system, and therefore did not fear its consequences. Three of the families were also said to have historic attendance issues and had been known to the EWS for many years. Such cases will present a challenge for any attendance intervention due to the scale of the problem and the fact that non-attendance is so ingrained.

With this particular parent, they've been through the system so they know what to expect. They know that at the most, the court is going to fine them £50–60. They seem to be quite happy to pay that every six to eight months (EWO).

In five out of the seven cases, families exhibited two or more of the 'risk' factors listed above (e.g. historic non-attendance) and in the remaining two cases, a lack of progress was largely attributed to the parents' lack of control over their children.

In terms of improving attendance, therefore, Fast Track was unable to impact on these seven cases. However, in terms of the prosecution process, Fast Track provided a speedy mechanism for dealing with parents who failed to ensure their children's attendance. Indeed, this was considered its main function in some of the LEAs (those that could be categorised as court-focussed Fast Tracks). Elsewhere however, LEAs hoped to utilise Fast Track procedures as a means of influencing parents and bringing about a rise in attendance. The following section examines those cases where this outcome was achieved and considers the point at which improvements began to appear.

Positive impact: Attendance showed clear improvements

Of the 16 cases where attendance showed clear improvements, six had reached the court phase of Fast Track, five had been withdrawn earlier from the process, four were being monitored and one case was still ongoing.

Prior to Fast Track the attendance of 13 of the 16 cases (for three cases this was not clearly stated) was described as:

- 25 per cent
- 45–55 per cent (2 cases)
- 60–70 per cent (4 cases)
- 71–80 per cent (2 cases)
- 'erratic'
- 'poor' or 'very poor' (2 cases)
- 'internal truancy'.

Whilst there appears to be a spread of non-attendance behaviours, pre-Fast Track attendance of this group looks slightly healthier in comparison to that of the ‘no impact’ cases. From this higher starting point, pupils and parents may find the targets set within Fast Track more achievable, which could explain why these cases responded positively to the process. It is also notable that the ‘impact’ (and ‘some impact’) group included primary-aged children, whereas the ‘no impact’ group did not. Again, a similar explanation for this could be offered. At primary school non-attendance tends to be less severe and has not yet reached an entrenched stage. Thus, cases are likely to be more receptive when the intervention is applied at a primary level, compared to secondary targeted intervention when attendance problems have had considerable time to develop. Consequently, the attendance of all primary-aged children from the 30 families showed either a clear improvement or at least ‘some impact’.

In terms of the particular issues which seem to have fuelled non-attendance amongst this group, it is noteworthy that some were relatively minor. Problems with bus fares, parents taking children out of school for family functions, a build up of absence due to minor health complaints – these were all problems which when challenged, could be rectified relatively easily by the parents. At the same time, some of the risk factors identified with reference to the ‘no impact’ families, were still in evidence amongst this particular group. For example, cases with a lack of parental control (3), a history of non-attendance (2), non-cooperation (3) and previous prosecutions (1) were all represented within the ‘positive impact’ families. It may be that the influence of these factors on Fast Track’s success depends on their severity.

Appendix 4 indicates the impact on attendance in terms of the level of improvement. It can be seen that in some cases 100 per cent attendance was achieved and in others the change was described as dramatic or significant. The question now remains, what was it exactly that brought about these improvements? The following section examines those factors which were linked to a change in attendance amongst those cases which reported a clear impact on attendance or at least some impact (i.e. partial or temporary).

Why did attendance improve?

The change in attendance was frequently attributed to the **threat of prosecution** (in eight cases). The prospect of appearing in court was sometimes enough to motivate parents to address their children’s attendance or at least to initiate communications with the EWS. In four of the eight cases, EWOs specifically noted a transformation after the summons or a court letter was sent. Others spoke more generally about getting an enhanced level of cooperation from parents once they had been informed that they might be taken to court for their child’s absence from school. It would seem, therefore, that in these cases, parents were galvanised into action once the non-attendance became linked with legal proceedings.

Mum wasn’t communicating with me, it was always one way. It was me ringing mother. It was really hit and miss. It was more myself constantly bombarding her with phone calls and saying this is the next step. I wasn’t able to work with mum until I gave her a summons (EWO).

She's quite timid and I think it was just what she needed. I think she needed to realise the seriousness. When sometimes you read that caution it can really frighten parents and they have to sign it (EWO).

As signalled earlier, EWOs can sometimes struggle to engage on any level with parents, as they may not respond to phone calls, letters or attend meetings. Thus, the reasons for non-attendance can never be fully understood or discussed. The threat of prosecution, however, can exert sufficient pressure on parents, such that they feel compelled to engage with the EWS, at which point remedial action can be taken. An EWO explained that the mention of court succeeded in getting a parent into a meeting, at which point she finally expressed her concerns about her son being bullied. Once this information had been disclosed, the EWS and the school were able to take steps to reassure mum that her son would be safe in school. Mum also felt that the situation had improved because she had started to articulate her worries, which meant that the matter could be addressed:

The point I'd like to make is that, had we not met with [mum], had she not been put on the Fast Track process, had we not met with her we'd never have known about these problems because she wasn't willing to communicate with us in the first place, so if it was that threat of court action that actually got her to cross that bridge and come into school, well brilliant. What we want is solutions, we don't want to prosecute people (EWO).

The pressure was gone through the meetings, it was the talking. It was getting that letter, going in that room, talking: 'I need [name of child] to come out of PE' or I need this bullying stopping'. And if you are not in them meetings to do that talking nothing happens (parent).

In half the cases the impact of Fast Track was associated with the **meetings or panels** held during the process. As described above, meetings provided a forum for discussing the attendance difficulties with parents and then agreeing a solution. For three of the eight cases, where meetings were highlighted as an effective element, parents were also said to be surprised at the level of non-attendance once they were confronted with the figures. They simply had not appreciated how much school their children had been missing: *'We found out how many times they'd been playing truancy, I was shocked (parent)* and *'I didn't realise she'd be off that much' (carer)*. Faced with the facts these parents proceeded to improve their children's attendance, e.g. by being stricter, making arrangements to get children to school on time and by escorting them to school.

In terms of the actual process, another influential factor cited by interviewees was the **defined timescale** of Fast Track. As well as threatening parents with prosecution, an added pressure was that they were given a deadline of 12 weeks (one term) to improve attendance. Court therefore was an imminent prospect, not something they could push to one side or ignore. One parent admitted that they were surprised by the speed of the process:

It does scare you. I mean, I'm not soft but it scared me a bit. I didn't think it would happen that quick. I thought I'd get another chance but you don't get a second chance (parent).

In a seemingly difficult case, a Fast Track prosecution was able to generate improvements where previous legal proceedings had failed. This particular family had been known to the EWS for a number of years and had been prosecuted several times before. However, these prosecutions had taken a while to reach court and they always

'found ways to get out of it' (e.g. provided medical evidence). With Fast Track, however, the process was accelerated and when the case went to court they received a fine. Attendance subsequently improved and the EWO believed that this was due to the speed of the process, the fact that it was systematic and that *'the family is now aware that the LEA means business'*.

From the parent's perspective, three interviewees felt that the Fast Track process had worked because it had put **pressure on their children**, rather than themselves. In one instance, two brothers had been truanting once they arrived at school. They were called to the meeting where mum was informed that, if attendance did not improve, she may be taken to court. They subsequently stopped truanting, scared of what might happen to their parents if they continued. In another case, which reached the final court stage, a father felt that his daughter's presence in court was valuable because it showed her the consequences of non-attendance:

The court thing helped me to get her into school. I wanted her to come to the court so that she would see that it was important. She's a little bit frightened now. I think it has worked (parent).

For others, Fast Track appeared to **empower parents** as it gave them the backing to exert some authority over their children. Rather than seeing Fast Track as a punitive system, therefore, some parents welcomed their involvement in this legal process because they could use it to secure the compliance of their children.

I got home and said to [child's name] I've had a meeting about you today with Education and it's very serious and I've got to go to court (parent).

I benefited from that because I was taking my daughter in, signing her in and there were phone calls if she missed any lessons. So it kept me involved and it kept me aware of where she was and what she was doing. So yeah, I do back the Fast Track 100 per cent (parent).

A deputy headteacher, when discussing the first case above, confirmed that this parent saw Fast Track as a *'framework around her sanctions'* with her daughter and was using it to convince her daughter that non-attendance was a serious issue and there were legal repercussions. Similarly, an EWO allocated to the second case agreed that Fast Track had indeed 'backed up' mum. Mum could say to her daughter that she had to escort her into school and sign her in, because that is what Fast Track required:

I think, more than anything, it backed up what mum wanted to do but maybe wasn't strong enough to do. I think because mum knew that she was being tracked and she was signing in to say that she was taking [child's name] to school everyday, it helped her to enforce that with [child's name] – "Look I've got to do this and I'm signing to show that I've got to do it." So it gave mum a bit of backing so that she wasn't totally having the argument with {child's name} on her own (EWO).

Hence, whilst LEAs tended to use Fast Track to target and influence the behaviour of parents, there were also examples of parents who, in turn, would employ Fast Track to influence the behaviour of their children.

Some impact: partial or temporary attendance improvements

This third and final group comprises cases which demonstrated some impact as a result of Fast Track, although they did not achieve a complete turnaround. Pre-Fast Track attendance amongst these seven cases was described as:

- 30 per cent
- 40 per cent (2)
- 65 per cent
- ‘very poor’ (2)
- ‘problems with punctuality’.

Three of the seven cases had reached court, two were ongoing and two had previously been withdrawn but, because of a subsequent decline in attendance, were about to re-enter Fast Track.

For this sample it is perhaps most useful to explore the reasons why attendance problems were not entirely resolved. For the majority, a lack of parental control appeared to temper the effect of Fast Track. In four cases, there was evidence that, despite parents’ willingness to address non-attendance issues, their children exercised a considerable degree of independence which militated against any efforts the parents made to influence their attendance behaviour. For example, a single father had successfully increased the attendance of his two younger children, but had to remain within the Fast Track system because his eldest daughter continued to be absent from school. The EWO working with this family conceded that:

I think [child’s name] is making it quite difficult for him, because she is going out early in the morning dressed in school uniform and he doesn’t know where she is half the time.

Another parent felt that her authority over her fourteen-year-old daughter no longer had any effect, explaining:

It doesn’t matter what I say to [child’s name]. They do what they want to do, they take no notice of me. They laugh at me if I tell them off. If I say I’m grounding them, they just sit there and laugh and they walk out the door (parent).

However, the same parent admitted that she was in fact very protective of her daughter and preferred not to force her to go to school. Mum said she was worried about her child’s wellbeing (there were claims of bullying, although these were not upheld by the EWO) and mum also mentioned that her daughter had a history of self-harm.

[Child’s name] is a self harmer and so I do panic. So, if she says to me I’m getting bullied mum, I’m not going to school and I force her to go, I’m scared in case she does anything.

In another case, a parent voiced concerns about her son’s health. The EWO suspected, however, that the mother suffered from a paranoid illness and she would conjure up fictitious health problems. The son, though, would also complain of feeling unwell, possibly taking advantage of his mother’s state of mind. Hence, these cases were aggravated both by the parent’s failure to enforce attendance and the child’s ability to manipulate the situation. In the latter example, Fast Track generated a temporary improvement in attendance, as mum started to reclaim some authority over her child.

However, she was unable to maintain this after a stay in hospital and attendance took a downward turn.

The issue of parental control is therefore the result of a complex interplay between the mother/father and the child. Whilst a parent may claim to have no control over their child, in reality they may have loosened the reins somewhat for fear of upsetting their child or damaging their health. Within this group, however, there was an example of a parent who seemed to be making all the efforts to improve her daughter's attendance, yet despite this, her daughter remained defiant. A school interview commenting on the situation, said '*I think there is a concern when you have someone as supportive as Mrs X*'. Here the interviewee is questioning whether Fast Track should be used in circumstances where parents are genuinely committed to improving their children's attendance.

Moving away from cases where a lack of parental control reduced the impact of Fast Track, another compounding factor was where parents had been prosecuted in the past. In two cases, the parents made some early attempts to improve attendance after entry to Fast Track, however they failed to maintain this. Both had been prosecuted before, although not through Fast Track. It was felt that neither parent was particularly phased by the court process and for this reason it did not serve as a sufficient motivating factor.

Finally, there were two examples of parents of children who initially made improvements during Fast Track, but due to a change of circumstance (a parent's stay in hospital and a loss of employment) attendance reverted back to its original levels.

6.5.3 The views of EWOs: did Fast Track make a difference and why?

EWOs working with all the families discussed here were asked to reflect on the outcomes and speculate as to what would have happened if they had not embarked on a Fast Track route.

Of those cases which showed a clear positive impact, most EWOs (eight) suggested that the outcome would definitely have been a lot 'worse' without Fast Track intervention. Some felt that Fast Track, with its tougher stance, had focused parents' minds, whereas with the previous system, attendance could easily fluctuate back and forth.

I think we would still be playing this ping pong game, a bit of improvement, a lot of excuses and then I would visit, then improvement for a bit, then drop off again and I think it's the fact that we set this four to five weeks to improve means you have this very specific period.

Honestly, I think this kid would have just stopped coming to school completely. I can imagine her attendance now being 20 per cent.

I think that we would still be faffing around trying to support her and threatening prosecution and then being concerned as to whether that was appropriate in view of her family problems. I think we would be saying 'Well, she's got these problems and she's pregnant'. It's the fact that we have toughened our approach but tempered it with mercy. It has been far better for her as well.

Three EWOs said the cases would still have gone to court but it would have taken a lot longer. Interestingly, in two cases, the EWOs said the families would not have received any input from the EWS unless attendance had declined. This was because the Fast Track target group in this particular LEA represented an entirely new cohort, one which would not normally have been referred to the service.

Of those seven cases which evidenced some, although not necessarily a sustained impact, four EWOs still purported that without Fast Track the situation would be worse. One EWO also commented on the speed, stating that, under the general prosecution process, it would have taken longer to reach court and two interviewees felt that the Fast Track outcome was the same as it would have been under the general/previous prosecution arrangements.

Finally, turning to those cases which failed to respond at all to Fast Track, there were three EWOs who, despite a lack of apparent success, still felt that Fast Track had made a contribution. For example, one EWO said that the parents did at least make a ‘*slight effort*’ to improve attendance and another, referring to her own working practices, said that without Fast Track the case would simply have ‘*dragged on*’, with court warnings being issued until Year 11. Fast Track had in some respects brought the case to a speedier conclusion, although the desired results had not surfaced. Similarly, another EWO said the case would simply have ‘*petered off*’ because they would not normally take Year 11 cases to court, but with the accelerated pace of Fast Track it was possible to do so.

6.6 How can Fast Track be improved?

Moving away from family accounts, this last section considers how effectiveness could be enhanced by presenting the professional interviewees’ ideas for improving Fast Track. Although generally content with the current operation and implementation of Fast Track, interviewees did identify factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic to the process that would lead to improvements.

Intrinsic factors/issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources • Structure, procedure and process • Evaluation and monitoring
Extrinsic factors/issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court-related issues and outcomes • Profile/awareness

6.6.1 Intrinsic factors and issues

Fast Track could be improved through additional **funding and resources** according to seven EWS and school representatives (from four selective LEAs and one LEA which operated Fast Track across the authority). Increased levels of EWS staff would lead to increased efficiency of prosecuting under Fast Track, and would also facilitate increased levels of support for families during, and following the process. The appointment of dedicated staff to implement Fast Track – whether EWS staff to bring the prosecutions, or school-based staff to monitor and support attendance – was suggested by several school representatives. *A dedicated post with one or two support workers would help* (EWS manager). In addition, a senior school representative suggested that extra resources could be used to facilitate access to alternative

education opportunities for some young people as a means of re-engaging them, alongside the Fast Track approach. *‘Vocational options could be used as a way of getting some of our kids back on board’* (deputy headteacher).

Modifications to the **structural aspects** of the Fast Track process were proposed as possible improvements. An EWS practitioner contended, for example, that improved forward planning and rigid scheduling of LEA panel meetings would improve the logistical capacity and efficiency of the process, as all those involved would be in a better position to prepare for, and cope with, unknown or unpredictable numbers of cases progressing through the system. Others suggested that Fast Track could be improved if the process had scope for **greater flexibility**. Several EWS representatives believed that there was a danger that this framework imposed too much rigidity in terms of procedure and sequence.

It’s a very rigid system, that’s a difficulty. At times, we feel very locked into it (PEWO).

I think it’s important that there’s flexibility and that you have discretion on your visits. If you feel that it would be negative to visit [at the time specified by Fast Track procedure] then you should be able not to visit (EWO).

Certain **procedural modifications** were identified that would improve the Fast Track process. A senior school representative was critical of the delays in the system that occurred following temporary improvements in attendance that arose from a pre-court meeting. If this level of attendance became unacceptable again, *‘we have to go through the same process again. It’s quite frustrating’* (headteacher). Hence, this interviewee proposed that the Fast Track system could be modified, and short-circuited, so in such cases, the process could automatically progress to the next stage (i.e. court), leading to a more immediate effect or outcome. This point was expanded by an EWS practitioner who suggested that the process could be streamlined even further than the existing 12 week timescale in certain cases:

I think that it could be made shorter. If you’ve got the evidence, like 0 percent for the last six months, why do you need to go another 12 weeks? Give them two meetings, then straight to court. Six weeks would be the time (EWO).

Conversely, other interviewees suggested that Fast Track would be improved with the introduction of **additional stages** to the process. It was felt, for example, that a more thorough consideration of cases could be achieved by the addition of a home visit to families, rather than sole reliance on issuing letters and monitoring attendance levels:

There should be some home visits. I feel that if we need to go to court with cases, we need to be able to show that we’ve done everything possible to help and support that family into regular attendance (EWS manager).

A senior school representative suggested that mechanisms should be put in place to support parents in improving attendance during and following a Fast Track prosecution, so that legal proceedings were not the be-all and end-all of the process:

It’s really important to work with the family afterwards to make sure that the impact of the process actually continues (assistant headteacher).

A senior EWS practitioner suggested that Fast Track would be improved through increased **monitoring and evaluation** of attendance data in a systematic manner in order to assess its impact and effectiveness.

6.6.2 Extrinsic factors and issues

Suggestions for improving factors or elements that were essential to the effectiveness of Fast Track, but which were not direct components of it, were also made. These largely focussed on issues relating to the courts, other agencies and public perceptions/awareness of Fast Track.

In terms of improving the **courts'** contribution to effective Fast Track prosecutions, interviewees suggested that efforts should be made to ensure that the courts have the **capacity** to deal with the potential volume of Fast Track cases, and to provide sufficient court time for these cases. Dedicated courts were seen as advantageous. The **speed** with which courts became involved with Fast Track prosecutions was an issue raised by several EWS practitioners, school staff and a court representative. It was felt that once a case was deemed appropriate for court action, the timeframes involved were currently too long. Courts were seen as being too slow in allocating times for these cases to be heard.

The thing that would improve Fast Track is the courts coming on board quicker ... that's a major factor, and you need to have some sort of clarity over what the bench gives as a fine (PEWO).

From our perspective, we could tighten it up [give court dates earlier in the process]. The first part was in November in the schools, and now we're going to court in April, so that's not so much Fast Track (legal assistant).

The issue of court dates was seen as particularly damaging to the Fast Track process, especially in contexts where cases were adjourned following parents' non-attendance at court:

Something needs to be done about court dates, so that, if a parent doesn't turn up and it needs to be re-arranged, you don't have to wait another three months for the next date (head of year).

An EWS practitioner echoed these views, explaining that as a result of repeated adjournments, *'sometimes, up to a year has gone by and that child has still not been in school. Closer liaison with the courts'* was seen as a way of addressing this issue (EWO).

Several interviewees suggested that Fast Track could be improved if the **disposals** issued by magistrates were re-considered. It was felt that the impact of Fast Track was diluted by fines that did not reflect the seriousness of the case:

Fast Track has to have teeth. There needs to be agreements with magistrates that if a case is Fast Track, then there has to be a powerful outcome in court. We can Fast Track it, but then it becomes log-jammed in court, stuck behind the ice cream man who played his chimes after 7.30 at night, or Mrs Jones fiddling £200 from the Benefits Agency ... my own personal opinion, and it goes against all my socialist and liberal views, is that until we lock a parent up, round here, they will not take any notice (SEWO).

You get parents who are fined £75 and they are earning £30,000. [Benches] need to use what's available to them [especially conditional discharge] I think for some parents, having it hanging over their head, helps the child to get into school (SEWO).

Raising the profile and public awareness of Fast Track would improve the process and its potential impact on tackling non-attendance, according to school and court representatives. Increased publicity was seen as a way of enhancing the possible deterrent effect of Fast Track, facilitating a wider impact than just on those directly involved in the process.

It needs its profile raising, nationally to remind parents that it's not something that has gone away, it's still around. Highlighting cases that have gone to court – I think that's quite a powerful message (assistant headteacher).

I think better awareness is certainly something we need (court clerk).

Some way of advertising it throughout the school, or certainly through the local press, so everyone in the school knows what's happening (governor).

Policy and practice implications

Across the LEAs, the effectiveness of Fast Track was discussed and considered on two levels – its influence on attendance levels and its contribution as a prosecution framework.

- Firstly, in terms of having a positive impact on attendance levels, some LEAs reported that Fast Track was indeed effective in motivating a change in behaviour and attitude of young people and parents. Often, meetings and letters, within the legal framework of a time-limited Fast Track could be the catalyst for change. As a result, cases would make satisfactory improvements which would lead to an end, or suspension of the process. This was seen as the most common cause of Fast Track's effectiveness – the 'short sharp shock' to motivate young people and parents to turn the situation around, with the help and support of school and EWS. Most often, it was deemed to be effective for those cases where non-attendance was not at a crisis point. Hence, Fast Track was seen to be appropriate and successful in the marginal and borderline non-attendance cases, reflected in EWS's deliberate targeting of these cases. Conversely, entrenched non-attendance was often associated with other issues within the family situation, and Fast Track was not seen to be effective in these complex cases. As well as being ineffective, Fast Track was also identified as being inappropriate in such circumstances, as the timescale was not sufficient to properly address the needs of these families. The question remains, if Fast Track is failing to make any impression on these more difficult cases, what additional and alternative strategies can be employed to address their needs?
- The second element of Fast Track's effectiveness related to procedural effectiveness, largely, but not exclusively, demonstrated in the two LEAs described as court-focussed. Here, Fast Track was seen as being beneficial where the non-attendance was in fact entrenched and where young people and parents were not regarded as being cooperative or attempting to engage with the school or EWS. Despite the contention that prosecution in such cases was unlikely to affect changes in attendance, Fast Track was still regarded as effective, because it provided an appropriate mechanism by which these particular parents could be brought swiftly before the courts. Would LEAs that use Fast Track for this purpose, not also wish to widen the target group and tap into its potential as an early intervention strategy?
- The promotion of Fast Track as a way of 'backing up parents' as they endeavour to ensure their children's attendance may also need to be considered.

Chapter 7

The development and sustainability of Fast Track

Key findings

With regards the future development of Fast Track at an LEA level, in half the authorities there were interviewees who believed that **primary schools** would benefit from the use of Fast Track. According to the data entered onto the case tracking system, however, only 12 per cent of cases concerned primary aged children.

An LEA wide expansion of Fast Track, whilst considered desirable in three LEAs, was in practical terms, regarded as unfeasible based on current resourcing levels. Meanwhile, other interviewees questioned whether a blanket use of Fast Track was in fact necessary – they instead supported a more **targeted application**, employing Fast Track where it was most needed (e.g. in schools with poor attendance).

In order to secure the long term sustainability of Fast Track, interviewees called for **more resources**, not just for the EWS but also for schools and the courts. Meanwhile, some interviewees highlighted the vital role that schools have to play, stressing that without their support and cooperation, Fast Track could not operate successfully. In an LEA with a high level of school involvement, it was felt that the continuation of Fast Track would benefit from **training for school staff** (to identify and assess possible cases).

Finally, some interviewees warned that whilst Fast Track may currently serve as a deterrent, low level penalties may, in time, reduce this effect and its value as an intervention may diminish. Similarly, interviewees advised capitalising on its potential deterrent function, by using **publicity** to inform parents about the legal consequences of non-attendance.

Introduction

This final chapter looks at the future of Fast Track, based on interviewees' suggestions for how the intervention could develop within each LEA, alongside issues associated with its long term sustainability.

7.1 The future development of Fast Track

Interviewees were asked how they saw Fast Track developing within their LEA. Comments in the following areas were generated:

- **Fast Track in primary schools**
- **Resource implications of extending Fast Track**
- **Fast Track as a targeted intervention**
- **Training for schools**
- **The role of Fast Track within EWS working practices**

7.1.1 Fast Track in primary schools

Six interviewees in five of the 12 LEAs agreed that Fast Track should have a greater presence in primary schools because *'at the end of the day, that's where we really need it'*. One EWS interviewee observed that children with poor attendance in Year 6 can sometimes be overlooked as schools know that pupils are about to move on. Hence, problems are not picked up until their arrival at secondary school. Another EWO felt that action taken at primary level could often produce more positive results. They noted that legal meetings concerning a primary-aged child tended to secure the presence of other agencies and hence a better package of support was made available to the family. Fast Track targeted at primary aged pupils was therefore regarded by interviewees as both a necessary and potentially effective strategy. The case tracking data showed that only 12 per cent of cases recorded on the system concerned primary-aged children. Yet, primary-aged children were demonstrated through regression analysis to respond more positively to Fast Track (see Chapter 5).

7.1.2 Resource implications of extending Fast Track

At the start of the evaluation, 10 of the 12 LEAs opted for a selective implementation of Fast Track and introduced the framework to a limited number of schools (ranging from one to five). Just two were already operating Fast Track across the authority. By the third phase of data collection, a further four LEAs had initiated some extension of Fast Track – three had rolled out across the whole authority and one LEA had expanded Fast Track to encompass new schools. Interviewees in three LEAs, whilst in favour of extending Fast Track, recognised that an LEA wide coverage would place the EWS resources under considerable strain. A service manager explained that he *'would love to have Fast Track in every school, but we just can't, the whole system would grind to a halt because we just could not Fast Track enough cases through'*. In another LEA, meetings had been held with schools who expressed an interest in Fast Track. However, if this led to a sizeable uptake, then the EWS interviewee stressed that resources for Fast Track would have to be reviewed.

7.1.3 Fast Track as a targeted intervention

Two interviewees, a governor and EWO from different LEAs, expressed the opinion that a blanket use of Fast Track would be inappropriate and unnecessary. They supported a targeted application, whereby Fast Track would only be used in those schools with significant attendance problems. In this way, they felt the impact of Fast Track would be more visible and thus convey a strong signal to others about the consequences of failing to attend school regularly. Two EWS interviewees (again from two LEAs) also stated a case for maintaining a balance between enforcement and welfare. They did not wish to see supportive case work completely overridden by a prosecution orientated approach. Indeed, an EWO from a different LEA admitted that they were undertaking prosecution work, at the expense of preventative interventions. These interviewees therefore wished to retain sufficient flexibility in order for different interventions to be used for different circumstances.

I feel strongly that Fast Track is not the panacea for all non school attendance. I think we've got the balance where we allow EWOs to work with the really severe cases, try and help the families where there are hardships and child protection issues. We bring help to the families that need it and we have a bit more control over those that just may be need a bit of a push (EWS manager).

7.1.4 Training for schools

With regards future developments, a PEWO felt that the role of the school during the pre-Fast Track period required some attention. In this particular authority, the pre-Fast Track work was very much school driven, with EWOs only becoming involved later on in the process. This meant that school staff (in administrative posts) were undertaking home visits connected with prosecution. The interviewee was concerned as to whether these staff possessed the necessary skills to undertake such tasks and proposed that the EWS should offer some professional supervision to these individuals. The interviewee felt that this would improve the appropriateness of cases proceeding to the next stage of Fast Track, as under the current arrangements, the EWS was unconvinced that the circumstances behind each case had been thoroughly investigated before referral to Fast Track. Earlier in the evaluation, one of the most significant changes reported by LEAs since the introduction of Fast Track was that schools now had more responsibilities for attendance. As key partners in the Fast Track process, LEAs may need to consider how they can best support schools and ensure they have the necessary skills to undertake Fast Track procedures.

7.1.5 The role of Fast Track within EWS working practices

Other comments made in relation to the development of Fast Track centred on its role within EWS working practices. The contrasting views that were expressed underscore the degree of variation which currently exists across LEAs with regards the use of this framework. For example, one EWO, from an LEA wide Fast Track authority, described how the strategy had already been fully integrated into EWS practices, such that Fast Track was the only system for prosecution:

I think we got to that stage now that this is how we work. I don't think EWOs think of anything but the Fast Track systems in terms of prosecution. That's been accepted as our way of working (EWO).

Meanwhile, an EWS interviewee (also from a LEA wide authority), saw Fast Track developing as one of three legal options:

I see it as part of our prosecution procedures ... what I would like to see is a three minded approach to it – fixed penalty fines, Fast Track and 4441a prosecutions (PEWO).

And in a court-focussed Fast Track, the PEWO said ideally they would only like to use Fast Track for cases that have been to court twice previously, hence you ‘*may only have to use Fast Track three or four times a year*’. Thus, LEAs appeared to be at different stages of developing Fast Track or had opted for a specific type of implementation. For those LEAs wishing to utilise Fast Track on a larger scale, a key consideration for the future will be how to resource its continued application, as many LEAs cited this as a restrictive factor. This is discussed further in the following section.

7.2 The sustainability of Fast Track

Interviewees were asked to consider the longevity of Fast Track and whether there were any sustainability issues associated with its continued operation. Twelve interviewees in seven authorities did not foresee any issues. This included a mixture of school, EWS and court personnel as well as selective and LEA wide Fast Tracks. The remaining interviewees made comments in the following areas:

- **A need for more resources**
- **Support of schools**
- **Impact of low level disposals**
- **Pressure on the courts**

7.2.1 A need for more resources

In nine out of the 12 LEAs, there were a quarter of interviewees (14) who highlighted resource implications in relation to the continued use of Fast Track. Two of the three LEAs, where this was not raised as an issue, were operating a court-focussed Fast Track and thus had a smaller number of cases to deal with. Several interviewees called for additional resources, not just for the EWS, but also for schools and the courts. For example, an EWO felt that the multi-agency panel convened during Fast Track needed better resourcing to ensure that it took place and time scales were adhered to. A deputy headteacher noted that the process had been ‘Fast Track’ up until the legal stages, at which point a bottle neck occurred and the pace of the process slowed considerable. Hence, adequate resourcing was required ‘*at all levels*’. A home school mediator, who took a lead role at the school stage of Fast Track, suggested that the process would benefit from a full-time post in school, focussing solely on Fast Track cases (in this one school, 100 pupils had been selected for Fast Track). There were also requests for more EWS staffing in order to make optimal use of the Fast Track process, as voiced by the following SEWO:

A lot of the stuff that they are putting forward and asking us to do, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that, it’s good. But what they don’t do is give us the people to do it. So you don’t lose anything, you gain something, but there comes a point when you can’t absorb more and I just think that if there was some more money put into this area, I think we would see kids in school (SEWO).

However, the PEWO from the same authority, pointed out that in time, Fast Track could potentially free up EWS resources. They explained that EWOs could work on a short term basis with families, carry out a piece of work and if no improvement/or cooperation was achieved the case could proceed into Fast Track. This contrasted with indefinite case work which could stretch into many months or even years. A school governor and EWO, from different LEAs, also speculated that Fast Track could ultimately reduce EWO workload. They predicted that as families became aware of Fast Track and its consequence, attendance levels overall would begin to rise thus cutting EWO referral rates. A SEWO also felt that as EWS staff became more familiar with the system and the system itself became more refined, the burden on EWO workload would lessen. Interviewees therefore seem to be implying that additional resources would be welcomed initially, in order to firmly establish Fast Track, but that this early investment may prove profitable further down the line, as the effects of Fast Track are felt and attendance improves.

7.2.2 Support of schools

In five of the 12 LEAs the contribution of schools was implicated in Fast Track's sustainability. In an LEA where the first stage of Fast Track was school driven, the coordinating EWO anticipated that other schools in the LEA may be resistant to Fast Track, given the amount of the work they would be required to undertake. In a second authority, where EWOs were soon to become school based, the PEWO was unsure as to whether schools would share the same priorities as the EWS. If not, Fast Track could falter in these schools. In two LEAs (one a whole school focussed Fast Track and the other a letter-based Fast Track), interviewees suggested that schools should provide funding if they wanted Fast Track and that schools could actually run the process themselves. Lastly, in one LEA an interviewee advised that schools need to be geared up for working with pupils post-Fast Track:

The school needs to accept that they have a role to play once the Fast Track process is complete and there's been a period of monitoring and the EWO isn't directly involved with the family. The school need to make sure that all the appropriate systems are in place to support that child in returning to school. The support needs to be ongoing otherwise it will be back to square one (EWO).

More generally, one EWO (from a court focussed LEA) queried whether enough thought had been given to how EWOs should work with families after Fast Track. They wanted to know what could be done if attendance did not improve following a prosecution.

7.2.3 Impact of low level disposals

In five LEAs, the effectiveness and therefore sustainability of Fast Track was linked to the outcomes of those cases that proceeded to court. Interviewees felt that whilst the threat of prosecution may currently function as a sufficient deterrent to some parents, the use of low level disposals could eventually undermine this deterrent effect.

Sometimes when new things come in, it's effective, but if people keep getting small fines, it will not be effective (assistant headteacher).

If it keeps going and there's as many cases going through and they're all getting £20 fines, then it's just going to die a death. People aren't scared of it (PEWO).

Similarly, if Fast Track is to exert an influence over parents, four interviewees from three LEAs felt that more publicity was required so that parents were made aware of the legal process and the penalties they could receive.

7.2.4 Pressure on the courts

Three court representatives, whilst not experiencing any problems currently in relation to Fast Track, felt that sustainability could become an issue if the number of cases increased – both in terms of court time and the work load of legal services. The following comment comes from a legal assistant working in an authority with just one Fast Track school, but because of the chosen approach, 100 pupils were involved in the system.

If it just remains in one school and a couple of year groups then that's fine. But once it goes more global that's when we'd probably have a few problems, fitting in with the times. I mean we'd still do them, but it just wouldn't be very Fast Track then.

Policy and practice implications

- Given the diversity of Fast Tracks operated across the 12 LEAs, its long term development and sustainability will be most likely be influenced by the particular model used – as this determines the number of cases dealt with and the workload of school staff, EWOs and the courts. Yet, in three quarters of the LEAs there were interviewees who cited resources as a factor in its continuation, stating either that Fast Track put a strain on current resources, or that additional resources would be required. Sufficient resourcing may therefore be a determining factor in the lifespan of Fast Track.
- A series of comments were also made which suggest that the sustainability of Fast Track has yet to be fully tested. The strategy is relatively new and its impact partly hinges on what happens at the latter stages of the process – the disposals given, publicity around those disposals, provision for work after Fast Track. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of Fast Track outcomes may therefore be necessary at a national and LEA level to gain a sense of its true impact. Its ultimate success, may also be facilitated by more high profile publicity and some consideration as to what strategies can be used with families post-Fast Track.
- In half the LEAs interviewees also pointed to the critical supporting role played by schools and that without their investment, Fast Track may struggle to survive. How can it be ensured that schools are fully on board with the ethos of Fast Track and that they have sufficient resources to support its use?

Conclusion

In an attempt to answer the research questions posed at the start of the evaluation, this conclusion draws together the various strands of evidence presented throughout the report. Interviewees were asked to comment separately on the challenges arising, main impacts, effectiveness and the sustainability and development of Fast Track. However, in responding, interviewees often chose to highlight similar themes. Particular attention is therefore given to those issues which resonated most frequently throughout the data collection.

During the implementation and operation of Fast Track, what challenges were encountered?

As data was assembled from 12 LEAs, it became evident that LEAs had implemented the framework in different ways. However, across interviewee types, there emerged a cluster of shared challenges relating to: gaining accurate attendance information on Fast Track cases; coping with the workload linked to Fast Track; working within the defined timescale; and maintaining a good relationship with families. The following issues may therefore warrant some consideration:

- Interviewees referred to the critical supporting role played by schools and that, without their investment, Fast Track may struggle to survive. How can it be ensured that schools are fully on board with the ethos of Fast Track; that they invest in or have sufficient resources to support its use; and that the need to accurately record all non-attendance is accepted?
- Given that accurate information forms an essential basis for the effective delivery of Fast Track, does consideration need to be given to the effectiveness of school attendance systems prior to Fast Track being introduced?
- The extra workload created by Fast Track for EWOs continued to be reported a problem even after the initial implementation period. Will there be implications for long-term sustainability if extra resources (e.g. a designated Fast Track post) are not available to support the initiative?
- In the light of alternative Fast Track interpretations, how important is consistency in practice across LEAs?

What has been the impact on attendance rates and attitudes towards attendance?

With a few exceptions, the overarching view amongst interviewees was that Fast Track has had a positive impact, particularly with improvements to EWS procedures and concomitantly, attitudes to attendance and even attendance levels. It is worth emphasising that interviewees tended to nominate impacts associated with the processes leading to prosecutions, rather than those following court proceedings.

Evidence from the NFER case tracking system would suggest that Fast Track can lead to improvements in attendance, whilst families are under the umbrella of Fast Track. However, once the intervention has reached its conclusion or is suspended, attendance levels may not be maintained. This finding, however, relates to a specific sample of cases and it must be acknowledged that the data provided by LEAs was not complete. At the same time, some interviewees did make similar observations noting that attendance could deteriorate once the spotlight of Fast Track is lifted.

- What can schools and the EWS do to curb a decline in attendance after Fast Track? Are there sufficient systems for continued monitoring of attendance and in turn, reapplying pressure when needed?

For which types of case does the strategy work best?

The majority of interviewees concurred that Fast Track was likely to be more effective for cases where non-attendance was not at a crisis point. Hence, Fast Track was seen to more successful in the marginal and borderline non-attendance cases. Conversely, entrenched non-attendance was often associated with other issues within the family situation, and Fast Track was not seen to be as effective in these complex cases. Thus, the level of attendance pre-Fast Track was felt to be influential in how cases responded to the intervention. As highlighted in the family illustrations and supported by interviewees' comments, pupils' self-determined actions and a lack of parental control were frequently identified as factors militating against the success of Fast Track.

- If Fast Track is failing to make as much impression on the more entrenched cases of school non-attendance, what additional and alternative strategies can be employed to address this?
- Would those LEAs, which employ Fast Track for its procedural effectiveness with more serious non-attendance cases, also wish to alter or extend its use to encompass borderline attendance cases?

What are the effective elements of Fast Track?

The aspect of Fast Track most frequently commended, and thus raised as both a positive impact and an effectiveness factor, was the more structured approach, within a clearer timescale. The pace of Fast Track could also help convey to parents and pupils the importance of school attendance. Other characteristics regarded as effective were the consistency, clarity and transparency of Fast Track. In terms of specific stages or elements of Fast Track, panels/meetings were considered effective, a view which was supported by an analysis of the case tracking data. The meetings were seen as valuable because of their legal basis and because they provided an opportunity to clarify parental responsibility and agree an action plan to improve attendance. During the course of implementation some LEAs made changes to the framework in order to make it more effective – this included redefining the target group (e.g. targeting borderline cases, as opposed to pupils with more serious non-attendance patterns) and extending the pre-Fast Track period to allow for a better assessment of each case and giving families time to improve attendance in order to avoid entry to Fast Track.

- Could each EWS do more analysis regarding the effective elements of their Fast Track system?

Recommendations

- The accurate recording and ongoing monitoring of attendance data has emerged as paramount to the success of Fast Track for several reasons. In operational terms, evidence of non-attendance (in particular unauthorised absence) must be made available if cases are to proceed smoothly to court. Post-Fast Track, attendance needs to be monitored both for the purposes of evaluating the intervention's impact and also, to intercept those cases which start to deteriorate once the threat of Fast Track is removed. Interviewee accounts and case tracking data suggest that so far, the effects of Fast Track are often short-term and the system now needs to be developed to ensure that any improvements forthcoming can be sustained. **LEAs and schools need robust and rigorous monitoring systems, and, in turn, should maximise the information and insights such data can offer.**
- Undoubtedly, schools are key players in the Fast Track process, contributing to the provision of attendance data, attendance at panel meetings and planning for the reintegration of pupils. Likewise at the later stages of Fast Track, the process relies on courts to accommodate cases, to identify court dates within the time frame and to decide on appropriate disposals. Meanwhile, the process is coordinated and driven by the EWS. Fast Track can thus be seen as a joint venture between these various professional groups and effectiveness will depend heavily on the success of this collaboration. **All parties need to subscribe to the ethos of Fast Track, appreciate its value and have received sufficient information and/or training to fulfil their particular set of responsibilities.**
- Issues of workload, time and staffing were raised across interviewee types, as well as in LEA wide and selective Fast Tracks. Sufficient resourcing may therefore be a determining factor in the lifespan of Fast Track, or at least the scale of its usage. **For contributors to fully embrace the Fast Track system, some consideration needs to be given to availability of resources to support its use.**
- Finally, the wording – ‘Fast Track to prosecution’ – does imply that Fast Track is a process for accelerating cases quickly to court. However, the majority of LEAs in this sample also employed Fast Track as an early intervention tool, to work with cases in a structured manner in order to generate improvements in attendance prior to any court appearance. Whilst prosecution is a possible outcome, so is withdrawal and, according to interviewees, the majority of cases are not destined for court. **It is perhaps worth promoting the role of Fast Track as a preventative strategy, as opposed to one whose terminology might suggest solely a punitive function.**

Appendix 1

The key characteristics of the LEA sample

Table 1: Characteristics of the LEA sample

Type of LEA	EWS service structure	Who takes the prosecution	Scope of Fast Track when first implemented	Roll out of Fast Track	EWO's / School population	% prosecutions per pupil population **	Social work trained service
Inner London	Not devolved	Legal Services	One secondary, two primaries schools	January	1:1453	0.32	Yes
Metropolitan	Not devolved	Legal Services	Schools in three areas	January	1:2035	<i>medium</i>	Yes
New Authority	Not devolved	Court Officer	One secondary, one primary school	January	1:3143	<i>quite high</i>	No
New Authority	Not devolved	EWS (SEWO)	LEA wide	January	1:2700	<i>medium</i>	No
Inner London	Devolved	EWS (Court Officer)	One secondary school	February	1:1653	0.01	No
Inner London	Devolved	EWS (SEWO)	One secondary school	February	1:2889	0.09	No
Outer London	Not devolved	Legal Services	Three secondary schools	February	1:4156	0.07	No
Metropolitan	Not devolved	EWS (SEWO or PEWO)	Four secondary schools	February	1:1800	<i>low</i>	No
New Authority	Not devolved	Legal Services	One secondary school	March	1:3000	<i>low</i>	No
New Authority	Not devolved	Solicitor	Three primaries, three secondary schools	March	1:5500	<i>rising</i>	No
Metropolitan	Not devolved	EWS and legal services	Two secondary schools	April	1:2260	0.12	No
Metropolitan	Not devolved	EWS	LEA wide	April	1:1727	<i>high</i>	No

** Figures refer to prosecution rates for the academic year 2001-2002 taken from a related piece of NFER research. Where figures were not available interviewees were asked to describe their levels of prosecution.

Appendix 2

Summaries of the Fast Track process in each LEA

LEA 1

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Four schools
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Below 80 per cent
Panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To monitor attendance and identify poor attenders ▪ To send a letter to parents outlining legal responsibilities and enclose an attendance report ▪ First-day contact ▪ To monitor attendance each week for four weeks ▪ To give pupils a weekly attendance report ▪ If attendance improves, to continue to monitor attendance for eight weeks ▪ If no improvement, entry to Fast Track
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No involvement until panel meeting
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 weeks of school level work

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks of LEA level work
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 80–85 per cent
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Letter sent home explaining entry to Fast Track ▪ If there is an improvement, a letter of acknowledgement is sent ▪ If there is no improvement, parents invited to attend governors attendance panel
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A governors attendance panel (week 5) ▪ Who attends: ESW, school representative and school governor ▪ Role: a formal meeting where parents sign up to an action plan
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formal reviews four weeks after governors attendance panel ▪ Continuous monitoring by school and EWS
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cases not withdrawn
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitor until pupil leaves school or moves out of area (pupil does not come off Fast Track)

LEA 2

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LEA wide
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Below 80 per cent attendance
School panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panels are optional
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To monitor attendance • First-day contact • To continue contact with parents via letters and phone calls • To implement programmes of work with young people • To refer pupils with unsatisfactory levels of attendance to ESWs
ESW activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To arrange first home visit within one week of referral • To work with parents to try and address needs, provide support and improve attendance
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 weeks

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60–70 per cent attendance • Previous attempts made to improve child’s attendance • Cases are not selected where there are legitimate reasons for non-attendance • Long-term non-attenders are unlikely to be chosen, as are cases where intervention from other agencies is required.
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home visits • Telephone calls • School staff meet with pupil to explain what’s involved prior to a meeting • A school meeting is held
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel held at Week 1
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal reviews at weeks six and nine
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant improvement in attendance • Targets achieved (targets are case specific) • Parents engaging with EWS/school (but no improvement in attendance due to child) • Mitigating circumstances
Post-Fast Track monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance monitoring ongoing (by EWO and school)

LEA 3

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Two high schools/LEA wide (interviewees differed in their descriptions of scope)
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Below 70 per cent
Panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First-day contact ▪ If no improvement, send a letter to parents outlining concerns ▪ School works with pupil to try and resolve attendance issues, i.e. target setting with form tutor, implementing rewards. ▪ To refer pupils with unsatisfactory levels of attendance to ESWS
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To discuss case with school ▪ To meet with child in school ▪ Invite parents into school to devise an action plan
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 weeks of school level work

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cases where school intervention was unsuccessful ▪ Families previously known to EWS ▪ Where parents are not cooperating ▪ Attendance levels of 60–70 per cent
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Week 1: a home visit or meeting in school to formulate action plan, set targets and a letter is sent home ▪ Week 3: a home visit where targets are reviewed and a letter is sent inviting parents to a formal warning meeting ▪ Week 5: a formal warning meeting is held on LEA premises and PACE caution given (if parents do not attend, a home visit is conducted) ▪ Week 6/7: letter sent to parents about prosecution ▪ Week 8: prepare documents for prosecution ▪ Week 12: case submitted for prosecution
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A meeting in week 5, but no panel ▪ Who attends: District manager, EWO, parents ▪ Role: to give parents a formal PACE caution that is delivered by the District Manager.
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Week 5: a formal warning meeting is held on LEA premises
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved attendance (can be withdrawn at any stage)
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School and EWO continue to monitor attendance ▪ EWO reactivate case if attendance falls below 70%

LEA 4

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One school
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Below 85 per cent attendance over a two week period
Panel before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Yes
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To monitor attendance and identify pupils with poor attendance ▪ First day contact ▪ If no improvement, to invite parents to governors panel meeting ▪ At the meeting devise an action plan with targets ▪ To review action plan four weeks later ▪ To continue to monitor attendance, if no improvement, the case is referred to EWS.
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not involved until school refers case for Fast Track
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 6 weeks

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks ▪ If parents fail to attend LEA panel, case will automatically go to court within 4 weeks.
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Previous intervention with EWS or other agencies ▪ No cooperation from parents ▪ Parentally condoned absence ▪ Failure to meet targets set at a school attendance panel
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An initial home visit by EWO ▪ School support and work with family ▪ If family does not cooperate there is minimal intervention (letters and a visit) ▪ EWO collates copies of governors panel contracts ▪ LEA panel is held ▪ Appropriate information is sent to legal services and a court date applied for
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LEA panel held in week one ▪ Who attends: PEWO, EWO, school representative, parents and other agencies ▪ Role: for all involved to sign contract and set review date for four weeks time
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review meeting held four weeks after LEA panel ▪ If attendance has improved, case is referred back to school for further four weeks monitoring ▪ If there has been no improvement in attendance, case will proceed to court
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Significant improvement in attendance ▪ If health problems emerge
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 week monitoring period back in school and if continue to reach 90 per cent target, taken off Fast Track. If fail to meet target will consider going back into Fast Track.

LEA 5

Entry to Fast Track (no pre-Fast Track period)	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three areas (South, Central and North)
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12-14 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80 per cent attendance or less • Lack of cooperation from parents • Cases are not selected if there are other issues, i.e. medical or social
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Week 1: a meeting between ESW and team manager • Week 2: a letter to parents inviting them to attend a meeting • Weeks 3–6: a case review meeting attended by parents and ESW • Weeks 6–8: a school attendance review meeting
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A school attendance review meeting is held • Weeks 6-8 • Who attends: - team manager (chair), ESW, school representative, child, other agencies involved. • Role: to review case, reasons for absence, and set targets
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESW reviews informally every two weeks (week 3–6, 6–8 and week 10)
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved attendance • Parental cooperation
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 weeks

LEA 6

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One school, but elements of Fast Track being used LEA wide (e.g. education strategy meetings)
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Below 80 per cent
Panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To monitor attendance ▪ To provide pastoral support ▪ To involve home-school liaison officer/learning mentors, to contact parents and try and address attendance issues
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First-day contact ▪ To continue to contact parents to provide support and try to resolve attendance issues ▪ To conduct home visits
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 weeks

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 80 per cent attendance or less ▪ No cooperation from parents
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cases contacted on a daily basis ▪ Attendance discussed at an educational strategy meeting
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An educational strategy meeting held in week three ▪ Who attends: Service Manager, EWO, other agency representative (if appropriate), parent and child (if secondary age) ▪ Role: very formal; to make decisions based on action plan; for service manager, parents and child to sign a contract
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ From week 7/8: Monthly review until court case is heard or decision is made not to prosecute ▪ Attended by EWO and service manager
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Significant improvement in attendance ▪ Case specific issues
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ EWO continues to monitor pupil's attendance and if attendance drops case will re-enter FT ▪ School provides EWO with up to date attendance information ▪ At the end of next term following court warning, decision made as to whether a new court warning letter needs to be issued

LEA 7

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Four secondary schools and one primary
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Below 80 per cent attendance over four weeks ▪ Ten days consecutive unauthorised absence
Panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School/EWO identify pupils with attendance issues ▪ First-day contact ▪ Send letters to parents as and when necessary ▪ Depending on resources in school, to involve home-school liaison officer ▪ If no improvement, referred to EWS and notify parents of referral
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To collect documentation of school attempts to resolve attendance issues ▪ To collect attendance data for 6 week period prior to school attendance panel
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 weeks

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter to Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 80 per cent or less over a four-week period ▪ Ten consecutive days of unauthorised absence
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Letter is sent to parents informing them that they are in Fast Track and inviting them to School Attendance Panel ▪ EWO intervention – home visits, phone calls, letters ▪ School continues to monitor attendance
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Held in weeks 1-2 ▪ Who attends: PEWO, EWO, school representative, school governor, parent and child, other agencies involved ▪ Role: to set attendance targets; for parent to sign a contract
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formal reviews in weeks 5–6 (4 weeks after SAP) ▪ Usually reviewed by everyone that attends SAP, or at least PEWO, EWO and school rep.
Reasons for Withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased and maintained attendance
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attendance monitored for 2-3 months ▪ Role of EWO diminishes if attendance improves ▪ School monitors attendance and if it decreases informs EWO

LEA 8

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LEA wide
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Two consecutive weeks of unauthorised absence ▪ Ten sessions of unauthorised absence in a five-week period at secondary school ▪ Five sessions of unauthorised absence in a five-week period at primary school ▪ Fifteen incidences of lateness in a five-week period ▪ Pupil not returning to school after a period of exclusion
Panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some schools have panels (but not a specific requirement of Fast Track)
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To identify pupils with attendance problems ▪ First-day contact and tutor follow up ▪ Talk to parents, some schools have home-school liaison workers who will do pre-referral work with the families. ▪ To refer pupils with unsatisfactory levels of attendance to ESWS
EWS activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Before case is referred to EWS service, EWOs will do pre referral, preventative work in school (meet with pupil and family). The amount of work will depend on the SLA with the school
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 weeks

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can take longer than 12 weeks – typically 14-15 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Same as school attendance triggers listed above ▪ If no progress with case – i.e. the pre-referral, preventative work hasn't been effective
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Week 1: meeting with parents ▪ Week 3: meeting with parents; discuss referral to Social Inclusion panel to decide if there are grounds for prosecution; court warning notice served. ▪ Week 5/6: meeting with parents ▪ Week 7: Youth Inclusion and Support Panel, arrange summons ▪ Week 9: serve summons ▪ Week 12: court
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Held in week 7 ▪ Who attends: PEWO, EWO, Headteacher, YOT, Social Services ▪ Role: to decide whether to proceed to court or another course of action
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review is ongoing and conducted by EWO informally ▪ Meet with family three times to review case ▪ Formal review at the panel in week 3 (decide whether to proceed with prosecution)
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No set criteria ▪ Improved attendance
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitor for a minimum of half a term to a term

LEA 9

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One school
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Below 80 per cent
Panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Yes – chaired by school
School activity	<p>Stage 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To ensure accurate registration, to monitor attendance, first-day contact, to offer support of school staff (e.g. learning mentors, Connexions), to arrange a meeting with parents at school <p>Stage 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To consider referral to outside agencies (e.g. behaviour and educational support team), to refer to EWS and notify parents of referral
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To arrange a home visit and inform school ▪ To make an initial assessment of reasons for non-attendance ▪ To provide school and SEWO with written feedback
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 6 weeks

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 80 per cent attendance or less ▪ Parentally condoned absence ▪ Lack of cooperation from parents ▪ Previous intervention by school and EWS unsuccessful
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Week 1: initial assessment by EWO, parent given copy of written statement, summons served ▪ Week 3: home visit, consider whether tasks have been fulfilled ▪ Week 7: Borough Attendance Panel (BAP) – optional depending on need, decide to prosecute or withdraw ▪ Week 8: notify parents on outcome of meeting ▪ Week 9: written statement produced for court ▪ Week 12: court appearance
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Held in week 7 ▪ Who attends: SEWO, EWO, police officer, ESO, pupil services and parent ▪ Role: decide whether to prosecute or withdraw
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fortnightly ▪ EWO reviews
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do not withdraw cases for improved attendance ▪ If parents are cooperating and it is the child that is the problem ▪ Where other agencies are involved with family
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attendance reviewed continuously

LEA 10

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LEA wide
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 80–90 per cent attendance
Panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No school panels
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To identify pupils with attendance problems ▪ First-day contact ▪ To continue to contact parents, talk to pupils, set targets, reward met targets ▪ To provide a range of interventions/reintegration programmes ▪ To arrange a meeting in school to discuss reasons for non-attendance ▪ To refer pupils with unsatisfactory levels of attendance to EWS
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ EWO takes referral from school after above work carried out ▪ Home visit to make initial assessment of reasons for non-attendance ▪ Action plan with targets ▪ If no improvement, send out section 7 letter threatening prosecution and if still no improvement – book date for pre-court meeting ▪ To collect documentation of school attempts to resolve attendance issues
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 6-8 weeks

LEA level work after cases <u>enter</u> Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Primary: 90 per cent attendance or less ▪ Secondary: 80 per cent attendance or less ▪ No cooperation from parents ▪ Previous interventions not worked
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pre-court meeting ▪ Apply for summons immediately after pre-court meeting (within a week) ▪ Frequent home visits, telephone calls, letters
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A pre-court meeting held in week one of Fast Track ▪ Who attends: SEWO chairs, school representative, other agency representative, parent and child ▪ Role: SEWO makes final decision whether or not to prosecute
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formal review (week six) ▪ Continuous informal review between EWO and SEWO
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased and maintained attendance, exclusion, educated at home, extenuating circumstances
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attendance monitored for 24 weeks (2 terms) ▪ If attendance did not improve, then the EWO would continue to visit on a fortnightly basis. ▪ Take all cases on a 441 initially and would then go for the enhanced offence under 441a if needed to go back to court.

LEA 11

School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LEA wide
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Below 85 per cent
Panel before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To identify pupils with attendance problems ▪ To contact parents (first-day contact or letter) ▪ If no improvement, to invite parents into school to discuss concerns ▪ To employ a range of intervention strategies, incentive schemes, pastoral support ▪ If no improvement, to discuss case with School Attendance Improvement Officer ▪ If no improvement, to refer pupils to the School Attendance Support Assistant
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To contact parents and arrange home visit ▪ To discuss attendance issues and devise action plan ▪ To advise school of any action that has been agreed ▪ To work with parents to address needs, provide support and improve attendance
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4 weeks

LEA level work <u>after</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No specific criteria ▪ Attendance pattern more important than attendance level ▪ Varies from 80–90 per cent attendance level ▪ Parents not engaging ▪ Not cases where attendance is below 50 per cent, or families have social issues
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Week 1: Initial home visit by assistant EWO; if other issues revealed case is referred on to other agencies; attendance target set for Week 3 ▪ Week 1–3: assistant EWO makes a home visit every time pupil is absent ▪ Week 3: parent receives formal PACE caution ▪ Week 6: court warning letter sent out ▪ Week 7: court date identified ▪ Week 9: EWO and assistant EWO review case and conduct a home visit to inform parents of review outcome ▪ Week 10: gather evidence for court
Panel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formal review at Week 9 ▪ Continuous informal review by EWO and Assistant
Reasons for Withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Withdraw and refer back to school at Week 6 if 100 per cent attendance (but if suspect attendance could decline case would remain in Fast Track)
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review attendance six weeks after court date and at the end of the academic year

LEA 12

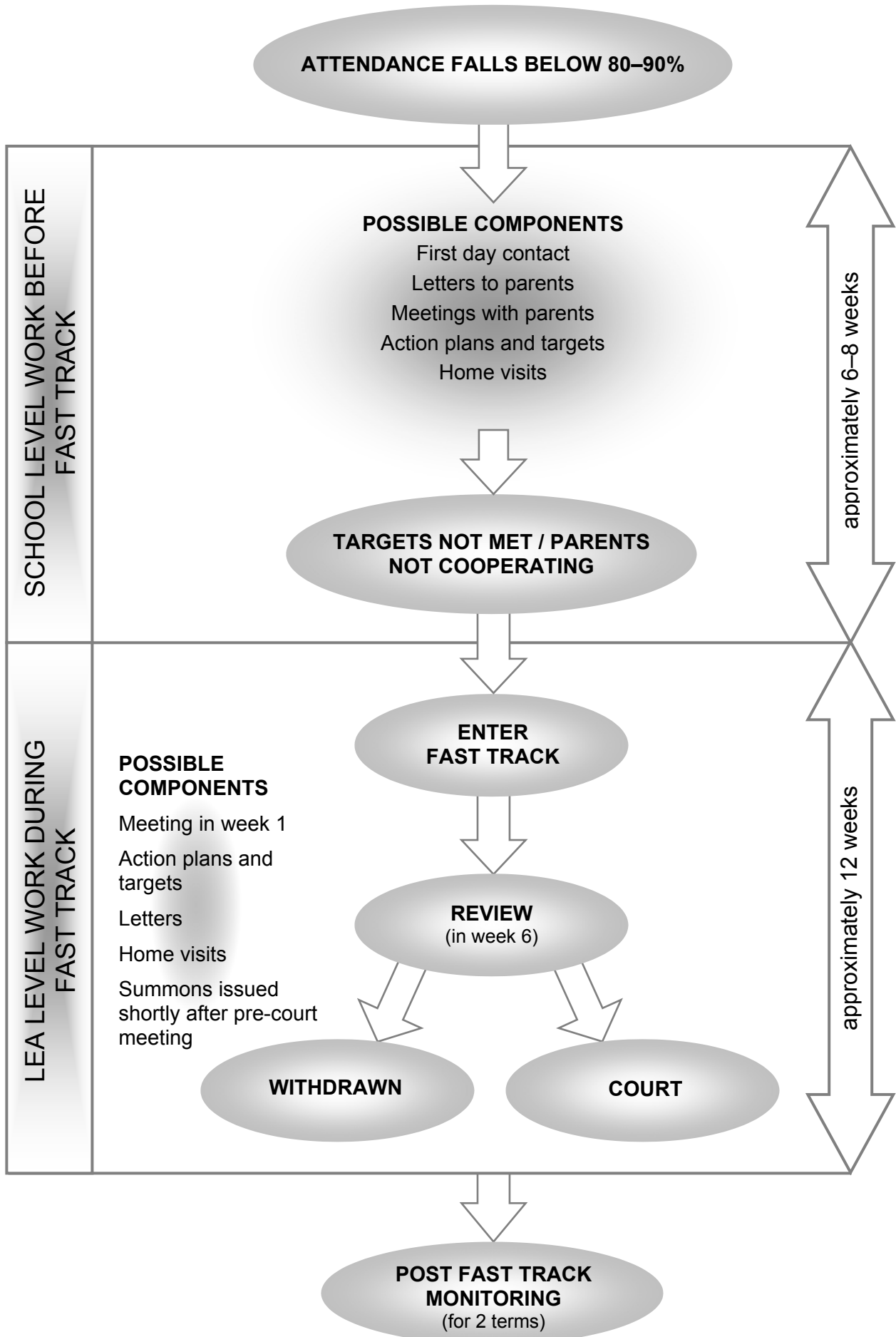
School level work <u>before</u> cases enter Fast Track	
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LEA wide
School attendance triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Less than 85 per cent attendance (secondary) ▪ Less than 90 per cent attendance (primary)
Panel held before entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No (only during Fast Track see below)
School activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To identify attendance of less than 85 per cent (at secondary) or 90 per cent (at primary) over a period of not less than two weeks ▪ To contact home by phone/letter and records reason for absence ▪ If absence unauthorised, to make referral to EWO within ten working days ▪ School and EWO to identify needs of child and family
EWO activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sometimes responsible for first-day contact ▪ To do a minimum of one home visit prior to school attendance panel ▪ To possibly start medical check to ascertain if sickness is valid ▪ To talk to pupils alone at home or at school ▪ To liaise with other agencies e.g. Connexions, Social Services etc.
Timescale before case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Four weeks

LEA level work after cases enter Fast Track	
Timescale after case enters Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 12 weeks
Scope of Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ LEA wide
Criteria for entry to Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Primary: 90 per cent, secondary: 85 per cent ▪ Prior intervention failed ▪ Parent condoned absence/no cooperation
Process during Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Week 1: school attendance panel (SAP) ▪ Week 2-3: continue with home visits (If attendance improves to 85/95 per cent, monitor for further four weeks – if attendance remains satisfactory at end of 4 weeks, EWO will refer case back to school and close it) ▪ Week 3: If at end of week 3 attendance is unsatisfactory LEA panel convened ▪ Week 8: EWO discusses prosecution with SEWO and prepares court brief ▪ Week 12: prosecution
Panel after entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SAP in week 1 and then LEA panel in week 3 if no improvement in attendance ▪ Who attends SAP: EWO, headteacher, school governor, other agencies (if appropriate) and parents ▪ Role of SAP: outline problem, identify if parents need additional support, notify parents of their legal duties, agree action plan and set four week window for significant improvement in attendance ▪ Who attends LEA panel: PEWO chairs, EWO, parents. ▪ Role of LEA panel: similar agenda to SAP, agree and sign action plan
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reviewed through panels
Reasons for withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Significant improvement in attendance ▪ Targets met
Post-Fast Track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Usually for 4 weeks

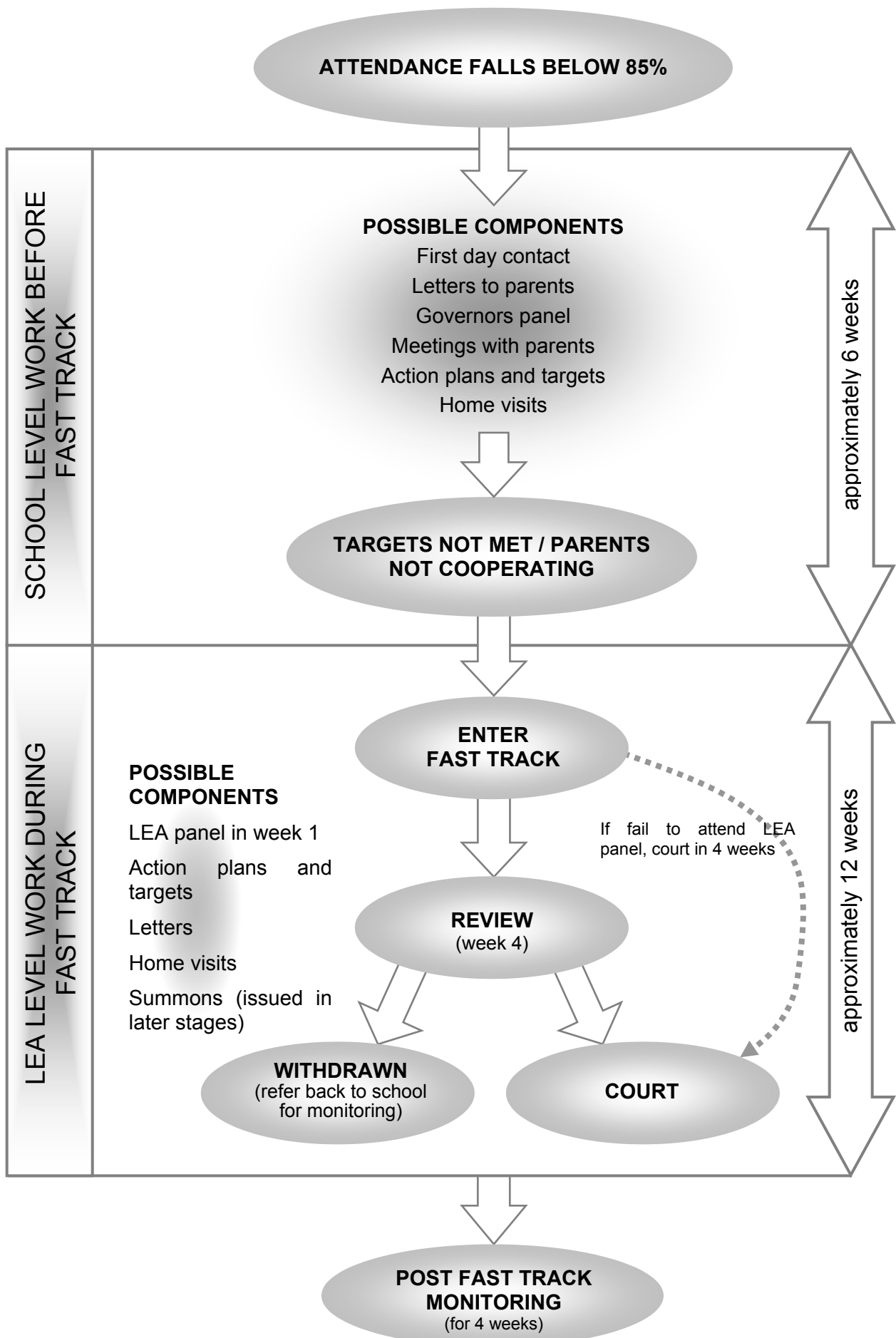
Appendix 3

**Models depicting three different versions of
Fast Track**

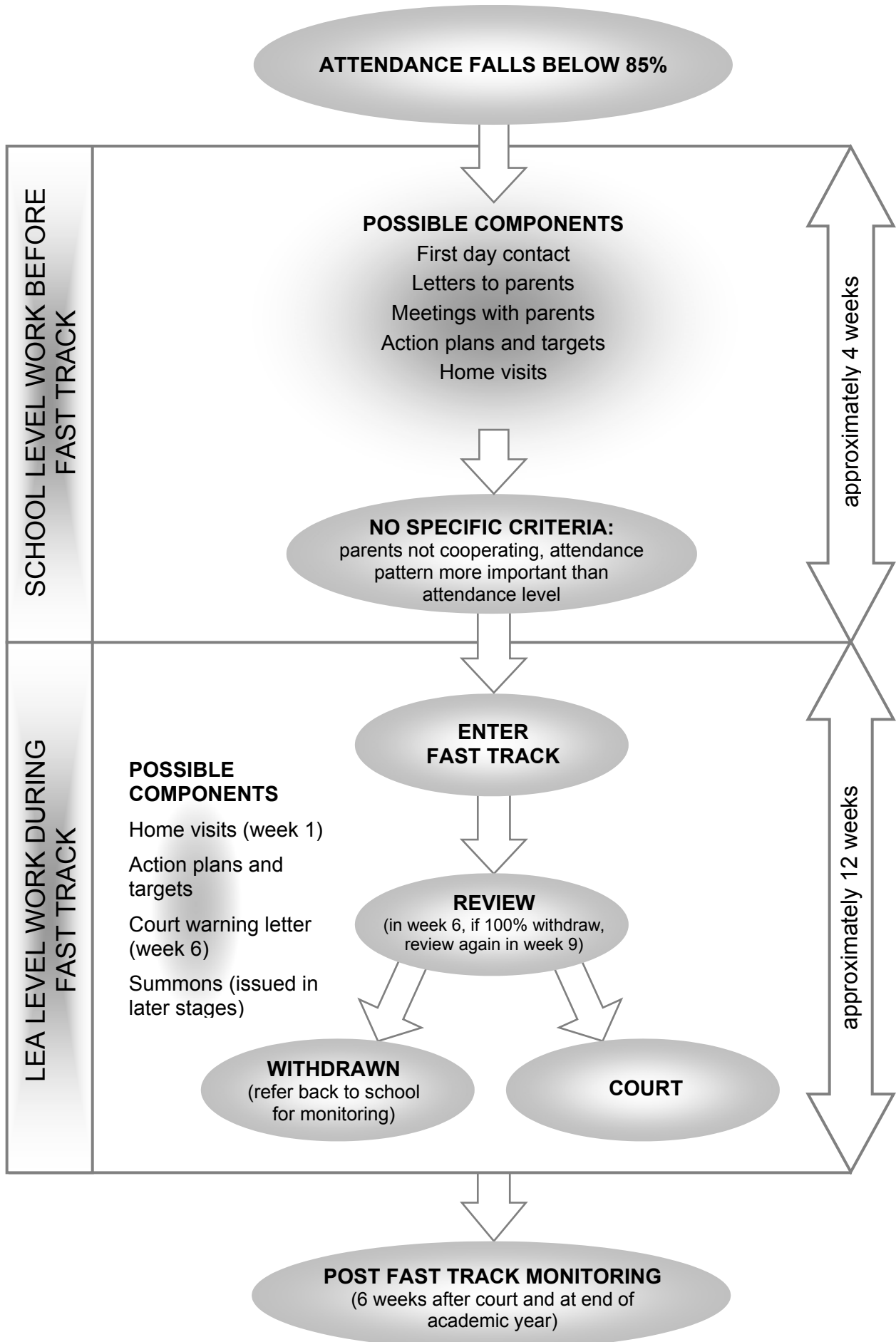
LEA 10: LEA wide, 'early intervention', one panel, extended pre-Fast Track period



LEA 4: one school, 'early intervention', two panels, extended pre-Fast Track period



LEA 11: LEA wide, 'court based', no panels



Appendix 4

Overview of 30 Fast Track families

Table 2: An overview of 30 Fast Track cases

Year group	Family background and attendance history	Attendance before entry	Stage reached	Outcome of process	Effect of Fast Track on attendance
Positive impact: attendance showed clear improvements					
2,9	Prosecuted 5/6 times previously,. protective mother, prefers to have children at home.	Erratic, history of non-attendance in family	Court	Guilty £200 fine	Attendance improved after summons issued
9	Mother likes to have daughter at home, daughter manipulates mother.	55 %, problems since primary	Court	Adjourned because attendance improving	Attendance now near 90%, improved after summons issued
8	Mother too lenient, unable to enforce attendance.	65 %	Court	Conditional discharge	Now 75%, improved in lead up to court
11	Mother cooperated with EWS, daughter would not comply, problems since move to secondary	Poor	Court	Conditional discharge	Improved in lead up to court
9	Truants with cousin, mother gave lots of excuses.	60 %	Ongoing	Monitoring, likely to be withdrawn	Currently around 100%
2	Overprotective carer (grandmother involved in custody battle with mother).	47%	Reached SAP	Withdrawn	100 % after school attendance panel
9	Medical excuses given, but not serious enough to stay away from school.	Started with odd day and then longer periods	Reached SAP	Withdrawn	100% after school attendance panel
11	Parents divorced, mum unable to enforce attendance.	Not known	Court	Adjourned	Attendance improved since daughter sent to live with father
8	Mum could not afford bus fare.	Not known	Early stages	Monitored	Attendance improved

Year group	Family background and attendance history	Attendance before entry	Stage reached	Outcome of process	Effect of Fast Track on attendance
8,10	Boys played truant. Parent escorted children to school.	Internal truancy	Early stages	Monitored	Attendance improved after boys attended meeting
9	Children would go on trips with parents (funerals, weddings). Seen by parents as a cultural responsibility.	80 %	Court	£300	Improved to 100% after summons sent
6	Parent terminally ill/ child living with relatives.	68% and many lates	Monitoring after SAP	Attendance being monitored	Attendance has improved significantly
6	Family recently moved to area.	74%	Monitoring after SAP	Attendance being monitored	Attendance has improved significantly
8 & 10	Single parent	65–70%	Monitoring after panel	Case withdrawn	Attendance has improved significantly
1	Single parent/ frequent moves/ health issues.	Around 25%	Monitoring after SAP	Withdrawn	Attendance improved, mother wanted to avoid the LEA panel
1	Single parent/ drug use	70%, also chronic lateness	Monitoring after SAP	Withdrawn	Dramatic improvement, mother responded to the threat of court
Some impact: partial or temporary improvements					
10	Prosecuted previously, history of non-attendance, claims of bullying, not proved, single parent. Mum worried about daughter (self-harms).	40%	At SAP stage		Slow progress – mum is now communicating with EWS
6,7,9	Mum recently left family home, Dad has panic attacks	30-50 %	Court	Ongoing	Case withdrawn for one of children because attendance improved

Year group	Family background and attendance history	Attendance before entry	Stage reached	Outcome of process	Effect of Fast Track on attendance
7	Single parent	65%	Monitoring after review meeting	Case withdrawn but is now re-entering Fast Track and a court summons applied for	Attendance has deteriorated since the case was withdrawn
9	Single mum	Very poor	Monitoring after review meeting	Case withdrawn	Attendance has improved dramatically
6	Mother lacks control over son, claims of illness	30 %	Court	£75 fine plus £25 costs	Attendance improved initially and then declined
2,4	Mother suffers from depression, not willing to accept help	Problems with punctuality	Court	Adjourned because attendance improving	Some improvements
5	Father in prison	Very poor	Court	Guilty, given 160 hours community service	Some improvement initially after meeting, then declined
No impact: attendance failed to improve					
11	Prosecuted previously, mother has no control over daughter Single parent	45 %	Court	Guilty, £75 fine	Attendance worse
7,9,10 and prim	Parents lack parenting skills	Very poor	Court	Conditional discharge and £90 costs	No improvement
10	Mother fails to set boundaries, total non-cooperation from mother, claims of bullying, not substantiated	'dire in year 10'	Ongoing	Submitted to case managed to proceed to court	No improvement
8	Older sister had history of non-attendance, total non-cooperation from parents	70 %	Court	Fined £1000, plus £120 costs	No improvement

Year group	Family background and attendance history	Attendance before entry	Stage reached	Outcome of process	Effect of Fast Track on attendance
9	Nearly reached court previously, total non-cooperation from parents.	Long term non-attender	Court	Fine £75, plus £25 costs	No improvement
8	Mother has no control over children, had to move house to avoid harassment from father, problems with transport.	Very poor	Ongoing	Held back going to court because of family issues	No improvement
11	Single parent	School refuser	Court	Guilty, given a conditional discharge	None

Source: Case-study interviews during phase two and three data collection.

Appendix 5

Findings from the parent focus groups

FINDINGS FROM THE PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

The views of non-Fast Track parents

The evaluation undertook three parent focus groups. These were held to ascertain the awareness of Fast Track amongst parents not personally involved in the intervention. The groups also provided an opportunity to garner parent's opinions on the effectiveness of the approach and to glean their ideas for possible alternatives. The groups ranged in size from four to seven participants and were conducted in three different LEAs (two operating selective Fast Tracks and one across the whole authority). None of the LEAs represented court focussed Fast Tracks.

Awareness of Fast Track

With regards the first aim, it was found that the majority of parents had not previously heard of the new Fast Track to prosecution framework. One parent, who worked in the school and knew an attendance worker, was aware of its existence. On the whole, this sample of parents lacked any knowledge of Fast Track prosecutions at a local level, although they could recollect cases which had appeared in the national media.

Views on prosecuting for school non-attendance

When asked to contemplate the general principle of prosecuting parents for school non-attendance, the first reaction of all three groups was to distinguish between those parents who willingly engaged with their children's education and those who showed no interest. Participants felt that it would be unfair to threaten court action in cases where parents were making every effort to guarantee their child's presence in school. Early in the discussions, participants would often point out that, whilst a parent may accompany a child to school, there was no guarantee that they would remain on the premises. In the family case studies presented in Chapter 6, pupils' self-determined actions and a lack of parental influence were highlighted as compounding factors to the success of Fast Track and it would seem that these parents also recognised the effect these factors can have on attendance behaviour. Attendance was thus seen as a shared responsibility – parents had to ensure children reached school in the morning, pupils had to stay in school after arrival and schools had to create the necessary conditions to ensure that pupils felt no inclination to abscond and if they did, they would be apprehended. At the same time, one parent pointed out that their capacity to guarantee attendance was hindered by their work commitments. This particular individual left for work at five in the morning, and, whilst they would telephone their child to get them up, ready for school, there was not much more they could physically do. There was a consensus view, however, that prosecution was only appropriate if parents were blatantly unsupportive of their child's education and made no attempts to improve the attendance. One of the groups also believed that cases should be assessed on an individual basis and the reasons for non-attendance investigated. Some of these issues are illustrated by the parent comments below.

<p>The limits of parental control and the problem of internal truancy</p>	<p><i>You can only do so much for the child. They could leave home to come to school, but who knows where they go. You can only do so much.</i></p> <p><i>I've got a friend who brings his daughter to this school. He brings her in one gate and she goes out the other. What can he do, what can he do?</i></p> <p><i>Apart from taking kids into schools and then going off, what's to say they're not going to abscond? I mean, it goes on in school. There's registration and then they disappear don't they?</i></p>
<p>Schools responsibility for retaining children</p>	<p><i>I mean, if there's a reception there and they see the child going out of school, ask them where they are going.</i></p>
<p>Cases need to be judged individually</p>	<p><i>I think every case should be looked at individually, because obviously if you have got a seven year old and you just don't bother to get up and take him to school, then I think you should be prosecuted. But I think if you have got a 15-16 year old, you can't bodily carry that child to school every day.</i></p>

Perceived effectiveness of a Fast Track approach

Whilst most of the parents possessed no prior knowledge of Fast Track, once the intervention was described, they were asked to comment on whether it would make a difference – could it influence parents' behaviour and would attendance improve? Obviously, participants were only able to offer theoretical answers, rather than any based on their own observations. Most expressed some reservations as to the overall effectiveness of prosecuting parents. Firstly, parents from two of the discussion groups, asserted that the impact of prosecution would depend on whether the parents were able to exert any control over their children's behaviour. Where this had been lost, they suggested that parents would struggle to make any impression on attendance, even after a prosecution. Effectiveness was also thought to be constrained by the penalties imposed. Again, in two of the groups, the level of fines was questioned and it was known that, if families were classified as low-income households, then the fines could be significantly reduced and may even remain unpaid. Under these circumstances, a prosecution was thought unlikely to precipitate a change in behaviour. One participant felt that prosecution would only act as a deterrent once it had been seen to happen locally, at which point parents and pupils may take the threat seriously. One group took issue with the 12-week time limit of Fast Track. They felt that, if more complex problems were at the root of non-attendance, 12 weeks would not allow parents sufficient time to address the situation. They agreed that more flexibility was necessary to accommodate the needs of individual cases. Two participants, however, alluded that Fast Track could be effective in certain respects. In one case, a mother had actually employed the threat of her own imprisonment to persuade her young child to go to school when he was faking illness. Another participant, from a different group, felt that Fast Track was helpful because attendance was being closely monitored and parents would be informed if their child had any problems (otherwise, they may not know). Some of these issues are illustrated by the parent comments below.

Inadequate fines	<i>Some of the families haven't got the money so the fine system doesn't work. They pay a bit each week, so it's no hardship to them. They probably get £300 fine and then they will go home, say 'I can't afford to pay it all, I will pay it two pound a week'. The kids still don't go to school.</i>
Needs a local profile	<i>A lot of kids are 'Do you think I care if my mum goes to jail?'. It's not working with them. It needs to be happening locally before they sort of sit up. I've not heard about it in X, only down south and that's the one that was on television.</i>
More flexibility in the timescale	<i>It's got to be a 12-week plan that includes sorting out the problems within the school to help the child get back into school, but even in that situation, I don't think you should look at prosecution because it's not actually the parents' fault. I mean, it's the schools fault for not picking up on the problem and trying to deal with it in school.</i>

Alternatives to prosecution

Participants were also surveyed to obtain their ideas on possible alternatives to prosecution – what else could be done? A number of proposals entailed re-directing intervention from the parent to the child. This was suggested in both a punitive and supportive sense. For example, there were those who said that in some cases it may be more appropriate (and effective) to punish the child for their non-attendance, in the form of fines or community service. This was deemed appropriate where the non-attendance concerned an older child who was refusing to comply. Others felt that children may benefit from alternative forms of educational provision. There was a recognition that some children simply did not fit the mould of mainstream education and their attendance would improve if they were given other opportunities (e.g. vocationally based courses).

Other ideas for prosecution alternatives maintained the focus on parents but advocated a more supportive stance. One group recognised that parents often lack the necessary skills to influence their children and they therefore recommended the use of parenting classes. They felt that these could be combined with the 12-week Fast Track period, during which parents would be set a target of improving attendance, as well as having to attend parenting classes. This way parents would not be left to tackle attendance on their own, but instead would be acquiring strategies to help them meet their targets. In a broader sense, the same group felt that parents needed to re-educate themselves, so they would come to appreciate the benefits of schooling – it was felt that attendance was simply not supported by some parents, because they placed no value on education. Some of these issues are illustrated by the parent comments below.

Punishments directed at the pupil	<i>Make the child pay, not the parent. If the parents didn't care and they were laying in bed all day and they didn't care whether their kid went or didn't go then they should pay the £2000, but if you have got some parents who are absolutely devastated by it, then the child pays for it.</i>
Parenting classes	<i>Some parents don't have parenting skills. If they were brought up by parents that think 'Go to school if you like, if you don't want to, don't', that's normal to</i>

	<i>them, they pass it on to their children, they pass it on to their child and it just goes on and on and on.</i>
Alternative education	<i>I mean there's children, lets face it, out there where school just isn't for them. They are not inclined to education. They just do not click with school and I think when you meet children like that, in that senior school, to maybe offer them alternatives, skills that are going to employ them later in life.</i>

References

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