RAISING ATTENDANCE

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A Detailed Study of Education Welfare Service Working Practices

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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The research documented in this report set out to examine the overall contribution of LEAs to improving school attendance. It was commissioned by the Council of Local Education Authorities (CLEA) Research Programme and was conducted between April 1999 and April 2000. The aims of the research were to:

- identify the range of activity undertaken by the Education Welfare Service (EWS) in improving attendance, including innovative approaches at school and community level

- audit multi-agency approaches used to address non-attendance and examine how these affect attendance levels

- examine key staffing issues that have implications for improving attendance, in particular the skills and training of those working within the EWS and other agencies

- report and evaluate examples of effective LEA practice in improving attendance

- examine the overall contribution of LEA services to improving attendance.

An initial audit of EWS activity and initiatives aimed at improving attendance was conducted in Phase One of the study (telephone interviews with senior managers in 106 LEAs) and these findings were reported in *Raising Attendance 1*. The present report, based on the data collected in Phases Two and Three of the study, extends further these two main areas of investigation.

METHODOLOGY

The aims of **Phase Two** of the study were, in particular:

- to obtain EWS staff perspectives on a range of service, staffing and working practice issues and their implications for effectiveness in improving attendance

- to garner more detailed accounts of the initiatives identified in Phase One of the study and, more specifically, both strategic- and operational-level staff views on their impact and effectiveness

Following the telephone interviews, a sample of 20 LEAs was selected to include a range of different types of initiatives in which there was evidence of effectiveness in improving attendance and which involved multi-agency input. The sample was also

selected to reflect LEAs nationally in terms of their type and size, levels of authorised and unauthorised absence and levels of EWS resources (numbers of pupils to one EWO). These data are presented in Appendix 1. These figures show that, whilst the sample can be considered representative in terms of type and size of LEA and levels of service resources, the sample was weighted towards authorities with low unauthorised absence figures and medium levels of authorised absence. In Phase Two, face-to-face interviews were conducted with both senior managers and operational-level staff in EWSs and some operational-level staff from other agencies. In total, 69 personnel were interviewed, 53 of whom were EWS staff, 11 from other education services and five from other agencies. The interviews were divided into two sections. The first section concerned the general working of services (the focus of Part One of this report), whilst the second section related to the initiatives highlighted (the focus of Part Two of this report). The 20 senior managers and 22 out of the 29 EWO/ESWs interviewed were asked about the general issues, whilst the remaining interviewees were only asked about the relevant initiatives. In total, 40 different initiatives were explored and these are detailed in Appendix 2.

The aims of **Phase Three** of the study were, in particular:

- to place the initiatives under study within a wider context, in terms of the LEA, the EWS, other agencies and the schools involved

- to garner the views of schools, parents, pupils and other agencies on the impact and effectiveness of initiatives

Phase Three of the research focused on five case-study LEAs, again selected to include, as far as possible, a range of initiatives in which there was evidence of effectiveness in improving attendance, as well as multi-agency working. They were also selected to represent a range of LEA contexts, taking into account the type of LEA, its size, levels of authorised and unauthorised absence and level of EWS resources.

In this phase of the research, in addition to EWS staff and EWS support workers, a wider range of staff from other agencies, school staff, parents or carers and pupils were interviewed. The number of interviewees asked about each initiative is detailed individually within the case studies. In total, within the case studies, 13 individual initiatives were investigated. Details of the LEA context and the initiatives under investigation for each of the case studies are presented in Appendix 3.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

As a prelude to the NFER research, this review teases out some of the contemporary issues pertaining to the working practice of the Education Welfare Service, as well as considering general implications for raising attendance. The first part of the chapter discusses the complexity of non-attendance and, with reference to the literature, a typology of non-attendance is presented. This is accompanied by a consideration of current levels and the associated methodological problems in acquiring accurate data. The second part of the review turns to the role and status of the Education Welfare Service in improving attendance, followed by a synopsis of available strategies.

NON-ATTENDANCE – A COMPLEX ISSUE

From the beginning of compulsory education, there have been children who have stayed away from school – some missing specific lessons, some for much longer periods of time. In the short term, these children are not receiving a full education. In the long term, the consequences are potentially much more damaging. Research has linked truancy with unemployment, homelessness and crime (GB. Parliament. HoC, 1998), all of which give succeeding governments, and the public at large, cause for concern.

Non-attendance is multi-dimensional, in that it can take many forms – single lessons, half-days, whole days or several weeks. Before considering strategies that seek to eliminate non-attendance, it is first necessary to grapple with its definition. The commonly used term 'truancy' is misleading as it only captures a small proportion of non-attendance, typically conveying the image of a rebellious child purposefully choosing to skip school. 'Truancy' does not adequately represent, for example, the school refuser who feels unable to cope emotionally with the classroom environment, or the child who stays at home to look after a younger sibling, with parental permission. Truancy, according to Stoll (1990, p. 14), however, is '*absence from school for no legitimate reason*'. For this reason, the more encompassing term of 'non-attendance' will be used throughout this report. Indeed, to arrive at a singular definition is almost impossible, given the various manifestations and multiple causes of non-attendance. In the broadest sense however, non-attendance is simply absence from school for no legitimate reason (Stoll, 1990).

The lack of uniformity with regards to non-attendance carries both academic and practical repercussions, as recognised by Gabb (cited in O'Keefe, 1994, p. 13), who explained that '*Since the term has been given different meanings by different writers, the literature cannot be regarded as dealing with an homogeneous subject.*' It is therefore very difficult to draw any inferences as to the 'typical truant' or the 'best solution', but precise classification might go some way towards identifying the most appropriate remedial strategy. Three main forms of non-attendance have been

described – truancy, school refusal and condoned absence, the distinguishing factor being the locus of control (Whitney, 1994):

Truancy
In cases of genuine truancy, the essential element is that the child chooses not to participate in the school day. Truancy is therefore behaviour within the child's control.

School refusal
Alternatively, children may refuse school for weeks or months at a time. Here, the child may not be choosing to avoid school, but, due to overwhelming pressures, they feel compelled to do so. For example, they may be angry, confused, depressed or anxious; they may have major emotional and behavioural problems or be the victims of abuse; they may have developed an 'adult' lifestyle in which school attendance is no longer conceivable; they may be beyond parental control or looked after by the local authority.

Condoned absence
These children are absent because of a failure by their parents to fulfil their legal duty or with the tacit approval of parents. They may be working in the family business, moving around the country, looking after sick relatives or younger children, exploiting their parents' lack of interest in education, or at home 'cooling off' after an incident at school. In many of these families a culture and a cycle of non-attendance has developed.

Source: Whitney (1994)

Non-attendance may therefore arise from a conscious decision on the part of the child, or it may originate from other sources, namely, factors within the school environment or the family home. Whitney further elaborated on the underlying causes and drew attention to the heterogeneous experience of non-attendance. In some cases, non-attendance is triggered by anxiety and the consequential emotion is one of relief. In contrast, other children perceive 'bunking off' school as a risk-taking activity, one instilled with a 'thrill factor'. At the same time, some children may wish to go to school, but are prevented from doing so by economic restrictions or family circumstances. Others are opportunists, taking the odd day off when circumstances allow. A diversity of causes and emotions therefore underpins this form of disaffection, signifying the surprising complexity of non-attendance.

CURRENT LEVELS OF NON-ATTENDANCE

How many children are absent at any one time? According to the DfEE (GB. DfEE, 1999d), an equivalent of eight million school days is lost each year as a result of 'truancy'. School registers, taken in the morning and afternoon, provide the principal source of absence data and reference to this source led Tyerman (cited in O'Keeffe, 1994) to confirm that the annual rate of absence from school was about ten per cent. A true measure of the overall level of non-attendance, however, is difficult to obtain as the answer really depends on the type of non-attendance under scrutiny. Attendance registers do not, for example, account for incidences of post-registration truancy (PRT), where children are present for registration, but then miss subsequent lessons. In recognition of this omission, Stoll (1994) surveyed 38,000 pupils in Years 10 and 11 through anonymous questionnaires. Incorporating the concepts of both PRT and blanket truancy (whole days), the study revealed truancy levels of 31 per cent, far higher than any figures previously quoted.

A further weakness associated with data collated from school registers concerns the way in which absence is classified as either authorised or unauthorised:

> *Parents may not authorise absence; only schools can do this. If school staff have reasons to doubt that the explanation offered about a particular absence is genuine, the absence should be treated as unauthorised* (GB. DfEE 1999a, p. 49, Annexes).

This distinction has been used since 1993 by the DfEE to construct national pupil absence tables showing the levels of authorised and unauthorised absence from maintained primary and secondary schools in each local education authority area. The percentages of half-days missed due to authorised and unauthorised absence are presented and, to put these figures in context, the tables also include the average number of half-days missed per absent pupil. However, schools sometimes apply differing criteria in authorising absences, and consequently there can be significant variation, even within schools (Whitney, 1994). This observation was supported by OFSTED (1994), which found that there was a great deal of inconsistency in the practice of who authorised absence: the school or the parent. Whitney suggested that, in some instances, schools may feel powerless over the non-attendance of a particular individual, for example, where there is school refusal or parentally condoned absence, and the headteacher may therefore authorise the absence rather than risk being seen to have a problem. According to Stoll (1994, p. 35), '*The* [absence] *tables are seriously flawed and urgently require review if the statistics are to give a more accurate picture of truancy in schools.*' Such data cannot therefore always be regarded as an accurate reflection of absence levels and the concept of authorisation is a contentious one. The implications of authorisation were pursued further in this study.

IMPROVING ATTENDANCE

The Government is committed to a one-third reduction in truancy levels by 2002 (GB. Parliament. HoC, 1998). The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) described this as a tough, but achievable goal and proposed a series of measures towards realising this ambition, with an emphasis on targets and penalties for non-attendance:

- targets (at school and local authority level) for reducing truancy, with a focus on the worst performers
- assistance to schools for achieving targets, with attendance issues placed centrally in the programme of Education Action Zones
- a new power for police to pick up truants under the Crime and Disorder Bill
- a tougher approach, in the form of fines and parenting orders, for those parents who fail to ensure that their children attend school

In essence, the SEU sought to initiate a 'step-change' in non-attendance, by involving not only schools and LEAs, but also the police, courts, parents and pupils. The DfEE (GB. DfEE, 1999d) further reinforced the Government's zero-tolerance stance towards non-attendance, with plans to increase financial penalties for parents who condone their child's absence. In addition, the DfEE set out recommendations for the

dissemination of good practice in raising attendance through newsletters, a website and an annual celebration of schools which have made the greatest attendance gains. It is therefore against a backdrop of targets and league tables that LEAs are required to raise attendance.

The most recent, and possibly most controversial, DfEE proposal for improving attendance set out plans for schools to both take the responsibility for and provide the resources to promote good attendance, on the basis that attendance is considered an integral component of school improvement (GB. DfEE, 1999d). School-based and locally managed EWOs would, according to the report, enable schools to respond more quickly to incidences of non-attendance. There is no doubt that such a move would have major implications for the role of the EWS.

THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATION WELFARE SERVICE

In the first instance, primary responsibility for ensuring that a child attends school lies with their parents, either by registering them at school or arranging suitable alternatives. It is then the task of the LEA to ensure that the parent complies with this duty and they have at their disposal a number of powers to secure cooperation. They may serve an attendance order, which specifies the school (or Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)) at which the child should be registered. They may prosecute parents in a magistrates' court in cases of irregular attendance or apply to the courts for an Education Supervision Order (ESO), which puts a child of compulsory school age who is not being properly educated under LEA supervision (Section 437–443, Education Act 1996, cited in GB. DfEE, 1999c). At ground level, the role of monitoring and improving attendance is carried out by the EWS.

'School attendance officers' were first created as a consequence of the 1870 Education Act. However, it was not until the mid 1940s that they became known as education 'welfare' officers (EWOs), with a remit to provide support for pupils in the broader context of school, home and the community (OFSTED, 1995). The work of an EWO may now extend to a range of other areas, including special educational needs, assessment for free school meals, child protection, illegal employment of school-aged children and placement of excluded children, in addition to a statutory duty to enforce attendance. Even so, the original, and still dominant, function of the EWS is to investigate children's absence from school and to promote good attendance (OFSTED, 1995).

Even without these additional responsibilities, non-attendance itself is '*not a discrete entity*' and '*it is this very complexity that has meant the education welfare officer has never been able to simply undertake an attendance-enforcement function*' (Blyth and Milner, 1991, p. 233). The broader welfare orientation redefined the service, such that many officers now refer to themselves as education 'social' workers, a reflection of this wider remit. Twelve years ago, however, the EWS was described as a divided service, with some officers taking a preventive social work stance and other EWOs being seen as attendance 'policemen' (Reid, 1988). Twelve years on, does this division still exist or are these two tasks performed simultaneously and harmoniously? Where along the welfare–enforcement continuum does the balance now lie?

In the absence of Government directives concerning service organisation, staffing or qualifications, EWSs tend to reflect local needs and local practices (Collins, 1998). In one study, the daily activities of the EWS were investigated using a postal survey (Halford, cited in Collins, 1998). A range of activities was identified. Respondents spoke of home visits to interview parents and children, counselling pupils, working collaboratively with teachers, liaison with other agencies, providing welfare rights advice to parents, running group work sessions and involvement with police in truancy patrols. In addition, six core objectives of the EWS have been identified (Southern, 1992):

- encouraging children to benefit fully from their education
- linking home and school
- using interagency links to obtain better resources for pupils and their families
- facilitating communication between the EWS, parents, pupils and schools
- influencing interagency interaction by clarifying roles and responsibilities
- influencing school policy.

Thus, the role of the EWS can encompass many and various activities and intervention may be targeted at a range of recipients, not just pupils. An audit of EWS activity was presented in the first report and working practice issues are considered further in Chapter Four of this report.

THE STATUS OF THE EDUCATION WELFARE SERVICE

Reid (1988) highlighted a 'professional dichotomy' within the EWS. It was thought to originate partly from the varied training backgrounds of many EWOs – some were entirely untrained, others partially, whilst the remainder held full academic and/or professional qualifications. At this time, Reid called for national agreements on the content and structure of initial and in-service training courses, without which he felt that '*far too many EWOs are operating with blinkers on, because they know no better*' (p. 161). More recently, Collins (1998) again drew attention to this issue and reported that the majority of EWS employees had no relevant training in teaching, social work or other related professions.

Inconsistent professional backgrounds have been said to taint the status of the profession in the eyes of schools, teachers, social workers and other professionals (Whitney, 1994), a claim similarly made by Reid (1986), who argued that the profession has, for some time, been given a low status. At the same time, the range of skills demanded of a typical EWO was not thought to be adequately reflected in the pay and conditions, which do not compare with colleagues in other agencies. In addition, once recruited to the profession, staff development and training were found to be underdeveloped and inadequately funded (OFSTED, 1994). Whilst staff demonstrated knowledge around the concepts and skills of social work, matters concerning school organisation and the statutory requirements of education were identified as requiring further familiarisation. This current research therefore collected information on the professional backgrounds of EWOs and staff development opportunities within the EWS, with particular reference to implications for effective practice.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING ATTENDANCE

In 1999, through the 'Social Inclusion: Pupil Support' grant, the Government allocated £500 million to fund action against truanting. Given links with the curriculum, the school environment, the family home, poverty and bullying, '*the rational approach to the management of truancy should be based on the identification of factors contributing to its causation*' (Berg, 1985, p. 326). It is not surprising, therefore, that the strategies available for tackling non-attendance vary from one-to-one counselling, through to national legislation concerning curriculum content. As a precursor to the NFER research, it is useful to outline some of the working practices and initiatives that have already been presented in the literature. Firstly, some general principles were highlighted. These focused on:

- multi-agency intervention
- early intervention
- whole-school intervention.

Multi-agency intervention

Operationally, enforcement of attendance is fulfilled through the Education Welfare Service. However, given the multi-faceted nature of attendance problems, the causes and symptoms of non-attendance often benefit from outside agency contributions. Social workers, schools, educational psychologists, health professionals, the police, the Youth Service, local businesses and the surrounding community, may all have a part to play in addressing the problem. The DfEE (GB. DfEE, 1999b) recommended multi-agency liaison and the sharing of information at an early stage so that action plans can be devised for improving individual pupils' attendance. The role of other agencies in raising attendance has therefore been audited within the current research.

Early intervention

In terms of approach, strategies may be reactive, dealing with children already showing poor attendance, whilst others may be preventative, in an effort to pre-empt and therefore stem the tide of future absentees. In December 1997, the Welsh Office published a paper on school attendance and the role of the Education Welfare Service. Whilst the report shared much in common with parallel DfEE guidance (GB. DfEE, 1999b), it also highlighted the benefits of intervention at primary level and concluded that preventative work in primary schools and the early years of secondary education was particularly cost-effective. The Welsh Office advocated primary-focused work in order to develop habits of regular and punctual attendance, establish the importance of education at an early age and communicate to parents that truancy or condoned absence will not be permitted. The report also recognised the transfer from primary to secondary school as potentially 'unsettling', further grounds for ensuring regular attendance from the start of primary school. Five years ago, Learmonth (1995) found clear evidence of many LEAs moving towards a more preventative approach and the current research therefore set out to investigate perceptions of the balance between preventative and remedial approaches currently within the EWS.

Whole-school intervention

Interventions concerned with addressing non-attendance can operate at any level: individual (e.g. peer mentoring), school-based (e.g. attendance and behaviour policies) community-focused (e.g. truancy watch schemes) and nationally driven (e.g. curriculum content). An acceptance of non-attendance as a whole-school issue, involving all children, all teachers, parents, ancillary staff and the local community, was identified as one of two key elements in reducing truancy by Learmonth (1995). Computer registration systems which enhanced surveillance powers and monitoring systems within a school, for example, were only thought to significantly impact on attendance levels when the system was a component of other more comprehensive approaches, which could then utilise the data fully. Furthermore, the evaluation found that whole-school approaches were those most likely to make an impact on post-registration truancy.

The Audit Commission (1999) supported this principle and proposed that LEAs should be assisting schools in their management of absences, rather than concentrating on individual casework with pupils. Casework was thought to be time-consuming and the Commission supported the notion that changes to the school environment and school systems can, in the long run, make a bigger impact on whole-school attendance levels. In addition, following a survey of how LEAs collect attendance data, the Commission also advocated the use of attendance data to inform the allocation of resources to schools, emphasising effective targeting and siting resources where there is most need. The Audit Commission advocated, therefore, that EWS personnel should become policy advisers and analysts and take a more strategic approach to non-attendance. The principle of whole-school intervention is discussed in the context of this study, as is also resource allocation.

Specific strategies for improving attendance

Practical guidance on specific strategies for tackling non-attendance was provided by the DfEE (GB. DfEE, 1999b), which highlighted the importance of first-day contact in the event of absence and the use of community-based initiatives, such as truancy watches, where police now have the power to remove truants from the streets. First-day response, where parents are contacted immediately, should their child fail to attend, has been highlighted as an effective strategy by many. As a general rule, the SEU (GB. Parliament. HoC, 1998) suggested that the most effective measure against non-attendance was to act quickly, consistently and to always contact the parents. In an independent evaluation of interventions funded through GEST monies between 1993 and 1995 (Learmonth, 1995), again, first-day response to non-attendance was found to be particularly effective. Other practices highlighted in the report included:

- unambiguous discipline policies to stamp out bullying and peer pressure
- computerised registration to identify patterns and causes of truancy
- dealing early with literacy and numeracy problems
- offering alternative curricula for those unlikely to achieve at GCSE
- extra-curricular activities to capture the interest of those at risk of disaffection
- parents' groups
- truancy watch schemes
- support for pupils during the transition to secondary school.

In addition, Learmonth (1995) reported that many authorities were found to be using education welfare assistants for in-depth work with young people, often in a preventative way, freeing up EWOs to deal with more pressing cases.

Others have highlighted specific strategies requiring further study. For example, for the 1994–95 GEST grant allocation, 43 out of 85 projects included a truancy watch component and, at the time of writing, the evaluation reported that many of the schemes were still in the early days and there was, as yet, little evidence of their effectiveness. Similarly, the use of Education Supervision Orders has been overlooked and rarely mentioned in the context of non-attendance strategies (Whitney, 1994). Whitney thought, however, that, appropriately used, the Orders might be effective, and recommended national research in this area.

Clearly, a range of strategies can be employed at different levels to boost attendance levels, reflecting the four main areas of influence on pupil attendance – individual, family, social and school factors (identified previously by Kinder *et al.*, 1995). Some strategies therefore target specific groups of vulnerable pupils (e.g. support for victims of bullying), whilst others target pupils with more long-term needs (e.g. alternative provision for hard core non-attenders). When addressing such individual needs, the key elements required to address disaffection need to be considered: the opportunity to establish positive personal relationships, to achieve academic or vocational success and to appreciate constructive leisure (Kinder and Wilkin, 1998). Other interventions focus on parents, who, by their action or inaction, indirectly affect attendance (e.g. parent support groups). Yet others, opt for 'catch-all' whole-school strategies, such as IT monitoring systems, or concentrate on specific attendance-related issues (e.g. a whole-school approach to bullying). The goal of the current research has been to investigate those strategies which, in the eyes of today's Education Welfare Service personnel, have had the greatest impact on attendance figures.

PART ONE
EDUCATION WELFARE SERVICE GENERAL WORKING PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

Senior and operational-level EWS staff in the 20 LEAs visited in Phase Two of the study were asked about issues concerning EWS general working practice. Senior managers were asked about the LEA characteristics with implications for dealing with non-attendance, as well as about the structure of services. Both the 20 senior managers and at least one operational-level EWO in each LEA (22 out of the 29 EWO/ESWs interviewed) were asked about issues concerning staffing and working practice. In particular, issues of working practice identified by EWS staff within Phase One of the study were raised for further exploration. Responses to these questions are the subject of Part One of this report. Responses broadly covered four main areas, corresponding to the four chapters in Part One, namely:

1. LEA characteristics
2. Service organisation
3. Staffing issues
4. Working practice.

Firstly, an overview of the findings relating to EWS general working practices is presented.

OVERVIEW OF EWS WORKING PRACTICES

It was evident that, whilst EWSs were involved in addressing other welfare concerns, an overwhelming emphasis was placed on attendance issues. There was a sense of urgency concerning the need to raise attendance figures and reach attendance targets such that this had become a major focus of their work, despite the fact that some staff expressed concern that other welfare matters had, as a result, fallen by the wayside.

School attendance is not an isolated issue and the contribution that LEAs make to raising attendance cannot be considered without reference to the political and social context. A wide range of factors was found to impinge on the LEAs' ability to make a difference in this respect. Firstly, the wider community context was an influential factor. Significant social deprivation, unemployment and a transient population, for example, not only had a marked effect on parental and pupil attitudes to attendance that, in some LEAs, was reportedly difficult to combat, but also had implications for the allocation of EWS resources and the strategies employed. In a few LEAs, the level of absence itself – the sheer size of the problem – was felt to create its own inherent problems. The way in which services were organised was also perceived to

be an influential factor. In the current climate of Government-led attendance targets and, in some cases, dwindling resources, not surprisingly, a move away from the more traditional approaches to service organisation and delivery was evident. Many authorities, for example, had adopted a needs-based approach to the allocation of workers to schools and a few EWSs had been restructured in more radical ways, reflecting a more focused approach to service delivery.

A number of national and local developments were thought to have impinged on the work of EWOs in recent years. The lack of time to assimilate new initiatives and to reflect on and evaluate working practice can only compound the problems for services that are already overstretched. Whilst Government proposals appear to have placed increasing emphasis on the enforcement role of the EWS, views about this were clearly mixed. Staff differed, for example, in their views about the timing and use of prosecution and Education Supervision Orders. Preventative and multi-agency work, whilst recognised as valuable and important long-term strategies, remained fraught with difficulties. The present focus on attendance targets and the immediacy with which they are expected to be achieved makes it difficult for EWSs to engage in long-term strategies with a more diffuse focus as they have to prioritise other areas of work. Effective general practices identified, such as strict caseload management systems, again reflected the present pressure for more sharply focused work and the need to make more effective use of EWS staff's time.

A variety of other issues was also felt to detract from effective working practice, not least, the distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence and the present focus on the latter. This distinction was felt to deflect attention away from particular categories of non-attendance, such as parentally condoned absence, that might have an equally detrimental effect on a child's education. In conjunction with Government targets, this had resulted in inaccurate attendance data for EWSs to work with and in genuine problems being camouflaged. Much EWS time was therefore currently invested in tightening up school systems, perhaps at the expense of addressing the causes of non-attendance. There was a resounding call for this distinction to be abolished and for services to work with attendance rather than absence figures.

In addition, a number of age-old staffing issues for the EWS remained and the need for these to be addressed would seem more pressing in the light of recent developments and the changing focus of their work. Recruitment of staff from diverse backgrounds, on the one hand beneficial to services in terms of the broad range of experience, skills and qualities available, also meant that workers came from different starting points, making the need for a training programme vital to avoid inconsistency within services. National inconsistencies were also evident. Some LEAs recruited only qualified staff, whilst others had none, and yet others appeared to be moving towards this. Despite this, there were reservations about the relevance of the CQSW to their work. Whilst obtaining the qualification was thought to give workers confidence and allow them to consolidate the theory behind their practice, concern was expressed about the lack of a specific 'education welfare' module. In addition, a 'social work' stance with pupils and parents might become increasingly less relevant, given the changing focus of their work. A high profile had evidently to be placed on on-the-job and in-house training. A recognised external qualification for EWS staff, however, might raise the status of the profession in the eyes of other professionals, liaison with whom is a fundamental aspect of their work.

Overall, EWSs were having to constantly adapt and develop in response to new pressures and there is evidence that different LEAs are at different stages of such development. With the present move towards an increasing focus on school attendance figures, is there a danger that the EWS becomes overly focused on the symptom, rather than the cause, of non-attendance and that the skills and qualities of EWOs become diluted?

CHAPTER ONE
LEA CHARACTERISTICS

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter concerns the LEA characteristics which were perceived to have implications for improving attendance and, as such, the chapter has a strategic focus. Interviews in the 20 LEAs generated responses from senior managers, operational-level staff within EWSs and, in a few cases, staff from other agencies. Senior managers, in particular, were encouraged to highlight aspects relating to the size of the authority, the local community, the organisation of services and the LEA's relationship with schools. Aspects identified were wide and varying but could broadly be grouped into those concerning:

- the socio-economic climate
- the population
- size and geographical spread
- schools
- attendance levels
- LEA organisation.

1.2 THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLIMATE

Overall, the most frequently referred to feature of the socio-economic climate was that of social deprivation, raised by interviewees in 13 out of the 20 LEAs. In seven cases, interviewees highlighted that social deprivation correlated with areas where education was believed to be a low priority by families. This resulted in a '*constant battle*' for EWS workers attempting to involve parents in educational issues: '*No matter what we do, no matter how informed they may be, it's very, very difficult to get them to walk into school whatever that reason is*' (senior manager). One EWO reported a link between pockets of social disadvantage and '*hot spots*' of poor attendance and a senior manager described the direct relationship between low parental expectations and pupils' attendance:

> *Because a lot of the pupils and their families have low expectations, they don't necessarily value education. So, staying off when it's your birthday or staying off to go down to the town and do some shopping or staying off to look after the house when your mother has gone shopping because of the high crime rate is perfectly normal and acceptable, or it has been, and we are working against that* (senior manager).

In conjunction with social deprivation, interviewees within six LEAs singled out high unemployment as an influential factor in tackling non-attendance. Unemployment

was said to result in low aspirations amongst both parents and children and a difficulty in them being able to understand the value of education.

Other interviewees made references to poor housing, a lack of community amenities, drug problems, domestic violence and crime. In only one case was a direct link with attendance made explicit, when a local community officer reported that local crime made it necessary for some children to remain at home, as well as having '*a big influence on the truancy*'. Areas of social deprivation were also reported to have implications for the safety of workers.

Interviewees within 12 authorities discussed the consequences of mixed catchment areas, in terms of varying deprivation levels and rural/urban districts. Whilst urban areas tended to generate a greater number of attendance problems, rural areas were seen as equally challenging for staff, because of the wider geographical spread of schools. Having mixed urban and rural areas was also reported to result in inconsistent school performance regarding attendance and a consequent difficulty in attracting funding to support these areas. In areas where affluence and deprivation stood side by side, the attitudes of school staff were said to differ and, combined with a need to meet Government targets, there was an unrealistic demand for LEA support by schools in the most deprived areas.

1.3 THE POPULATION

In terms of the population characteristics, the feature most frequently cited as influencing attendance issues was having a large transient population, with specific references to refugees and travellers. This was raised by interviewees within seven authorities, three of which were London boroughs.

For workers trying to deal with non-attendance issues, a number of implications were discussed. In the first instance, pupil movement prohibited in-depth work and therefore the ability of the EWS to maintain pupils in schools. Any intervention with a child could suddenly cease if the family relocated and it was then difficult to trace them. For schools located in areas of high mobility, the turnover of pupils was rapid, with figures of 60 per cent quoted by one interviewee. Lastly, where authorities were inundated with new pupils, it was sometimes difficult to find school places (interviewees spoke of schools reluctant to take refugee children) and, as a result, children would occasionally have to travel significant distances to school, which ultimately could affect their attendance.

The next most commonly cited issue, in relation to the population, was a high percentage of ethnic minority pupils, noted by interviewees within four of the 20 LEAs. One senior manager reported, for example, that '*certain ethnic communities value education more than others*'. Extended absence was reported to be a particular problem within certain ethnic minority groups. One EWO, also a member of the Asian community themself, outlined the dilemma:

> *I can understand from the parents' point of view, they want their children to be aware of their own culture and religion. That's very important because these families don't only have their assets here, but abroad as well, and they will pass that on to the younger generation. That bond, that is a big issue,*

especially living in quite a mixed community. Extended holidays ... it's educating the parents and getting the message across to them, saying how important it is for their child to attend regularly and not to miss out on those few weeks or few months. If they knew how much overall of the child's education ... then they might look at it differently (EWO).

Another difficulty arose where pupils came from outside of the borough, so-called 'cross-border' children. There was a reported lack of clarity regarding responsibility for these pupils. In one authority, a difficulty in being able to see cases through had been addressed by the appointment of an EWO with a dedicated 'out-of-borough' remit. An interviewee also suggested that cross-border children sometimes received a lower level of service from the EWS because of their status.

In terms of the LEA population, other issues raised included single-parent families, dysfunctional families, 'looked-after' children and having a mixed population, although the specific implications for attendance were not detailed.

1.4 SIZE AND GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD

Interviewees within nine of the LEAs referred to ways in which the size of their authority influenced attendance issues.

In five authorities, the number of schools or their geographical spread was seen to impact on staffing levels and the deployment of officers. For example, a senior manager in one authority spoke of a policy where, despite a large number of schools, each school was required to have a named EWO. A large geographical spread, on the other hand, had repercussions for the deployment of officers because of the amount of travelling involved. In addition, one senior manager explained that communication with a large number of schools hindered meaningful consultation over the development of attendance policies and practices. Another interviewee spoke of the ease with which pupils could truant in large areas with several big towns.

In contrast, interviewees in four LEAs indicated that the small size of their authority actually enhanced their ability to deal with non-attendance. The tracking of pupils, for example, was said to be much easier in a large authority which had recently split into a number of smaller ones. Being within a small authority was also perceived to have benefits for working closely with other agencies and providing a faster response to problems:

We have monthly meetings and the child is taken on immediately. So, it's a quicker response and it is quite geographically isolated, so everything is here. We have the courts, we have the police and we work closely together, because we are so small (senior manager).

1.5 SCHOOL FACTORS

In dealing with non-attendance, school-based influences were also acknowledged by interviewees. Firstly, a restricted number of school places resulted in pupils having to travel some distance to school, with specific implications for disaffected students because of the limited options available to them. This latter issue was also reported to

have a knock-on effect for school populations, leading, in some cases, to schools becoming overburdened with 'problem' pupils.

Secondly, the existence of grant-maintained schools (or ex-grant-maintained schools) was raised as an influential factor. One interviewee hinted at a negative impact on the relationship between the LEA and the schools: '*In terms of working with schools as an authority collectively, it probably hasn't helped in some ways.*' Another reported that the '*fairly draconian admission process*' resulted in '*lots of difficult children being kicked out without recourse to anybody*', again with the result that some schools inherited all the 'problem' pupils, which then had a knock-on effect for staff morale:

> *So, eventually, one school took all the rubbish basically, all the difficult ones. That is a problem in itself because suddenly the staff are dealing with a lot of difficult children and they get angry and pissed off because they see other schools' exam results – A to C – up there, and they are battling down here to survive* (senior manager).

Lastly, the push to raise achievement in schools was believed by one interviewee to have increased the gap between '*those who can and those who can't*'. Although s/he felt that, overall, more pupils were achieving more, s/he also felt that there was a group of pupils being left behind and that, in turn, affected their desire to attend: '*They are not accessing the curriculum so there is no motivation to turn up.*' Combined with the instability of the local population within this particular authority, a 'disaffected' pupil attitude towards school was described: '*Why am I going? I can't do the work and I haven't got many friends and it's cold.*'

1.6 ATTENDANCE LEVELS

Interviewees within four LEAs reported having attendance figures lower than the national average and this in itself was thought to affect the way in which non-attendance might be handled. Interviewees observed how low attendance figures often correlated with negative parental attitudes, as discussed previously. In another authority, a senior manager emphasised the prevalence of parentally condoned absence:

> *You can talk for a long time and speculate on the reasons, geographical reasons, but, at the end of the day, there's a very high level of parentally condoned absence. Parentally condoned absence forms a very, very high percentage of any school's absenteeism rate* (senior manager).

Commensurate with this, the authority reported a very high rate of parental prosecution. In another LEA, a densely populated area comprising of '*predominantly two problem areas*' was also reported to have resulted in a tendency to undertake more court work than in other LEAs. This was despite the fact that prosecution was reported to be '*the last avenue that we take*'.

1.7 LEA ORGANISATION

Some aspects of LEA organisation, such as where the service was sited and the level of resources available to them, were reported to impact on how EWSs responded to

non-attendance. Where education services, such as the Educational Psychology Service and the Behaviour Support Service, were housed '*under one roof*' (in three authorities), this was found to have improved communication between the different LEA services. This was often the case where reorganisation had taken place and the LEA had been split into new, smaller authorities: '*We are all in this room so the access to information, communication, information sharing and asking for support is excellent.*'

Following recent major restructuring, the EWS in two authorities had been located within Social Services rather than the LEA. The full implications of this move were as yet unclear. One senior manager, though, whilst having '*reservations*' to begin with and having to fall into line with Social Services' procedures, was positive and reported that links with education had been maintained and multi-agency working improved: '*So I kind of feel that we are straddling both ... so we have kind of got a foot in both camps and it's kind of nice*' (senior manager). S/he also highlighted the benefits of being protected from staff cuts, of regular supervision and support and being able to undertake other activities that were not possible previously.

In terms of resources, whilst interviewees within three authorities indicated that they felt they had good resources, two also indicated that they felt that their service was under-resourced for dealing with the significant number of pupils not attending school within their LEA. This was particularly the case where LEAs had split into smaller authorities, leaving some lacking in resources. In contrast, one senior manager, who considered his/her LEA to be well resourced, noted that each high school had an ESW (part-time or full-time) and reported a consequent keenness to be involved in early intervention work.

KEY POINTS

- Social deprivation, which often correlated with education being a low priority for families, was one of the main factors interviewees highlighted as having implications for dealing with non-attendance. In some LEAs, workers spoke of a constant battle against negative parental attitudes. In conjunction with social deprivation, high unemployment was reported to stifle the educational aspirations of both parents and children, resulting in poor attendance.

- A transient population was said to result in a high pupil turnover in schools, lack of stability in the population and a difficulty in being able to follow through work and deal with the underlying problems of non-attendance.

- Different ethnic groups were felt to place different values on education and, within certain groups, extended absence was emphasised as a particular problem.

- Where pupils came from outside of the borough, problems were encountered regarding responsibility for these pupils, following cases through and the likelihood of a lower-level service from the home EWS.

- A large number of schools and a large geographical spread in some authorities were cited as having implications for both the level and allocation of staff, as well as effective consultation. On the other hand, personnel in small authorities reported being able to track pupils easier, facilitation of interagency working and a faster response to non-attendance problems.

- A restricted number of school places and the existence of grant-maintained schools within the same LEAs resulted in limited options for disaffected students and certain schools becoming overburdened with 'problem' pupils.

- In authorities where attendance figures were low, negative parental attitudes and parentally condoned absence were highlighted as particular issues.

- In two authorities within the sample, the EWS had recently been relocated within Social Services rather than education and, in one case, this was reported to have resulted in positive benefits to the service without a reduction in the links with education.

- Where services were located within the LEA, they tended to be grouped with other LEA services with common aims and this was reported to have aided communication.

CHAPTER TWO
SERVICE ORGANISATION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the organisation of EWSs. Senior managers of the EWSs in the 20 LEAs visited were asked to describe and provide a rationale for the present service structure. They were encouraged to consider the following aspects:

- service structure
- the allocation of staff to schools
- specialists posts
- the employment of education welfare assistants.

Before discussing each of these aspects, the location of services within the local authority will be discussed briefly in order to locate the data within a wider context. Interestingly, two services were distinctive in that they had recently been placed under the auspices of Social Services, one falling within the remit of the Youth Offending Team and the other within the Child and Families Assessment Team. The rationale behind this move, in one case, was so that all children's services were together and, in the other, so that all services with a 'social work' remit were combined.

The remaining services, sited within the LEA, were reported to fall within the Schools Section, the Pupil/Student Services or the Special Educational Needs Section. Where the EWS was located within the Schools Section, the senior manager in one authority reported that the primary aim of the authority was raising achievement and '*you can't raise achievement unless you get children in school*'. Where services were located within Pupil or Student Services, two interviewees reported the common aim of enabling access to education and the rationale given was that this enabled effective links with other support services to be developed. In conjunction with this, EWSs were sometimes reported to sit alongside other support services, such as the Educational Psychology Service and the Behaviour Support Service. In some cases, being located within a wider service with a broader remit meant that heads of EWSs often had a dual role and were responsible for other services as well.

2.2 SERVICE STRUCTURE

When asked to describe the service structure, seven senior managers reported that they had recently undergone restructuring or reorganisation. EWS structure typically involved the allocation of casework teams on the basis of geographical areas. This approach, which was reported by senior managers within ten out of the 20 LEAs, was felt to provide a uniformity of services and consistency of relationships with schools and was either due to the large size of the service or was historical in origin.

Examples of a large and a small LEA with a service structure based on casework teams in geographical areas are presented in Illustrations 1 and 2.

Illustration 1 **A large LEA with casework teams based in geographical areas**

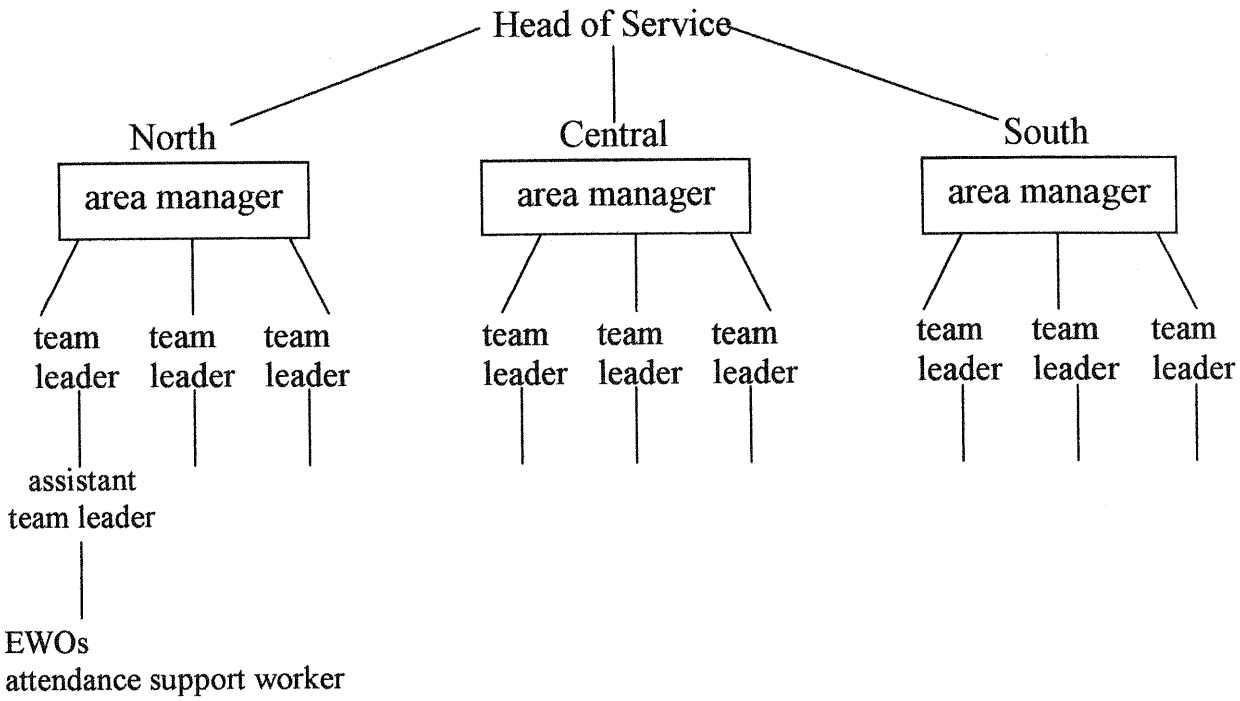
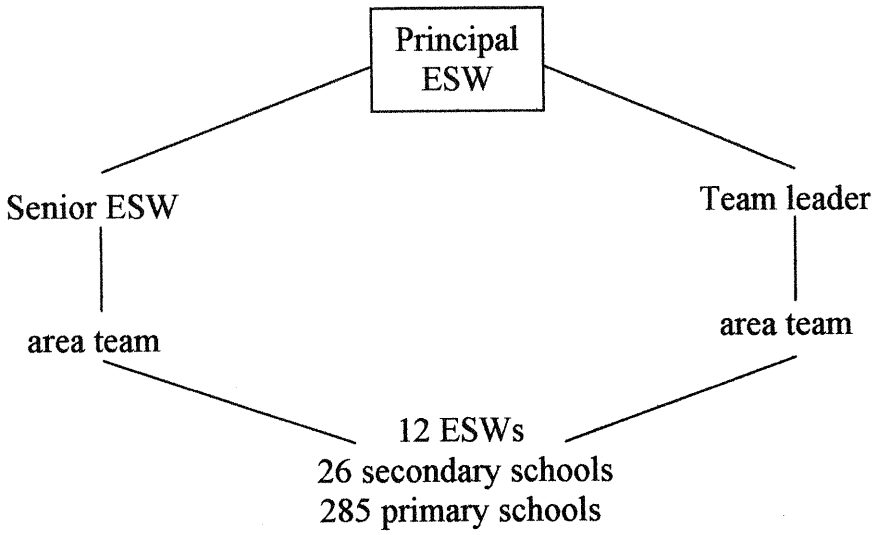


Illustration 2 **A small LEA with casework teams based in geographical areas**

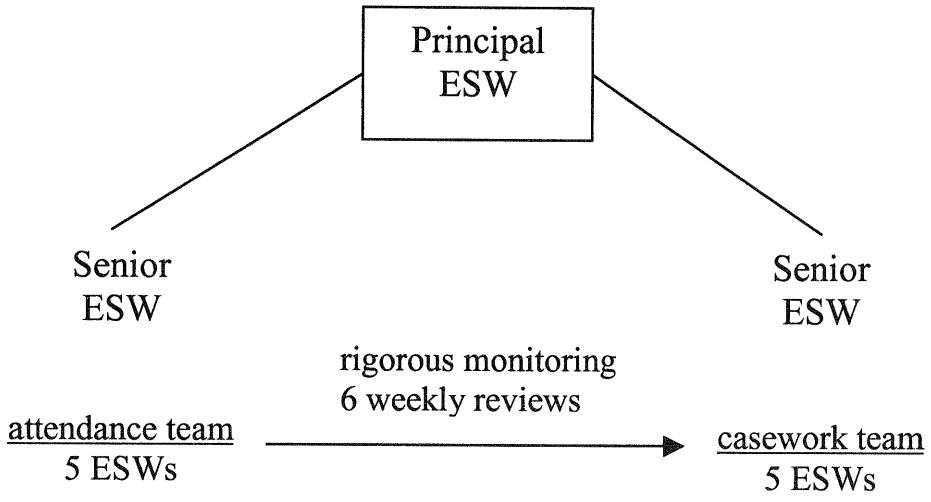


A number of significant deviations from this traditional approach were highlighted within some LEAs, including divisions into:

- primary and secondary casework teams
- casework and whole-school attendance teams
- multi-disciplinary teams.

In two LEAs, workers were organised into **primary and secondary casework teams** rather than based on geographical areas. In both cases, the EWS contained a very small number of staff overall. The rationale presented for this was the ability to adopt a more focused approach to secondary attendance problems and to be able to carry out more preventative work in primary schools. This is shown in Illustration 3, which also exemplifies a division into casework and a whole-school attendance team, discussed next.

Illustration 3: A small LEA with an attendance team and a casework team with the casework team divided into primary and secondary sectors

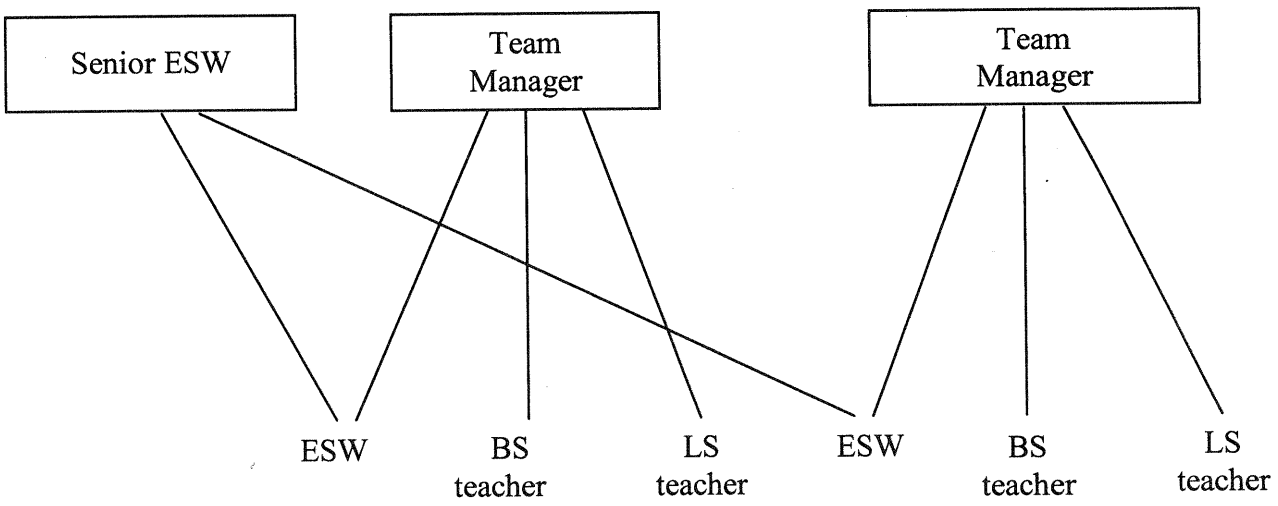


- 2 primary ESWs (91 schools)
- 3 secondary ESWs (21 schools)

Whilst most services adopted a casework approach to service delivery, EWSs within two LEAs were notable exceptions. In these LEAs, workers were organised into separate **casework and whole-school attendance teams** (see Illustration 3). In this approach, one team dealt with casework whilst the other team dealt with wider whole-school attendance issues and was used to target schools with the greatest need. The rationales offered for adopting this approach included: having a small service compared to the school population; being able to deal with more children; being able to tackle all similar problems together within the school environment; a reduction in time spent on unnecessary home visits; and wanting to be more proactive in dealing with attendance issues.

In one authority, the EWS was reported to be organised into **multi-disciplinary teams** alongside other LEA services, specifically, behaviour and learning support staff, each with their own team manager (see Illustration 4).

Illustration 4: Multi-disciplinary teams



BS = Behaviour Support
LS = Learning Support

Following reorganisation, they were no longer organised according to geographical areas and the PEWO and the area officer posts were lost. The senior EWO remaining in charge of the EWS staff was sceptical and unclear about the rationale behind adopting this approach, although s/he recognised that: '*We did need to tighten things up.*'

2.3 ALLOCATION OF STAFF TO SCHOOLS

Within the interviews, senior managers were encouraged to explain how the staff was allocated to schools within their service. Four senior managers were not specific about how their staff was allocated to schools. Two basic types of allocation emerged from the data:

- blanket distribution of staff to schools
- a needs-based approach.

Within six out of the 20 authorities, interviewees indicated that there was a **blanket distribution of staff to schools** with no account being taken of individual school needs. Officers were allocated across the board to one or two secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. All the LEAs reported to be using this type of system were either small- or medium-sized authorities and four out of the six had either low or medium numbers of pupils to one EWO, indicating a relatively favourable level of resources. In all cases, officers were reported to be responsible for one or two secondary schools and their feeder primary schools.

The rationale for this approach was based largely on the fact that workers were able to remain consistently with one school. This was reported to result in staff developing knowledge of the local area, an understanding of the school culture and knowledge of families and their children as they transferred from primary to secondary school. In an authority where the service had moved from allocation by geographical area to allocation to a secondary school and their feeder primary schools, more effective communication was reported because workers had responsibility for all the children on roll at a school.

In conjunction with this approach, three senior managers touched on the value of their officers being school-based rather than office-based. A sensitive issue at the present time with Government plans to devolve EWS funding to secondary schools, being school-based was advantageous because it: gave staff insight into the working of schools; enabled staff to relate more closely to the problems of the school and their staff; facilitated the development of trust and cooperation within the school; led to effective work between families and school; and led to consistency for both schools and families.

However, others, whilst advocating a school-based approach, reported a danger that officers served the school rather than the authority, being '*ruled from within the school*', with the risk of become a '*messenger and skivvy for the school*' and that this might not be in the interests of the children and their families. Another interviewee argued that being office-based preserved the necessary level of supervision and training required to do the job. S/he felt that schools themselves would not be able to provide this level of support.

On the whole, however, one interviewee thought that the advantages of being school-based outweighed the disadvantages. Whilst s/he recognised that EWOs might feel that being school-based impeded their work and might result in a loss of their identity, s/he felt that school-based EWOs were more effective and that schools' attempts to influence workers could be overcome with diplomacy, trust and respect. The issues surrounding the advantages and disadvantages of being school-based are discussed further in Chapter Four on EWS working practice.

In two cases, where no account was reported to be taken of needs when allocating workers to schools, senior managers did, however, report having a 'floating' EWO

who was not allocated to schools who could help schools with particular attendance problems.

Senior managers within ten out of the 20 LEAs indicated that they used a **needs-based approach** to service delivery, with some form of statistical data being used to develop a 'formula' which then determined the needs of schools and thus their allocation of staffing resources. This approach would seem to follow Government recommendations for targeting resources where they are most needed (Audit Commission, 1999). All of the LEAs using this method were either medium- or large-sized authorities and three out of the ten had a large number of pupils to one EWO in comparison to other authorities, thus indicating a low level of resources. However, the statistical data and the methods used to determine the level of need varied, and a selection of these is presented in the examples below. The first four examples are of authorities that have used attendance data in various ways to determine the level of need in schools, whilst the last is an example of an LEA which, having tried a variety of methods, reverted to using simple referral data. In the first example, authorised and unauthorised absence figures were added together to provide an overall figure for the 'loss of education' within a school that was then used to weight schools accordingly:

Illustration 1: Weighting according to 'loss of education'

'So any primary school with absence of eight per cent or more gets 150 per cent weighting. Then everyone else gets 100 per cent, except for those few schools that don't get a service at all because their nature and their location is such that they really don't need a visiting service from us. We visit the families. With secondary schools it's 200 per cent weighting rather than 100 per cent. That affects four or five of our schools in the secondary sector, which means quite a difference between a school like [X] *which would be getting 14 hours next year and one like* [X] *which I think is only getting about eight hours. They are very similar in roll number but their needs are very different.'*

In the second illustration, the number of free school meals was used to determine need in primary schools, whilst attendance levels were used to determine need in secondary schools, along with the number of pupils in each school. Schools were then ranked according to these figures:

Illustration 2: Ranking schools according to need

'We use a formula based on pupil numbers and free school meals for primary schools and pupil numbers and attendance for secondary schools. So we rank schools in terms of the most need and we allocate a notional number of hours to that school. We then work out how many EWOs we need in that team. Then each EWO has the notional equivalent of 1,104 hours made up from 300 hours with that school, 200 hours with that school, because they need less, 600 hours with that school, because they need more. We don't then monitor how much time they spend with each school, but that's our way of trying to ensure that our EWOs have their own school patches in terms of workload. Each of our full-time EWOs tends to have three secondary schools, which is quite a lot, and about 20 to 25 primary schools.'

Illustration 3 provides an example of a service where previous figures using the LMS formula were not felt to reflect schools' needs and this system had been replaced with

a system using the numbers of pupils below certain attendance levels to band schools according to their need:

Illustration 3: Schools placed in bands according to attendance

'So what we've done this year is looked purely at attendance ... with schools under 90 per cent: schools highlighted in their OFSTED reports as attendance being an issue – the amount of unauthorised absence – and then we've looked at the schools with the amount of pupils below 85 per cent attendance, 75 and 65 per cent. So we've got all of these various criteria and the numbers on roll as well and we've come up with a formula for all schools and we've put them into bands A, B, C and D, and that gives an allocation of hours to each school. We've visited the majority of schools to discuss this and so far the schools are very happy. They seem very satisfied and see that it's been a far better way of measuring the needs that they have, but we are still in the consultation process, but nobody has come back and said this isn't fair.'

In the fourth example of a service using attendance data, again the number of pupils below a certain attendance level was used, but the senior manager further elaborated on how knowledge of the area and knowledge of the EWS staff might also be taken into account:

Illustration 4: A mix of statistics, local knowledge and knowing the EWS staff

'It's partly to do with statistics, partly to do with local knowledge and partly to do with knowledge of the ESW. Originally we allocated the ESW caseloads by looking at the school population and attendance statistics in one term, the spring term, but we don't use the ones that would normally be collected. We look specifically at kids that have got under 75 per cent attendance and numbers of children not authorised or unauthorised so we know actual numbers of kids and we use that then to help allocate time, or the slice of the cake each school can have. Then the schools are then joined together. We might have two fairly easy schools or perhaps a fairly easy school or a difficult school of a smaller size. So it depends on the size of the school, number of kids with attendance problems, knowledge of the area because we know there are patches ... so it's taking into account those and what's a reasonable caseload for each ESW. Because schools are funny places, it's matching up the ESW to that particular area and school.'

In the final example of allocation procedures below, the senior manager reported that, as a service, they had tried all types of formula using a variety of data to determine schools' needs, but they had all given the same result. They now used mainly the referral rate to allocate resources to schools:

Illustration 5: Referral rate

'So, we basically use the referral rate from the schools to determine what level of resource they get, with a little bit of discretion, management discretion, in terms of some fine tuning here and there. So we calculate them on the referrals that we get each year. EWOs log them on a weekly diary and we just add them up and we then work out what an average EWO caseload should be, by adding all of them up and dividing them by 40. We have got 40 staff. Then we work out how many referrals that school has produced and how many EWOs that needs to work to it. So we have got some secondary schools that have got three EWOs and we have got some secondary schools that have got half.'

Whilst six out of the ten senior managers used attendance figures in the formula, the use of unauthorised absence figures appeared to be a bone of contention in some

authorities. One senior manager, for example, reported that s/he was reluctant to use unauthorised absence figures because '*Schools cannot teach kids if they are not in school. I don't care why they are not in*'. S/he also suggested that schools might '*massage the books in terms of unauthorised absence versus authorised absence*'. S/he suggested that masking of unauthorised absence levels in this way might lead to inadequate staffing being allocated to schools such that '*the EWO would sink without trace*'. The issue of authorised and unauthorised absence and how it affects working practice is further addressed in Chapter Four of this report.

Of those providing a rationale for the adoption of the 'allocation by formula' method, senior managers spoke of focusing resources on those schools which needed the most support. Staff cuts and shortages were also given as justification for this approach, guaranteeing a service for schools, based on the resources available. Four senior managers reported that changes had been made when services had been reviewed, and senior managers within three authorities indicated that an increasing focus on attendance and Government targets was responsible for a move towards a needs-based approach.

Despite this, senior managers in four authorities indicated that, for the reasons highlighted earlier, they had tried to retain, as far as possible, the allocation of workers to one or two secondary schools and their feeder primary schools and not to move them around. At the same time, in other authorities, there had been a deliberate move away from allocating EWOs in this manner because of the disparate amounts of work amongst officers. In addition, where EWOs stayed with their schools for long periods of time, a few senior managers felt that there was a danger that they became too '*cosy*' and their objectivity could become clouded with regard to how schools were contributing to non-attendance. The allocation by formula system therefore meant that some schools no longer had a named officer and one authority had encountered resistance from headteachers for this reason. Yet, a senior manager stressed that, within this system, all schools were still entitled to refer to the service. Furthermore, interviewees from four authorities explained that they had taken into account headteachers' views when devising their needs-based system, such that it had been '*shaped around what schools wanted*'.

2.4 SPECIALIST POSTS

Senior managers were also encouraged to highlight whether they had any specialist posts within their services and in 14 out of the 20 LEAs these were evident. The specialist posts most often highlighted by senior managers and the number of senior managers identifying them are shown below in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 The number of senior managers identifying specialist posts

Specialist posts	No. of senior managers
Travellers	4
Child employment	3
SEN/special schools	3
Child protection	2
Exclusions	2
Looked-after	2
Ethnic minority	2

Source: Interviews with LEA personnel in Phase Two of the project, 1999

The most frequently identified specialist posts were those with a responsibility for travellers, child employment and special educational needs. Three out of the four authorities reported to have a 'traveller' post were London boroughs. Previous data in Phase One of the research indicated that the role in child employment within some EWSs was being reduced and was frequently one of administration only. However, in contrast to this trend, one senior manager indicated that this was a developing and more proactive role in his/her authority. In addition, SEN specialist posts in two areas were reported to be diminishing.

When asked about the rationale, specialist posts for specific groups of children were reported by one senior manager to be a response to an HMI audit which had identified gaps within provision. Within one authority, four Standards Fund posts were appointed for dealing with exclusions and, as such, it was a major focus for the service. In another, the appointment of an exclusion officer was reported to be something that was '*pushed politically*' and that existing skills within the EWS were appropriate to support excluded pupils back into school. A court officer had been appointed in one authority. Their value was related to their extensive knowledge of the legal system being taken seriously by magistrates and therefore a greater consistency of sentencing.

In another LEA, a SEWO was appointed to deal solely with Education Supervision Orders (ESOs) and disaffection in Years 10 and 11. The ESO responsibility was reported to be in response to the Children's Act and identifying a need to focus on support for primary pupils rather than prosecution for older pupils with entrenched attendance problems. They had also identified a gap in provision for disaffected pupils in Years 10 and 11. These initiatives form the focus of Case Study Five. Another point of note was that a SEWO within one authority had responsibility for a range of specialist areas, such as child employment, child protection, SEN, looked-after children, etc. In addition, two senior managers reported that officers within their service were encouraged to develop specialist skills, such as counselling and work with the hearing-impaired.

2.5 THE EMPLOYMENT OF EDUCATION WELFARE ASSISTANTS

Senior managers were also encouraged to highlight whether they had education welfare assistants (EWAs), or their equivalent, working within their service. These might variously be called attendance workers or EWAs, but each term referred to

those working in a supporting role to EWOs. Within 12 LEAs, there was no evidence of the use of EWAs.

Of the eight senior managers who reported that they appointed EWAs, four were based in new authorities. In five cases, EWAs were reported to be involved in project work and, in most cases, these were funded through the Standards Fund or, in one case, SRB funding. Where EWAs took a role in befriending young people, the rationale was that they could provide a consistency and regularity that EWOs could not, because of their caseloads, leaving the EWO also to focus on empowering parents. One senior manager also reported that early intervention by EWAs might not only help reduce caseloads, but also '*help the schools manage that "on the cusp" type problem rather than the more entrenched problem*'.

In two of the three authorities where EWAs were employed to undertake more general work, an assistant was appointed to each area team, whilst in another, two were based in schools and one within the LEA. They were reported in one authority to undertake an initial assessment and produce a plan of action, after which time, if no progress were made, the case would go to a more formal attendance conference. In this way they filtered referrals to the service. The employment of EWAs in one LEA is discussed in depth in Case Study One.

KEY POINTS

- Two EWSs were notable in that they had recently been organised under the umbrella of Social Services in an attempt to gather all children's services or all 'social work' services under one roof.

- In contrast to the traditional approach of the allocation of casework teams on the basis of geographical areas, having primary and secondary casework teams enabled two LEAs to focus on particular primary and secondary attendance issues.

- The division of staff into a casework team and an attendance team in two LEAs enabled them to focus on whole-school attendance issues.

- In one authority, EWS staff were organised into regional multi-disciplinary teams alongside staff from the Behaviour Support Service and the Learning Support Service.

- There were two basic systems in place for the allocation of staff to schools. Where workers were assigned a secondary school and their feeder primary schools, this was thought to be commensurate with staff having knowledge of the local area, the families within it and an understanding of the school culture. In conjunction with this, both the advantages and disadvantages of being school-based, as opposed to office-based, were highlighted.

- In half of the authorities, a needs-based approach to the allocation of staff was evident, using school statistics (often including attendance data) to develop a formula on which needs were determined. Whilst some EWSs used figures for unauthorised absence in their 'formula', other interviewees reported that either they or schools were reluctant to use these as a measure of school need as they were dependent on schools' interpretation.

- Just under three-quarters of the EWSs reported that they had some specialist posts. The most frequently referred to were those for travellers, child employment and special educational needs.

- In eight out of the 20 LEAs, senior managers reported that they employed EWAs. They were thought to be effective because they were able to offer pupils a consistent relationship, helped reduce officers' caseloads and helped schools deal with 'one-off' attendance problems.

CHAPTER THREE
STAFFING ISSUES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter centres on staffing issues within the EWS. Interviewees were asked to comment on the professional backgrounds of staff, in particular areas of previous employment and any qualifications held, and what implications these might have for effectiveness. Perceptions of the types of skills and qualities required by staff to work in the area of non-attendance, and specifically with young people, were also garnered during the interviews. Interviewees were then asked to elaborate on any opportunities for staff development, either external or internal, and to identify any perceived staff training needs. Finally, interviewees were invited to suggest any other issues that they felt related to staffing.

3.2 PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND OF STAFF

The 20 service managers interviewed were asked to detail the professional backgrounds of their staff and any qualifications held, while 22 of the 29 individual EWOs interviewed discussed their professional backgrounds prior to joining the EWS. Three major professional backgrounds surfaced and the others are discussed as a final category:

1. **Social Services**
2. **Education**
3. **Youth work**
4. **Other professional backgrounds.**

3.2.1 Social Services

EWS staff with a Social Services background had almost all been social workers and many had worked in residential settings. Thirteen of the 20 senior managers referred to staff entering the EWS with this background, while ten of the 22 EWOs confirmed that this had been the route they had taken.

Thirteen senior managers referred to staff having the Diploma in Social Work or the CQSW and nine of the EWOs interviewed stated that they held one of these qualifications. Senior managers in two EWSs confirmed that all their staff were qualified social workers, while the senior manager in another commented that this was the case for the '*majority*' of the service. In one other service, the senior manager interviewed commented that all but four EWOs were qualified and that the four who were not were currently being funded to undertake the DipSW. The aim was '*to move towards a fully qualified service*'. Two other senior managers confirmed that, although not all staff were qualified, or had gained the qualification since joining the

service, being qualified in Social Services accreditation would now be a prerequisite for all new recruits.

In other services, numbers of staff with a social work qualification varied between one and six. In one of the EWSs with only one qualified social worker (who happened to be the senior manager interviewed), there were no qualification conditions for either a Senior EWO post or a Team Leader post, while the qualification was desirable, though not essential, for the post of Principal EWO. EWOs with no social work qualification confirmed that their training had been 'on the job', with one stating that her application to undertake a DipSW had been unsuccessful.

Four senior managers and three EWOs discussed the benefits of staff having a qualification in social work. It was believed to give staff a level of confidence in their ability and their approach to tasks, so that they could offer a better quality of service. Interviewees also commented that being able to link the theory to practice consolidated the work, as well as bringing in the legal aspect. One further advantage was that a recognised, professional qualification (in what had traditionally been seen as '*a Cinderella service*') ensured recognition from other agencies. However, a cautionary note was sounded by one senior manager who felt that, while the qualification gave staff '*breadth of vision*', there was still a lot of learning to be done 'on the job'.

Some staff were, however, more doubtful about the value of such a qualification. Whilst recognising the importance of having qualifications and standards, seven of the 20 senior managers voiced concern about whether the DipSW was the most suitable qualification. The qualification could give insights into the theoretical aspects of the work, but putting theory into practice was not always that easy. One senior manager believed that experience was often more valuable than training, commenting that one of their service's most effective EWOs was not qualified. Another senior manager believed that having the Diploma or CQSW did not necessarily mean a member of staff could automatically do the job and having the right personality was sometimes more important.

Echoing a comment made earlier concerning the enforcement aspect of the role, one senior manager remarked that '*a fundamental problem*' with the DipSW was that it did not prepare staff fully for their work, as there was no education welfare module within it. Thus, the enforcement aspect could posit a problem for those trained in social work, '*... because they see that as far too controlling and not enough care*' (PEWO).

One EWO who had worked previously within Social Services thought that the experience of working with children and families had impacted on their current work in terms of greater understanding and made them much more aware of the issues and potential concerns: '*I think I came into this job with my eyes open*' (EWO). Conversely, a senior manager believed that people who entered the service with experience of working with children and wanting to do more of the same were often disappointed, as EWOs tended to spend more time working with parents and schools than with individual young people, '*... so there can be some adjusting to do*' (PEWO).

3.2.2 Education

A background in education was highlighted by 11 of the 20 senior managers and by 12 of the 22 individual EWOs. The majority of EWS staff with such a background had been qualified teachers, some of whom had worked in the area of special educational needs. Others had been nursery nurses, non-teaching assistants, school clerks/secretaries or governors, while one service manager referred to staff having backgrounds in pupil services, such as the writing of statements for pupils with special educational needs. A qualification in teaching was referred to by two senior managers and five of the EWOs interviewed.

Four interviewees (two senior managers and two EWOs) proffered the belief that a background in education ensured an awareness of school cultures and systems, which resulted in greater credibility with school staff.

3.2.3 Youth work

Nine of the 20 senior managers referred to a background in youth work as a common theme and, of the 22 individual EWOs interviewed, four had been youth workers. One senior manager identified two members of staff within their service with a youth work qualification.

A background in youth work was felt by two EWOs to give staff a better understanding of young people and thus how to engage them. Staff with this type of background were used to viewing young people as '*the main service user*'. One disadvantage, highlighted by a senior manager, was that anyone joining the EWS who had worked with young people and been an advocate for them had difficulties in adjusting to the law enforcement role inherent in the job. It could sometimes be a struggle for them: '*EWOs find that difficult because they are child-centred*' (Senior EWO).

3.2.4 Other professional backgrounds

This category encompassed a range of previous employment or backgrounds, in particular health and the police. Of the 20 senior managers interviewed, two commented that they had staff in the service with a background in health. One referred to having staff who were trained nurses while the other had a member of staff who had worked in the area of mental health. Two of the 22 individual staff interviewed had worked for the Health Service, one as a hospital liaison officer. A senior manager referred to two members of staff within their service with a nursing qualification. Two senior managers commented that staff sometimes came from a police background.

Other areas, each referred to by one senior manager, included engineering/industry, degree courses (especially where they had included placements with the EWS), counselling, work for the Citizen's Advice Bureau, within a local authority housing department, as a careers officer, as a lawyer, as a childminder or as a housewife. Areas each referred to by one EWO included engineering/industry, work in the voluntary sector (e.g. delivering meals-on-wheels and working in hospitals), clerical work, and work as a civil servant. Only one interviewee had not experienced any

previous employment, having only ever worked for the EWS. Other qualifications mentioned included a counselling qualification, degrees in politics and humanities, a BTech and a qualification in Welfare Studies.

Seven senior managers commented on the value of bringing in staff from diverse backgrounds. It was felt to be useful to have different personalities with different strengths coming into a team. The broader spectrum of skills, knowledge and experiences then provided was thought to impact on the effectiveness of the service: '*The broader the base of experience that officers have, the more able they are to relate to the problems that they are dealing with*' (PEWO). Senior staff also commented on the value of a fresh perspective offered by people of different ages, with different experiences.

A drawback was felt to be that this diversity could sometimes make pinpointing training needs and directing training at the right level difficult, when staff had very different areas of expertise and thus different needs.

One senior manager reflected on how the role of the EWO had evolved over the years. It had tended to be seen as a second career, often attracting people from service backgrounds (e.g. police or army), or retired rent collectors who were used to '*knocking on doors*'. That had all changed so that different skills and competencies were needed, something that the interviewee felt was reflected in staff recently recruited to the service. The focus was now much more on communication and interpersonal skills, discussed in the next section.

3.3 QUALITIES AND SKILLS REQUIRED BY EWS STAFF

EWS staff were asked to elaborate on what they considered to be the particular qualities and skills required by staff to work around issues of non-attendance, and in particular with young people.

A range of personal qualities was suggested which focused mainly on efficiency, self-value and relating to others. Efficiency qualities included the ability to manage time effectively and to be able to prioritise tasks under a very pressurised workload. Interviewees also valued the ability of staff to work on their own initiative and to be flexible in their approach to different situations. Self-value qualities were considered to be openness and honesty, in particular not lying or making false promises. Self-confidence was considered important as a large part of the work was trying to improve the confidence of others and interviewees also highlighted the ability to be thick-skinned when you were usually first in the firing line, dealing with antagonistic parents. Qualities which focused on relating to others included empathy, sensitivity, being non-judgmental whilst retaining a sense of objectivity, and having respect for the young people with whom you worked.

A number of skills were also suggested by interviewees as being important for working in the area of non-attendance, and particularly with young people. These included:

- communication skills
- interpersonal skills

- an understanding of young people and their families
- an understanding of systems
- assessment skills
- knowledge-based skills.

Most frequently mentioned, by 14 of the 20 senior managers and nine of the 22 EWOs, was the importance of good **communication skills**, both verbal and written. The work of the service entailed communication at different levels, with service users from a whole range of different backgrounds, but also with professionals from a variety of different agencies. Within this, five senior managers and three EWOs also highlighted the ability to listen to other people's point of view in order to properly understand their problems.

Good **interpersonal skills** were identified as important by eight senior managers and ten EWOs. Tact and diplomacy were considered vital, not only for dealing with families and young people, but also for dealing with staff in schools. In the latter case, EWS staff needed to be able to listen to both sides of the story and take a middle line. Counselling skills were thought to be very useful in dealing with difficult family situations. Equally, negotiating or conflict resolution skills came to the fore when trying to deal with the often very differing views held by the protagonists in some situations.

An understanding of young people and their families was highlighted by eight senior managers and eight EWOs as an important skill. Within this, six senior managers and five EWOs particularly specified the need for an understanding of young people. It was felt to be important to understand where they were coming from, to be able to understand their problems and thus to be better able to respond to them. Alongside this, one Asian EWO commented on the importance of understanding the culture of the young people with whom they worked. Very often those young people were trying to balance the values of two cultures, which could be very difficult for them, and this needed to be taken on board by the professionals they came into contact with. Two other senior managers and three other EWOs particularly referred to the need to have a good understanding of how families functioned. Very often the child's behaviour in not attending school could be seen as a symptom of problems within the family. School is then rarely the first priority for that family and EWS staff needed to be aware of that.

Eight senior managers and four EWOs stated their belief that **an understanding of systems** (e.g. education, legal, health, welfare) that impinge on the work of the service, and on the lives of service users, was important for EWS staff. Six senior managers and one EWO specifically referred to a knowledge of the education system and how schools function so as to be able to understand the issues in question. Alongside that, one senior manager and two EWOs stressed the need for staff to recognise the benefits and importance of education: '*I think you really have to care and believe in education for a child; that's the overriding principle*' (EWO).

Assessment skills were highlighted as important by five senior managers and four EWOs. A vital component of the work was collating all the relevant information about a situation, assessing needs and then coming to the most appropriate conclusion with regard to how to meet those needs.

Finally, three senior managers referred to **knowledge-based skills** being important, such as an understanding of basic social work theory and of relevant policies (e.g. equal opportunities). The need for an understanding of IT systems was highlighted, as a result of the increasing computerisation of schools' attendance systems. This issue was highlighted in a recent report from the Audit Commission (1999) which found that EWS advice to schools on data analysis, policy development and procedures was '*patchy*', partly because most of their time was spent on casework, but also because of a lack of training amongst EWS staff. The report concluded that '*... there is a major IT training need for EWSs if they are to realise the full benefits of computerisation for both themselves and for their schools*' (Audit Commission, 1999).

3.4 OPPORTUNITIES FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

EWS personnel were invited to discuss opportunities for staff development. According to three senior managers and one EWO, staff development in their service was given a high priority. There was a recognition that training was important and staff were encouraged to take up the opportunities that were available:

> *One of the things we did early on was to recognise that training was significant and important, and we actually developed a training policy for the service ... that we wish to train everybody up to a minimum threshold standard ... which is the core competency areas, so anybody who comes new to the service, we will run an assessment, an audit of what skills and training they have got, what the deficits are, what areas they could build on and we attempt, within the first six months of their time with us, to bring them up to the minimum threshold if they are not there already* (PEWO).

Three senior managers and one EWO, whilst recognising that some training, such as child protection, could be generic, were appreciative of the fact that training should be focused on the needs of the individual. Training procedures were being reviewed in some authorities to link them into staff appraisals, so as to be able to focus more closely on individual needs. One EWO commented that there was a varied training programme in the authority and, if a course was relevant, there was no problem with taking it up.

Interviewees were asked to describe:

1. **The training opportunities available to staff**
2. **The training needs of staff.**

3.4.1 The training opportunities available to staff

Depictions of the training opportunities available for EWOs in service comprised0:

- in-house training
- external training provision.

Eighteen of the 20 senior managers and 15 of the 22 EWOs confirmed that their service offered **in-house training**, with three of the former and two of the latter offering the view that this was mainly as a result of financial cutbacks which limited opportunities for external training. Regular, service-led training was the most common form of in-house training on offer. This was usually of one or two days' duration and was focused on specific areas or on new initiatives and/or new legislation. It could be whole-service- or team-level-based. It was considered useful to be able to draw on the expertise of staff from different backgrounds:

> *Within the service there will be people who have different skills and come from different backgrounds. For instance, we have one who is a trained family therapist, so she has done some solution-focused brief therapy work with us. There are other people with different backgrounds – we pull on that* (EWO).

Other in-house training opportunities included whole-service days with outside speakers coming in to lead or facilitate sessions, and on-the-job training, such as work shadowing, which was considered to be an invaluable way of learning about the work of an EWO.

A well-organised induction process was considered important. In one service, a working group set up to look at different aspects of service development was in the process of developing a '*good working practice document*' which would be used in the staff induction process.

Finally, the supervision of university students on placements for social work courses was felt to be a useful in-house training opportunity which made staff reflect on their own working practice: '[supervising students on placement] *really makes you sit up and think "Why am I doing this? What's the background behind this? Why do we do it this way and not that way?" So, I have encouraged staff to take that on board*' (PEWO).

External training provision was identified by 17 of the 20 senior managers and eight of the 22 EWOs. This usually consisted of accredited courses, either at university or through distance learning, or short-term courses on specific subjects aimed primarily at EWS staff. Interviewees referred to a range of accredited courses in Education Welfare. The one most frequently mentioned (by four senior managers and one EWO) was the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), usually offered by a local university although one senior manager commented that a member of staff had just begun to study for this through the Open University.

Four senior managers and two EWOs referred to the opportunity to attend short one- or two-day courses, often run through a local training consortium, aimed specifically at EWS staff. Two senior managers highlighted the use of two- or three-day residential courses, and one EWO referred to undertaking a practice teaching award.

3.4.2 The training needs of staff: identification and content

When asked to discuss the training needs of EWS staff, eight of the 20 senior managers and four of the 22 EWOs chose to elaborate on the way in which training

needs were identified. Most frequently mentioned (by four senior managers and two EWOs) were regular supervision and team meetings, where the needs of staff could be identified in collaboration with senior managers. The next most frequently mentioned method of identifying training needs (referred to by two senior managers and one EWO) was through annual reviews or appraisals, sometimes with an interim one after six months. Other methods of identifying training needs, mentioned by one senior manager each, were by means of a Training and Development Plan undertaken by each member of the service, and through working groups set up to look at service development, one of which looked specifically at staff training needs.

The changing role of the service in recent years was highlighted by two senior managers. New challenges in terms of, for example, Education Supervision Orders (ESOs) would result in the need for more training. Particular training needs highlighted included: sign language; health-related matters; child development; child protection; law/legislation; challenging behaviour; presentation skills and IT.

3.5 STAFFING ISSUES

When invited to discuss issues relating to staffing, interviewees highlighted a number of issues, some relating to staff development, which mainly clustered around:

1. **Resources**
2. **The lack of status of the profession**
3. **The focus of work.**

3.5.1 Resources

Interviewees referred most frequently to the issue of resources, in particular, staffing, funding and time. Twelve of the 20 senior managers and five of the 22 EWOs stated that, in their opinion, their service was understaffed. For some, decreased budgets had led to cutbacks in staffing numbers, which had put more pressure on existing staff and exacerbated the situation. Staff who left the service, for example through early retirement, were often not replaced:

> *Well, there are 12 ... the equivalent of 12 full-time EWOs. When I started in 1990 there were over 30. By the same token, 60 per cent of our job has not been cut – very, very little of it was cut ... so we basically deal with the same number of kids, more problems because we have to argue money now ... so we do more now in some ways with a third of the staff, so that's a big issue* (EWO).

One of the senior managers commented on the need for administrative staff to take up some of the clerical work currently left to individual EWOs, so that they would have more time to concentrate on their casework.

Two senior managers and two EWOs chose to focus on the issue of funding. The implications for the work of the service were felt to be enormous. Of particular concern to one senior manager was the fact that insufficient funding meant there was no cover budget for when staff were off sick. One EWO raised the issue of devolved funding and expressed their concern that devolving the service to schools could

potentially signal '*the end of the service*'. Only one of the interviewees who chose to focus on funding felt that their service was relatively well resourced, although they recognised that more funding was always welcome.

Seven senior managers and five EWOs mentioned the lack of money available for staff development. The opportunities were felt to be available but the limited budget for formal training made accessing them very difficult: '[The authority] *is an Investor in People so there's loads of surveys about what sort of training you want, but there's never any money for it, so that's the reality of it*' (EWO).

External training in particular had been severely restricted, with many services relying on in-house training opportunities, or a 'cascade' system where one member of staff went on a course and then fed back to the rest of the team. One senior manager had been able to provide a day-release facility for staff to attend courses if they were willing to fund themselves.

Closely related to this was felt to be the fact that, even if the funding for staff development was available, the workload within the service was so heavy that actually sparing staff to go on training courses was extremely problematic. Three senior managers and three EWOs highlighted the lack of time as an issue, such that: '*if you go on the odd course, it's a headache, it's not a bonus*' (PEWO). This would appear to support the findings of the inspection of the EWS (OFSTED, 1994) which reported staff development to be both underdeveloped and underfunded.

3.5.2 The lack of status of the profession

One senior manager and two EWOs proffered the belief that the EWS was still regarded as a low-status profession, with one senior manager remarking that they believed career advancement opportunities within the service were fairly limited. Having a recognised qualification would, it was felt, go a long way towards raising the status of the service and, concomitantly, boosting staff morale. Interestingly, as highlighted in the literature review, the perceived low status of the profession and the desirability of a fully qualified service are not recent concepts. However, as already noted, doubts were raised by the present sample as to the suitability of the DipSW for the full range of work undertaken by the service.

3.5.3 The focus of work

One senior manager expressed concern about the increasing emphasis on attendance issues which was again being attached to the role of the service, as evidenced in the recent Government intent to reduce truancy levels by 2002. There was a feeling that such an emphasis would result in the loss of the very valuable work and skills in other areas (supportive work, such as counselling and advocacy) that the service could offer:

> *It's very difficult with the kind of emphasis that's coming back on attendance. There is a concern here, and nationally, that we are being taken down the line purely of being attendance officers, and I think, if that's the case, it would be a great tragedy. I think EWOs do have a great deal to offer in terms of*

facilitating for young people ... and I think, if we are just going to be the wag man or whatever, I think the country as a whole would lose out (PEWO).

Another senior manager, commenting on the fact that a lack of funding meant staff could not undertake the DipSW qualification in his/her authority, expressed his/her disappointment that the early promises of the Government's social inclusion document, Circular 11/99 (GB. DfEE 1999c) regarding the increased role for the EWS, did not look likely to be fulfilled:

We were hoping that out of that document would come a description for our job and recommendation for training, but there's no clear indicators as to whether the DfEE see something as appropriate or not appropriate ... and I have to say that I am quite lost as well (PEWO).

KEY POINTS

- EWS staff had entered the service from a wide range of professional backgrounds, in particular, from Social Services, education and youth work. Other professions included the Health Service, the police, industry, the Careers Service, the Citizen's Advice Bureau, and the voluntary sector.

- Qualities required by staff focused on efficiency (prioritising, initiative and flexibility), self-value (openness and honesty, self-confidence and being thick-skinned) and relating to others (empathy, sensitivity, being non-judgmental and having respect).

- Skills required by EWS staff focused on communication skills; interpersonal skills; understanding the service users; understanding the systems (e.g. education, legal); assessment skills; and knowledge-based skills (e.g. IT).

- Opportunities for staff development were usually through in-house training such as regular service-led sessions, whole days with outside speakers, on-the-job training, induction processes, including the use of good practice documents, or through the supervision of students on placement.

- External opportunities consisted of accredited courses (either at university or through distance learning opportunities) or short-term courses often run through local training consortia. Opportunities were felt to be limited mainly because of funding and time constraints.

- Many staff felt their service was understaffed and under-resourced. Some believed the service was still widely regarded as a lower-status profession. It was felt that having a recognised qualification would go some way towards addressing this, although doubts were raised about the relevance of the DipSW for all aspects of the EWS work.

- Concern was expressed regarding the increasing emphasis on attendance issues being once again attached to the role of the service, which could result in the loss of important skills and work in other areas.

CHAPTER FOUR
WORKING PRACTICE

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter concerns issues revolving around the general working practice of the Education Welfare Service, rather than specific interventions aimed at improving attendance. Interviewees were asked to elaborate on the following:

- priority areas of work
- effective and less successful working practices (including multi-agency issues)
- changes and developments
- working practice issues:
  - authorised and unauthorised absence
  - enforcement and welfare
  - preventative and remedial work
  - Education Supervision Orders.

4.2 PRIORITY AREAS OF WORK

To clarify the precise role of Education Welfare Services, interviewees were asked to outline what they perceived to be their priority areas of work. Without exception, interviewees nominated improving school attendance as their primary responsibility. One noted '*if it's not attendance related, you have no role*'. Interviewees estimated that between 95 and 65 per cent of their time was spent on attendance matters, whilst other significant priorities included child protection, special needs, child employment, interagency work, pupils without school places and entertainment licences. A lot of these concerns, however, as noted by interviewees, do in fact impinge on attendance, and the dividing line between what is an attendance issue and what is not is often '*unclear*'. Interviewees also stressed that a child failing to attend school is not only an 'attendance' problem. The underlying reasons can be varied, requiring an EWO to work holistically with a child in order to bring about improvement. One interviewee stated that the '*whole job really is welfare*', arguing that, if a child is missing school, there are always going to be welfare concerns, regardless of their background. Hence, while services were clearly focused on raising attendance, the work engendered to achieve that goal comprised a number of diverse, yet interrelated activities: '*What you find is you go in on attendance, they all sort of go under one heading, but then we divert off*' (EWO). Overall, interviewees were unanimous that the EWS was dedicated to improving attendance, although the tasks required to fulfil that duty were many and varied.

Two interviewees commented that, in recent years, the focus on attendance issues had heightened. More menial tasks, such as collecting dinner money and undertaking escorts, had fallen by the wayside. One interviewee ascribed the tighter focus to staff

cuts, which prohibited longer-term strategies, such as group work and a counselling approach to attendance problems.

4.3 EFFECTIVE AND LESS SUCCESSFUL WORKING PRACTICES

Interviews probed for examples of effective practice and also those proving less successful within the general workings of the EWS, and responses discussed fell under four main headings:

1. **Work in schools**
2. **Caseload management**
3. **Resources**
4. **Interagency liaison.**

4.3.1 Work in schools

Twenty individuals, when probed on the issue of effective working practices, made reference to their work in schools. Four key areas of effective practice were highlighted:

- regular liaison with school staff
- school-based EWOs
- service-level agreements
- early intervention in primary schools.

Regular liaison with school staff was felt to provide an overview of what was going on in schools, facilitate early intervention, emphasise schools' responsibility for attendance matters and facilitate a coordinated approach to attendance problems, with common aims between the EWS and schools. Encouraging schools to identify attendance coordinators with whom EWOs could communicate was considered good practice. Generally, a close relationship with schools was deemed essential and, in some authorities, this recommendation has been taken one step further by locating EWOs at the very heart of attendance difficulties – in schools. **School-based EWOs**, although highlighted by some as an example of effective practice, were thought to have both advantages and disadvantages, as discussed previously in Chapter Two. Some LEAs chose to use **service-level agreements** (SLAs) with schools and this was mentioned by five interviewees as an area of effective practice. With limited amounts of time, SLAs were thought to focus the mind and clarify EWS and school responsibilities by detailing exactly what service schools were entitled to and what the EWO could and could not do. In one authority, the service manager was in the process of reintroducing SLAs because she considered them to be '*good practice*'. Two interviewees highlighted **early intervention in primary schools** as effective practice, whilst three identified gaps in the primary sector as a less successful area, including the lack of a service to primary schools, not identifying vulnerable pupils at this age and the lack of first-day response. This is discussed further in a later section of this chapter.

Other effective practices in relation to working with schools included giving presentations on attendance, taking into account the specific needs of schools and offering schools access to a duty EWO, who is always available on the end of a

telephone, should any problems arise.

4.3.2 Caseload management

Effective practices identified in relation to caseload management included:

- rigorous monitoring
- regular supervision
- data collection.

Interviewees commented on the successful way in which **rigorous monitoring** of cases was used to manage the volume of work in some services – if no improvement was evidenced, the case would proceed on to the next necessary stage, finally to court action. In conjunction with this, two individuals chose to highlight the **regular supervision** of cases, where they were discussed between EWOs and their managers. Regular supervision was thought to lead to more consistency and greater efficiency, enabling staff to be clear about how they should proceed with a particular case. In contrast, two interviewees admitted that, at times, cases were allowed to drift on, when in fact they should be brought to a speedier conclusion. One individual explained it was often hard to be forceful when faced with a '*poor mum on income support*', but that ultimately you have to remember, despite difficult home conditions, the child is being deprived of an education and this needs to be addressed rapidly, possibly through the courts. Another senior manager, concerned that cases were extending over 24 weeks, stressed the importance of pursuing attendance-related goals and achieving outcomes in that area. S/he noted that families sometimes became very dependent on the EWO, who then became immersed in a whole range of family problems.

Data collection systems, which supported caseload management, were also thought to result in effective working. In one authority, a closely monitored database had had a significant impact on the effective management of cases and the way in which the whole service operated (see Case Study One). Availability of attendance data had prevented cases drifting and, most importantly, enabled EWOs to know whether, in fact, they were making any difference. In another authority, access to a joint Education and Social Services index allowed information to be shared between services and also identified cases that needed to be closed, if no recent action had been taken.

Conversely, other aspects of the caseload system were nominated as less successful practice. Five individuals referred to weaknesses in their administration systems, namely bureaucratic record keeping, insufficient staffing for administration and feeling overburdened with paperwork. Another individual spoke of having to rationalise paperwork, in order to increase the overall efficiency of the service. Lastly, two interviewees considered the '*peripheral things*', such as conducting escorts and processing paperwork, to be an ineffective use of their time and that, as a service, they should be concentrating on matters more directly related to attendance.

4.3.3 Resources

Seven interviewees felt that the use of education welfare assistants was an example of effective practice, and that they both enhanced and complemented the work of EWOs in tackling non-attendance. EWAs were cheaper than EWOs, yet sufficiently skilled to carry out vital ground-level work, thereby releasing EWOs to perform other attendance duties (see Case Study One).

On the other hand, interviewees highlighted three aspects concerning resources that they felt led to ineffective ways of working:

- inadequate staffing
- lack of training
- short-term funding.

With reference to less successful practice, the EWS was felt by some interviewees to be debilitated at times by resource restrictions. Two interviewees highlighted **inadequate staffing** levels as a weakness and another two were concerned about the **lack of training** given to staff (see Chapter Three). The job was described as '*complex*' and as such required appropriate training, which in turn would improve the quality of service. One interviewee related training with increasing professionalism, which might raise the profile of the service generally. **Short-term funding** was also believed to hinder the overall running of the service. Some sources of funding were criticised for being too project-orientated, with the consequence that many approaches tended to have a '*fairly short shelf life*'. An annual funding cycle prevented services from thinking too far ahead, particularly when the '*sand is shifting under your feet all the time*'. This was said to restrict the amount of planning that was possible and make it impossible to adopt a strategic approach to service development. One interviewee was further aggrieved by Government pressure to meet attendance targets and the possibility of resources being devolved to schools.

4.3.4 Interagency liaison

When invited to discuss any multi-agency issues that related to their work, four interviewees acknowledged the value in working with other agencies. One individual felt that they would not be as effective without the support of other agencies in the community. Another interviewee saw multi-agency working as the '*way forward*', as no one agency could deal with the *'whole child'* effectively. While supporting a multi-agency approach, another requested '*specific guidelines from the Government on how this way of working should proceed*'. Lastly, some interviewees, whose authorities had adopted unitary status, reported better multi-agency liaison as a consequence. One individual found it easier to access other education staff and also that the relationship between the police and EWS had improved. Another interviewee reported closer working with Social Services. When asked about effective practices, five individuals identified their interagency liaison as a particularly successful aspect of their work. Specific mentions were given to joint team meetings with youth offending teams (YOTs), close working with educational psychologists and good relationships with Social Services and health professionals. These links were cited as valuable, leading to a better understanding of each other's roles and the opportunity to obtain advice from other professionals.

Although supported in principal, multi-agency work was reported to create some difficulties, in particular with Social Services. One interviewee reported conflicting goals – whilst Social Services tended to be protective of parents, for example, the EWS took a much more directive stance. Two interviewees raised concerns over the children that fall in between the responsibilities of the EWS and Social Services. They also spoke of children being shuttled around the system whilst agencies absolved responsibility: '*If it's got a smattering of anything to do with a child not going to school, the Social Services will say "It's your problem; it's not ours."*' EWS staff also expressed concern that, unless child protection was an issue, children referred to Social Services were not prioritised.

In terms of general practice, a number of other areas were identified as effective by interviewees, including being able to respond quickly to new developments and an evaluation programme carried out in collaboration with a local university to pinpoint effective practice. Practices not directly related to attendance were also highlighted, including the EWS advisory role in child protection, support to parents of children going through the statementing process and their role in preventing exclusions.

4.4 CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENTS

Interviewees were given the opportunity to identify any recent changes, either locally or nationally, which they felt had impacted on their work in practice. At local level, interviewees mentioned the following factors:

LOCAL DEVELOPMENTS	IMPACT
Local government reorganisation	The move to unitary status had resulted in staff cuts, reduced funding and severed relations with surrounding authorities. EWS staff were also reported to be '*just exhausted*' and unable '*to catch their breath*'.
Allocated school hours	Allocated school hours were felt to be difficult to work with and had resulted in schools being unable to buy in the EWS.
Grant-maintained schools	As a result of having grant-maintained schools, children were reported to be unable to gain access to their local school and some had been out of school for nearly a year. This had led to '*animosity*' between schools and between the LEA and schools.

Other local changes mentioned by interviewees included better access to alternative curricula for Year 10 pupils, a more strategic approach by a service following a recent OFSTED report, more work in primary schools and a move by one service to secure an agreed strategy between Education and Social Services regarding the education of children looked after by the local authority.

At national level, some interviewees felt that the speed and volume of developments were overwhelming and sometimes hampered service delivery, to the extent that one interviewee felt that '*we are losing our direction*'. A senior manager, while acknowledging the strength and basic value of many of the initiatives, complained that there was never enough time to properly evaluate them '*to find out how one works before it is submerged by a pot of others*'. Interviewees highlighted several national developments that they saw as influencing their work:

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS	IMPACT
The social inclusion agenda	As a result of the social inclusion agenda, one LEA had reviewed and reorganised its service structure into an attendance and a casework team (see Chapter Two), whilst in another, the social inclusion document was said to have given the service a '*backbone*' to the way they were moving. On a negative note, one interviewee criticised the way in which truancy and exclusions were placed under the same umbrella, such that the two were presented as the '*dry rot*' of society and non-attendance was criminalised by its association with exclusion.
The Crime and Disorder Bill	There were mixed views about the Crime and Disorder Bill, which grants police the power to arrest truants. Whilst one interviewee felt that it would help increase EWS–police liaison, another felt the Bill actually restricted the scope of truancy patrols. Under the new system, a truancy sweep must take place within a designated area, between certain hours, on a certain day and outside of those boundaries: '*You can't touch the kids; the police can't touch the kids; we are not allowed to touch the kids.*'
Devolved funding	The proposal to devolve funding from the EWS to schools (GB. DfEE, 1999d) will perhaps make the most significant impact on the workings of the EWS, but as its release came towards the end of the fieldwork, most interviewees did not comment on this move. One interviewee, though, was able to speculate on the implications, stating that it would affect '*where EWOs are based ... an effect on my post and the senior posts and also I think in the delivery of the service*'. Had the report come earlier on in the research programme, many others in the sample might have expressed similar concerns.
Greater enforcement	Three interviewees remarked on the Government's zero-tolerance approach to truancy, in terms of heavier fines, threats of prosecution, pressure to meet attendance targets and the focus on unauthorised absence. One individual detected a '*move away from the welfare side*'. This was reported to be unhelpful because it deflected attention away from the real problem and might leave schools feeling '*that it is a further tightening of the service you offer*'. A number of these issues are discussed in the next section.

Other national developments mentioned by interviewees included involvement in the implementation of 'Quality Protects', which sets certain standards of education for children in the care of the local authority, bylaws around child employment and entertainment, and involvement in Youth Offending Teams.

4.5 WORKING PRACTICE ISSUES

Given their topicality and impact on Education Welfare Service practice, interviewees were invited to comment on four key issues:

1. **Authorised and unauthorised absence**
2. **Enforcement and welfare**
3. **Preventative and remedial work**
4. **The use of Education Supervision Orders (ESOs).**

4.5.1 Authorised and unauthorised absence

Current Government guidelines (GB. DfEE, 1999b, Circular No. 10/99) require schools to record absences as authorised or unauthorised. An authorised absence is

given when the school has either given approval in advance for the pupil to be away, or has accepted an explanation offered afterwards as justification for the absence. Schools are then instructed to treat all other absences as unauthorised. The guidelines point out that it is the school, not the parent, which ultimately authorises an absence. Given that EWSs rely heavily on attendance data to inform their practices and allocate resources, the research sought to investigate the impact of the authorised/unauthorised distinction. Issues raised by interviewees, when asked to comment on the authorised/unauthorised distinction, included:

- the pressure on schools to authorise absences
- inconsistency in attendance recording procedures
- the exclusive use of unauthorised absence.

By far the most common observation, made by 16 interviewees from over half of the LEAs, was **the pressure on schools to authorise absences** in order to meet Government targets and perform well in the league tables. Interviewees intimated that schools were not being strictly honest in reporting their attendance figures and, where possible, absences were being authorised. One explained that even the '*good ones*' lie, because it's a '*survival mechanism*'. Indeed, one PEWO felt that headteachers who were honest were in fact penalised: '*Honest heads have got kicked in the teeth for standing up and being honest.*'

EWS staff felt, however, that honesty was vital if non-attendance was to be properly addressed. As one SEWO put it: '*How can you tackle truancy if you are not acknowledging that you've got a major difficulty with it in school?*' Schools were therefore faced with a dilemma. They may decide to authorise absences in order to meet Government targets and, in doing so, disguise absences that might benefit from EWS attention. Or they may decide to religiously record unauthorised absences, therein mobilising EWS resources and leading to a genuine improvement in attendance, although, in the short term, this might push the school further down the league tables, along with its reputation. By focusing on unauthorised absence, interviewees felt the Government was encouraging schools to '*camouflage*' absence. Hence, as one SEWO stated, whereas previously the class teacher would have been '*focused on the young person not attending*', now '*... he is more focused on making sure that he gets a note so that he can authorise the absence*'.

Interviewees also felt frustrated by the **inconsistency in attendance recording procedures**. Interpretation of the guidelines was said to vary widely – so much so that one individual described attendance figures as '*a work of the imagination*'. Schools were said to take different approaches, with '*totally different standards as to what to authorise*'. One PEWO stated that some schools are '*still totally confused*' about the two categories and when they should and should not authorise absence, despite constant reminders. Five interviewees mentioned having to offer regular training to teachers in relation to completing registers, as well as knowing when to question parents and dealing with holiday absences. Schools were said to sometimes accept parental explanations for non-attendance, when, in fact, they should really be challenging them. Automatic acceptance of parental authorisation in this way was thought to mask one of the biggest and most challenging forms of non-attendance, that which is parentally condoned:

We have a child who went fishing yesterday and mum has given him a note to say he had a stomach upset and the schools are going to find it very difficult to challenge that (PEWO).

Perhaps to promote better registration procedures, six interviewees, when asked to comment on the impact that the distinction had on their work, reported **the exclusive use of unauthorised absence** in their work. One interviewee explained that this restriction was partly in response to service targets, which were assessed according to levels of unauthorised absence. While such an approach may focus EWS staff and schools on unauthorised absence levels, one interviewee was concerned that a number of children may not be receiving the attention they need, as their frequent non-attendance will go unaddressed because it has been authorised.

Similarly, in terms of prosecution, eight interviewees stated that they could only take parents to court when absence had been unauthorised and this provided further justification (or perhaps incentive) for schools to keep accurate and honest records:

We say to schools that you can't have your cake and eat it. If a child is not attending and you want us to have a sound court case, you are going to have to be up front with exactly what is unauthorised and authorised (PEWO).

Interviewees felt frustrated when their efforts to ameliorate attendance were thwarted by a history of authorised absence, which effectively disabled them from pursuing the case in the courts.

Overall, nine individuals from nine of the 20 LEAs recommended removing the authorised/unauthorised distinction altogether and instead using the singular concept of attendance – either a child is in school or they are not. A child who is not in school, for whatever reason, is not receiving an education and that fact alone, for several interviewees, was the paramount issue. Interviewees felt that the current dichotomy actually impeded their work, instead of equipping them with data to appropriately allocate their resources and therefore tackle non-attendance.

4.5.2 Enforcement and welfare

EWOs have a primary duty to enforce attendance. However, the inclusion of 'welfare' in their job title, and the decision in some areas to assume the title of Education Social Work Service, signifies another dimension to their work. Interviewees were invited to comment on how they managed this split role. When discussing the dual role of enforcement and welfare, interviewees raised issues concerning:

- achieving a balance
- the role of prosecution.

Six individuals in the LEAs visited agreed that **achieving a balance** between enforcement and welfare could be, at times, problematic. They spoke of staff who were resisting the current Government push to crack down on non-attenders, instead wishing to retain their welfare skills. EWOs were sometimes thought to pull away or '*dip out*' of prosecution, '*because they feel it's a big stick*'. It was difficult for staff,

in one instance, to be supporting parents and, in the other, to be taking them to court. However, while many interviewees acknowledged a tension between enforcement and welfare and that it is a '*sensitive balance*', several averted the problem by clarifying their enforcement responsibilities with parents from the very outset and letting parents know that ultimately, they would enforce attendance through legal channels, if necessary. Similarly, although they are able to offer advice, help and support, interviewees stressed the need to inform parents of their legal responsibility to ensure that their child received an education. Such discussions were thought to avoid confusion and facilitate parental cooperation.

Whilst a few interviewees detected a national shift towards greater enforcement, there were mixed views about **the role of prosecution**. For some, it was seen as a '*last resort*', the '*ultimate rap*', the '*last option*', to be used when all other avenues of support were exhausted and justified when parents refused to cooperate and '*basically, couldn't give a toss*'. Others, in contrast, felt that, if prosecution was a likely outcome, it was better that such decisive action take place sooner rather than later. Perhaps in this way, families might respond to the short, sharp, shock treatment, and they might succeed in returning their child to school.

A couple of interviewees attributed a resistance to prosecution to the fact that it rarely proved effective in improving attendance. Others believed that the current system of fines was ineffective, making little impact on improving attendance. Interviewees called for '*legitimate penalties*' which would act as genuine disincentives and come down heavily on parents who were failing to meet their legal responsibilities. Staff were said to be disillusioned with the current system, which demanded a lot of their time in preparing to go to court but culminated in relatively small fines. One interviewee called for greater consistency in dealing with court cases and, to address the problem, the service had increased their liaison with magistrates and was considering the appointment of a court officer. Another inadequacy of the prosecution system, raised by one individual, was that it targeted parents and not the child. One interviewee, for example, argued that taking the parents of a Year 10 or 11 child to court was simply not effective. By that time the problem is often entrenched, the child is too independent and out of the control of the parents, and prosecution does not achieve anything: '*What use is it fining a parent if a 15-year-old is refusing to get out of bed in the morning?*' In these situations, interviewees felt it was unfair to prosecute parents and there was currently '*nothing that touches the child*'.

A couple of interviewees, on the other hand, highlighted the public relations function that prosecution sometimes performed. It signified to parents in the area, that non-attendance was not tolerated and that, if necessary, they would be taken to court. In one authority, when a very substantial fine was imposed, while the child concerned still failed to attend school regularly, the effect on the local population was evident: '*For about four weeks afterwards, attendance was virtually 100 per cent because everybody was scared stiff they were going to get a big fine*' (PEWO).

4.5.3 Preventative and remedial work

Interviewees were asked to comment on the balance between preventative strategies and the traditional 'fire-fighting' work of the EWS. Six interviewees purported that their service struck a balance between prevention and reaction. In particular, one

service was said to have achieved this equilibrium by dividing their staff into two teams, an attendance team and a casework team. The former carried out largely preventative work, while the latter took on those children with more deep-seated attendance problems. One EWS manager felt it was important to allocate enough staff to engage in prevention as well as reaction and to promote '*investment in education from an early age*' with schools, families and the community.

Four individuals wanted to stress that prevention was by far the best strategy for improving attendance. It was recognised that waiting until the problems turned '*full-scale*' in secondary school made the problem that much harder to address. As one senior manager pointed out, by that stage '*those problems are set in stone*'. There was much support for a model of 'early intervention' and putting more resources in when it can actually make a difference, i.e. at primary school level. Two interviewees highlighted targeting primary school children, in order to establish good habits early on in their school careers, as an area of effective practice, whilst three identified gaps in the primary sector as less successful. In some cases, preventative work had been achieved through the deployment of additional EWO support to primary schools, which had produced gains in attendance figures. Interestingly, one interviewee agreed that early action was necessary but that it should take the form of prosecuting parents of younger children. In this way, it was felt that parents would receive a clear message early on that school attendance was a priority and that they were legally responsible for their child's attendance. Such assertive action was believed to stamp out the inclination for non-attendance and prevent it becoming an even bigger problem at secondary school.

Ten interviewees felt that more preventative work was needed, especially at primary school level. Despite its recognised value, difficulties in adopting preventative approaches were highlighted, including:

- inadequate time and resources
- the pressure to reduce unauthorised absence levels
- having to siphon resources away from the secondary sector
- difficulty in proving the success of preventative approaches.

Interviewees commonly stated that there were simply **inadequate time and resources** to carry out a great deal of preventative work. Interviewees spoke of high referrals, heavy caseloads and staff shortages that prohibited anything preventative, instead leading to a largely remedial service. In addition, a school-based EWO felt preventative work was effectively curtailed because of his/her location. Instead s/he spoke of '*reacting to situations as they come up, because you tend to be working in crisis and fire fighting and very little time is left for prevention*'.

Preventative work was thought to receive less attention now because of **the pressure to reduce unauthorised absence levels**, due to the introduction of Government targets, directing EWS attention to the truants of today, rather than on longer-term preventative approaches. One interviewee explained that they were duty-bound to reduce unauthorised absence and, as a consequence, there was insufficient scope for preventative work. A comment from one senior manager illustrates the present quandary that many other EWS managers must find themselves in:

I think we need to concentrate primarily on preventative work – that's my personal opinion. Politically that's not a very popular opinion because we have got the statistics to look at... which has had a major significant impact on how I have had to shape the service, because at the end of the day ... I am going to be judged on whether I have reduced truancy ... by 2002 and if I have, then I am deemed to be a successful principal. If I haven't ... then I am deemed to not be successful (PEWO).

Having to siphon resources away from the secondary sector, which was flooded with attendance problems, was often felt to inhibit a more preventative approach. Traditionally, EWS resources have been channelled into secondary schools where, as one senior manager put it, '*people are screaming that kids are out on the street*'. Secondary schools may feel neglected by a service that is spending more time in primary schools or working with 'children at risk' rather than children in crisis. One senior manager, for example, who had recently allocated more time and resources to the primary sector, commented that, whilst primary schools were '*more happy*', it would take a while for the secondary schools to '*feel the benefit*'. As a result, they may feel that the EWS is '*not doing enough*', particular when the spotlight is being cast so heavily on current attendance figures.

Interviewees reported that, in terms of raising attendance levels, they often experienced **difficulty in proving the success of preventative work.** Evaluation was thought to be problematic and the benefits to take some time to materialise. This meant that targets might not necessarily be met immediately.

4.5.4 Education Supervision Orders

Education Supervision Orders (ESOs) shift responsibility for a child's education from the parent to the LEA. A supervising officer is appointed to work with both the child and the family to ensure that the child receives appropriate full-time education. Interviewees were asked to comment on the use of ESOs, since their introduction in 1989. Eight interviewees from six authorities were unable to comment fully on the application of ESOs due to no, or limited, experience. However, ten interviewees spoke of occasions where they felt an ESO had been useful and contributed towards improving a child's attendance. One advantage of applying for an ESO was the increased interagency input that arose out of the process. A formal meeting with the parent and the child, in the presence of all other concerned agencies, served to exert a degree of '*emotional blackmail*' which at times was enough to '*empower the child and parent, to get them back together and to get them to school*'. One PEWO saw ESOs as a vehicle for more focused, carefully thought out, evaluated and reviewed work around attendance. Several interviewees attached certain provisos to the success of an ESO, namely the cooperation of parents, consultation with legal experts and cases where younger children were involved. One PEWO, for example, only considered them a viable strategy for younger children, where the parents were cooperative but perhaps finding it difficult to control their child. In essence, interviewees were suggesting that ESOs had to be used appropriately and that they were not a '*blanket approach*' (see Case Study Five).

Twelve interviewees, on the other hand, described their experiences of ESOs as unsuccessful, with a further two individuals commenting on mixed outcomes. Several

interviewees mentioned the heavy workload and how time-consuming the whole process was, often because of the number of outside agencies that had to be involved. Others perceived the orders as '*toothless*' and lacking in power where the supervising officer did not have the cooperation of the parent or child. When pressed to suggest a solution to this problem, another interviewee replied: '*I don't know. But we do need something with a bit of clout, a bit of teeth in it, that we can actually use.*' As well as being time-consuming and lacking sufficient pressure, another criticism of ESOs centred around the fact that they do not offer anything additional to normal EWS input. Interviewees explained that, by the time a case goes to court, the EWS has often exhausted all avenues of support and intervention. Application of an ESO does not deviate from, or build on, their existing strategies and consequently, some interviewees perceived the ESO as ineffective.

KEY POINTS

- Interviewees agreed that their main areas of work revolved around attendance, although this alone encompassed diverse roles. There were also references to significant roles in child protection, child employment, entertainment licences and special educational needs.

- Practices highlighted as effective centred on EWS liaison with schools, rigorous monitoring of casework and interagency liaison, whilst ineffective practices focused on excessive administration and lack of resources.

- Interviewees reported having to respond to many local and national developments. Whilst acknowledging their value, there was frustration that there was never enough time to adequately plan and then evaluate their success. Nationally, the most significant development of recent years was the social inclusion agenda, although the more recent proposal to transfer EWS funding to schools will no doubt have a far-reaching impact on the EWS.

- There was a resounding call for the distinction of authorised and unauthorised absence to be abolished and for EWSs to work with attendance. At the very worst, schools were reported to be 'massaging' their figures to meet Government targets and to retain their position in the league tables, thereby masking the real problem. EWS personnel were sometimes instructed to work only with unauthorised absence, often leaving the significant problem of parentally condoned absence unaddressed.

- Interviewees referred to the difficulty in balancing enforcement and welfare roles and stressed the importance of being honest with parents concerning legal obligations. There were mixed views about when prosecution was appropriate, as well as concerns about the failure of prosecution to generate improvements in attendance and the need for effective penalties. Prosecution was, however, thought to transmit the message that non-attendance was unacceptable.

- Preventative work, while supported by interviewees, was, in reality, often limited due to lack of resources, the need to meet Government targets and the focus of resources on the secondary sector, as well as the difficulty in evaluating the outcomes. Despite these barriers, many interviewees wished to include more of this type of work and, in some cases, interviewees felt that a balance had been struck between remedial intervention and long-term prevention.

- There were conflicting views about ESOs. On the one hand, ESOs were felt to promote interagency work and were purported to be more successful with younger children, where parental cooperation had been secured. On the other hand, proportionately more of the sample considered ESOs as ineffective, on account of the heavy workload incurred, their inability to 'reach' older children and in many cases, the ESO was not felt to have any 'add-on' value to the normal EWS input.

- Whilst multi-agency liaison was thought to be a valuable approach, barriers to its implementation, particularly with Social Services, reportedly remained.

PART TWO
CURRENT INITIATIVES FOR IMPROVING ATTENDANCE

INTRODUCTION

Part Two of this report focuses on the initiatives that were identified by LEA personnel as examples of effective practice in improving attendance. An overview of all the 191 initiatives highlighted in the original sample of 106 LEAs was presented in the interim report. Here we focus on 40 initiatives highlighted within the 20 LEAs selected for more detailed examination in Phase Two of the study. The initiatives were grouped into the following categories, which correspond to the six chapters in this part of the report:

1. **Service-level developments**
   i.e. initiatives focused on restructuring services, allocation of resources to schools and the use of service-level agreements.

2. **Preventative strategies**
   i.e. initiatives aimed at preventing attendance problems, including examples of raising awareness of attendance issues, the development of effective systems within schools and incentive schemes.

3. **Initial response to absence**
   i.e. initiatives focused on making an immediate response to pupil absence, including catch-all systems, the aim of which was to act as a deterrent to pupils who absent themselves from school.

4. **Early intervention**
   i.e. initiatives focused on identification and intervention with pupils of concern, that is those considered vulnerable to later attendance problems or disaffection.

5. **Identified attendance problems**
   i.e. a wide range of strategies aimed at working directly with pupils where attendance problems had already been identified or with their parents.

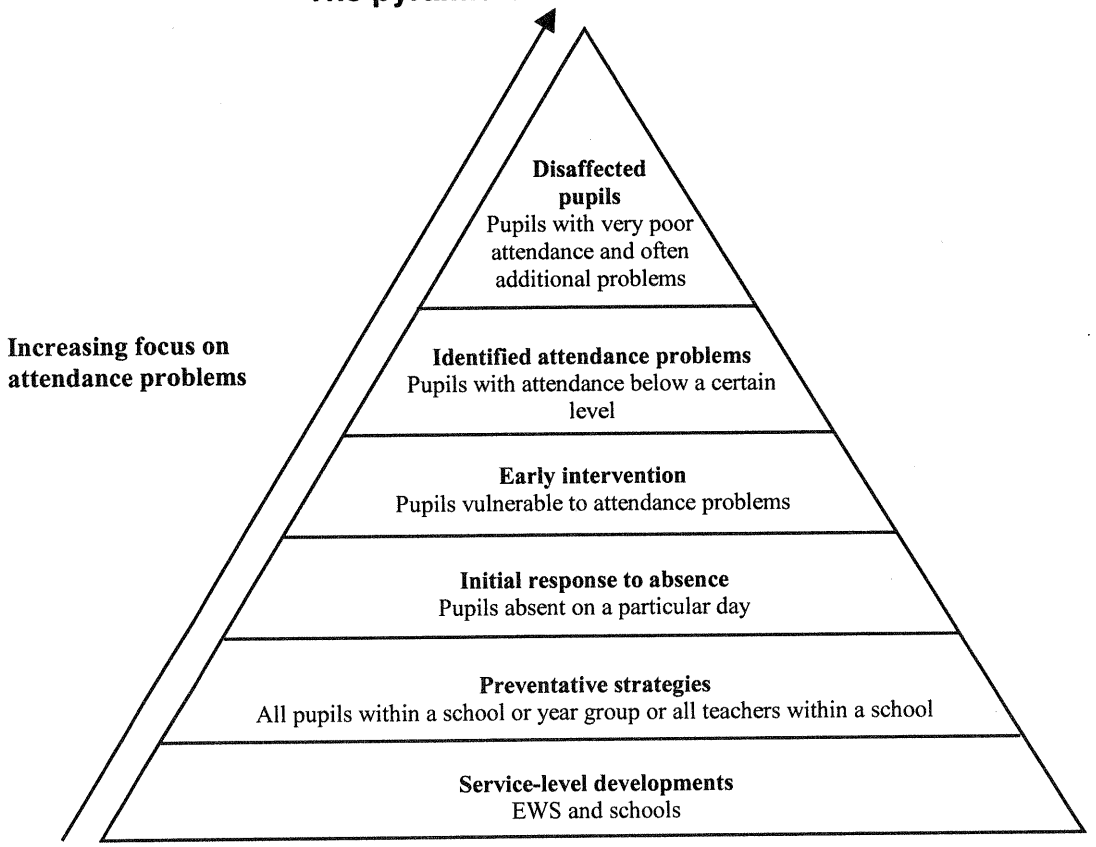
6. **Disaffected pupils**
   i.e. intervention focused on pupils often described by interviewees as disaffected – those with long-term attendance problems and often associated emotional, social and behavioural problems.

By way of a summary, the 40 individual initiatives discussed in the following six chapters are presented in Appendix 2. An overview of the findings is first presented.

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT INITIATIVES

It is evident from the initiatives discussed that the contribution that the LEA makes to improving attendance is both multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. Although concerned with pupils' attendance, initiatives were often aimed beyond pupils, at parents, schools, and, in some cases, the wider community, reflecting the fact that non-attendance is not always within the sole control of the child and initiatives therefore seek to influence a range of adult individuals and institutions. Indeed the typology might be seen as a continuum of initiatives with an increasingly specific focus on pupils with identified attendance problems, exemplified by the pyramid below.

The pyramid of attendance initiatives



In addition, the pyramid shows a shift from the symptoms of non-attendance/truancy to causes, with initiatives within the bottom sections of the pyramid focused on dealing with attendance or absence *per se* rather than the underlying cause. Perhaps as a result of this, they were very much the sole realm of schools and the EWS, and, only in rare cases, were other agencies involved. Their value, however, lay in the creation of a climate amongst pupils and within schools, families and the community that made it increasingly hard for children to truant or absent themselves. They were generally targeted at all pupils, and included whole-school strategies that influenced the ethos of schools and positive approaches to which it was hoped that the majority of pupils were likely to respond. As a consequence of these strategies, for example, attendance systems in schools and the EWS were refined so that their work was more

focused, and both awareness of and responsibility for attendance was raised, particularly with schools and parents. Preventative strategies, perhaps because they were variously targeted, had a more widespread impact, most notably in schools as a whole. In addition, they improved schools' relationship with parents and the EWS and even, in some cases, changed the attitudes of teachers to some pupils.

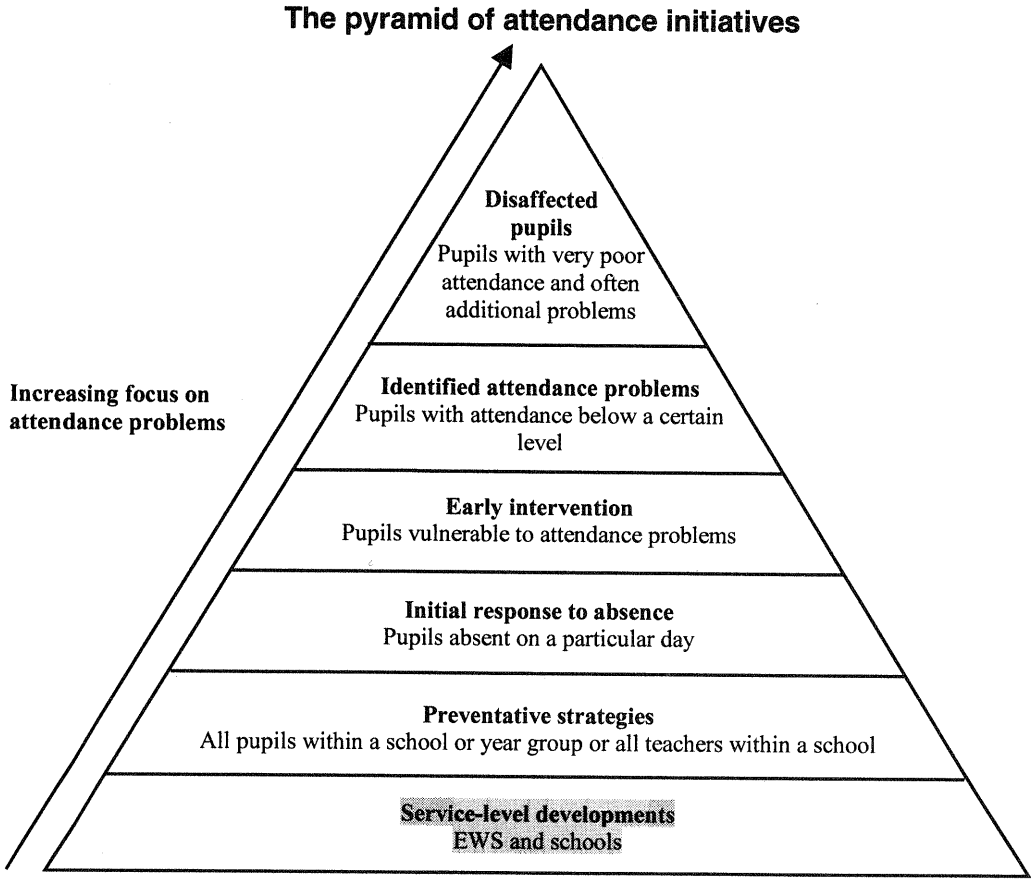
In contrast, towards the top of the pyramid, where interventions were focused on individual pupils of concern or those with identified attendance problems, a more individual approach was adopted and often the underlying causes of non-attendance examined. As causes can be multi-faceted, a range of different strategies was adopted and multi-agency involvement became more evident as the EWS was unlikely to be able to solve some of these alone. Where services did work with pupils of concern and those with identified attendance problems, it was recognised that this work could be both costly and time-consuming. Effectiveness often lay in developing a close relationship with pupils and parents that enhanced their psychological well-being, sometimes to the extent that they were able to re-engage successfully with education and, in some cases, society generally. Work with entrenched non-attenders was reported to be notoriously challenging and resource-intensive. The complex difficulties of these youngsters were unlikely to be resolved by educational professionals alone. This work often had beneficial effects on other agencies, but had little impact on parents, other than to prevent them from worrying about their child's future.

Given the multi-faceted nature of non-attendance, no one strategy will solve all attendance problems. The problem needs to be tackled from many directions and, equally, focused on whole-school strategies aimed at all pupils, thus 'stemming the tide' of non-attendance, as well as dealing with attendance problems once they have arisen. Given the difficulty in re-engaging pupils whose attendance problems have become more severe, it would seem appropriate for more resources to be channelled towards prevention and early intervention.

CHAPTER FIVE
SERVICE-LEVEL DEVELOPMENTS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses initiatives classified as service-level developments, which often focused on a whole-service or whole-school approach.



These initiatives reflect both an increasing focus on attendance within the EWS and the need for many services to make more effective use of their resources. Four initiatives within the 20 LEAs visited were considered to fall within this category:

- the use of an EWS database
- two attendance teams with a focus on whole-school issues
- the employment of EWAs.

The database and the use of EWAs were highlighted within one authority, which was a large, county LEA with low authorised and unauthorised absence, but with a

considerably large number of pupils (4,941) to one EWO, indicating limited resources. Two authorities had divided EWS staff into attendance and casework teams. One was a medium-sized London borough, again with a low level of authorised and unauthorised absence, but a high number of pupils to one EWO. The other was a medium-sized, metropolitan LEA with a medium level of authorised absence and a low level of unauthorised absence, but a low number of pupils to one EWO. A description of these initiatives is provided below:

The use of an EWS database On acceptance of a referral, the EWO recorded the attendance of the pupil for the last four weeks and then after each eight-week period until the case was closed. EWOs completed a referral form and administration staff input the information into the database, held at the four main area offices. Further detailed description of this initiative is provided in Case Study One.
Attendance team A The attendance team took referrals from their target schools, as well as providing whole-school interventions. With regard to referrals, however, the team focused on a six-week intervention to try to resolve the issue and, if not resolved within this time, the case was referred to the casework team. Specific pieces of work were decided in consultation with the target school. Whole-school input included staff training, group work, workshops with identified pupils, the development of first-day response schemes and presentations in assemblies.
Attendance team B In this attendance team, there was a major focus on consistent and effective data collection and its communication to the school. There were two electronic registration systems in the LEA and staff had to transfer the data across or do this manually from the registers (using spreadsheets). School data was examined for patterns of non-attendance and then used to inform the strategies adopted and to make comparisons across schools in the authority. School systems and procedures were examined. Pupils were given individual plans and targets, group work was undertaken with specific pupils and focus groups were set up so that pupils were listened to. Within primary schools, more preventative models were adopted, such as group work for pupils at transition and incentive schemes
The employment of EWAs School-based EWAs worked with children showing the first signs of non-attendance. Interventions included seeing individual pupils (from two weeks to a whole term), checking pupils were in lessons, seeing parents in school and liaison with school staff. In contrast to the EWO, the EWA was readily available and tended to work more with individual pupils than with families. Where there was no progress, cases were referred to the EWO, but this tended to be cases where prosecution was required. In addition, the EWA had a role in setting up first-day response and incentive schemes in schools.

5.2 AIMS

Aims varied within the four initiatives as they each tended to have a different level of focus – the service, in the case of the database, schools, in the case of attendance teams, while most of the work of the EWAs was targeted at individual pupils. However, common aims, shared by more than one initiative were:

- to use objective data to evaluate and inform practice
- to identify areas of effective practice
- to raise awareness of attendance issues in schools.

It was hoped, for example, that access to reliable data through the database would prevent poorly focused work and enable the EWS to set performance measures and targets at both service and individual casework level. By having an attendance team, which concentrated on the management of attendance and systems in schools, as opposed to individual pupils, the aim was to raise awareness of attendance issues

within schools. School-based EWAs, by nature of their location, shared this aim, as well as attempting to resolve problems before they became too entrenched and thus getting children back into school.

5.3 TARGETING

Interviewees were asked to give an account of the target group at whom the initiative was aimed. As information from the database itself was available service-wide, one of the main benefits was allowing both the service and individual workers to target their work more effectively. This will be discussed in more depth in the section on impact. Attendance teams and EWAs were used to target schools with the greatest need, usually those with the poorest attendance figures. In one case, level of need was based on both authorised and unauthorised absence figures and, in another, the attendance team worked in all schools, both secondary and primary, with below 90 per cent attendance. Having an attendance team also enabled schools to allocate their own resources more effectively. EWAs too were based in secondary schools with the greatest need, where they targeted pupils just starting to absent themselves, whom EWOs were unable to prioritise because of their workload. These referrals were either self-generated through examination of attendance patterns in the register, received informally through the pastoral coordinator of the school, or highlighted in the consultation meeting between EWOs and heads of year. In addition, EWAs became involved in strategies aimed at all pupils in the school, such as first-day response and attendance incentive schemes.

5.4 MULTI-AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Little direct multi-agency involvement was mentioned in connection with service-level developments. Both attendance teams, however, were reported to liaise closely with other LEA services, such as the Behaviour Support Service and Child Guidance, in order to provide a consistent approach. Liaison with the LEA department concerned with school effectiveness was also mentioned in one case, to ensure that the work of the team reflected school policy and ethos. In terms of outside agencies, links with Social Services, health visitors and school nurses, and the voluntary sector were referred to in connection with specific projects. Only one interviewee raised issues concerning multi-agency working. This EWO highlighted that multi-agency working takes time, that projects with many agencies involved can be difficult to coordinate and that, because agencies are short of money, they often see involvement in a project as a means of addressing their own agenda.

5.5 FUNDING AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS

When discussing service-level developments, interviewees who commented felt that these initiatives were cost-effective. The senior manager reported that the EWS database had not cost huge sums of money but had resulted in a '*huge movement forward*' in terms of how they managed the service. The attendance team, whilst costing a considerable sum to set up, was thought to have developed good practice and prevented schools from '*redeveloping the wheel*'. It was also thought that being an LEA resource enabled the team to engage in more preventative work, in contrast to schools: '*I am not sucked into the reactive, whereas I fully understand colleagues in schools are constantly having to react to the problem that confronts them.*'

However, a number of issues relating to funding were raised. Where EWAs were employed, their numbers had been reduced because of lack of funding, despite the fact that they had been shown to be effective. Some were employed on temporary contracts and uncertainty about funding for the next year made it difficult to retain good workers. The yearly funding cycle for Standards Fund projects was also noted by one EWO in connection with the attendance team they had set up. It had been agreed with the Education Department, however, that the team would adopt a three-year cycle. This enabled them to develop the initiative properly the first year, to implement it the next year and to make recommendations about how the work might be continued when the team disbanded in the final year. The EWO concerned was uncertain how the recent suggestion that money for non-attendance be devolved to schools might affect this. This EWO also raised the issue of joint funding for non-attendance and exclusions, pointing to the fact that it was important that those not in school received their fair share of funding.

5.6 EVALUATION

Informal, in-house evaluation and evaluation of individual pieces of work had been undertaken within service-level developments, but evidence of a formal evaluation was only found in one case. In addition, where this had been attempted, it was reported that inherent problems with formal data collection inhibited effective partnership between the attendance team and the school. Informal evaluation included evaluation reports on specific pieces of work, examination of data collection methods, meetings to discuss difficulties and reviews. These had led to systems of data collection being subsequently altered in two cases.

5.7 IMPACT

The strategic focus of service-level developments meant that direct impact on attendance levels and on individual pupils was reportedly difficult to quantify. Most initiatives had only been in place a short while. In contrast to some other initiatives, service-level developments tended to have more of an impact on EWS staff and schools (particularly on systems for monitoring attendance), whilst impact on individual pupils was limited.

5.7.1 Impact on attendance levels

In three out of the four initiatives, problems with assessing the impact on attendance levels were noted, mainly because it was too early to judge. Despite this, one interviewee noted that the attendance figures for the authority had gone up overall and the senior manager concerned stated that s/he was convinced that having the database would have a major impact on raising attendance. The employment of EWAs, on the other hand, was reported to make a definite difference to the attendance of individual pupils, which, in some cases, was reported to have improved by 60 per cent and on average by 15 to 20 per cent. The attendance figures for a school in which one EWA was located had risen from 88 to 90 per cent within the few years they had been employed.

5.7.2 Impact on pupils

In the case of both attendance teams and attendance workers, pupils exhibiting serious levels of non-attendance proved to be the most inaccessible. Attendance workers were better able to alleviate school-based problems, given that this is where they were located, and pupils in need of attention because home support was lacking. It was much harder to reach those children where the non-attendance had become routine and symptomatic of deeper family problems. The following excerpts give more detailed illustrations of the circumstances where most impact of EWAs was reported:

Employment of EWAs

A girl with behavioural problems and little support at home, whose attendance had improved from 50 to over 90 per cent:

> *Checking up on her, actually turning up on the doorstep in the morning to take her to school and standing over her, if you like, while she got out of bed. Then when I stopped working with her, her attendance trailed off and she actually came to see me one day and asked would I start working with her again because she liked it when she knew I was checking up on her. I think that was home circumstances. I don't think there was a great deal of support, so the fact that somebody was laying down boundaries was actually good for her.*

An EWA indicated that s/he was more likely to be able to resolve problems that were school-based rather than originating within the family:

> *When the problem that's affecting their attendance is school-based I can sort of do a silent cheer because I know that's going to be resolved. I can sort that out. Unfortunately, in the area that I work in, most of the problems are out of school and they are social, which is obviously harder. There was one child, when I noticed that he was missing on two particular days a week, and I went and had a look at his timetable and there was PE on there, I sort of played a hunch because he was quite a big lad for his age and I started speaking about showers and you could see the relief.*

In conjunction with setting up a first-day response scheme, an EWA identified that it discouraged some pupils, particularly those with parents at work, from taking time off school:

> *It certainly stops the children with working parents, because I know which ones to ring directly at work as well and it's certainly stopped a lot of the children ... once the parents have left for work in the morning, hanging on at home.*

In service-level developments, apart from the employment of EWAs, impact directly on pupils was generally limited. However, the senior manager reported that the use of the database would enable workers to share attendance rates with pupils more regularly so that they would be more aware of the situation and the expectations placed upon them. The employment of EWAs was reported to impact on pupils by discouraging non-attendance and resolving school-based problems.

5.7.3 Impact on schools

Access to both an attendance team and an EWA in schools was perceived to have raised awareness of attendance problems in schools. Whilst it was hoped that the data available through an EWS database might form the basis for school discussions and eventually lead to more children attending, the most impact on schools was evident where attendance teams had been employed. Having an attendance team was reported

to be an effective way of working for schools with significant attendance problems, as well as those having a number of pupils with around 80 per cent attendance. It was thought that, by raising these pupils' attendance to 90 per cent or over, the team significantly improved overall school attendance levels. More specifically, interviewees spoke of circumstances where attendance teams had made significant impacts:

Attendance teams

A school in special measures that had significant problems with attendance and negative staff attitudes towards dealing with attendance issues:

> *Unauthorised absence was a big issue and the school was in the frame of mind where it was saying 'Well, those are the kinds of families we have here. You won't do anything about that'. They were in a very negative frame of mind about it. A member of the attendance team went in there and did a very short-term piece of work, but very focused on helping the school set up first-day response to absence. Parents knew that they would be contacted if their child wasn't in school, if they hadn't contacted the school first and just that one exercise raised the attendance very significantly within a very short period of time* (PEWO).

The PEWO provided an example where a school had been helped by the attendance team to see a simple connection between the problem and the possible solution:

> *We looked at the excuses parents were giving and we found huge numbers of kids whose parents were saying they couldn't come to school because they had had an asthma attack. So what we did then was to make sure that every child who had given an excuse of an asthma attack was visited by somebody from the clinic and they got them registered at the asthma clinic and attendance went through the roof. Attendance improved by about 20 per cent in the school because those kids were now getting proper treatment and they did have asthma, but they weren't getting proper treatment. So that's an example of the kind of link you can make that will make a real difference.*

The EWO explained how the collection of data could determine where schools focus their intervention, in order to meet targets:

> *This is not dealing with entrenched non-attenders, but perhaps is dealing with students who have 80 to 85 per cent attendance. If you can move those students so they come up to 90 to 95 per cent then the cumulative effect of that, because there are more students involved, may actually meet the targets of the school that are required by statute and to show a good performance in the league tables.*

The above accounts illustrate that interventions need to be appropriate for the context. For instance, a monthly newspaper conveying the value of education and the impact of non-attendance had proved its success in a '*predominately white, middle-class area*'. The PEWO interviewed explained how it was subsequently transferred to a school within a '*very deprived estate*', where many parents could not read, rendering written communication redundant. What works well in one school, therefore, will not necessarily transfer to another school with a different context.

Overall, the provision of an attendance team was thought to have:

- made schools think about the way they managed attendance
- given schools a greater responsibility for attendance
- made clear how school roles and responsibilities married with those of the EWS.

However, in both cases where attendance teams had been set up, a negative impact on schools was also identified. Loss of a named EWO and less individually focused, reactive work had resulted in a negative response from some schools.

5.7.4 Impact on the EWS

A common impact within all service-level developments was on the work of EWOs, which was felt to be more focused and, as a result, more effective. Employment of EWAs, for example, was reported to make the job of the EWO easier and allow them to target more serious cases: '*In the three years that I have been doing it, I can perhaps only think of one or two cases where the EWO has then had to become involved and then it's prosecution.*' The use of the database and having an attendance team were said to direct EWOs' attention towards attendance issues, rather than being more child-centred and dealing with welfare issues. Clearer roles and responsibilities were noted, with workers not getting involved in issues they were unable to deal with.

Other effects of having an EWS database were that EWOs were able to make decisions based on objective data and, more controversially, those with consistently good or poor performance could be identified. In this way, good practice could be shared and individual poor performance addressed. Not surprisingly, following its initial introduction, the senior manager perceived a negative impact. EWOs were reported to find it time-consuming at the expense of working with families, but the senior manager's view was that: '*Unless you have got proper objective data to use in order to monitor the impact of the work, we don't know that we are using that time with the families effectively or not.*'

5.7.5 Impact on parents

As with pupils, having the EWS database was reported to make aims clearer and more obvious to parents so they were more aware of what the service was trying to achieve. The use of EWAs was noted to have raised the importance of good attendance and punctuality amongst parents, as well as encouraging them to accept more responsibility for their children's attendance. Setting up a first-day response scheme (discussed in detail in Chapter Seven), for example, was thought to have been particularly effective in raising their awareness. In one school, over half the children absent from school were now accounted for by parents telephoning compared with very few previously. The EWA reported that introduction of the scheme had also encouraged parents to be more honest when their children were off: '*A few parents have actually said to me "I am not going to lie any more. I am not going to cover up. I just can't get him out of bed, or I wish you would come round. I wish you could do something. I'm at the end of my tether".*'

5.8 KEY ELEMENTS

Whilst the key elements concerning the EWS database and the provision of an attendance team centred around data collection and its use, the key elements associated with EWAs focused on schools' commitment and being able to provide an immediate response to attendance problems. Common key elements identified by interviewees in connection with the database and attendance teams were:

- user-friendly methods of data collection and its communication
- using reliable data to identify areas of work and target resources
- a more focused approach to dealing with attendance issues

The PEWO responsible for one of the attendance teams felt that the key element was that more sophisticated analysis of data was being used to help schools see patterns of attendance and make significant correlations which then enabled them to adopt the most appropriate strategy. The senior manager responsible for the EWS database also identified that it was important to focus on only a few performance indicators to evaluate effective working rather than a complex array.

On the other hand, the key elements thought to make the work of the EWA effective largely reflected the essential ways in which the EWA differed from the EWO. These were:

- being school-based and therefore readily available
- being able to provide an immediate response to problems
- having time to follow up issues thoroughly
- having a clear role and one more of '*assisting*' than '*insisting*'
- persistence in checking up on pupils
- not being a member of the school staff
- schools' commitment to the approach

5.9 CHALLENGES

Common challenges were identified by interviewees in connection with attendance teams and the EWS database. They centred around integration of the strategy into the host service or school and were:

- the effective communication of new systems and procedures
- getting recipients on board
- the possible threat posed to other EWS workers.

Where attendance teams were introduced, for example, schools were reported to find difficulty adjusting to this new way of working. Communication was affected because the school had a team rather than one EWO to liaise with. In an attempt to combat the problem of reluctant schools, one of the teams now worked only with schools which bid for their services and were therefore willing participants. The difficulty of conveying the role of the team, which had a very broad remit, was also

reported to be a problem. The senior manager responsible for the database felt that getting his/her EWOs on board was a major issue as the collection of data ultimately created more work for them and this was coupled with the threat of it being used to assess their performance. Initial responses from EWOs were that data input would be time-consuming and take them away from their work with families and that it was unfair to use this type of data to measure the performance of individual EWOs. The EWS manager referred to a '*defensiveness*' and an '*understandable resistance and reluctance*' on their part to collect the data. In response, the EWS manager emphasised the need to know if they were making a difference. Communication of the systems to be used was important so that data was consistent and comparable across all workers. The likelihood of the attendance team being a threat to others within the EWS doing casework was also raised. It was thought that they might feel that their work was undermined, making establishment of an effective working partnership more difficult.

5.10 IMPROVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Improvements and developments were only suggested by those working within the attendance teams and, interestingly, interviewees within both authorities trialling this type of approach identified common areas, which were the need for more consistent data collection; improved communication with schools; and improved liaison between the casework and attendance teams within the EWS.

KEY POINTS

- Service-level developments included an EWS database, whole-school attendance teams and the employment of EWAs to assist EWOs in their work.

- The main aims of service-level developments were to use objective data to evaluate and inform practice, to identify areas of effective practice and to raise awareness of attendance issues in schools.

- Service-level developments were thought to be cost-effective because they provided an objective basis for service management, avoided duplication of work by different schools and enabled EWOs to engage in more preventative work.

- Whilst there was some difficulty assessing their impact on attendance levels and impact on pupils was limited, service-level developments had an impact on schools and EWOs. Schools were made to think about the way in which they managed attendance issues and were encouraged to take more responsibility for attendance; and the role and responsibilities of schools were made clearer. The work of EWOs was reported to be more focused.

- An attendance team was reported to be able to turn a school with major attendance difficulties around in a relatively short space of time provided that the work was focused on their needs, and to have an impact on schools with significant attendance problems.

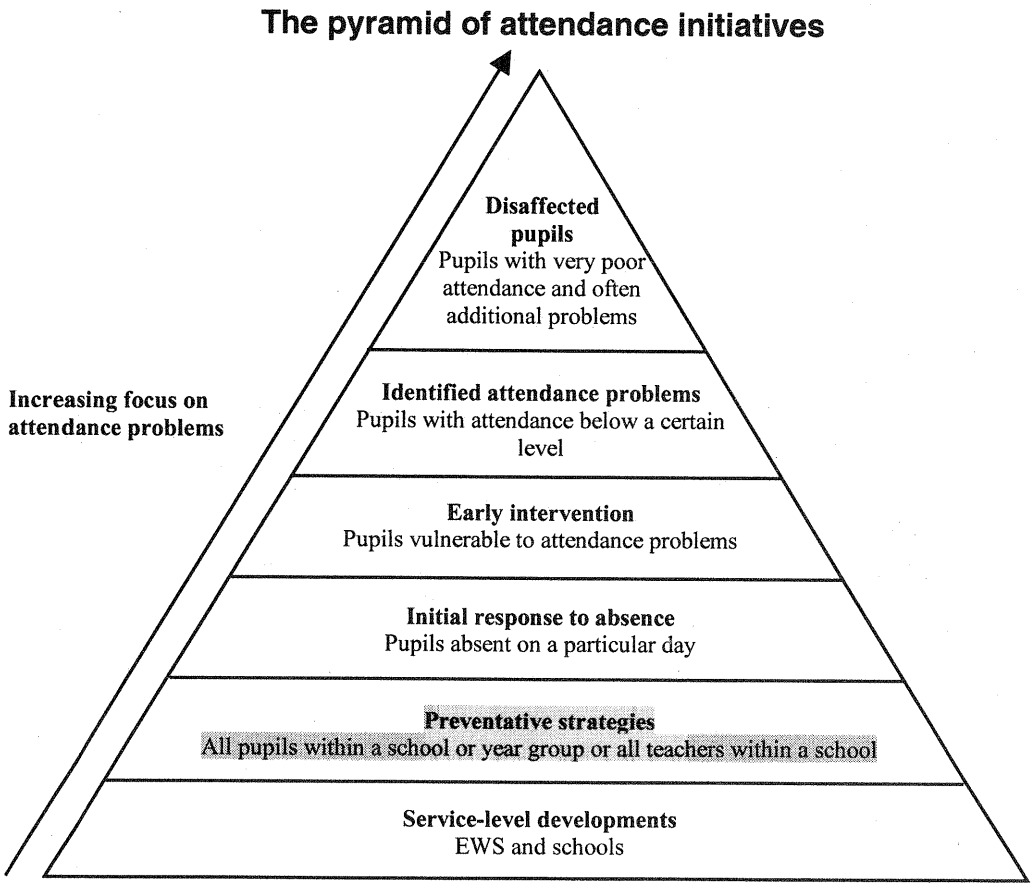
- EWAs were able to provide home support where this was lacking, but were felt to be most likely to have an impact when the problems with attendance originated within the school. Being school-based was thought to be an essential ingredient for the effective use of EWAs, as this enabled them to provide an immediate response to problems *in situ*.

- The key elements of service-level developments were highlighted as the need for user-friendly data collection methods, communication with schools and other EWOs, the use of reliable data and the more focused approach to EWS work. On the other hand, communication of new systems to other workers and schools was also a key challenge and, consequently, this was highlighted as an area for development.

CHAPTER SIX
PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is on strategies employed to prevent attendance problems, which included some targeted at all teachers and some targeted at all pupils within a school.



In total, nine initiatives were highlighted:

- an attendance conference
- a PSHE programme
- a peer befriending scheme
- two attendance incentive schemes
- two attendance audits
- the development of an attendance policy
- an electronic registration system.

Two attendance incentive schemes in different authorities and two authorities using attendance audits were examined. One authority provided both an example of a PSHE programme and the development of an attendance policy, whilst another authority provided both an example of an incentive scheme and an electronic registration system. In the latter case, these strategies were very closely linked. Seven LEAs were therefore represented in this group of initiatives. Three out of the seven were medium-sized, metropolitan LEAs and the only two county authorities in our sample also fell into this category. Four out of the seven LEAs had low levels of unauthorised absence, whilst four also had medium levels of authorised absence. Only one authority was poorly resourced, as indicated by the large number of pupils to one EWO. A description of these preventative strategies is provided below. Firstly, those targeted at teachers are presented, followed by those targeted mainly at pupils.

Preventative strategies targeted at teachers:

An attendance policy A process of policy development was initiated through the secondary headteachers' consortium. The EWS drafted a policy that could be adapted to all schools. The policy included, for example, the value of attendance, expectations, and the pastoral role, and processes and procedures were spelt out step-by-step.
Attendance audit A The EWO met with the headteacher a few weeks before the audit with a pre-audit check list. The audit day, conducted by two EWOs, began with a short meeting with the headteacher, followed by observation of registration. Procedures for dealing with non-attendance were then examined. Interviews were conducted with staff and pupils to ascertain their awareness of attendance policies and procedures. The attendance policy was later examined to see if this was reflected in practice. A report was produced within three weeks and a summary and recommendations given to the school. A booklet on how to conduct an attendance audit was available for all EWS staff.
Attendance audit B The audit comprised of two parts – a systems audit, as described above, and a case audit in which cases of non-attendance over a half-term period were examined to see how the school had dealt with them.
A computerised attendance information system An electronic registration system was used for morning and lesson registration. Pupils were informed. School duty staff received instant copies of attendance lists and they were able to check if pupils were missing from lessons. Complete lists were run off at the end of each week. The system was also used to page or e-mail others, to collate academic information and to generate letters.

Preventative strategies targeted at pupils:

An attendance conference The programme for the attendance conference was developed by the EWOs in conjunction with the deputy head and the attendance coordinator at the school. It comprised a half-day, interactive intervention (brainstorming, group work, presentations, etc.) for pupils concerning attendance issues. The main focus was on participation and listening to pupils' views. A booklet was produced for pupils and group facilitators, who were drawn from outside agencies and paired with form tutors to facilitate groups of 12 to 16 pupils. The conference was introduced in PSE sessions and some pupils were given the responsibility of welcoming guests from outside agencies. The work was followed up in the remainder of the half-term in PSE sessions.
A PSHE attendance programme The EWO liaised firstly with the deputy head and then with the year heads and form tutors in the school to discuss the aims of the sessions. Each class received two 55-minute sessions from the EWO, but a teacher was also present. Within the sessions, an interactive approach was used and attendance issues were discussed. Pupils worked in four groups of six, each exploring a different topic.
A peer befriending scheme EWOs made links with the school and then undertook an introductory visit. Pupil volunteers for befrienders were selected by the school, although they were asked to select pupils for their qualities and a mix of gender and behaviour. Parental consent was sought. Training for befrienders comprised of three half-day sessions focused on active listening, and issues such as confidentiality and bullying were also addressed. Some of the school staff were trained alongside. Once pupils were trained, schools ran the scheme to suit their needs. Pupils seeking help and befrienders were asked to complete referral forms that were used (confidentially) to inform whole-school policy. Peer befrienders also had weekly supervision sessions in school to provide support for them.
Attendance incentive scheme A Pupils in the school in which this scheme operated were asked about their preferred rewards. A range of incentives was then used to reward pupils for their attendance: certificates, vouchers for McDonalds, allowing pupils to attend school in their own clothes and passes to go into dinner first. At the same time, the awareness of pastoral staff was raised so that pupils were challenged about their absence. The first assembly each term was always spent rewarding pupils for their attendance the previous term.
Attendance incentive scheme B Separate incentive schemes were set up for primary and secondary schools within one LEA. Pupils with 100 per cent attendance for half a term and 98 per cent for a term in secondary schools were entered into a lottery for a £10 voucher for W. H. Smith's (one per year group). Pupils with 98 per cent attendance for the whole year went into a lottery for computer equipment to the value of £2,000, whilst one in each school received a data organiser. The gladiator scheme, run in partnership with three other local authorities, was adopted in primary schools. For every day they attended on time, pupils received stickers that were placed on a card. Children were encouraged to adopt a daily routine of monitoring attendance in this way. Individual schools determined the target attendance and pupils reaching the target received certificates. Pupils who received a gold certificate took part in a gladiator adventure day with a 'real life' gladiator.

6.2 AIMS

Common aims were identified amongst the majority of the preventative initiatives. These were:

- to raise awareness of attendance issues
- to identify areas of need in relation to attendance
- to improve or encourage attendance.

Four initiatives sought primarily to raise the awareness of teachers to attendance issues, whilst three were aimed at pupils and teachers, with the incentive scheme reportedly also aimed at raising awareness within the community as a whole. Attendance audits, in addition, endeavoured to raise the awareness of parents.

Another major focus for these initiatives was to identify areas of need related to attendance issues. Of those strategies targeted at pupils, for example, four gave them the opportunity to voice their concerns and reasons for not attending school, thus enabling their needs to be addressed. Where initiatives were targeted at teachers, audits and information systems both provided a means of identifying areas of weakness in school systems that needed to be addressed.

6.3 TARGETING

Of those initiatives aimed at teachers, attendance audits were time-consuming and were therefore targeted at schools considered to have particular difficulties with attendance. They were conducted in both primary and secondary schools, and one had been completed in a special school. In one authority, they were undertaken in schools under special measures or those with very low attendance figures (below 90 per cent). The other authority also included schools about to receive OFSTED inspections within their target group. The development of policies, on the other hand, was targeted at all schools within the authority and the information system had been introduced in one school as one of a range of strategies.

Of those strategies aimed directly at pupils, the PSHE programme and the attendance conference concentrated on a single year group. The PSHE programme was conducted with all pupils in Year 7 in a small Catholic school with no classes over 30 in number, covering pupils with a range of ability and a spectrum of attendance problems (some known by the EWS from Year 6). Year 7 was selected so as to raise pupils' awareness of attendance issues before problems started. The attendance conference, on the other hand, was targeted at Year 8 pupils. Pupils were thought to need time to settle in Year 7, but that input needed to take place before Year 9, when attendance often dropped off. One incentive scheme was aimed at the whole community within one school, whereas the other was targeted at all secondary schools, as well as pupils in Years 5 and 6 in those primary schools which were at the bottom end of the league tables for attendance.

6.4 MULTI-AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Multi-agency input was a key feature in only two of the initiatives in this group, the attendance conference and one of the incentive schemes, although in others, indirect links with other agencies were reported. In the attendance conference, staff from outside agencies, including school nurses, behaviour support teachers, the governors of the school, educational psychologists and other independent groups, facilitated the groups alongside form tutors. This was thought to be one of the key elements of the project and is discussed in more depth later in this chapter. Businesses, such as McDonalds, had been used to supply rewards, at no cost to the school, for one incentive scheme and the ultimate reward of the gladiator day was reported to be '*a huge multi-agency event*', involving, for example, the leisure department and the St John Ambulance Brigade.

Attendance policies and audits were reported to result in opportunities for school links with other agencies, with the Educational Psychology Service being brought in to help with identified problem areas and contact with Social Services in the case of looked-after pupils. One audit was reported to have led to the appointment of a governor for

attendance issues and, when developing the PSHE programme, the EWO involved had sought the expertise of a PSHE adviser.

6.5 FUNDING AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Few interviewees were able to describe cost-effectiveness in terms of actual figures, yet all the preventative strategies were considered to be cost-effective. However, the EWO concerned with the attendance conference felt that, if facilitators had expected to be paid, the initiative would not have been cost-effective. The school staff, on the other hand, felt that the attendance conference was value for money because it addressed many issues and not just attendance. The EWO who conducted PSHE sessions recognised the benefits in dealing with problems early on and s/he related cost directly to his/her casework: '*If I can improve attendance in that year by two per cent, that is ten visits saved for me.*' Whilst it was acknowledged that there was a major outlay in terms of salaries in the peer befriending scheme, it was also noted to be '*hands-on work*' and therefore value for money. The actual cost of an incentive scheme was reported to be £20,000 a year, but the cost was justified by the interviewee as it was reaching every child in the secondary sector and was cheaper than schools could purchase themselves because the authority was buying reward items in bulk. Attendance audits were considered to be particularly cost-effective because they:

- were proven to work
- effected training for school staff
- benefited the ethos of the school
- examined attendance issues in more depth than OFSTED inspections
- could be transplanted to other schools
- resulted in school ownership of attendance issues and therefore enabled the school itself to implement other interventions.

Few funding issues were raised. Three interviewees reported that they received Standards Funding or SRB funding. Of these, one interviewee reported that, as a result of the yearly funding cycle for projects, they had lost staff. In two cases, initiatives were considered to be a normal part of EWS work and, where this was the case, a lack of resources was highlighted. In others, schools bought in the service, as in the peer befriending scheme, or the LEA funded the initiative, as in the information system.

6.6 EVALUATION

In four out of the nine initiatives, a formal evaluation process was described and in all cases, interviews and/or questionnaires had been used to canvass the views of those directly involved. In only two cases, however, were attendance figures noted to be used in the evaluation. At the end of the half term in which the attendance conference was conducted, for example, the attendance of the whole year group was examined and those pupils still having difficulty with attendance (reported to be only six) were targeted for further intensive group work. Similarly, following an attendance audit, figures were reviewed after six months, at which point the audit was '*virtually re-run*' and the EWO involved reported a '*proven increase in all schools*'.

6.7 IMPACT

Preventative interventions generated a range of effects. School systems and the educational environment can have significant bearings on attendance levels and their enhancement may go some way to preventing the onset of attendance problems. Consequently, the effects emanating from preventative strategies were often seen to impact on school-related factors. At the same time, however, effects were also experienced by others in the non-attendance equation.

6.7.1 Attendance levels

In six out of the nine initiatives, improved attendance levels were reported, with gains of between two and six per cent noted. Where incentive schemes had been introduced into a school, attendance levels rose from 89 to 93.4 per cent in one authority and from 88 to 92 per cent in another. The deputy headteacher of a junior school reported that, whilst the average attendance last year had been 90.3 per cent, the attendance in Year 6 (a year in which the scheme had been introduced) was now between 96 and 97 per cent. Attendance audits were reported to have made a significant difference to attendance levels. In one secondary school, levels rose from 89 to 93 per cent over the evaluation period and, in one primary school, an improvement of two per cent per annum had been noted since the audit had been conducted. It was also purported, however, that unauthorised absence levels might increase initially as schools were encouraged to challenge parents more about their children's absence. The electronic registration system introduced in one school was said by the headteacher to have improved the attendance level by three or four per cent.

Whilst the attendance conference was seen to make an initial difference to attendance figures, this had not been sustained and it was recognised that more follow-up might be needed to maintain this improvement. The PSHE programme and the introduction of attendance policies for schools were felt to be too indirect to have a direct impact on attendance, at least as yet, although other effects were noted.

6.7.2 Impact on pupils

Interviewees were asked to consider the pupils for whom preventative strategies were most/least effective. Their responses, which refer to initiatives targeted at pupils, are summarised below:

	Most impact on pupils:	Least impact on pupils:
Attendance conferences	• whose absence was parentally condoned	• who were hard core non-attenders
Attendance incentive schemes	• who took the odd day or half-day off • with very poor attendance when the incentive was very tangible for them	• who were block non-attenders
Electronic registration	• who were casual truants • who skipped lessons	• with ingrained attitudes • whose absence was parentally condoned • with deep-seated attendance problems

Preventative strategies therefore tended to be more successful with casual, one-off, low-level non-attenders, rather than pupils where non-attendance had become deeply ingrained. Serious non-attendance is typically underpinned by a complex array of problems, which often require more intensive work to precipitate change. By contrast, those merely dabbling in non-attendance may be more responsive to strategies which raise the profile of attendance, offer rewards or increase the ability of school systems to detect non-attendance. Atypically, however, an incentive scheme was proved to be very successful with one pupil with poor attendance for whom the incentive was very tangible (see the examples below). Whilst attendance conferences were reported to be successful in combating parentally condoned absence, the electronic registration system was felt to have little impact on this. The following excerpts illustrate the differential effects of some strategies according to the characteristics of the target group:

Attendance conferences were reported to have had little effect on hard-core non-attenders:

> *I have got one little girl who's come from another school in the town and she's been for five half-days and that's it. She is now on our roll. She will go down the roll of attendance reviews and, OK, I don't think it's the way, but possible prosecution. It's not going to change her. She is not going to come to school; she's going to be a school refuser* (head of year).

But they were found to be successful for a pupil whose absence was parentally condoned:

> *One brilliant success story ... one of the Year 8s, who is a lovely lad, is down for a prize this week, because if he lasts until Thursday he has put one full half-term in. Now, at the particular time of this conference* [he] *was a problem. The whole of his tutor group was exercising pupil power – 'You are dropping our attendance down'. This particular conference I believe influenced* [X] *quite a lot. He is a mammoth success story and his attitude has changed and he has friends whereas he didn't have before. His mum would condone anything. He's a complete turn-around* (head of year).

The peer befriending scheme was reported to have been helpful for the majority of pupils who had used the service but unhelpful for a small minority of pupils who had used the service:

> *Certainly, the fact that people go back and use it time and time again and the fact that when they have been seen by a befriender they are on the exit poll. At one particular school, of 175 evaluations, 125 were stating that it was very helpful, 11 not helpful and 39 helpful. This is the response from service users: 'Befrienders are kind, helpful, won't break secrets, because they try to give good advice, the way that befrienders sort things out'* (EWO).

Attendance incentive schemes were reported to be least successful with 'block' non-attenders, and more likely to have an effect on pupils who had the odd day or half-day off. However, the deputy headteacher at a school where one scheme had been introduced gave an example of a pupil whose attendance improved from 40 to 100 per cent, but who was under the misinterpretation that if she completed a full half-term she would be able to go to the gladiator event day. The deputy head commented that: '*I had to break the news to her last week and was expecting her to be absent the next few days, but she wasn't*'.

Overall, preventative strategies aimed directly at pupils were found to have a number of effects on pupils. They were reported to:

- raise their awareness of the importance of school attendance
- deter pupils from truanting
- raise their awareness of the systems in place within the school to deal with their concerns and with non-attendance
- give pupils responsibility
- improve their psychological well-being through raised confidence and self-esteem
- make the school a safer and more comfortable environment for pupils.

Having discussed truancy at an attendance conference, many pupils were led to the conclusion that '*It's not for me*'. This strategy was also reported to have developed a corporate sense of responsibility for attendance, with pupils challenging each other's non-attendance. It had also provided pupils with the opportunity to share their ideas and develop their own strategies for supporting those with attendance problems. Incentive schemes were noted to capitalise on peer pressure and were thought to dissuade those who might be tempted to truant. It was perceived that peer befriending, on the other hand, created a safer school environment for pupils and, in this way, made it more likely that they attend.

Other initiatives, although targeted mainly at teachers, were also reported to impact on pupils. It was thought that pupils might notice a consistency amongst teachers' approach to non-attendance following an attendance audit. Knowledge of electronic registration systems was also thought to act as a deterrent to pupils. School attendance policies, on the other hand, were felt to highlight pupils' individual needs, making it more likely that they might be addressed.

6.7.3 Impact on schools

Before presenting the range of school-related effects, it is useful to consider the contexts in which preventative strategies were believed to make the greatest impression. Attendance policies and audits, for example, were believed to have most impact where schools were willing to be involved, where there was support from senior managers and where schools were able to accept constructive criticism. Success, therefore, appeared to hinge on the commitment, enthusiasm and cooperation of the schools involved and, where this was lacking, the impact of the interventions was limited:

Attendance audits were reported to be least successful in schools which were unable to accept criticism and where the process was not perceived as valuable:

> *Couldn't accept the criticism terribly well. We are going back to go through the audit report again with them* (EWO).

An audit, however, had made a significant improvement in a large primary school on special measures where school staff had worked hard to address attendance issues highlighted by a recent inspection:

> *The registers in* [X school] *were so appalling when we looked at them that we couldn't actually find an attendance figure for the school. We weren't able to get a bottom line. I was in there about three weeks ago and the attendance level now, according to the school, is 95.5 per cent. That was over the last academic year, when they have been in special measures the whole time, which I think is pretty good, and it is a very difficult area. They have worked hard on attendance across the board* (EWO).

Attendance policies were reported to have been unsuccessful where support from the senior management of the school was not forthcoming:

> *Some schools have not taken it on board and we have revisited and met with the head and year heads. It is more to do with the politics within the school. All we can do is put them in front of them and suggest that they put them there* (EWO).

They had been successful where schools were willing to adopt policies and this had led to effective working practices:

> *I think it has just been very, very effective in getting schools to actually say 'Yes, all of our heads of year need to meet with the EWO for this exchange of information'. For keeping each other in touch, for recording things and the reciprocal things for the school. For the information they get back after the visit as well. One of the secondary schools now actually puts on to their database the information the EWO feeds back so they actually maintain this for all of their pastoral data* (EWO).

In terms of specific effects, preventative strategies impacted on schools by:

- increasing responsibility for attendance issues
- raising awareness of attendance issues
- recognition of areas of weakness regarding attendance management
- encouraging the implementation of other strategies
- increasing awareness of the role of, and effective use of, EWOs.

One of the main factors, reported within the majority of the initiatives, was the raised awareness and responsibility of school staff for attendance issues. The headteacher of the school in which the electronic information system had been introduced, for example, stated that teachers were now '*more prepared to be involved with attendance*'. The EWO also reported that the school was now '*more proactive*' and that there was a '*more positive attitude*' towards attendance issues. Attendance audits were felt to challenge schools with regard to areas of weakness, to enable schools to use their EWO more effectively for specific areas of work and to lead to the adoption of other strategies concerning attendance. A sense of responsibility for attendance was perceived to have developed amongst form tutors as a result of attendance conferences. In addition, teachers were reported to take on board comments from pupils and there was a beneficial knock-on effect for the way that schools worked with outside agencies. On the other hand, the peer befriending scheme was noted to

create a more relaxed school environment, provide the staff with feedback from pupils, as well as emphasise the importance of listening to pupils.

6.7.4 Impact on the EWS

In five out of the nine initiatives, some impact on EWOs was referred to by interviewees. The introduction of the electronic registration system in one school was reported to have had a major impact on the role of the EWO in the school, as the school had become more proactive in dealing with attendance issues and could see the advantages of early intervention. This was thought to have resulted in a better working relationship and more effective working between the EWO and the school staff. Clarification of the EWO's role, the development of working practices with schools and providing a useful back-up when challenging schools or parents were reported outcomes of the adoption of attendance policies. Audits, on the other hand, enabled the EWO to target problems more accurately and work with schools on strategies to address them. Where EWOs had been used in more of a teaching role, as in the conference and the PSHE programme, it was thought valuable for teachers and pupils to see the EWO in a different role and, for one EWO, this had a major impact on their own confidence and skills.

6.7.5 Impact on outside agencies and parents

Within some of these preventative strategies, interviewees also reported a limited impact on outside agencies and parents. Where outside agencies had been involved as facilitators in the attendance conference, this was reported to raise their awareness of attendance issues and the work of the EWS. In addition, it was felt to be beneficial that the police had been viewed in a different light by the pupils and that the governors were seen as '*real*' people. The facilitators were noted to have enjoyed contact with the young people and were willing to participate again. Where attendance audits had been conducted in schools, it was noted that the community may be aware of linked strategies that had subsequently been established, such as the use of a pass system for pupils out of school. The information system was thought to have raised the profile of attendance within the town, as well as within the school.

The attendance conference and the incentive scheme were said to have raised awareness of parents, as well as pupils, with regard to attendance issues. Whilst the incentive scheme was reported to make parents '*think twice*' about keeping pupils off school, there were still problems with extended holidays and it was felt that using a non-uniform day as a reward might put pressure on parents with limited financial assets. The EWO involved in the development of the PSHE programme had been asked to talk to parents as a result of their involvement in the programme.

6.8 KEY ELEMENTS

Interviewees were asked what they considered to be the effective features of the preventative strategies and what they thought had brought about the perceived changes in attendance levels and in individual pupils. The responses to these questions have been combined to provide a summary of the essential ingredients for the effectiveness of preventative strategies. The 'essential ingredients' highlighted by interviewees were:

- schools' commitment
- schools' ownership or responsibility for attendance issues
- the high profile placed on attendance
- using people from outside the school environment
- providing a safe environment for discussion

A factor raised by a number of interviewees was the importance of schools' commitment to the initiative. This was reported by interviewees involved in the peer befriending scheme, the PSHE programme, audits and in the development of attendance policies. The peer befriending scheme was reported to help pupils manage their own problems and take responsibility for themselves, whilst the importance of ownership by the school was raised in regard to attendance audits. Interestingly, one of the key factors in both school-focused and pupil-focused initiatives was using people from outside the school environment. This was reported to be an important element of the attendance conference, the PSHE programme and attendance audits. In the latter, the EWO stated that it was easier for someone from outside to challenge staff and to say: '*This register is appalling. Please can you talk to the form tutor and make sure that it's improved.*' The head of year involved in the attendance conference explained that: '[Pupils] *often, sad as it is, listen to future employers and people from other agencies more than they do to us, who they see every day.*' In addition, PSHE programmes were noted to provide a safe environment for discussion by pupils, whilst attendance policies were reported to provide a basis for discussion and '*a safe place to train*' for school staff. Within the pupil-focused strategies, interviewees also identified the importance of the following key elements:

- listening to pupils
- a relaxed, informative and fun approach
- selection of the appropriate pupils as befrienders
- the use of peer pressure
- adopting tangible incentives
- having a realistic target that pupils can work towards

In connection with the electronic registration system, interviewees also highlighted the immediacy of information and having a foolproof mechanism for recording attendance as important.

6.9 CHALLENGES

Interviewees were asked to consider what had been some of the main challenges involved in adopting the preventative strategies discussed. Whilst being highlighted as one of the key elements in effectiveness for preventative strategies, ensuring schools' commitment, ironically, was also considered to be one of the main challenges. This was particularly the case in the introduction of attendance audits and the development of attendance polices within schools, as highlighted previously. In

the case of audits, the major task was reported by the EWO to be '*persuading schools with low attendance to let us in*'. Another EWO noted that there was still an element of '*non-ownership*' and that the little time allocated to teachers for pastoral work and the need for training were ongoing problems. In connection with the introduction of attendance policies, the main difficulty was in challenging headteachers. The PEWO, for example, described one case where the headteacher had been unable to get the staff to be involved in writing a policy. In peer-focused strategies, too, school commitment was felt to be vital. The form tutor, for example, was reported by the EWO to be the key to success in the implementation of incentive schemes. Some coordinators in schools were reported to be '*uncomfortable*' with the introduction of the peer befriending scheme and the introduction of PSHE sessions on attendance was thought to be a '*politically sensitive issue*' in some schools and therefore '*it was down to the headteacher*'. Another major challenge associated with the peer befriending scheme was ongoing modification and differentiation of the training to suit individual pupils' needs. On the other hand, the major challenge associated with the attendance conference was its initial organisation.

6.10 IMPROVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The major areas for improvement and development associated with preventative strategies were reported to be:

- more extensive follow-up
- extension to more areas
- more formal evaluation.

Interviewees highlighted the need for additional follow-up in three of the initiatives. It was felt that attendance conferences, for example, could be consolidated with more intensive work by the school and the EWO for five or six weeks after the conference. A need was expressed to revisit attendance a number of times in order to maintain awareness and the initial boost to attendance figures. The PSHE programme, it was thought, could be followed by time spent with each year group and revisited at the end of the year so that pupils had an opportunity to reflect on both their good and bad experiences. Policies too were thought to need revisiting with some schools, especially those with entrenched views, as there was a tendency to think that, once policies were written, that was the end of the process.

The possibility of extension to other areas was noted in six cases. Conferences and incentive schemes, which were presently restricted to one year group, were thought to be appropriate also for other year groups. Adoption of the peer befriending scheme had highlighted a wider remit for the project, perhaps extension to adults and training for all pupils through PSE. Both authorities using attendance audits were considering extending their use and providing all staff with training so that they could adopt this approach. In one case, the EWO suggested that audits might be improved by having someone from outside the county to conduct them so that they had no vested interested in the outcome. In one authority, the use of audits was to be combined with a county team that could '*troubleshoot*' schools. It was felt that attendance policies could be linked more to EDPs, and headteachers asked if they wanted further input.

The need for more formal in-depth evaluation was raised by three interviewees. In connection with the PSHE programme, more formal evaluation, particularly seeking the views of pupils, was felt to be appropriate. Examination of attendance figures later in the year after an attendance conference and the need for more formal evaluation before extension of the scheme were noted. Building in the use of more data and looking more at the causes of non-attendance when conducting attendance audits were also highlighted. Other developments included the need for more resources and updating worksheets and guidelines.

KEY POINTS

- Preventative strategies included initiatives which were both teacher- and pupil-focused. Teacher-focused initiatives included attendance audits, the development of an attendance policy and an electronic registration system, whilst pupil-focused strategies included an attendance conference, a PSHE programme, a peer befriending scheme and attendance incentive schemes.

- The aims of preventative strategies were to raise awareness and to identify areas of need in relation to attendance, as well as improving attendance.

- Multi-agency involvement was a feature in only two of the initiatives, but for the attendance conference it was felt to be a key element of its effectiveness.

- All the preventative strategies were considered to be cost-effective, based mainly on their far-reaching impact and the benefits of dealing with attendance problems early.

- Whilst the implementation of a PSHE programme and the introduction of attendance polices were thought to be too indirect to have an impact on attendance levels, other preventative strategies had resulted in improved attendance levels (although, in the case of the attendance conference, this had not been maintained).

- Preventative strategies were reported to have a number of effects on pupils, including raising their awareness of the importance of attendance, deterring pupils from truanting, giving pupils responsibility and improving their psychological well-being. Casual, one-off truants, however, were more likely to be affected than hard core non-attenders.

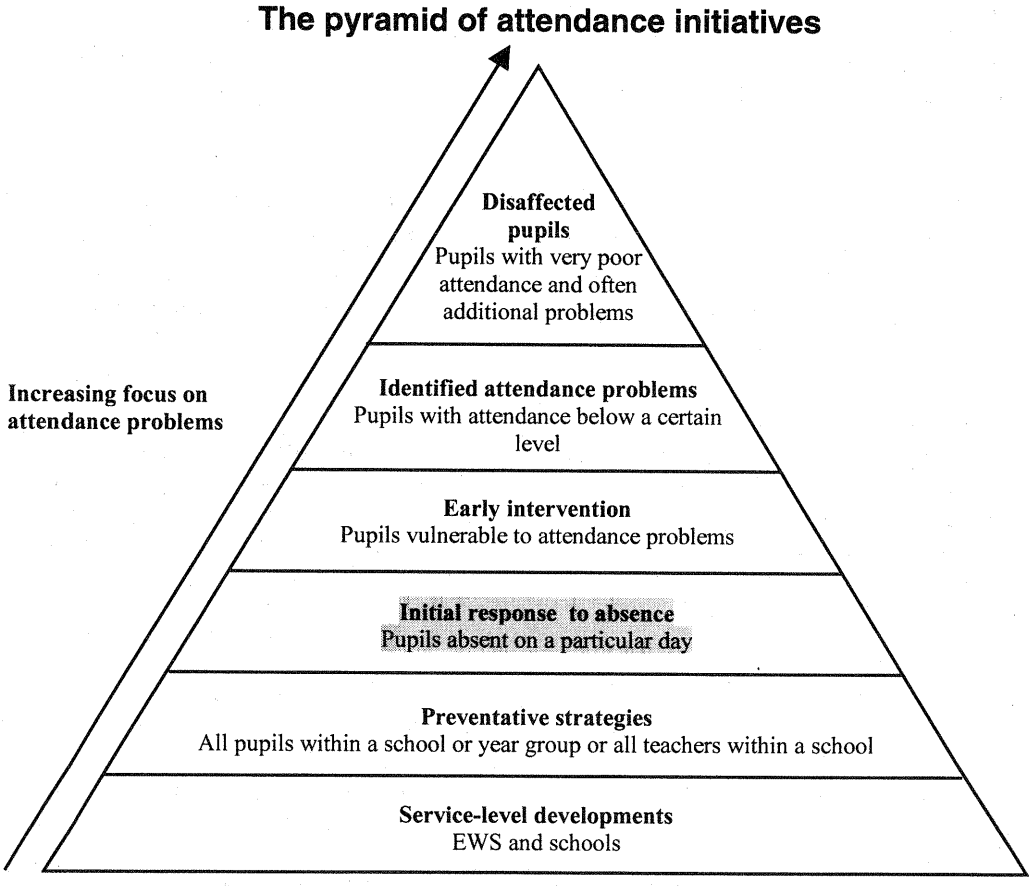
- Preventative strategies were also reported to have a number of effects on schools, including increasing their responsibility for attendance issues, raising the profile of attendance within the school, highlighting areas of weakness concerning attendance and more effective use of EWOs. Whole-school policies and audits were most successful in schools which were willing participants and with a strong commitment to the initiatives.

- The key elements of preventative strategies for effective practice were perceived to be schools' commitment and responsibility, the high profile placed on attendance, using people from outside the school environment and providing a safe environment for discussion. Whilst schools' commitment was considered to be a prerequisite for effectiveness, it was also considered to be one of the most challenging aspects.

CHAPTER SEVEN
INITIAL RESPONSE TO ABSENCE

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Initiatives classified as 'initial response to absence' were specifically focused on pupils absenting themselves from school on a specific day.



Two major approaches were identified that offered an initial response to absence, namely:

- truancy sweeps
- first-day response schemes.

The sample provided three examples of truancy sweeps, where children found on the streets during school hours were approached, questioned and, when appropriate, returned to their schools. Detailed descriptions of these are presented below.

Truancy sweeps
One-week sweep, targeting a particular school A uniformed policeman approached children detected by plain-clothed 'spotters'. The school had arranged for a member of staff to receive the police and the pupils that they brought back. At the end of every day, the police would complete a record sheet of all the children they had returned, with further details (time, where, etc). This sheet was then faxed to the EWS. The following day, the EWO made home visits and spoke to parents. Publicity was avoided at the start of the week, due to concerns that the children would disappear into houses where they would not be detected. Later in the week, however, the radio and press covered the sweep.
A community-based sweep This sweep used the 'eyes of the community' to report children found on the streets. If a resident, policeman or the estate caretaker spotted a child out of school, the details were noted and a truancy referral form faxed though to the EWO. The EWO then checked the reason for absence and, if necessary, visited the parents to discuss the absence.
A whole-borough sweep The sweep used police officers to stop children and then an EWO questioned the child as to why they were not in school. The children were then escorted back to school and their details entered on a form that was circulated to other EWOs. Parents received a letter notifying them that their child was out of school. The head of year, or the headteacher in the case of primary pupils, was also informed.

Five authorities out of the 20 highlighted as effective practice schemes which instigated a first-day response to non-attendance, where parents would be contacted on the same day that their child was absent from school, either by letter, phone or a home visit. Detailed descriptions of the different schemes are presented below.

First-day response schemes
A first-day response scheme administered by a telecommunications company Schools identified pupils who had been away from school for one day without giving a reason. A list of names was then faxed to the company. Call operators telephoned parents in the evening between 5 and 9 o'clock to ascertain the reasons for absence. A script was followed and calls were completely non-confrontational. The results of the calls were then faxed back to the school the following morning. On returning to school, the child still had to bring a note in from the parent to explain their absence. Prior to the scheme, parents were contacted and given the chance to opt out if they were not happy to be contacted by a telecommunications company.
A first-day response scheme administered by an education welfare assistant The EWA checked through the registers every morning and then sat by the late book to note the children who arrived late. The EWA also received phone calls from parents of children who were absent due to illness and checked the serious incident book for children who had been sent home by the school. The EWA then phoned the parents of all unexplained absences. If there was no response, the EWA went out to visit and, if again no contact was made, a contact card was left.
A first-day response scheme administered by an EWA over a four-week period Contact was made with parents as described above. Parents were notified in advance of the scheme by letter, which included a copy of the school's attendance policy. At the end of four weeks, the EWA put together a report with suggestions for improving attendance.
A first-day response scheme administered by teaching staff The scheme involved six school staff a day (30 over a fortnight) on a rota basis. The registers were compiled during period one and a list of pupils that were off that day was generated. This was checked against the late book and, at 9.45 a.m., a team of staff began phoning parents. At 10.05 a.m. the tutor period ended and the list of names was handed over to another member of staff to continue the calls. Any authorisation given by parents over the phone was then passed back to the school office, where the details were entered on to the computer.

Interestingly, another authority ran what could almost be described as a hybrid of the two approaches. Referred to as a 'sweep', the scheme actually took place within the confines of a school. All unexplained absences on a given day would be followed up by letters or other means. Unlike other first-day response schemes, it did not operate every day, but according to school need, perhaps once every half-term. In this way it combined the elements of a one-off 'sweep-like' intervention, using the procedures of a first-day response.

Truancy sweep/First-day response
An 'in-school' sweep An assistant EWO went into school on a given day and used SIMS data to identify every child that was not at school. They then tried to establish the reasons why and checked the late book. For those children that were left, three officers went out to visit homes. If parents were at work, a letter was sent out to say they had been visited and, where possible, a telephone call was made. The results of the day's intervention were recorded manually and on the computer. One copy was given to the head of year and another to the base EWO. If more input was needed, the child concerned would be referred to the base EWO.

7.2 AIMS

According to interviewees, the aims of truancy sweeps and first-day response schemes were to:

- boost attendance figures
- raise awareness about the importance of attendance, amongst the community, parents and children
- improve communication between the parent and school
- reduce crime in the community.

As well as the undisputed aim of trying to improve attendance levels, interviewees nominated a number of other objectives. These initiatives were believed to raise awareness of the importance of attendance amongst the community, parents and, of course, children. Parents were informed immediately if their child failed to attend school. They were also notified of their legal responsibilities and they were encouraged to make contact with schools as soon as possible, thereby improving home–school liaison. For the children, these schemes demonstrated that their non-attendance would be followed up and that they would most definitely be missed. One interviewee also pointed out that many of the children picked up on a truancy sweep would not necessarily be known to the EWS, therefore providing an opportunity to target one-off, sporadic non-attendance that would otherwise go undetected. It could be argued, therefore, that initial responses to non-attendance to some extent perform a preventative function, deterring non-attendance amongst those toying with the idea. In one area, the aims of the sweep were very much related to the surrounding community. Hence, the sweep, set up following complaints by elderly residents concerning groups of children hanging around during the day, endeavoured to reassure local residents and reduce local crime, as well as return children to school.

7.3 TARGETING

Truancy sweeps, by their very nature, were non-specific in terms of the target group, i.e. any child of school age found on the streets during school hours. However, there were parameters in terms of the geographical location. In one authority, the locale of a particular school was targeted; in another, a particular estate; and one sweep extended across a whole borough. In one area, children were approached even if they were with parents, therefore honing in on the problem of parentally condoned absence.

First-day response schemes, although seeming to offer a catch-all response to non-attendance, did in fact operate some degree of selectivity. Two schemes chose to follow up non-attendance that would benefit most from their input. Cases of below 50 per cent were seen as more demanding and were therefore left to more specialist EWO intervention. In one authority, Year 11 pupils were exempt from the scheme, because it was a pilot that ran in the summer months. Often schools or particular year groups were targeted on the basis of their poor attendance, e.g. six secondary schools where attendance fell below 85 per cent.

7.4 MULTI-AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

In all truancy sweeps, the EWS called on the services of the local police to assist in detecting children. A community-based sweep pulled together representatives from a number of agencies, including the estate caretaker, a youth worker and representatives from housing, the Residents Association and a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. In the case of first-day response schemes, one, rather uniquely, used a call centre of a national telecommunications company to make contact with parents. This was seen as advantageous because such centres have the equipment to make repeat calls to parents, without having to redial. Other interviewees mentioned liaising with health professionals in cases where absences appeared to be medically related; housing, because a family was being racially harassed; and the Transport Department, in connection with school buses.

Some issues were raised in relation to working with the police. One interviewee found it difficult to gain the trust of children once they had been stopped by a uniformed officer. In contrast, however, others saw the uniform as instrumental to the sweep. This was highlighted, for example, following an incident in which a plain-clothed officer approached a child, prompting concerns over child protection. In addition, a uniform was thought to be not only immediately recognised by children, but also signified the seriousness of non-attendance.

7.5 FUNDING AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Three schemes (one truancy sweep and two first-day response) were paid for through Standards Fund money. In terms of funding issues, three interviewees expressed concerns over the short-term nature of funding, which prohibited long-term planning and minimised job security. Without guaranteed funding, projects were at risk of losing staff and a school representative felt that the '*itty-bitty*' way in which funding was acquired prevented them from gaining full control of the situation and indeed from developing a true overview.

Those interviewees who commented on cost-effectiveness believed that the schemes justified their cost, because of the volume of work achieved, the feedback from schools, the long-term benefits to the child and the reduction in local crime. A headmaster of a school implementing a first-day response scheme concluded that it was not just the non-attenders who gained as a consequence. Children who were absent from school required additional attention on their return, distracting the teacher away from the rest of the class. Therefore, by minimising non-attendance, the teacher was able to concentrate their energies towards the needs of the whole class. This, in the headmaster's view, was what made the scheme cost-effective. Lastly, a truancy sweep was said to reduce the amount of vandalism and burglary in the area and, for this reason, the policeman interviewed considered the scheme to be cost-effective.

7.6 EVALUATION

Seven of the nine schemes were formally evaluated. For the in-school sweep, computer printouts were produced itemising all the visits of the day and the subsequent code given for the child's absence. Further evaluation was planned in the form of a questionnaire to staff, as well as more detailed statistical analysis. A one-week truancy sweep was reviewed in a post-sweep briefing, which assembled all the parties involved. Likewise, although not formally evaluated, the residents involved in a community-based sweep received reports detailing actions and referrals, which, in a sense, allowed the impact of the scheme to be monitored.

Three of the first-day response schemes used attendance figures to evaluate success, comparing before and after levels and, in one authority, the EWA responsible for first-day response produced a short report on the ten most contacted children. Such information was considered valuable for both schools and EWS staff. Interviewees also spoke of including practical recommendations in their evaluation reports, e.g. activities for keeping children in on the last day of term, dealing with lateness, etc. Over time, the data collected proved useful in identifying any trends, such as gender differences, or ethnic implications.

7.7 IMPACT

As well as improving both individual and whole-school attendance levels, the impact of initiatives classed as initial response to absence centred primarily on raising awareness of and increasing responsibility for attendance matters, particularly with parents and schools, but even the wider community. Improved systems for monitoring attendance in schools were also another feature. Given that many EWSs are operating within a climate of limited resources and an increasing focus on attendance issues, the ability of interventions to raise awareness and reinforce others', but particularly schools', responsibility for attendance might need to be an increasingly important feature.

7.7.1 Impact on attendance levels

All schemes were considered to have raised attendance levels and, in some cases, percentage improvements were given:

- Interviewees discussing truancy sweeps reported attendance increases of eight per cent within a school targeted and, in the case of the 'in-school' sweep, 11.4 per cent of children went back to school the same day and 66.7 per cent went back the next day.

- Of the first-day response schemes, attendance levels rose by 1.71 per cent (over a 12-week pilot project), three per cent over a term, three per cent generally and, in one case, by nine per cent over four years.

One comment made concerning the impact on attendance was that, at any one time, a number of interventions may be in place and it is therefore difficult to attribute success to any one. However, the interviewees stated that the schemes were none the less significant contributors to improving attendance figures.

7.7.2 Impact on pupils

Both truancy sweeps and first-day response schemes were considered to have:

Most impact on pupils:	Least impact on pupils:
• who were occasional truants • who were considering truanting • with above 50 per cent attendance • who were willing to share their problems, e.g. bullying, family problems • whose parents condoned their absence	• who were serious non-attenders • whose parents had no control over them • who were older, with more entrenched attitudes

Thus, whilst these initiatives were felt to be effective for pupils who had the odd day off or acted as a deterrent for those who were tempted to truant, they were felt to have had little impact on long-term, hard-core cases of non-attendance. In addition, since these strategies often relied on parents and used them as a vehicle for conveying the importance of attendance, where parents had already lost control of their children and effectively abandoned their responsibility for their child's attendance, they were less likely to have an impact. Almost as a side-effect of these schemes, the consistent everyday contact with some pupils afforded them the opportunity to share their concerns and highlighted the underlying causes of non-attendance that might then be addressed. The following examples illustrate the types of pupils for whom these strategies can be effective:

Truancy sweeps:
Those considering truanting:

> *The child who is hinkering on 'Do I or don't I truant?' has got to understand they might be caught and that's going to happen and I have no doubt about that. It's not going to help the hard child, but that's not what's intended* (EWO).

A pupil being bullied:

> *He began to trust me because I was always walking around, popping in to see him. I didn't force him back to school. He had big problems at school. He was getting bullied. He was a success. Every day I would find him. He used to hide by the railway lines and I knew exactly where he went and I used to go and see him every day. But he did go back* (policeman).

First-day response:
A pupil with family problems:

> *By being on the ball and responding to her needs on a daily basis, she actually broke down on the way to school in the car and told me a lot of things which were going on at home. She probably wouldn't have had that chance if I hadn't built that relationship with her every day* (EWA).

A pupil with 70 per cent attendance and whose parent condoned their absence:

> *He was a very nice child but his attendance was about 70 per cent. I used to go and visit. Mother wasn't very happy because she said there were other children outside playing about. I said that we were not interested in them ... We asked her to come to a meeting and she didn't come. He didn't come. What we did was we said we will do a school medical. He didn't want a medical either, but it did have that effect. He is on 100 per cent attendance this term* (EWA).

Truancy sweeps and first-day response schemes impacted on pupils mainly by raising their awareness of the consequences of non-attendance, thereby deterring it in the future. From a child's point of view, truancy sweeps were public, hard-hitting and, through the involvement of a police officer, relatively serious. Interviewees spoke of children who were '*horrified*' and '*shocked*' that they had been caught. One scheme actually employed a 'shaming policy' to maximise its impact – children were accompanied back to school by police officers and escorted through the playground, preferably at break time, in full view of their peers. It was thought that the embarrassment generated would be enough to deter future non-attendance, as well as to demonstrate to other children that, if they too decided to truant, they would eventually be caught. In this sense, truancy sweeps were not only returning children to school; they were also conveying a clear anti-truancy message.

While perhaps not as public, the effect of first-day response schemes was essentially the same as truancy sweeps, largely because they were so unrelenting. Children soon realised that their non-attendance would always be noticed, and that their parents would always be informed. Again, the system was thought to impact on both current non-attenders and those at risk by stressing the view that attendance was important and that there was, literally, no place to hide.

7.7.3 Impact on schools

No specific impacts were reported on schools in relation to truancy sweeps, although naturally their attendance figures rose. First-day response schemes, however, did impact on both school systems and school staff by:

- improving registration and other attendance-related systems
- encouraging staff to take responsibility for attendance matters
- saving teacher time, because of additional EWA support.

In order to maximise the efficacy of first-day response, registration systems and parents' telephone numbers had to be accurate. Interviewees therefore reported a refinement of existing systems. With structured procedures in place for responding to non-attendance, teaching staff were said to be more willing to get involved in attendance matters, as they were supported by accurate, immediately accessible information. Having a dedicated person to follow up non-attendance was also said to save teacher time, allowing them to concentrate on other school matters. In two schools, the approach had proved so worthwhile that they had continued the project in-house, employing, in one case, an attendance secretary.

7.7.4 Impact on parents

Parents were said to be affected in much the same way as children, as a consequence of the two schemes. These schemes were said to:

- raise awareness of the systems in place and that non-attendance was not permitted
- reinforce parents' responsibility for their child's attendance
- improve communication between parents and the school.

Parents, like their children, received the message that non-attendance would not tolerated and that they would be contacted in the event that they failed to explain their child's absence beforehand or if their child was found out on the streets. As a consequence, one interviewee believed that absences were now far more genuine. The second major impact on parents related to the communication between school and home. Parents were now aware of the system for reporting absence and would actually pre-empt contact by the EWA/EWO by phoning in at the designated time to report an absence.

7.7.5 Impact on the EWS

One side-effect of both truancy sweeps and first-day response schemes was that they brought to the attention of the EWS children that would never have otherwise been referred to them. The attendance level of these children would instead continue to deteriorate, presenting more entrenched attendance problems later on in school. In this sense, the two schemes incorporated an early warning system, with the opportunity to eliminate the first signs of non-attendance, through immediate, corrective action.

7.7.6 Impact on the community

The influence of truancy sweeps and first-day response schemes also extended to the surrounding community by:

- raising awareness of the importance of school attendance in the community
- providing a safer community environment, e.g. reducing crime levels.

By removing children from the streets, juvenile crime was said to diminish and as a consequence a better community environment was created and the 'spirit of the community' was raised. An EWA making home visits as part of a first-day response scheme soon became a familiar face on the estate, therefore raising the profile of attendance in the community. Again, a vital aspect of both schemes was that they communicated very strongly a zero-tolerance view of non-attendance to pupils, parents and the community at large.

7.8 KEY ELEMENTS

First-day response and truancy sweep schemes were considered by interviewees to be effective because of their:

- immediacy
- persistence
- consistency
- ability to raise awareness

Without doubt the effective ingredients of first-response schemes were cited as their immediacy, consistency and persistence. Non-attendance was instantly detected and the consistency of response meant that both parents and children knew that, in the event of unexplained absence, parents would soon receive a phone call, a letter or a visit from an EWO. As one interviewee stressed: '*You can't afford to let your grip slacken.*' In this way parents were effectively worn down, became conditioned to the system and soon learnt that, to avoid unnecessary hassle, they needed to contact the school in advance of an absence. Similarly, truancy sweeps offered an instant response to non-attendance and their public nature meant that they too raised awareness amongst those concerned. Other key elements raised by individual interviewees included:

- planned reintegration for returned truants
- using plain-clothed spotters to detect children
- good interagency relationships
- using teachers for first-day contact, so that other pastoral issues were discussed
- having sufficient transport to convey children back to school.

7.9 CHALLENGES

Difficulties encountered during truancy sweeps included the logistics of conveying large groups of children back to school; using unaccompanied police; working with difficult families and approaching parents. In one authority, where a policeman went out without an EWO, the individual involved found the lack of education knowledge a hindrance. An EWO, he explained, would always know the right questions to ask and would also have the expertise to challenge parents found with school-aged children.

To guarantee the success of first-day response schemes, interviewees explained that it was essential that EWOs/EWAs received accurate attendance data, otherwise parents may be contacted unnecessarily, or, worse still, some children may slip through the net. One school representative too spoke of parents being irritated in the event of unnecessary phone calls. Those running the schemes were therefore faced with having to criticise existing school systems and tighten up procedures. Some school staff interviewed, however, recognised the need for accurate data. A head of a primary school explained, for example, that for the scheme to operate smoothly, the EWS personnel had to be provided correct information, so that genuine absences were followed up, rather than holiday absences where prior authorisation had been granted. Secondly, while first-day response was seen as an effective strategy by many interviewees, others acknowledged its limitations where particular children were concerned. Little impact was reported amongst children with more serious attendance problems and, perhaps in these cases, other approaches are required.

7.10 IMPROVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Only a few suggestions were made when interviewees were asked how projects could be improved. A policeman involved in a truancy sweep felt it would be useful to have an EWO present when questioning children and, in another area, an interviewee recommended more publicity to raise the profile of the sweep. In the case of first-day response, one interviewee suggested targeting particular year groups at vulnerable times, e.g. Year 7 after the transition to secondary school and Year 10 in the summer term.

KEY POINTS

- The sample included two types of approach which sought to offer an initial response to absence – truancy sweeps and first-day response schemes – whilst one authority operated a combination of the two approaches in the form of an in-school sweep.

- Both approaches sought to boost attendance figures, as well as raise the issue of attendance amongst parents, children and in the community. First-day response schemes in particular endeavoured to improve home–school liaison by placing the onus on parents to contact schools in the event of an absence. A community-based sweep served to quell the concerns of local residents and reduce the incidence of local crime.

- In terms of multi-agency involvement, truancy sweeps solicited the input of the local police to approach children on the streets. Other notable multi-agency input was seen within a first-day response scheme, which used a national telecommunications company to make phone calls following up non-attendance.

- Initiatives were perceived to be cost-effective because of the amount of work they achieved, the feedback from schools, the long-term benefits experienced by the children and the reduction in local crime.

- All schemes reported increased attendance levels, with improvements of between 1.71 per cent (over a 12-week project) to nine per cent (over four years).

- The initiatives raised the awareness of pupils such that they were deterred from future non-attendance. They had the most impact on occasional truants or those considering truanting, rather than hard-core cases of non-attendance. They were also felt to be less effective where parents had little control over their children. The initiatives also 'exposed' children whose non-attendance may not have been noticed for some time.

- First-day response schemes were reported to improve school systems, although confronting schools about ineffective systems was felt to be one of the biggest challenges, and encourage teaching staff to take responsibility for attendance-related matters.

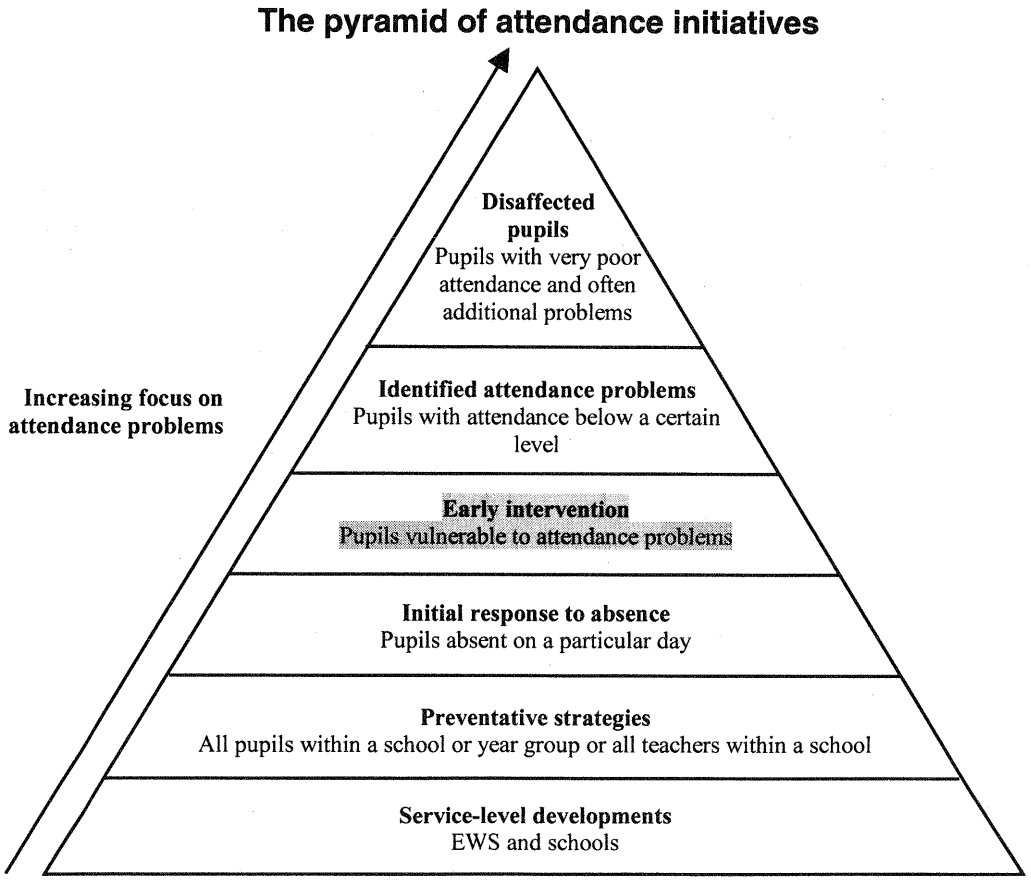
- Parents too were said to have acquired a clearer understanding that non-attendance would not be permitted and that they were held accountable. Consequently, communication between parents and school was seen to improve. Community effects were also evidenced, in the form of greater awareness of the attendance issue and a reduction in local crime.

- Effectiveness was ascribed to the immediacy, consistence and persistence of schemes, as well as their ability to raise awareness.

CHAPTER EIGHT
EARLY INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This section discusses early intervention strategies, categorised as such because they targeted individuals or groups that could be considered vulnerable and therefore at risk of developing attendance problems in the future.



In total, five authorities offered examples of this type of work and these included:

- a parents' support group
- a primary intervention project, which offered practical help to families and their children
- a project concerned with the school transfer of 'looked-after' child
- two transition projects, set up to facilitate the move from primary to secondary school.

Detailed description of each of these initiatives is provided below.

Parents' support group

The group met on a Thursday morning at 9 o'clock at the primary school where parents brought their children to school. The morning started with tea and coffee and was run by a nursery teacher and an EWO. At each session, a variety of topics were discussed, including drugs, attendance, bullying and domestic violence. The group was very much parent-led, following up any issues that they themselves generated. When appropriate, outside contributors would be invited along to give talks on relevant topics.

Primary intervention project

Focusing on four primary schools in a socially deprived area, the EWO key worker undertook a variety of tasks, including work directly with school staff and pupils, providing support to families and liaison with other professionals involved. The first stage of the project entailed going into schools to establish and refine systems, such as keeping detailed registers and compiling letters to parents. Non-attendance was followed up by a series of letters and, if, after a fifth letter, the parent had failed to respond, then a referral would be passed to the key worker. At this point, the key worker collated information from any other services involved with the family to determine what intervention was most appropriate. The worker made a home visit and looked at getting practical help for the family, e.g. benefits or support in the community. Direct work with the child was also offered but very often the project endeavoured to improve the child's home environment by working with the family. At no time was the child viewed as 'the problem' and all intervention was solution-focused.

Looked-after children's project

Set up in a city with a large number of looked-after children, this project brought together Social Services and the Education Department to facilitate the smooth transfer of children into new schools. Previously, communications between the manager of the children's homes and local schools had suffered, because the process was *ad hoc* and both '*viewed one another with great suspicion*'. The project was therefore initiated to give structure to the process and build a bridge between children's homes and schools. The EWS received a referral form from Social Services, at which point a pre-admission meeting would be arranged to discuss the child's needs and entry to school. All concerned agencies were invited, thus making sure that the child received the best possible start. Further support was offered by two 'looked-after children' support teachers. The teachers undertook a number of tasks, including meeting with headteachers, working with long-term non-attenders, arranging alternative provision, attending case conferences, advising schools on teaching and learning strategies, behaviour therapy and implementing Pastoral Support Plans.

Transition project 1

Set up by the Youth Service, this project used mentors in Years 7 to 10 to support pupils in the transition from primary to secondary school. Mentors were trained over a five-week period, covering such topics as, the role of the mentor, mentoring skills and the transition period. The mentors were selected by their schools and tended to be confident young people who, although doing well, needed to be involved in other activities. The mentors visited the primary schools to meet prospective Year 7s and relationships were further cemented at a personal development residential held during the summer holidays. The residential comprised activities such as orienteering, 'It's a Knock Out' and IT skills. The scheme also used junior leaders, aged 16–17, whose role was to support the mentors, as opposed to mentees. Junior leaders were recruited from schools, New Start and an alternative education programme. After the transfer, the mentees received ongoing support through drop-in sessions and homework clubs, once a week. If desired, the mentees were given the opportunity to train as mentors later on and likewise mentors could become junior leaders. Two teachers from the school provided additional in-school support, in terms of informing children about sessions, speaking to form tutors, etc.

Transition project 2

This transition project supported not only pupils, but also their parents, in the transfer to secondary school. Instead of peer mentors, the scheme offered support through classroom assistants. Prior to transfer, the classroom assistant went into schools to observe and befriend the children. At the same time, parents were visited to gain their cooperation and to pass on relevant information, such as the school calendar, timetables and school procedures concerning attendance, and also to allow parents to share their own concerns about the transition. Before transferring, the children, from different primary schools, were brought together for a day of team building activities and the opportunity to form friendships. On arrival at secondary school, the children continued to be supported in the classroom. Children completed target planners with goals related to attendance, homework and behaviour and each child involved received a membership card.

8.2 AIMS

The interviewees cited the following as aims for early intervention strategies:

- to make the EWS available to parents and to establish links with the community
- to work preventatively at primary level to reduce truancy and disaffection
- to promote the smooth transfer of looked-after children to new schools, thereby minimising truancy and disaffection
- to support children in a successful transfer from primary to secondary school and to reduce the stress of transfer.

Despite targeting groups that may have already been showing early signs of disaffection, the interventions were in many ways preventative. For example, the primary intervention project took a '*proactive, preventative*' approach, and endeavoured to work with families at the earliest opportunity to establish good habits of attendance. Likewise, the project focusing on looked-after children oversaw the admission procedure to new schools so those children benefited from a smooth transfer, thereby reducing behaviour problems and/or possible non-attendance. In a similar way, the primary–secondary transition projects offered support at a vulnerable time to minimise future exclusions and non-attendance, and promote achievement later on.

8.3 THE TARGET GROUP

Nearly all the projects targeted primary-aged children, further indication of their preventative emphasis. In addition, the parents' group worked with parents of young children and the 'looked-after' project worked with children between five and 16 years of age. Another common factor in targeting was the decision to work in areas characterised by social deprivation and poor attendance. The parents' group was held at a primary school on an estate with a significant drug problem, high crime rates and, some years previously, incidences of rioting. Similarly, the primary intervention project targeted an area that had suffered from the loss of traditional heavy industries in recent years, resulting in high unemployment and poverty. By their location, the target groups for both these projects, could be considered vulnerable and therefore at risk of developing attendance problems. For the transition schemes, vulnerability was determined by teaching staff, who identified children they thought would benefit from additional support in the move to secondary school – criteria for selection included low confidence, behaviour problems, low achievers, difficult family backgrounds and very quiet children.

8.4 MULTI-AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Two projects liaised with a whole network of other agencies, in order to meet the diverse needs of their target group. The primary intervention project made contact with Social Services, the Health Service, Education Services, local charities and community groups – indeed anyone that could enhance the family life of the child concerned. The looked-after children's project operated through a multi-agency structure, having been established jointly by the Education Department and Social

Services. In addition, the looked-after support teachers involved the Young Person's Support Service, New Start, Barnados, the Careers Service, the Health Service and the Youth Service.

The remaining two projects also offered examples of multi-agency input. An EWO and a nursery teacher from the host primary school jointly coordinated the parents' group. When needed, outside agencies would be invited to give talks, e.g. headteachers, education workers and health visitors. Of the transition projects, one was organised by the EWS, with referrals made, where appropriate, to Social Services, Child Guidance and the Health Service, and the other project was entirely set up and delivered by the Youth Service.

Enhanced interagency liaison was an impact of some projects (see later) and only one interviewee raised any issues specifically in relation to multi-agency liaison. The looked-after scheme established structures and procedures for dealing with the school admission of looked-after children (in addition to in-school support). A more formal system was appreciated by the participating agencies, in particular having a named individual to speak to. As a consequence, interagency relations were said to have improved. However, disagreement over funding responsibility was a debilitating factor, in that '*Social Services will perceive it to be an education issue; Education will perceive it to be a Social Services issue*' (looked-after children support teacher), the outcome being that resources were not adequately budgeted for.

8.5 FUNDING AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Both transition projects were funded by the Standards Fund. The primary intervention project had originated from GEST funding. Meanwhile, the looked-after children project was jointly funded by the Education Department and Social Services and the parents' group by a regeneration budget. Interviewees perceived their work as cost-effective because of the long-term benefits accrued. The parents' group was said to encourage good attendance habits; a transition project saved EWS resources in Years 8 to 11 and the second transition scheme was thought to make a significant social impact. Meanwhile, the looked-after project was considered economical by a Social Services representative because it responded to needs, rather than plodding through procedures regardless of their relevance to the child. In addition, raised awareness of looked-after children and increased interagency work were considered valuable spin-offs, justifying project expenditure. One interviewee, though, held reservations that the primary intervention project was almost too cost-effective, because it demonstrated that enormous gains could be made with limited resources. This did not support a request for more staffing.

In terms of funding issues, two projects suffered because of the short-term cyclical funding system. Funding for the parents' group was due to cease at the end of the financial year, leaving an uncertain future. A transition project found it difficult to recruit vital classroom assistants because funding decisions often came at the last minute. In addition, with regard to transition schemes, because of changes in Government funding arrangements, secondary schools might have to buy in a programme that begins in primary school. The PEWO concerned stated that this made it '*quite a hard sale to make in the first place*'. Lastly, the looked-after

children's project wanted additional funding to enhance their service, e.g. for teacher training and the recruitment of classroom assistants for supporting children in school.

8.6 EVALUATION

Four of the schemes had been formally evaluated, with the remaining scheme monitoring the progress of children closely, in order to generate case studies with tried and tested strategies for success. Three of the projects utilised questionnaires to ascertain the impact of their work. A transition project, in particular, surveyed every person involved, including children, parents, classroom assistants and teachers, gathering a wealth of information which could be used to track the progress of every child involved.

8.7 IMPACT

Early intervention projects were reported to have a major impact on parents and schools, as well as on pupils. For example, parents' psychological well-being had often improved, as well as their children's. These initiatives not only raised awareness of schools about attendance matters but also changed the attitude of school staff to pupils by providing a greater understanding of their needs. This may mean that a wider impact might be felt by other, similar pupils and the effects of such projects may be significantly more widespread than first anticipated. Interviewees within the looked-after project, which involved close liaison between Education and Social Services, not surprisingly, stood alone in enhancing interagency liaison and resulted in significant changes in attitude of these agencies towards each other. This too may have a knock-on effect for other pupils and other professionals.

8.7.1 Impact on attendance levels

In all but one of the projects, interviewees reported evidence of improved or maintained attendance. The primary intervention project was reported to have effected '*marked increases in attendance and a reduction in unauthorised absences*' in the targeted schools. A transition project was said to have maintained very good attendance levels, as children settled in at secondary school. The looked-after project reported better attendance amongst the children involved. One project, however, could not comment on the attendance benefits because it had only been operational for two terms.

8.7.2 Impact on pupils

Of the four initiatives that worked directly with pupils, the two transition projects were reported to have most impact on pupils with poor self-esteem and low confidence and those who tended to be isolated, although this approach was also felt to be beneficial for pupils who were disorganised or who had behavioural problems. The looked-after project, on the other hand, was felt to have more impact on younger rather than older pupils, and felt to help pupils with issues about separation from their family. It was found to be very difficult to engage pupils who had no experience of mainstream education, often with low self-esteem. The primary intervention project also reported success where sibling rivalry was involved. The following examples further illustrate the pupils for whom these strategies were most successful.

Transition projects

A pupil with poor self-esteem, low confidence and isolated from her peers:

> *Her attendance in the primary school was poor, very poor. Her self-esteem and her confidence were poor. Her ability to deal with classroom situations was poor. In primary school,* [the classroom assistant] *said that she had her own desk all on her own. She was fairly isolated. She actually teamed up with and became good friends with the other girls on the project. Her attendance improved dramatically and the biggest achievement was to watch her self-confidence grow* (EWO).

A disorganised, isolated pupil:

> *He was always last to be changed, always last into the sports hall, never got picked for a team, was reluctant to push himself forward and didn't mix with the other kids that well. He's got friendships with the other kids because he's joined in the games. He's become part of what's going on without really having to push himself into it* (teacher).

The looked-after project:

A pupil with family separation issues:

> *Because of circumstances and because she wanted to see her mum more, she was actually not going to school as often as she should have been. But, because I was involved, we've managed to be able to have liaison meetings with the school, the looked-after support teacher, and we've actually managed to do a reduced timetable for her which includes her mum coming in to sit with her in school* (EWO).

Pupils with no experience of mainstream education and low self-esteem:

> *That's because they find it very difficult to fit into that regime, because they've either been in small units or they've just opted out themselves for various reasons. They typically have low self-esteem. They don't think that they can do very well academically so they give up and they say they don't want to do exams because they feel they can't* (looked-after support teacher).

The primary intervention project

Sibling rivalry:

> *The younger sibling constantly felt as though he didn't have a place, that mum's attention was always with that child. I suggested within the school that he actually had ownership of a group. That was delightful because not only did they befriend him, but they supported him to respond in a different way and, at the end of the school day when his mum picked him up, they would go out and say '*[X] *has tried really hard today', and it was lovely to see the child actually almost fluffing up his feathers and responding to that and it also meant that mum was just sensitively aware that she did have another very vulnerable little button here who wasn't managing* (EWO).

Three projects cited the improved psychological well-being, in the form of a raised self-esteem, as a pupil effect and, amongst those involved in the looked-after project, there were children who had '*started to enjoy school for the first time*'. Specifically in relation to attendance, the primary intervention project was said to bond the child with their school and encourage good habits of attendance. This effect was believed to have longer-term consequences, as behaviour problems were more easily addressed and attainment improved if a child was regularly in school.

8.7.3 Impact on schools

Projects were thought to have impacted on schools by:

- changing staff attitudes towards certain types of pupil
- raising their awareness of resources and giving advice on managing disaffection
- enhancing liaison with outside agencies.

Through observing the work of two projects, school staff were said to have altered their attitudes towards particular types of pupil. In the case of the looked-after project, school staff were now more aware and therefore more understanding of the difficulties encountered by looked-after children: '*Looked-after children aren't seen as rogues and villains; they're seen as children with needs.*' To address these needs, they were said to be utilising the strategies and resources used by the project. Also, because of the structured system for admitting a child to school and the follow-up support given, schools were said to be more welcoming of looked-after children. A transition project, which took time to listen to children's problem, had demonstrated to the school that such an approach was effective and, consequently, teachers were thought to '*look at children differently*'. The primary prevention project, which concentrated first on implementing and improving school systems around attendance and behaviour, made a significant contribution to school effectiveness. In an evaluation report completed by a participating school, the school commented on the valuable information shared in relation to managing pupil disaffection and, furthermore, '*The whole-school policy of shared information and concerns with truancy and behaviour has become more strongly focused on a multi-agency approach.*' This school now felt more supported by other agencies. Finally, involvement in a transition scheme had also promoted better interagency liaison. Prior to its implementation, the school had concerns over Youth Service involvement, but following its success, relationships were now very good.

8.7.4 Impact on parents

Of the two projects targeted at parents, the parents' group was felt to have most impact on parents who were suspicious of authority and therefore difficult to access, but least impact on parents of very poor attenders and those who were prepared to condone their children's absence. On the other hand, the primary intervention project offered the type of support that was most beneficial for parents who were finding it difficult to cope practically:

Primary intervention project
Parents finding it difficult to cope:

> *I had another mum who was very poorly, really struggling and had a very able little girl who was very controlling of mum. Even though it was hard for mum because she physically was ill and her energy was depleted really, she was saying quite clearly 'It's just easier to let her do what she wants. I haven't got the energy to deal with this', but she also knew that there was a huge payback on that* (EWO).

Interviewees reported the following impact on parents:

- improved psychological well-being – raised confidence and self-esteem
- raised awareness and thus a greater understanding of the value of education
- enhanced parenting skills.

The projects which reported impacts on parents were those which incorporated significant amounts of parental support, targeting not just children, but also their families. The parents' group, by virtue of its membership, impacted most visibly. The confidence and self-esteem of parents were reported to have risen, they had become good friends and the parents themselves had returned to education. At the same time, the sessions held in the group had succeeded in conveying to the parents the importance of education and also provided a forum for discussing parenting skills. The primary intervention project also endeavoured to support parents, so that many were able to manage better at home. Similarly, a transition project sought to reassure parents over their child's transfer to secondary school and to develop their confidence when discussing their child's education with teachers.

8.7.5 Impact on other agencies

In just one project, interviewees specifically cited an impact on other agencies. The multi-agency structure and approach of the looked-after project helped foster effective liaison. The relationship between Social Services and Education Services was perceived to be '*very strong*', with greater understanding of each other's concerns: '*less of a feeling of them and us*'. Social Services realised that educational professionals did in fact care about the needs of looked-after children, while residential staff in children's homes were said to be more '*attuned to educational issues*'.

8.8 KEY ELEMENTS

The overwhelming key factor in the effectiveness of early intervention projects was the need to developing trusting relationships with pupils, parents, school staff and other professionals. In many respects, the comments made by those operating early intervention strategies related to the quality of their relationships. Project workers needed to establish and nurture relationships in order to gain the confidence of those involved and, from that vantage point, initiate change. Indeed, this was seen as the key element of the primary intervention project, which targeted vulnerable children in socially deprived areas, where both families and schools were under considerable pressure. The project worker spoke of having to be sensitive, empathetic and honest, because you have to have '*a trusting working professional relationship. It's critical, especially in hard areas – they don't need someone to come in and fudge things*'. From the perspective of the looked-after support teachers, their effectiveness stemmed from adopting a child-centred approach and developing an effective relationship with the child so that they could motivate and assist them. A transition project also highlighted its person-centred approach as a means of making gains with pupils. The effectiveness of the looked-after project stemmed from the multi-agency approach, with agencies working cooperatively towards a common goal, as well as its increasing formalisation of the admissions system. Instead of an *ad hoc* system, those involved

in the process had forms to fill out and named individuals they could contact to discuss looked-after matters.

In connection with developing effective relationships, interestingly, the status of those implementing interventions was also highlighted as important. The fact that one transition project was youth worker-led, was thought to have contributed to its success, as '*teachers are always going to be teachers*'. The input from a nursery teacher in the parents' group was vital as his/her position allowed him/her to develop relationships with parents in school and extend an invitation to the group, although the success of the group was also attributed to its informal atmosphere. The interviewees believed that parents would be quickly deterred by attempts to impose a structure or follow a prearranged agenda. In this sense, the group was very much parent-led. On the other hand, in the looked-after project, qualified teacher status gave support workers credibility and meant that they were in a good position to discuss curriculum issues with school staff.

8.9 CHALLENGES

Interestingly, a common challenge was faced by early intervention projects, namely a resistance to the schemes and having to gain the trust of those involved. For instance, the parents' group was located in an area where social workers were viewed with suspicion and they subsequently had to tread very carefully when welcoming new members to the group. In this authority, EWOs were known as education social workers so they clarified from the outset that they were not from Social Services, but from the Education Department. The primary intervention project, while working with families, also targeted school systems for attention and the coordinator explained that it was a challenge getting schools on board initially and she actually had to pull out of one school, which was proving ineffective. The coordinator spoke of having to act sensitively with schools and develop trusting relationships with staff so that, at a later date, her recommendations for improvement would be well received. A transition project, run by the Youth Service, also had to invest time in reassuring the participating school. The school, perhaps as a safeguard, appointed two teachers to help coordinate the scheme. However, the scheme operated well from the start, culminating in effective liaison between the school and Youth Service. Other challenges reported by interviewees included keeping on top of paperwork, ensuring the project was resourced, finding it difficult, at times, to identify a mainstream school for looked-after children and working with children who find it impossible to settle in mainstream.

8.10 IMPROVEMENT AND DEVELOPMENTS

Interviewees suggested a number of ways in which their projects could be enhanced. In the main, they concerned either an extension of the existing project, or a need for more resources.

Firstly, the parents' group and a transition project wished to extend their work by involving more participants – more parents and more children. Secondly, an interviewee suggested that the primary prevention project that was administered by one individual could be improved by increasing staffing levels. Similarly, an EWO who dealt with looked-after children as just part of their working remit suggested that

it should actually occupy one hundred per cent of someone's time. Other recommendations included securing permanent funding, offering counsellor training to transition mentors and guaranteeing sufficient planning time in the run up to a transition project. Lastly, one interviewee made a comment which could perhaps be applied to many of the schemes featured in this research. Short-term funding allows services to test out a range of interventions, on a time-limited, project basis. She suggested that, once a project had proved its effectiveness (which she believed hers had), it was time to terminate project status and incorporate the key elements of it into everyday working practice.

KEY POINTS

- Early intervention strategies targeted individuals or groups that could be considered vulnerable and therefore at risk of developing attendance problems in the future. Specific initiatives included a parents' support group, a primary intervention project offering practical support to families, a project facilitating the transfer of looked-after children to new schools and two transition projects. Very often the projects encompassed a significant preventative component.

- In most cases, the initiatives targeted primary-aged children, in accordance with their early intervention approach. Socially deprived areas were also prioritised, where the likelihood of non-attendance was possibly multiplied due to more stressful living conditions.

- Multi-agency liaison was a key component of two projects, in which it was considered imperative in order to address the diverse needs of the target group. The looked-after project, in particular, had succeeded in enhancing interagency relationships, namely between the Education Service and Social Services, who were now working in unison to achieve common goals. However, interviewees still reported issues of contention over funding responsibility.

- In all but one of the early intervention projects, interviewees reported evidence of improved or maintained attendance. Pupils' improved self-esteem was also noted. Parents too were said to be more confident through their participation, as well as more aware of the importance of education. Projects were considered to have most impact on younger pupils with poor self-esteem and low confidence, rather than older pupils with more entrenched difficulties, and better targeted at parents, who, with support, might cope better.

- Schools too had benefited from their involvement in the schemes. Teachers were reported to have changed their attitudes towards pupils with problems and their awareness of strategies and resources to address their needs was raised.

- In just one project, there was a specific reference to other agencies being affected. The looked-after initiative, with its multi-agency structure and approach, was said to have cemented interagency relations and bridged the gap between Social Services and the Education Service.

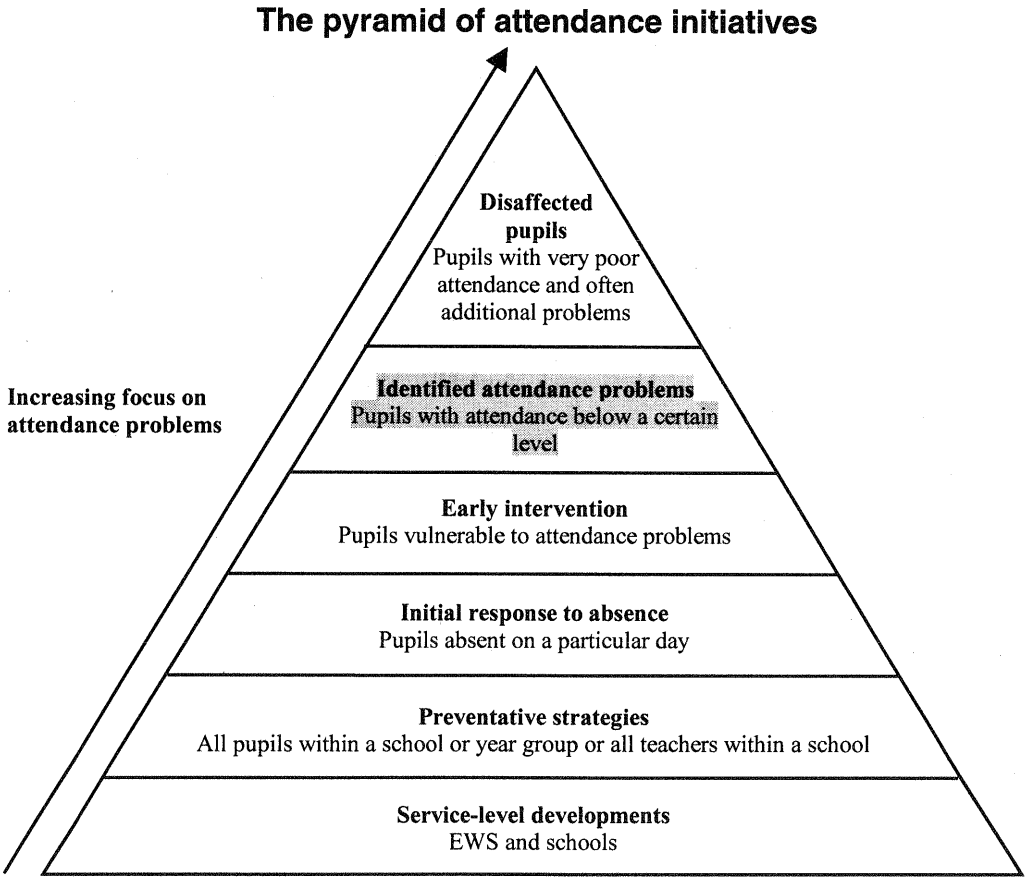
- The initiatives were viewed as cost-effective because of the long-term benefits generated (e.g. good attendance habits and saving EWS resources in later years).

- The effective component of early intervention schemes typically centred around their ability to establish trusting relationships with pupils, parents, school staff and other professionals. Often the schemes were operating in impoverished areas, where children, families and schools were under significant pressure. In order to promote change, project staff had, first of all, to win the trust and support of the target group. Consequently, the difficulty in obtaining this trust and fighting resistance to the schemes was cited as one of the major challenges.

CHAPTER NINE
IDENTIFIED ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This category of initiative included an array of different approaches for working with children identified as having attendance problems and usually with attendance below a certain level.



In total, nine initiatives fell within this category. In three cases, efforts were directed towards parents to 'indirectly' influence their children's attendance. In other cases, resources were focused at the level of the individual child, providing in-depth support to promote better attendance through close monitoring, group work or a multi-agency approach. Initiatives variously focused on:

- targeting parents
- close monitoring of attendance

- group work
- a multi-agency approach.

Three projects targeted parents for intervention, in the form of a parents' support group, distribution of pagers to notify parents of non-attendance and an attendance blitz that targeted parents through a series of staged letters. These projects are detailed below:

Parent pagers Parents were issued with pagers so that they could be notified immediately if their child failed to attend school. A session was set up to distribute the pagers in a positive manner, presenting them as a means of support.
A parents' support group Using the principles of an Assertive Discipline programme, a group was established to support parents (all mothers) whose children were not attending school and for whom the EWS were considering an ESO. In addition, all participants were drug users on a methadone programme. Each group ran for 12 weeks, once a week for two hours. Sessions were informal and began with tea, coffee and biscuits. Although the programme was underpinned by a series of pre-planned topics (parenting styles, assertiveness, etc.), there was sufficient scope to deal with matters as they were raised. In this sense, the group was very much parent-led. A significant part of the programme entailed role-play (facilitated by a drama therapist), to act out scenarios and consider the effect of different responses. Each six-week period was marked by rewards, usually a day out.
An attendance blitz Schools were targeted for an attendance blitz, whereby an EWO would undertake a complete audit of all registers. A series of staged letters were then sent to parents of children falling in various categories of attendance. The letters ranged from polite reminders for those just below the acceptable threshold (i.e. 90 per cent) to court warnings for children with attendance of 30–40 per cent. The EWO then returned to the school up to four times to monitor the children who had been identified and send out follow-up letters, if necessary. As time went on, the number of children on the list for action decreased. Each letter at every stage emphasised the importance of communicating with the school, and parents were given the opportunity to disclose any problems they may have, in order to receive appropriate support.

In two projects, there appeared to be a major emphasis on the monitoring of pupils' attendance. One linked attendance with attainment, whilst the other offered more intensive EWO support to children who were closely monitored in order to prevent further slippage. This included setting individual targets for children and meeting with their parents. These projects are detailed below:

A project linking attendance with attainment

This project, operational in 16 secondary schools, targeted pupils in Year 11 whose attainment levels were predicted to rise if their attendance could be improved. The EWS wrote to all secondary schools to obtain their agreement to monitor the identified pupils. Schools were then asked to pay special attention to these individuals and carry out first-day response to any subsequent absence. Parents were notified in writing that their child's attendance would be monitored and the letter stressed the importance of education (especially in Year 11). Once a fortnight, the EWO met with the appropriate teacher to go through the list of names and discuss any difficulties.

Intensive EWO monitoring and support

Using attendance data generated by SIMS, this initiative targeted children whose attendance fell below 85 per cent. Form teachers were also consulted to identify any children that they were concerned about. Where non-attendance had arisen through holidays, children were eliminated from the list. Those remaining were called to a meeting to talk about their attendance. This was done individually or in a group, depending on circumstances. They were told that their attendance was cause for concern and this was underlined by showing the children their attendance record on a computer screen. The importance of regular attendance was stressed, but at the same time, they were encouraged to talk about any problems that may be affecting their attendance. Registers were checked every week and if there was no improvement, parents were invited in. Two key stage coordinators were available for an hour each on different mornings to meet with the children and, where appropriate, their parents. Children were set individual targets that, if met, were rewarded by a certificate.

Two authorities highlighted examples of group work programmes as effective practice, whereby children were brought together to discuss their attendance problems and the underlying causes:

Group work 1

This group work programme sought to promote attendance and address related issues. Letters were sent to parents to obtain their permission and the coordinator explained to the young people selected what the group would involve. Attendance was entirely voluntary and information divulged in the group was treated as confidential. The content of each session depended on the participants and what the young people felt they needed. Groups began with teamwork exercises and then looked at the importance of attendance. Issues, e.g. bullying and self esteem, were covered according to need. The group normally took place in school, although, in one instance, a group was held at a youth centre. Sessions lasted for an hour for between six and ten weeks.

Group work 2

This group was based around a support package using worksheets, although, as above, each session was flexible enough to respond to issues the children raised. Consequently, each group was unique, because of the different dynamics and problems presented. Topics covered included self-esteem, truancy, attendance and relationships. In the first session, introductions were completed and the ground rules agreed. To unobtrusively determine a child's home circumstances, children were asked to fill out a worksheet about themselves and who lives at home. This made it easier for the EWO to talk about family matters, without making any incorrect assumptions (e.g. both mum and dad living at home). The ethos of the group was that it was a special time for the children and separate from school. Hence, although based within a school, teaching staff did not contribute.

The remaining two initiatives have been grouped together because of their focus on multi-agency intervention. In one, a multi-agency group met to formulate a package of support for children with attendance problems and the other was an example of the effective use of ESOs to gain multi-agency support for both parents and their children.

A multi-agency attendance project

The project set out to identify difficulties early on and, through communication with the young person and their family, identify the reasons for any changes (in behaviour, appearance or attendance). Appropriate intervention was then offered. The intervention operated through a two-tier system, comprised of a management group (responsible for funding and strategic issues) and an implementation group, which essentially carried out the groundwork for the project. The implementation group met three times a term to deal with new referrals and set up and revise action plans. Children were referred to the group by their school. An initial assessment was completed and a plan of action decided. Depending on the nature of the problem, different agencies would be involved, with one agency taking the lead. The lead agency would then feed back progress to the project coordinator (seconded from the Youth Service) and, at subsequent meetings of the group, the action plan would be reviewed.

The use of Education Supervision Orders

Prior to applying for an ESO, the EWS progressed through a series of stages giving parents the opportunity to work with them. Stage 1: The EWO visited and tried to work with the family. Stage 2: They were sent a letter, followed by a formal warning letter. Stage 3: They were invited into the Civic Centre to discuss some of the problems and avenues of support. Stage 4: If no response was forthcoming, the matter went back to the governors of the school, who tried again to address the problem. Stage 5: If no progress was made at this stage, the case went to the non-attendance panel, which included representation from Education Services, Social Services, Legal Services and Councillors. The EWO explained to the parents that the EWS would push for prosecution with the possibility of a fine, or they must cooperate and receive the necessary support to improve their child's attendance. Support offered as part of an ESO varied depending on the circumstances, but often involved input from other agencies, particularly Social Services.

9.2 AIMS

In three cases, the interventions were adopted because they were considered to engender a more economical way of dealing with non-attendance. Given that the children exhibited significant attendance problems, the amount of support required would be relatively high, encroaching on the available EWO time. Therefore, working with children in a group, as opposed to individually, saved EWO resources, while at the same time, giving intensive support to vulnerable young people. Likewise, the attendance blitz was conceived in response to a high number of referrals generated by schools, which did not tally with the amount of allotted EWO time. The blitz therefore created a fast-track system, which minimised direct EWO contact whilst still reaching large numbers of children and their parents.

Three initiatives exemplified the principal of 'joined-up' thinking. The attainment-attendance project joined forces with the LEA Advisory Service to interpret National Curriculum key stage test scores and identify those children who would benefit from additional input. In two, a multi-agency panel endeavoured to offer support to children by pooling the expertise and knowledge of its members.

More specifically, the aims of the nine interventions were:

- *Linking attainment with attendance*: to raise attainment through improved attendance.
- *Parent pagers*: to combat truancy and to inform parents of non-attendance.
- *Attendance blitz*: a fast-track method for responding to absence.
- *Parents' group*: to enable and empower parents.
- *Group work 1*: to work with young people in a time effective manner, addressing issues of irregular attendance.

- *Group work 2*: to offer children support, raise their self-esteem and to deal with ten children in one place, as opposed to individually.
- *ESOs*: to ensure that the young person concerned can settle and succeed in primary school, to ease the transition period and secure a positive future at secondary school.

9.3 TARGETING

Children were typically targeted for intervention because their attendance fell below a certain level. The attendance blitz, for example, took action where attendance dropped below 90 per cent and the multi-agency attendance project targeted pupils below 85 per cent. The parents' group was targeted where attendance was so poor that the EWS was considering an ESO. This was attributed to the fact that the parents were simply unable to get up in the morning and that they lacked effective, assertive parenting skills. Attendance at the group was initially 'encouraged' with the threat of prosecution should they fail to participate, although voluntary attendance was soon secured.

Other factors were also considered. For the attendance-attainment project, the selection procedure included an analysis of Year 9 National Curriculum key stage 3 test scores, to identify those individuals capable of achieving Grades A to C at GCSE level. The multi-agency attendance project used changes in the pupil (e.g. in appearance, standard of behaviour or attendance) as catalysts for action. In the case of ESOs, the target group typically comprised primary-aged children with attendance problems, but often a range of stresses, e.g. poor housing, drug use and financial pressures, compounded these problems. In these circumstances, it was unlikely that the family would respond well to prosecution and instead, additional support was sought through application for an ESO. In the case of both group work projects, children tended to be known to the EWS beforehand. Parents targeted for the parents' group were drug users and were also frequently involved in domestic violence.

In a number of projects, schools were involved in selection of pupils or were at least consulted about pupil involvement. The multi-agency attendance project, for example, operated in a secondary school and its two feeder junior schools, with teaching staff referring children they were concerned about. Similarly, the intensive EWO monitoring scheme also used the knowledge of school staff to select eligible participants at the point of transition. For group work, teachers were said to be more aware of the young people and what combination of participants would succeed, although the EWO made the ultimate selection in one project so that they knew the children's backgrounds.

9.4 MULTI-AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Multi-agency input was an integral component of two projects in particular. A multi-agency framework underpinned the attendance panel, which involved representatives from the Youth Service, the Health Service, the police, Education Services and Social Services. While this approach allowed for the implementation of a broad-based support programme, an interviewee acknowledged that the different cultural bases and boundaries of each agency needed to be worked through and understood in order for the team to function effectively. However, an evaluation of the intervention had

revealed the benefits of adopting a holistic approach, in terms of information exchange and the creation of a multi-agency safety net through which young people were finding it increasing difficult to fall. Prior to pupils receiving an ESO, a multi-agency panel assessed their needs and an ESO was seen as a way of facilitating multi-agency involvement, but particularly Social Services input.

Multi-agency involvement also figured in other initiatives. The parents' group used role-play to practise parenting skills and a volunteer drama therapist aided this activity. A group work programme had, at times, been jointly led by a youth worker and was currently branching out by pulling in additional agencies, e.g. the community development officer. Less directly, other initiatives would simply liaise with other agencies where necessary, e.g. Social Services in the case of parent pagers. The attainment-attendance initiative incorporated multi-disciplinary, joined-up thinking and the EWS joined forces with the LEA Advisory Service, employing their expertise to interpret National Curriculum key stage 3 test scores. A group work programme acknowledged that there was scope to include more agencies. Interviewees suggested inviting someone from Behaviour Support to make themselves known to the children or a school nurse to cover health issues.

9.5 FUNDING AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Three out of the nine projects were financed from the Standards Fund, whilst the remainder were funded as part of general service provision. The blitz project was thought to be cost-effective because it dispensed with home visits, whilst still impacting on large numbers of children. Two projects (attendance-attainment and the parent pagers) were perceived to be cost-effective because of their tangible effects on attendance. The parents' group, funded by the EWS, was described as '*totally and utterly cost-effective*' given that the drama therapist volunteered her services for free and the coordinator had to bring in her/his own tea and biscuits. Finally, three projects (ESOs, the multi-agency panel and a group work project) related their cost-effectiveness to the long-term benefits to the pupils concerned and society at large. No issues concerning funding were raised except that the long-term future of the blitz project was uncertain and the EWO interviewed voiced her frustrations at the insecurity of funding, particularly in light of the project's success.

9.6 EVALUATION

Seven of the initiatives had been formally evaluated. The attainment-attendance scheme was monitored as part of a general service evaluation, although the overall success of the initiative would be reflected in the exam results (not available at the time). The parents' group measured attendance of the children before the group and after. The multi-agency forum undertook an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, following which some of the project protocols were amended. A group work project measured attendance levels ten weeks before the group, during the group and ten weeks after to ascertain whether any improvements had been sustained. Finally, the attendance blitz kept records on the progress made by identified children.

9.7 IMPACT

The main effects of these strategies were directly on the parents and pupils selected as the target group. As well as improving attendance of individual pupils, these strategies raised awareness, improved the psychological well-being of both pupils and parents and resulted in their re-engagement. There was little direct effect on schools, whose main role appeared to be in selection of the target group.

9.7.1 Impact on attendance levels

For all initiatives bar one, a positive impact on attendance was reported. All three group work programmes produced gains in attendance. The effect of the parents' group was evaluated by measuring attendance levels before and after the course and, for the mothers who attended regularly, their children's attendance went from as low as 30 per cent up to at least 70 per cent, with most achieving 90 per cent plus. Similarly, for a pupil group work programme, it was estimated that, in 90 per cent of cases, there were great improvements and, in the case of both group work programmes, the percentage total change was calculated as 33.7 per cent and 9.66 per cent. In relation to ESOs, the EWO concerned reported that all the children under a supervision order were now attending school.

Two projects cited the need for less intervention as evidence for increased attendance. For instance, as the blitz project returned to check registers, the number of letters that were sent out got progressively fewer. Likewise, the intensive monitoring project monitored fewer and fewer children – 21 children were followed in Year 7 and by the end of the year the number had dropped to 14. Overall, in the pilot secondary school of the blitz project, out of 162 children, 124 improved their attendance. Of the remainder, some had been referred to other agencies and a small number of cases had progressed to court action. A primary school blitz, where, out of 29 children, 13 required no further action after one or two letters, was equally successful: 14 continued to be monitored by school and two children were being considered for possible court action. The EWO responsible explained that, in some respects, the blitz scheme was more successful at primary level, because, from a parent's point of view it was easier to influence an eight-year-old than a 14-year-old. The blitz had also worked well in a school that complemented the blitz by reviewing their own systems and stressing to teachers the important of accurate registration.

Finally, there were instances where attendance gains were evident but it was difficult to link them directly with any particular intervention. For instance, attendance levels in a school receiving the multi-agency intervention rose from 83 to 89 per cent. Given the existence of other complementary strategies, however (e.g. first-day response), the interviewee could not directly attribute these improvements to the initiative. This comment was also made in relation to the effects of a group work programme. Thus, whilst it is not possible to tease out the individual effects of these initiatives, the results of multiple interventions (of which they were part) appeared to be positive. Indeed, it is unlikely that any singular strategy could impact on all forms of non-attendance, and multi-faceted approaches may in fact be the most effective.

9.7.2 Impact on pupils

Initiatives were reported to have been successful for different types of pupils:

	Most impact on pupils:	Least impact on pupils:
Attendance-attainment	• who were borderline A to C grades	• who were the worst attenders
Attendance blitz	• who had had problems with transfer to secondary school • with other difficulties that were highlighted, e.g. mental health problems	• who were older • who were hard core non-attenders
ESOs	• who were younger • with poor social skills • whose attendance was compounded by family stresses • where prosecution was unlikely to be successful	• whose parents were unable to understand the procedures • whose families were very difficult to make contact with
Group work	• who were younger • with less entrenched problems	• who were older • who had the most entrenched problems
Multi-agency forum	• whose problems could be helped by intensive input from another service	

Again, even strategies aimed at pupils with identified attendance problems were reported to have less impact on hard-core non-attenders with entrenched problems. On the other hand, individual interventions had most impact where specific underlying causes of non-attendance were able to be identified and addressed. Impact on pupils included:

- the motivation to achieve
- increased awareness of their attendance
- raised self-esteem and confidence.

The attendance-attainment project highlighted the scale of young people's non-attendance. As a result, pupils were more aware of their attendance and the possible implications for attainment. The project demonstrated how odd days missed could rapidly accumulate and affect their overall chances of exam success. By alerting them to this connection, the project was said to motivate children to attend and achieve. The intensive monitoring scheme was also reported to raise pupils' awareness of their attendance.

The third pupil effect emanated from a group work programme and the ESOs. For both initiatives, interviewees felt that children's self-confidence improved. The group work programme, in particular, encouraged the children to value themselves and to develop trust in adults. From a foundation of trust, children were able to disclose their worries to the EWO and, in time, their non-attendance declined. Importantly, by bringing children together, the group helped foster friendships and develop mutual support.

9.7.3 Impact on schools

Projects working with identified attendance problems impacted on schools by resulting in more consistent, accurate attendance procedures. Like many other projects in the sample of 20 LEAs, effective working hinged on receiving accurate data to target pupils for intervention and to monitor attendance. If improvements were to be guaranteed, then schools had to tighten up their systems. Consequently, interviewees from four projects observed that schools' attendance procedures had become more accurate and consistent. For the attendance-attainment project, form tutors were said to be more consistent in authorising absences. Similarly, as a consequence of the blitz project, which undertook staged analysis of registers, schools had to pay more attention to register keeping and, when it was appropriate, to authorise an absence.

Participation in the multi-agency project was also useful for schools, in that it allowed them to discuss their difficulties and canvass other agencies for solutions. In this way, the project provided a sounding board for ideas.

9.7.4 Impact on parents

Initiatives that specifically targeted parents were reported to be effective where they were appropriately targeted. Parent pagers, for example, were reported to have failed where they were given to parents who condoned their child's attendance and had most impact where parents were motivated to address their child's difficulties. Two projects, the intensive monitoring project and the parents' group, were reported to be effective where parents were likely to respond to the threat of prosecution or the involvement of Social Services and to be cooperative. The parents' group, in addition, was noted to be effective where parents lacked the necessary parenting skills to get their children to school and where there was a background of drugs involvement.

The initiatives impacted on parents by:

- promoting better communication with school
- reducing parentally condoned absence
- raising their awareness of attendance
- offering support to parents.

The intensive monitoring scheme, like first-day response schemes, contacted parents in the event that their child did not attend school. In time, therefore, the level of parental communication was said to improve, with parents pre-empting letters and contacting the schools beforehand. A regular response to non-attendance also meant that parents were less inclined to condone absence, as they knew it would inevitably be followed up. The multi-agency project too had a similar effect on parents, in terms of promoting better home–school communication.

A specific outcome of the attainment-attendance initiative was its ability to raise parents' awareness over the importance of attendance. In many cases, the attendance of those targeted in that particular initiative may not have been especially poor, more a case of the odd day here and there and possibly holiday-related non-attendance. Therefore, before the initiative identified these pupils, parents were often unaware of

the extent of absence and the fact that it could threaten their child's exam success. Parents were therefore said to be alerted to the fact that their child was considered a potential achiever, but at the same time that their child's non-attendance was giving cause for concern.

Direct support for parents was a dominant feature of two projects. As a consequence of ESOs, the immediate threat of prosecution was removed, replaced instead with more intensive family support. Thus families were said to be grateful to have someone working with them in a constructive manner. In the context of the parents' group, where children's absence was so closely related to their family circumstances, it was more important to support the parents and change their behaviour, in order to impact on their child's. Although the sessions concentrated on developing assertive parenting techniques, the parents benefited in many more ways from their involvement. A commitment to the group and increased self-esteem were evidenced by mothers taking more pride in the appearances. Attendance was initially guaranteed because the EWO involved would go and collect participants from their homes. As time went on, however, mothers would be dressed, waiting by the door, ready to be picked up. Generally, group members began to see themselves as more worthy people and a few were able to access education courses.

9.7.5 Impact on other agencies

Other agencies were impacted where there were significant levels of multi-agency involvement. For example, multi-agency representation on the attendance project meant that, where necessary, the coordinator could pull in support, in particular, the local medical officer was now able to provide health checks.

Also, in respect of ESOs, once a child was placed under an ESO, then the EWO interviewed found it a lot easier to liaise and work with Social Services, as the support packages required their input and the ESO had legal status.

9.8 KEY ELEMENTS

Within the different types of project, different factors were nominated by interviewees as the key elements of their effectiveness. The main ones are summarised below:

- listening to pupils or parents and tailoring a programme to their needs
- involvement of independent outside agencies
- taking a positive approach
- providing consistency
- the focus on attendance
- providing an intensive level of support
- raising the profile of attendance in year 11

In group work, above all, interviewees stressed the importance of listening to the participants. This enabled facilitators to get to the root of poor attendance and therefore run a programme that would be of most value to the recipients. In the case

of the parents' group, responding to participants' ideas placed the power of change into their hands so that any progress made would be perceived as self-generated as opposed to externally imposed. Children also were said to respond well to this approach. A group work facilitator pointed out that, for one hour, the children were given her undivided attention and, more significantly, she may have been the only adult able to listen to their concerns. Coupled with a caring atmosphere and the reassurance of confidentiality, the group work sessions instilled children with the confidence to open up and talk about their problems.

Non-attendance is undoubtedly a school issue, yet the solutions are not always located within school. In two projects, success was related to outside agency involvement and independence from school, which allowed for a more supportive regime. The young people, in particular, were said to appreciate a less authoritarian, informal approach. The operation of the attendance panel was further strengthened by its Youth Service-led coordination, a service experienced in interagency work. In a similar way, the parents' group was said to benefit from the contribution of an outside drama therapist, who had no connections with Social Services and no agenda with regard to attendance. This helped win the trust and enthusiasm of parents.

The attainment-attendance project stood alone amongst the sample, in that it harnessed the potential to achieve as an incentive for raising attendance. In promoting the scheme to parents, instead of focusing on the negative, i.e. your child is not attending, the scheme capitalised on the fact that the target group had been 'chosen' as possible achievers and their attendance therefore needed to be increased. The parents' group too sought to concentrate on the positive aspects of their parenting, rather than criticising participants over the negative. Also, no pressure was placed on the mothers in relation to their drug use. Instead the programme endeavoured to applaud success and encourage improvement.

The intensive EWO monitoring scheme, on the other hand, cited 'continuity and regularity' as key elements of effectiveness. This corresponded with the key elements of its close relation, first-day response schemes, which operated in a similar way, although less intensively. The attendance blitz was seen as a way of targeting limited resources, with a specific focus on attendance, rather than getting entangled with the underlying social problems. Finally, ESO effectiveness was said to stem from the level of support arising from its implementation. EWS intervention was fortified through the backing of the courts and the increased time given to work with families. Validation through the courts was also said to give greater access to Social Services.

The attendance-attainment project was also unusual in that it targeted Year 11 pupils. A PEWO explained that, by Year 11, a common view is that it is too late in the day to tackle poor attendance. He argued though that it is at precisely this time when attendance is paramount, given its repercussions for attainment. Thus a key element of this scheme was its ability to raise the profile of attendance in Year 11.

9.9 CHALLENGES

Three specific types of challenge were raised by interviewees from three initiatives. Whilst group work facilitators acknowledged the importance of allowing participants to express their thoughts, it was equally important to retain a purpose to the sessions.

A challenge therefore lay in preventing the sessions becoming a 'chat group' for airing personal problems. Thus the coordinators sought to achieve a balance between self-expression and maintaining the focus.

The intensive monitoring scheme found school refusers a particular stumbling block, especially where a lack of parental cooperation existed. Despite intervention, this type of pupil often proved unresponsive.

Thirdly, a teacher interviewed about a group work programme envisaged a potential challenge should EWS support be withdrawn. Intervention of this nature, she believed, could not be done by teachers, as they were too busy trying to meet the demands of the curriculum. In addition, pupils were said to respond to the scheme, precisely because it was not teacher-led. The group sessions were a 'special' time, offering a safe environment to disclose their problems.

9.10 IMPROVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

A small number of suggestions were made as to how the initiatives could be enhanced further. For the attendance-attainment project, schools were keen for the project to be instigated earlier on, before Year 11. Clearly schools were finding the initiative an effective way of working and therefore wished to extend its target group.

A group work project could be improved, it was said, by inviting more outside agencies to contribute as speakers. In a document reviewing the programme, several suggestions were made as to the future and how the group could be developed. These included increasing the number of young people able to access the support, training young people to run their own support group within school, training young people to act as mentors and, finally, establishing a buddy system, where young people with problems could be linked up with a buddy who would offer in-school support and, if necessary, help the young person arrive at school.

Of the remaining initiatives, the parents' group had no separate facility for the mothers' young children and could therefore have benefited from a crèche facility. In the case of ESOs, the EWO interviewed believed that, in preparing for an ESO, it would be advantageous to be personally involved in the case a lot earlier. That way she would be more informed of the child's background and better able to prepare a report.

KEY POINTS

- Within the sample, a number of different approaches existed which targeted children with identified attendance problems. They included a project linking attainment with attendance, three parent-focused initiatives, two group work projects, a multi-agency attendance project, an intensive monitoring programme and the use of ESOs.

- When asked to describe the aims of the intervention, interviewees often spoke of having adopted a strategy because it enabled them to work in a time-effective manner with individuals who needed high levels of support.

- Children were targeted because their attendance fell below a certain threshold, although other criteria were often used for selection purposes, e.g. the potential to achieve at GSCE and where attendance was compounded by other pressures.

- Multi-agency involvement was central to the delivery of two initiatives, the multi-agency group and ESOs, whilst for the remaining initiatives, other agencies made contributions where relevant, e.g. as speakers for group work sessions.

- In all but one instance, attendance was said to have improved as a consequence of the intervention, although at times it was difficult to disentangle the effect of the project from other attendance-focused schemes.

- Initiatives motivated pupils to achieve, made them more aware of their attendance and, in some cases, raised their self-esteem and confidence. Interventions were less likely to impact on pupils with entrenched attendance difficulties, but where specific underlying causes could be identified and addressed, they were more effective.

- As a consequence of the initiatives, schools' attendance procedures became more accurate and consistent.

- Some initiatives provided direct support for parents, whilst, in other cases, the persistence of the initiative improved the level of parental communication with schools, as well as raising awareness generally over the issue of attendance.

- Depending on the initiatives, the key elements of success centred around listening to participants' concerns and tailoring programmes to their need, the involvement of outside agencies, consistency and the level of support given to families. Challenges, on the other hand, included the need to maintain the focus within a parents' group, lack of success with school refusers and the possibility of EWS withdrawal from a group work programme.

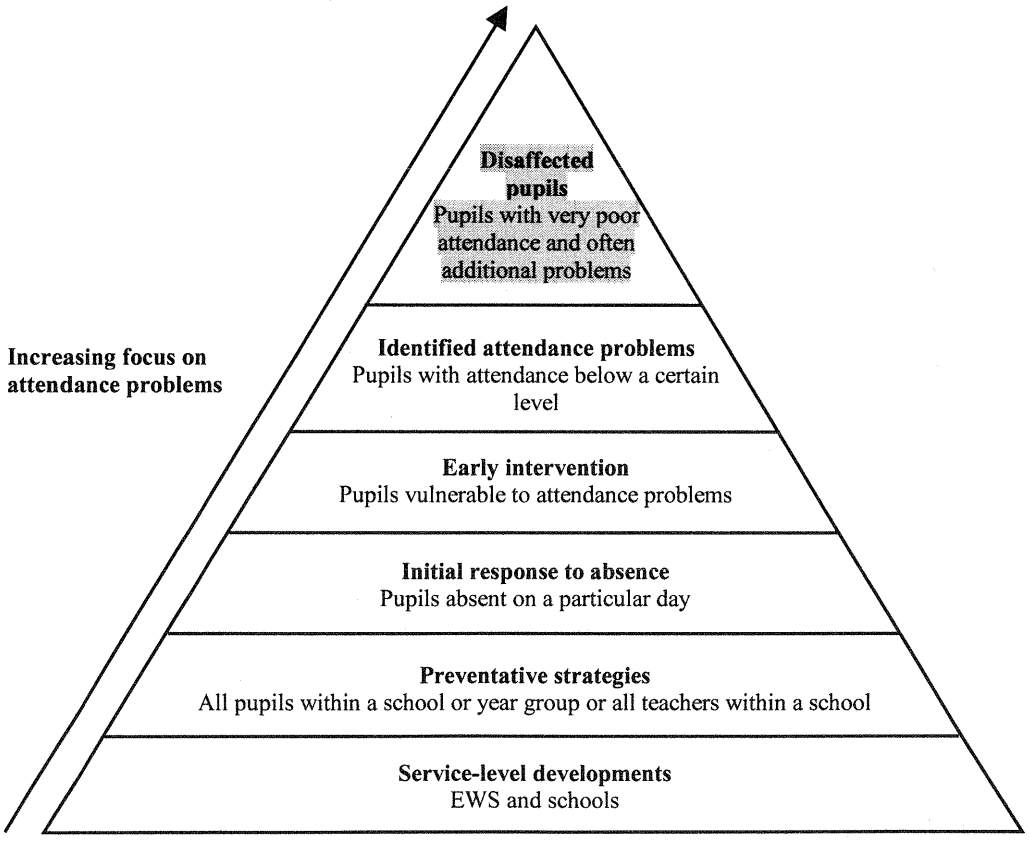
- A small number of improvements were recommended, involving extension to other year groups, using more outside speakers, more facilities and the introduction of other methods of support, e.g. mentors and a buddy system.

CHAPTER TEN
WORK WITH DISAFFECTED PUPILS

10.1 INTRODUCTION

As the interim report noted, pupils with entrenched attendance difficulties and often associated social, emotional or behavioural problems, were generally the most difficult group to support and the most challenging group of pupils with which to work.

The pyramid of attendance initiatives



Initiatives within the Phase Two sample of 20 LEAs which focused on pupils identified as being 'disaffected' included:

- two alternative curriculum schemes
- revised key stage 4 provision in a PRU
- a school unit
- intensive project work with young people with the most entrenched problems.

Short descriptions of each of these initiatives are provided below:

Alternative curriculum scheme 1

An alternative curriculum scheme for disaffected key stage 4 pupils was operating in a medium-sized metropolitan authority, well resourced in terms of EWS staff. The initiative was very flexible and involved assessing the needs of pupils in order to access the most appropriate provision. This provision could involve training providers, local colleges, community projects, centres for continuing academic work – any agency that might be able to provide something appropriate for the young people. The coordinator of the project saw the role as that of a broker.

Alternative curriculum scheme 2

Another alternative curriculum scheme in a medium-sized new authority, again with a low ratio of pupils to one EWO, concentrated on negotiating with local colleges to provide placements for Year 11 pupils with a history of non-attendance. These were primarily link courses for early school leavers with elements of work experience and life skills (completing CVs, job applications, interview skills, etc.). The courses ran five days a week for 13 weeks towards the end of the academic year. Pupils remained nominally on the school roll whilst attending this provision.

Key stage 4 provision in a PRU

Revisions had been made to the key stage 4 provision within a PRU in a medium-sized outer London borough. Up to 60 key stage 4 pupils attended the PRU and also courses at a local college. Previously, the PRU provision had not all been on the same site and had only been part-time. With the help of SRB money, it had been possible to bring the provision together on one site and a full-time programme was being established for the key stage 4 pupils. Curriculum modules were being developed and curriculum managers appointed which would allow more flexibility in meeting pupils' individual needs. The modular structure also proved helpful with pupils arriving mid-term – excluded pupils could join at any point during the term depending on when they were excluded. A mentoring scheme was being introduced to support the pupils in their work and their attendance. A multi-disciplinary team was also being set up to work in the PRU, providing all-round support for the young people. Plans were in hand to extend the college courses on offer and include work experience placements. The key stage 4 provision had been particularly praised in the PRU's recent OFSTED inspection.

A school unit

A school unit was introduced in an 11–16 coeducational school with approximately 700 students. Pupils whose attendance and/or behaviour was giving cause for concern could be referred to the unit for additional support from a senior member of staff and an EWO. In the unit, the pupils would continue with their normal schoolwork whilst discussing their behaviour and how it might be modified in order to rejoin their class. The EWO support meant that student counselling could be undertaken, that better home–school liaison could take place and that issues related to assertiveness training, anger management, overcoming peer pressure, etc. could be addressed. Placements were usually short-term, students would stay for a maximum of a week full-time and then be reintegrated gradually back into lessons. If they began to have difficulties, they could be pulled out again for a while and for some students one-day placements were used as an opportunity to calm down. Once a placement had been agreed, parental agreement would be sought and an admissions log filled in. Students would then negotiate and agree a Student Action Plan, which they signed and were given a copy of. Staff then developed a comprehensive Action Plan. The placement was monitored through a progress sheet. At the end of the placement, the students reviewed their progress and made plans for the future. Staff were notified of action points, and a review programme came into effect on the students' return to mainstream school.

Intensive project work

Intensive project work focusing on vulnerable young people with the most entrenched difficulties was operating in a medium-sized new authority. The authority was poorly resourced in terms of EWS staff, as indicated by the large numbers of pupils to one EWO. The project was set up to provide more focused support to pupils not attending school, who were in need of some stability in their lives and reinforcement of their own importance or worth. Those catered for could be any age from five to 16. Following referral, a home visit was made and an action plan drawn up. Normally, a visit was also made with the pupil to their school. The timescale for returning the child to school depended on the assessment of the project staff member involved. The work was very intensive and so one child could be the focus of a whole term's input. EWAs had been employed by the project and it was felt that their youth had significantly aided relationships with the young people involved. The project had a multi-agency Steering Group which would oversee referrals and keep a watching brief on cases.

10.2 AIMS

The initiatives were characterised by two major aims – enriched educational opportunities and intensive support. The two alternative curriculum schemes endeavoured to provide disaffected pupils with a more relevant and appropriate curriculum, thus re-engaging them in education. The key stage 4 provision in the PRU had been revised to widen the choices available to the young people, so as to offer them a more flexible and enjoyable curriculum comprising vocational courses at a local college, key skills and work experience. This, it was hoped, would raise their self-esteem and get them back on the right track in order to gain some qualifications, '*to show them they are capable of learning*' (senior manager), and how to use this to move on into employment. Another revision within the PRU was the creation of a multi-disciplinary team working together to offer the key stage 4 youngsters full-time provision rather than part-time as it had been previously. This team included an EWO and a social worker but also a curriculum manager, personal mentors to provide extra support for the young people, and an access and opportunities position. The latter aimed to provide post-16 support after the young people had moved on to college, work or training.

Two projects concentrated on offering intensive support to vulnerable young people, to avoid a deterioration in their circumstances. The aim of the school unit was to identify and support children whose attendance and/or behaviour in school was causing concern, and/or who might be approaching either a fixed-term or a permanent exclusion. Similarly, a project aimed at young people with really entrenched difficulties employed a multi-agency approach to provide more intensive, focused support to try and alleviate the young people's difficulties.

10.3 TARGETING

Both the alternative curriculum schemes were targeted at disaffected Year 11 pupils with a history of attendance problems. In one of the initiatives, the pupils were reported to be at the lower end of the ability range whilst in the other, although the ability range was said to be wide, the interviewee commented that because they had not been attending school regularly, the pupils were always behind academically. The numbers catered for varied, with one initiative specifying a maximum of five at any one time, and the other currently running with 14.

The PRU offered provision to young people without a school place, or whose school placement had irretrievably broken down. With younger pupils, the aim was reintegration, but with key stage 4 pupils, although it was not completely ruled out, reintegration was generally considered an unrealistic option. Pupils were usually excludees or poor attenders with whom the EWS had tried several approaches to get them back into school. If the PRU was oversubscribed, then looked-after children would be given priority. The key stage 4 element of the PRU was very busy and had to operate a '*hot desk*' system where, when one group was at college, another group was working in the unit.

The school unit, although available for all pupils, catered mainly for those in the upper school whose behaviour was causing concern or who were having difficulties in school (attendance or emotional problems). There was a maximum of eight pupils attending the unit at any one time.

The intensive project work was targeted at vulnerable children. This included looked-after children (either in foster or residential homes), homeless children, school refusers or phobics, excludees, and non-attenders who may be involved in crime. The age range was from five to 16, with a caseload maximum of 25.

10.4 MULTI-AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Input from other agencies was a major feature of these initiatives, reflecting the diverse needs of the young people involved. Agencies working with the alternative curriculum schemes included Community Education, the Youth Service, local colleges, local training providers, the police, the Careers Service and a local art gallery that was running a major art project. An EWO involved with one of the schemes stressed that it was about finding out what the young people were interested in and then '*tapping into*' that provision.

Agencies involved within the PRU included Education, Education Welfare, Educational Psychology, Social Services and the Youth Service. Education concentrated on the academic side of the work, Education Welfare on attendance issues, while Social Services provided support to the families especially where there were more entrenched problems. An educational psychologist was attached to each key stage section of the PRU. The Youth Service then provided additional activities specifically aimed at enhancing self-esteem and building up the young people's confidence. The key stage 4 provision was jointly owned by Education and Social Services, both agencies putting up a share of the funding. The multi-agency approach was described as creating '*a 360 degree support around the young person*' (senior manager).

Education Welfare, Health and Social Services were the main agencies linked to the school unit. Social Services would be involved if they were working with a child who was attending the unit. A wide range of agencies was involved with the intensive project work, including Social Services, schools, the Tutorial Support Service (supporting school work and the reintegration process), Child and Adolescent Mental Health, local Family Centres, Educational Psychology and Education Welfare, many of which were also represented on the multi-agency Steering Group. Each of these

agencies had input into case discussions and it was felt that by pooling resources, it was possible to offer a more flexible service.

Interviewees were asked whether there were any issues pertaining to multi-agency liaison. In the key stage 4 provision, one of the PRU interviewees stressed the need for good communication and making sure that all concerned were clear about their roles and responsibilities. The agencies involved tended to work very closely together and were able, it was felt, to bring strengths from their different disciplines. The Youth Service in particular had a very good representation of young black workers who could work effectively with the young black students within the PRU. Within the intensive project work, there was felt to be a lot of 'joined-up' thinking taking place at ground or operational level, but not so much at higher, more strategic levels. Equally, there were sometimes tensions between Education and Social Services, particularly when educational professionals felt that social workers were defending the right of a family to stay together when they considered residential care to be a better option for a child. However, it was noted that the project was considered to function as '*a constructive forum*' (Steering Group member) for debating these issues.

Lastly, interviewees suggested other agencies which could usefully contribute to the projects. Housing was mentioned when discussing the intensive project work. Their knowledge of how to access homeless families in the area could, it was felt, have been an important asset to the work with children and families. With reference to the key stage 4 provision, input from Health and Youth Offender teams was mentioned for those children with mental health problems or offending behaviour.

10.5 FUNDING AND COST-EFFECTIVENESS

The issue of cost-effectiveness was explored with interviewees in three of the five initiatives focusing on work with disaffected pupils. One of the alternative curriculum schemes was considered to be cost-effective because the only real cost involved was an EWO's salary. However, cost-effectiveness was felt to be difficult to measure because the quality of life of so many of the young people had been so poor before becoming involved in the scheme. The revised key stage 4 provision in the PRU was felt to be cost-effective in terms of the knock-on effects which could be measured, e.g. a reduction in juvenile crime, fewer costs to Social Services in terms of accommodating young people, fewer family break-ups and an increase in the number of young people going on to FE or to better skilled jobs. Being operated by senior staff, the school unit had been quite expensive to run but it was still considered to be a very cost-effective strategy.

In one of the alternative curriculum schemes, funding was described by the EWO involved as being a bit '*ad hoc*' with a lot achieved through networking. In the other scheme, the schools would normally pay for the college places but, in some instances, the college had actually waived the tuition fees. The senior manager involved commented that it was '*a nonsense*' that alternative provision could only be accessed once a young person had been excluded; before this stage, it was necessary to negotiate with schools in order to access funding for preventative work.

The PRU received SRB funding, but funding was always an issue and meant that it was impossible to plan very far in advance. Government changes in funding for

excludees and truants affected the provision and there was always the fear that something effective would have to be withdrawn due to a lack of resources. The key stage 4 provision was jointly owned by Education and Social Services, the latter also putting up a share of the funding.

Funding for the school unit had been partly provided by the school and partly through GEST money. The latter had been reduced and, after a year, the unit had been closed because, without any external funding, the school had been unable to fund it by itself. The intensive project work was funded through Standards Fund money and some GEST money. It was felt that, in order to safeguard the intensive project work, the funding should be incorporated into mainstream education welfare provision. Problems arose in trying to justify the amount of funding needed due to the intensive nature of the work.

10.6 EVALUATION

Neither of the alternative curriculum schemes had been evaluated formally, although informal evaluation was based on the numbers finishing their courses. The PRU had been the focus of an OFSTED inspection which had particularly highlighted the good practice within key stage 4. The school unit had been inspected by HMI because of being in receipt of GEST money. Inspectors had given the unit a '*glowing*' report but, despite that, the funding had been cut the following year. An internal evaluation of the unit had also been carried out which had involved keeping strict records of attendance and exclusions. Similarly, the intensive project work which had been in receipt of Standards Fund money had been evaluated annually for the DfEE. At the same time, every case was evaluated individually by staff.

10.7 IMPACT

Projects working with disaffected pupils generated the effects listed below. Of particular note is the extent to which the initiatives impacted directly on the young people, cultivating their social skills and raising their overall sense of self-worth. As a consequence, the young people were successfully re-engaged with education and training. The following sections discuss each effect in more detail, with illustrative examples.

10.7.1 Impact on attendance levels

In all five cases of work with disaffected pupils, attendance levels had improved, although to varying degrees. Interviewees from the alternative curriculum schemes and the revised key stage 4 provision in the PRU commented that their work had had a major impact on schools' attendance levels. Disaffected young people in key stage 4 were receiving alternative provision and were out of school where they would have been pushing up schools' absence figures. In the case of the PRU, the extra facilities and improved provision meant that more disaffected key stage 4 pupils could be catered for, which resulted in a reduction in waiting list time.

As the school unit also catered for those with behavioural difficulties, many of the pupils referred were actually good attenders. For those referred because of attendance problems, the unit had been shown to have an impact on their subsequent attendance.

It was considered difficult to judge the impact of the intensive project work on attendance levels *per se* because of the difference in the perspective of the work. One young person could be the focus of a whole term's intensive work and, as such, the work would not have any major impact on attendance levels generally. However, for individual pupils, attendance levels had improved. In some cases, where they had been out of school for a whole term before receiving the intensive support, attendance had improved to 100 per cent.

10.7.2 Impact on pupils

Interviewees were asked to consider the pupils with whom the initiatives had been successful and those with whom they had not worked quite so well. Older children with ingrained attitudes or those who could not accept responsibility for their behaviour were said to be the most challenging. However, the overwhelming tenor of the interviewees' accounts was that the work was worthwhile, even if the numbers of successes were small. Successes were reported with some pupils who had not attended school for a number of years and where specific aspects of behaviour (e.g. anger management) were able to be addressed. The information in the box below provides some examples of cases where the alternative curriculum schemes and the school unit had been particularly successful, and some where they had not.

Alternative curriculum schemes were reported to have been successful with a key stage 4 boy who had not been to school since Year 7:

> [He] *actually joined a literacy group in* [the local] *library. It was a group run by a tutor from* [the] *college who I know and it was for adults with disabilities and not every young person can cope with that. There were adults who had Down's syndrome and things like that, and he went in there to do maths and English with this tutor. The idea was that he would go in and the tutor would give him some work and he would leave, then take it back the next week and the tutor would give him some more, but what actually happened – this youngster became part of the group and supported these adults with disabilities and his confidence just soared and he continued to go there and he has helped with discos and all sorts of things* (EWO).

They were less successful for some in changing perspectives of education at a later stage:

> *I think it's too late, and although we continually try and take young people to careers interviews and to college and try and get them on to work placements, we have to be realistic. If they have got to the latter stage of their education, particularly Year 11, maybe it's too late, and you have to be careful about taking risks with work placements and college placements; you don't want to send everyone there who is not going to attend because you obviously lose your credibility ... I never like to give up on anyone and I will keep trying ... but you have got to be realistic* (senior manager).

The school unit was reported to have worked for most pupils, especially where specific aspects of their behaviour could be addressed:

> *One it mainly worked with, there was a young lad, he was in Year 8 or 9 ... he was on the point of exclusion because he was horrendous in every lesson, so we pulled him in and anger was his problem. So they had him for a while in the* [unit] *and then I started anger management with him ... how to control his temper and alternative ways of showing his temper ... and we integrated him back in and it worked ... he made it to the end of school and he did OK; he didn't do brilliantly in his exams, but he did OK. At least he walked away with something* (EWO).

The unit had not worked for all pupils, in particular where pupils were unable to recognise their own role in, and responsibility for, their disaffected behaviour:

> *One young lady, she attended for two weeks and then we didn't see her again ... we were bringing her in mornings only with mum, and mum would spend time in the [unit] as well, would come in and sit with her and work with her, and that was unbelievable, but she would run as soon as she got by the [unit] door and she would be running round the building going crazy and we just couldn't win; we tried everything with that girl. She just didn't want to be in school, there wasn't any phobia ... 'You are not telling me what to do' sort of thing. It didn't work with that girl. She has left now, she has had her results, she has had a baby at 15 and things like that ... that's one we didn't win, but you can't win every one* (EWO).

The most commonly reported effects on pupils related to their improved psychological well-being, namely confidence, self-esteem and self-motivation.

Increased confidence was an effect particularly noted in the alternative curriculum schemes and the revised key stage 4 provision in the PRU. Many young people were very timid and withdrawn when they first became involved but they very quickly became more confident. Another feature of the work with disaffected pupils was an improvement in their self-esteem and being treated like an adult was linked to increased self-esteem. Particularly noted in the two alternative curriculum schemes

was an effect on pupils in terms of increased motivation to go on to further training, or into the world of work.

Skill acquisition also emerged as an outcome of the initiatives. When out of school for long periods of time, young people can become alienated from their peer group. Involvement in the initiatives encouraged interaction with others which enhanced their social skills. They also felt more able to organise things like their travel arrangements to and from the provision they were attending. In the case of the intensive project work, which aimed to reintegrate pupils back into school, improved social skills helped the young people engage in peer group interaction, thus reducing longer-term, anti-social behaviour. Concomitantly, it was felt to reduce the risk of health problems, and in particular mental health problems, because the young people benefited from peer support. Learning to cope amongst their peers in school was also an effect noted in the school unit.

10.7.3 Impact on schools

As far as the alternative curriculum schemes and the revised key stage 4 provision were concerned, the main impact on schools had been the improvement in their attendance figures. At the same time, schools were pleased that something was being provided for the young people. Staff in the PRU appreciated the fact that it was hard for schools to turn disaffected key stage 4 pupils round once that had begun to miss large chunks of coursework, and felt that the revised provision meant schools were going to be able to offer these pupils something much more quickly. The knock-on effect would, it was hoped, be that schools would be more willing to take on younger excluded pupils if they knew that they could refer the more difficult key stage 4 ones.

The school unit had only run for just over a year because the GEST funding had been reduced, and this was felt to have been an insufficient period of time to be able to assess its full impact.

The main effect on schools of the intensive project work was identified by project staff as an improved relationship between the EWS and schools. The latter were now able to see how, through patience and a will to make it work, successes could be achieved with pupils whom they had been prepared to write off. It was noted that schools also now felt more able to cope with challenging pupils, knowing that the support of the project was available.

10.7.4 Impact on the EWS

An impact on the EWS was identified by interviewees in four of the five initiatives focusing on work with disaffected pupils. In the two alternative curriculum schemes, the impact was felt to be in terms of increased job satisfaction, through the knowledge that, although the work was time-consuming, it was possible to make a difference to the lives of the young people concerned.

The work of the school unit was part of a whole-school approach to non-attendance of which the EWS was a part and, as such, had helped the latter's work in school. The impact on the EWS of the intensive project work had been in terms of improved interagency working: '*We are coming from different directions so the more we are*

sharing office space and work time together, the better dialogue there will be' (Steering Group member). The project had raised the profile of the service, in particular with schools, in working with a vulnerable group of pupils.

10.7.5 Impact on outside agencies and parents

The main impact on outside agencies was in terms of raised awareness of the work being done with disaffected pupils.

The revised key stage 4 provision in the PRU was considered to be a big help to all agencies involved with this group of young people. One of the main difficulties was finding something to offer them when they were not attending school, so the extended provision had taken some of the pressure off other agencies. The intensive project work had impacted on other agencies in terms of improved multi-agency liaison and working. There was a recognition, especially within the residential care sector, that the project could provide an effective service. Project workers had been able to bridge a gap by helping residential staff bring an '*educational dimension*' (Steering Group member), such as recognising the need to do homework, to have the right textbooks, etc., to the lives of the children in residential care.

An impact on parents was identified by an EWO from one of the alternative curriculum schemes. Parents were usually '*delighted*' to see their children actually doing something positive and a concomitant effect within the local community was felt to be in the fact that they were not hanging about the streets. Parents of children attending the school unit were grateful for the help their children were receiving, and, in turn, were very supportive of what the unit was trying to achieve.

10.8 KEY ELEMENTS

Interviewees were asked to consider what they believed it was about their work that brought about the changes in the young people and in their levels of attendance, and also to identify what they saw as the key elements which made it effective practice. The following points were raised:

In summary, the key elements raised by interviewees from more than one project were:

- that individual pupil needs were addressed
- the small group setting and supportive ethos
- the skills, personalities and determination of the staff
- the quality of relationships between staff and pupils
- the multi-agency input
- remotivating young people and raising their expectations
- a flexible approach

In addition, the fact that the school unit was part of a whole-school approach to attendance and behavioural problems was an important factor for the EWO interviewed, as it meant that the work of the unit was seen to be fully endorsed and

supported by the school. Providing the young people with some stability in their lives was identified as a key element in the intensive project work.

10.9 CHALLENGES

When asked to identify the main challenges inherent in working with disaffected young people, there was a general feeling amongst interviewees that meeting the needs of the pupils concerned was a challenge in itself, as each case could be so different. A senior manager in the PRU commented that staff motivation could sometimes be a challenge; the work was very hard and could, at times, be quite isolating.

Interestingly, in the revised key stage 4 provision, a factor that had been highlighted as an essential ingredient for effectiveness was also identified as one of the main challenges to the work. This was the multi-agency element of the work – there were still felt to be issues to resolve around the management of staff and who took ultimate responsibility.

In the intensive project work, the very nature of the work and the fact that it focused on the needs of so few pupils at a time was identified as a challenge. There were felt to be issues about the overall credibility of the EWS within the LEA and with the schools within the authority. As a result of recent local government reorganisation, the service had been '*decimated*' (Steering Group member) and since then had struggled to provide an effective service to schools. Thus, focusing on the needs of only a few pupils was felt to have done little to improve relationships between the service and schools. There was thought to be '*a huge ignorance*' (Steering Group member) amongst mainstream headteachers as to the actual work involved in the project, although the few involved thought it was very effective.

Other challenges in the revised key stage 4 provision were the problem of being oversubscribed at times, and finding appropriate buildings, although the latter had now been resolved. A challenge highlighted in one of the alternative curriculum schemes was getting the young people to leave at the end; many of them still needed support and here the links with Community Education were felt to be important.

10.10 IMPROVEMENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In all five initiatives aimed at disaffected pupils, the major focus for improvement and development was reported to be on continuing and extending the current provision. In one of the alternative curriculum schemes, more provision for vulnerable boys was reported to be an area in need of development. At the same time, provision was needed for some '*streetwise*', fairly aggressive girls whom it had been difficult to place with their peers.

Within the key stage 4 provision a more flexible and individualised curriculum was in the process of being introduced, which included extending Year 11 college courses and combining them with work experience placements. Alongside this, a further development was the creation of a multi-disciplinary team to work within the PRU to provide the key stage 4 youngsters with all-round support. A post-16 tracking system

was to be introduced with a drop-in facility to provide the young people who had moved on to college, training or work with help and advice.

Interviewees in the school unit and the intensive project work, whilst commenting on the need to extend the work that had been done, recognised that there were funding constraints. The work of the school unit had in fact been unable to continue because of a reduction in GEST funding. An interviewee in the intensive project work commented that one way to extend the provision would be to incorporate the project funding within mainstream EWS funding. Under current funding constraints, one area of development that was considered possible was to build on the use of EWAs as part of the regular, ongoing work of the project.

KEY POINTS

- Initiatives focused on working with pupils identified as being 'disaffected' included two alternative curriculum schemes, revised key stage 4 provision within a PRU, a school unit and intensive project work with young people with the most entrenched problems.

- The main aims of projects targeted at disaffected pupils were to re-engage them in education, provide them with 'time out' to learn how to modify their behaviour and to alleviate attendant problems.

- Multi-agency involvement was a feature of all five initiatives focusing on disaffected pupils, although less so in the case of the school unit, reflecting the need to address problems other than attendance.

- Whilst some of these interventions were felt to be costly to run, three were reported to be cost-effective, mainly because of their knock-on effects, such as reduced crime and the numbers of young people going on to further training.

- Initiatives aimed at disaffected pupils were felt to impact on attendance levels, although to varying degrees. Pupils were receiving alternative provision and thus no longer pushing up schools' absence figures and, for some individuals, attendance had improved to 100 per cent.

- The most commonly reported effects of the work on pupils were related to improvements in their confidence, their self-esteem, their social skills and their self-motivation.

- For the alternative curriculum schemes and the revised key stage 4 PRU provision, the main impact of the work on schools was in terms of improved attendance figures. An improved relationship between the EWS and schools was felt to be the main impact of the intensive project work on schools.

- The key elements for effectiveness of the work with disaffected pupils were felt to relate to addressing pupils' individual needs in a smaller group with a more supportive ethos; the quality of the skills and personalities of the staff; the quality of relationships with peers and staff; the determination of the staff not to give up on the pupils; the multi-agency element of the initiatives; a flexible approach and raising the young people's expectations. The multi-agency aspect was also thought to be one of the main challenges to the revised key stage 4 PRU provision.

- The major focus for improving and developing initiatives aimed at disaffected pupils was reported to be on continuing and extending the current provision.

PART THREE
THE CASE STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

This section of the report focuses in more depth on five LEAs, selected to exemplify, as far as possible, a range of initiatives, effectiveness and multi-agency involvement, as well as illustrating different types of LEAs. The aims of the case studies were, in particular:

- to place the initiatives under study within a wider context, in terms of the LEA, the EWS and the schools involved

- to garner the views of schools, parents, pupils and other agencies on the impact and effectiveness of initiatives and for whom they were most effective.

Interviews were conducted with staff from other agencies involved, schools, parents and pupils, in addition to further interviews with EWS staff, focusing especially on the context of the LEA overall and the initiatives. The case studies provide more detailed accounts of some of the initiatives previously highlighted in the chapters in Part Two of the report. In some cases, three initiatives within an LEA were highlighted for further study, whilst in others there were two. Brief details of the LEA context and the initiatives involved in each case study are provided in Appendix 3. Each case study begins with an outline of the LEA context within which the initiatives took place. Following this, each initiative highlighted is detailed in turn using the following format:

- additional descriptive details of the initiative (including the multi-agency aspect)
- the rationale behind involvement in the initiative for the LEA, schools and other agencies
- the overall effects of the initiative (on pupils, schools, parents, EWOs and other agencies)
- discussion of those for whom the initiative was most/least effective
- why the initiative was thought to be effective.

The views of schools, pupils, parents and other agencies are incorporated where relevant. A final overview, highlighting particular aspects of the initiatives and referring back to how the initiatives fit within the overall LEA context, completes the story.

CASE STUDY ONE

LEA CONTEXT

Within this authority, three initiatives were nominated as particularly effective in improving attendance levels. EWS personnel chose to highlight two examples of initiatives that were classed as service-level developments – the use of an EWS database and the employment of EWAs (although they were called project workers or attendance support workers within this authority). In addition, the conducting of attendance audits, considered a preventative strategy, was used to identify strengths and weaknesses in attendance policies and procedures at whole-school level.

This LEA was a large county authority, described as a broadly affluent area with high employment, but with some pockets of deprivation. The population, although predominantly white, was felt to have a sizeable and diverse ethnic community located in particular areas. Whilst there was reported to be a high level of parental motivation and interest in education, in some areas, a cycle of family non-attendance was noted.

Attendance figures were well above the national average – 95 per cent in primary schools and 92.4 per cent in secondary schools. Perhaps because of limited staff resources, the LEA focused on dealing mainly with unauthorised absence. The senior EWS manager identified a wide range of strategies presently in place for tackling attendance problems, including those aimed at service-level, preventative approaches, as well as those aimed at pupils with identified attendance problems and disaffected pupils. Whilst casework was considered foremost, because of the service's legal responsibility to ensure pupils' entitlement to education and thereby improve their life chances, there was a recognised need to help certain schools improve their attendance levels. Emphasis was therefore placed on these two elements of their work, which the senior manager felt had to be balanced effectively. As a service, they had spent a lot of time making their casework system '*more robust*' so that cases did not just drift, and in supporting schools in developing systems to deal with attendance.

THE EWS DATABASE

The service had introduced a database which was used to monitor individual casework and to establish attendance targets. In connection with the EWS database, the EWS manager, an area manager, an EWO and the LEA information officer involved in setting up the database were interviewed.

What is the EWS database?

Brief details of the EWS database were provided in Chapter Five. The information added to the database included pupil names, their DfEE identification numbers, concerns and attendance data on referral, as well as the action taken by the school prior to referral. Each EWO was limited to a caseload of 25 live cases plus ten cases requiring less intensive intervention. Following activation of a case, the action taken and the present status of each case were recorded on the database at the end of each term and attendance data added every eight weeks. Targets were linked to data collection and set for individual cases, for example, if there had been no attendance at all for the four-week period prior to referral, there was an expectation that the pupil achieved 60 per cent attendance within the next eight weeks. If, however, the EWO had been working with a case for 24 weeks and they had not achieved 90 per cent attendance, the case automatically went to a court assessment meeting and there had to be good reasons for not taking court action. The database provided information for a variety of purposes, for example, for discussion with schools, pupils and parents, for discussion with EWOs within supervision and for annual reviews with schools. Individual pupils could be tracked and records could be extracted for particular areas, schools, year groups or for individual EWOs, thus enabling the service to assess their performance at a number of different levels.

The multi-agency aspect

The EWS database was linked to a 'children out of school' or COS database, which included information from other services and agencies about pupils who were out of school for a variety of reasons, for example, because they were excluded or ill. Three times a year, the EWS and other services involved in working with children who were out of school provided a snapshot of the information about these individuals for half a term. This constituted the core information against which targets were then linked each year. The COS database, unlike the EWS database, was funded from a cross-services budget and this also facilitated links to Social Services' data systems. There was an individual tracking system so that information could be shared amongst agencies, enabling resources to be targeted more effectively and making possible packages of provision for individual pupils. COS multi-agency groups, which included the EWS, SEN, admissions, Youth Service, the PRU, Youth Justice, Social Services, the Careers Service, and local colleges, met in each area and discussions were focused on the child.

What was the rationale behind the development of the EWS database?

The COS database had been developed in response to a report submitted to committee in 1996 which noted that a number of pupils within the LEA were out of school and the need for better data for members of the council. When asked about the rationale, the information officer outlined the need for a central management information system so that the LEA knew how many youngsters were out of school and so that services had a baseline to work from in order to be able to see that they were making a difference and to continue to improve. The information officer reported that they were keen to overcome obstacles to sharing information between agencies, to focus on the child's needs and to ensure that resources were targeted effectively. S/he stated that they had been in discussions with a number of agencies and that there was plenty of scope and goodwill, although s/he acknowledged that Social Services and Education sometimes had different agendas.

For the EWS, the overall purpose, reported by the EWS manager, was to provide management information to ensure that the service could measure its impact in an objective way and set performance measures and targets: '*Unless we know what difference it makes, we can't assess what impact we make.*' In this way, the EWS would then be able to target resources, which were limited, more effectively. In addition, the EWS manager and the information officer spoke of the need to coordinate the work of all LEA services, schools and other agencies, thus breaking down existing barriers to information sharing. The primary objectives were to track and monitor individual pupils so

that they fulfilled their educational potential and to focus EWO casework so that cases were not allowed to drift. Other specific objectives highlighted were to:

- develop a global recording and monitoring system
- be able to track through an attendance issue on a young person
- have live data and up-to-date information
- facilitate structured work flow by providing timescales, highlighting overdue actions and the use of standard letters
- make other LEA information (e.g. exclusions and admissions data) available to the EWS
- identify areas of good practice that might be shared amongst EWOs and areas of weakness that might be addressed
- have one named person rather than a host of agencies working with child.

What were the effects of having the database?

Having the COS database was perceived by EWS staff to lead to better planning and implementation of strategies and targeting of resources, to involve the appropriate agencies when relevant and to ensure that they fulfilled their responsibilities. The information officer, who had interviewed managers within different departments with regard to the COS database, reported that managers were more aware of trends in data and where to allocate resources, and more able to look critically at services and to discuss individual cases with staff within their service. The database was reported to give key workers the tools to do their job effectively, a factor previously dependent on individual networking. The COS database was thought to impact on schools, in that pupils' progress would be monitored and they would receive appropriate packages of provision, and parents would see a more unified and coordinated approach to service delivery.

In the first two years of having the EWS database, the attendance figures in the LEA were reported to have risen. The database provided a baseline against which to judge future services and set performance targets. The EWS database was perceived by senior EWS staff to have had major implications for the effective working practice of service staff. As well as encouraging them to have a more focused approach to attendance problems, discrepancies amongst EWO caseloads and practices were reduced and a more consistent service provided to schools. The data encouraged schools to take a more focused approach to attendance problems and to do more work with cases before the EWS got involved, and reinforced what the EWS was trying to achieve. In addition to raising pupils' and parents' awareness of attendance problems, packages of provision could be put together to suit pupils' individual needs, whatever their circumstances. Not surprisingly, given the clear, time-limited procedure for court intervention, more court work was a noted outcome, but the procedure was also reported to be more consistent across the LEA, as EWOs who were previously reluctant to take court action now had a set procedure to follow.

Why is the database effective?

The LEA information reported that the key element of the COS database was having a system that provided the correct information, at the correct place and the correct time so that the authority could ensure that resources were there and that there was a coordinated approach to delivery across services and agencies. The EWS manager reiterated this and reported that the essential elements of the database, in addition to a focused approach and targeting resources, were having consistent data and coordinated multi-agency working. In addition to having the EWOs on board, another challenging aspect was said to be being clear about what the service wanted from the data in the first place.

ATTENDANCE AUDITS

In connection with attendance audits, the EWS manager, two senior EWOs who had undertaken attendance audits and two headteachers, whose schools had been audited, were interviewed.

What is an attendance audit?

Details of the process involved in an attendance audit were provided in Chapter Six. Overall, the attendance audit was considered to entail about three days' work, including the pre-audit meeting with the headteacher, the attendance audit day itself, examination of documentation and writing the final recommendations. The audit day was conducted by an area manager and a senior EWO, one of whom was from outside the area in which the school was located, in order to prevent any bias. Procedures for dealing with non-attendance and lateness were observed and registers examined in depth. Key members of staff and pupils (usually one with poor, one with mediocre attendance and one with good attendance) were interviewed. Following the audit day, documentation was examined to see if this was reflected in practice. Follow-up visits were conducted where appropriate to see if recommendations had been implemented.

What was the rationale behind the use of attendance audits?

The EWS manager reported that the rationale for adoption of this approach was to satisfy service requirements in relation to schools within the Service Development Plan. School and EWS staff agreed that the objectives of an attendance audit were to identify strengths and weaknesses in the school, address the latter and so improve attendance. The school staff interviewed had wanted extra support for attendance issues. In addition, the EWO noted that an audit enabled them to spread good practice and to engage in more proactive work.

One headteacher interviewed was from a well-established infant school in a mixed socio-economic area with some level of unemployment. A lot of parentally condoned absence (especially for extended holidays) was noted and a cycle of non-attendance in families who think that attendance, especially at infant school, does not matter, was also evident. The other headteacher was from a special school with pupils from a wide area, creating a particular transport problem. Whilst parents were keen to get their children to school, they were reported to be less concerned about their achievement. In one case, the DfEE and, in the other, OFSTED had highlighted attendance rates as poor, although they had now improved, for example, to 94 per cent in the infant school. When the headteacher came to the school a few years ago, the staff accepted the low attendance level as normal and, when s/he contacted the EWS to help address this, they suggested an attendance audit as a starting point. The special school, on the other hand, had been told that the level of unauthorised absence (more than ten per cent) in comparison to the national average was unacceptable. The headteacher, however, felt strongly that this was an unfair comparison.

When asked about the strategies used to address attendance, whilst the infant school focused on raising awareness of the importance of attendance (through assemblies, parents' meetings and their prospectus), the special school focused on providing a safe and pleasant environment for pupils and providing an alternative curriculum at key stage 4. The attendance audit was linked to the infant school's development plan and their attendance policy and they had used it to help identify the changes needed to make their systems more effective. The headteacher of the special school saw the attendance audit as a positive step forward and one that would examine issues beyond attendance, including the wider whole-school ethos. S/he recognised that, if the school was to be judged against the national average for mainstream schools, they would have to improve attendance.

What were the effects of attendance audits?

Not surprisingly, schools felt the greatest impact of attendance audits. In mainstream schools that had been audited, attendance levels had risen, although this might be due to their combination with other strategies. This was confirmed by the infant school headteacher interviewed, who also reported a rise in attendance levels. The headteacher of the special school, however, reported no change. In one school with a high intake of difficult pupils through casual admissions, for example, attendance had improved gradually since the audit to just over 90 per cent. The fact that conducting of an audit raised

awareness of and responsibility for attendance issues by school staff was confirmed by the headteachers. In the special school, for example, the audit had highlighted to staff that attendance was a wider issue than just marking the registers. More specifically, audits were reported to have:

- encouraged schools to set up other strategies, such as bullying interventions, first-day response, an attendance policy and training in completing registers
- resulted in schools developing an attendance action plan
- highlighted areas that schools could tighten up on with minimum effort
- ensured a consistent approach to attendance procedures throughout the school
- highlighted discrepancies between policy and practice and enable them to be addressed
- highlighted particular types of non-attendance (in the special school, for example, pupils were either good attenders or effective non-attenders and staff spent a lot of effort on the latter with no gain)
- confirmed established areas of practice
- provided school staff with new ideas for tackling attendance issues
- identified areas of good practice that could then be adopted throughout the school
- provided a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of schools and the EWS
- facilitated joint working and team building with the EWS
- raised the whole profile of attendance and made it a priority area for staff, parents and pupils.

As well as deterring pupils from non-attendance, audits ensured that parents informed the school of reasons for absence. They were also thought to impact on the work of the EWO attached to the school, in some cases changing their work with the school so that it was more effective.

On the negative side, attendance audits might raise levels of unauthorised absence initially because of the change in the way staff marked the registers, although this could then be targeted. One headteacher stated that the staff was apprehensive to begin with and EWS staff noted that audits may create more work for teachers.

For which schools were attendance audits most/least effective?

Attendance audits were targeted at schools with the greatest attendance problems and were reported to be most effective where schools had been involved willingly and had taken on board the recommendations made. One headteacher interviewed reported that audits were a useful tool for schools with problems with attendance. S/he noted, however, the need for an established, '*fairly shared culture*' of working together to change things within the school ('*Everybody knew we had to do something about it*') and the need to '*get everybody on board*' (including the parents and the pupils). However, gaining the commitment of staff in 'failing' schools, was also found by EWS staff to be one of the most challenging aspects: '*Because there is a lot of defensiveness – "Why do you want to come up and check on me?"*' A poor relationship between the EWO and the school was thought to detract from success. These factors might therefore be a necessary prerequisite for the effective use of audits.

Why were attendance audits effective?

A number of key elements were reported by EWS staff as the essential ingredients for effective audits. It was agreed by both EWS staff and the headteachers interviewed that having an objective view from someone from outside the school was a major factor:

> *I think if schools have got problems with attendance, then it is a very useful tool. That somebody can spend that time, not involved with the school, having an independent person come and look at your practice. That was good, and we certainly didn't find it threatening. It was just a very great help* (headteacher).

> *I think it encourages consistency and it's someone else coming in with a different viewpoint ... no preconceived ideas and can see 'Look, if you do this, this will happen'. They are sometimes just too close* (EWO).

The willingness of schools to undertake audits again surfaced as a key element in their effectiveness. It was thought important that there was a clear desire and a commitment on the part of the school and that

the process was conducted in partnership and as a mutual exercise between the EWS and the school. One headteacher shared the view of the EWS manager that it was important that those conducting the audit were experienced EWS staff with knowledge and understanding of attendance issues: '*Obviously they need to have a background in attendance matters.*' The headteacher of the special school, in addition, raised a number of other issues about the conduct of the audit for it to be effective, including:

- the thoroughness, breadth and rigour of the process, described as '*sharply focused*'
- the level of prior EWS contact with the school: '[the EWO] *already had a view of the sort of ethos of the school that I think was hugely important*'
- the positive, open and sensitive approach of the auditors:

  If there's some bulls in china shops, then they're not going to get very far antagonising people. They weren't invisible either, which was I think equally important. They were seen present and people, kids in particular, were introduced to them as they came into school.

- preparation of the school staff for the audit: '*People were prepared and were taking it as a serious activity*'
- immediate and direct feedback to staff
- clear recommendations
- a clear follow-up process.

The EWS manager reiterated the need for dedicated time to conduct the audit, a clear procedure to follow and the development of a clear action plan at the end of the process. Other EWS staff also referred to the formalised procedure and the final document that made it more likely that schools might take action as a result of the audit. It was vital to suggest areas for improvement rather than just confirming that systems and procedures were OK. The audit was thought by EWS staff to enable them to examine so many different aspects of attendance within the school, to evaluate them and feed back their findings to schools in a relatively short period of time so that strategies might be implemented quickly. One headteacher interviewed confirmed that the audit produced an overview that they previously had not had. S/he also felt, importantly, that the audit focused attention on attendance and encouraged the school staff to reflect on their practice with regard to attendance matters:

> *Well, I think it focuses everybody's attention on attendance. It makes you think about your practice, reflect on it and it gives an overview of the school which perhaps the headteacher doesn't have because* [the EWO] *sat in the foyer and watched the comings and goings of the day, which I never have time to do.*

This then led to consistency and changes in other areas of school life, thus broadening its impact. Other factors highlighted by EWS staff were the opportunity for the school to get feedback from pupils. One headteacher reported that conducting an audit was very different to other strategies adopted to address attendance problems because it was part of what they did as a whole school.

THE EMPLOYMENT OF EWAS

EWAs (referred to in this authority as attendance project workers) were employed by the service to enhance the work of EWOs and to allow them to focus on more serious attendance problems. In connection with the employment of EWAs, one EWO, two EWAs, a headteacher and a senior teacher in two different schools, and a parent and two pupils were interviewed.

What do EWAs do?

Brief details of the role of EWAs were provided in Chapter Five. EWAs were school-based and had two main aspects to their work: pupils just starting to show signs of, or particular patterns of, attendance and the implementation of first-day response. They liaised closely with EWOs assigned to the school and were involved in consultation meetings between the EWO and year heads. Their work revolved around talking to pupils, checking pupils were in lessons, picking pupils up and bringing them to school, and liaising with school staff and parents. In contrast to the EWO, they tended to work more intensively with individual pupils and to take more of a helping role rather than an enforcement one. This was confirmed by one of the pupils interviewed, who the EWA had tried to encourage to go to school by talking to her and getting her up in the mornings rather than '*have a go at me*'.

What was the rationale behind the use of EWAs?

The employment of EWAs was used by the LEA as a way of directly targeting schools with poor attendance and raising their figures. The headteachers interviewed, both from small, mixed, comprehensive schools, reported their schools to be undersubscribed and struggling to survive. Casual admissions, some of whom had been excluded from other schools and a lot of whom brought with them learning, behavioural and attendance problems, were noted to be a particular problem. Both schools had a mix of pupils from deprived areas and affluent backgrounds and consequently mixed parental attitudes to education. In one school, attendance hovered around 89 per cent, whilst in the other, attendance had risen steadily over the last five years to over 90 per cent this year. In both schools the focus appeared to be on preventing attendance problems (e.g. through incentive schemes, offering counselling, effective monitoring systems, close liaison with primary schools, etc.). The use of EWAs to address difficulties before they became too entrenched was therefore commensurate with this overall strategy. It was recognised that the longer pupils were out of school, the more difficult it was to get them back.

It was agreed by all those involved that the role of the EWA was to work alongside the EWO, to implement first-day response to absence, to provide support for pupils and to get them back to school before problems became too entrenched. The focus for intervention tended therefore to be on pupils lower down the school. Conflicting views were expressed about whether the EWA had a counselling role. Whilst the staff in one school felt that the EWA did offer such a role, the EWO attached to the school was adamant that this had to be regarded with caution as EWAs were not trained counsellors.

What were the effects of having EWAs?

EWAs were reported to have a wide impact – on attendance generally, on schools, pupils, parents and EWOs. Where EWAs were employed, improvements in attendance levels for individual pupils were confirmed by a pupil and her parent interviewed, who both stated that she was now attending school most days. Similarly, school staff confirmed improvements in school attendance levels. One reported, for example, that, since an EWA had been appointed, attendance figures had gone up and up. S/he was certain that they would slip back down again without this extra form of support and this had actually happened in one school when the EWA had gone on maternity leave. Where there were casual admissions, figures were felt to always have the potential to get worse, but attendance had improved despite this.

Pupils and parents valued the support of the EWA. One of the pupils interviewed reported that she now chose to get out of bed and, as well as improving her attendance, the EWA had made her feel good about herself. She noted that teachers '*are more different towards me 'cos they thought I was actually making an effort to come in, so they were making an effort too*'. One EWA reported that genuine cases were identified for support and that family relationships had improved for some pupils.

In addition to raising awareness in schools, EWAs felt that attendance issues were addressed quicker, thus preventing more entrenched difficulties. The EWO and the EWA felt that schools were encouraged to provide more pastoral support, be more flexible and to maintain pupils in school, as well as being more aware of the agencies they could access for support. Whilst school staff raised none of these issues, they did identify that regular meetings with the EWA had taken a lot of pressure off pastoral staff. In contrast, they also felt that, at times, having the EWA put more pressure on school staff because some children now attending did not want to be there. They felt too that registers were more consistent and more accurate and that the EWA had encouraged the school to look at an alternative key stage 4 curriculum, using work experience and part-time timetables.

The EWO reported that contact with the EWA saved him/her time because of their intimate knowledge of families and ability to cover a lot more ground. The fact that the EWA was school-based meant that the EWO could contact them at any time about individual cases. One EWA, whilst stating that EWOs were sometimes precious in the beginning, felt that they made the work of the EWO easier and enabled them to spend time targeting more serious cases of non-attendance.

For whom were EWAs most successful?

EWAs were not expected to become involved in cases where there were entrenched attendance problems and significant other factors involved (e.g. mental health issues), as they were felt to be insufficiently qualified for such tasks. Problems located within school were most easily solved, although one EWO reported that, where home support was lacking and pupils needed to know someone cared and set boundaries for them, was also a successful area of his/her work. This was confirmed by one of the pupils who had difficulty getting out of bed in the mornings and did not like school.

Why were EWAs effective?

School staff agreed with EWS staff that being school-based was an essential element of EWA practice, noting that this enabled the EWA to provide an immediate response and to be available for discussions with school staff, thus developing an effective working relationship with them. It was also said by school staff to provide the EWA with '*the reality of the ethos*' and by one EWA to be an important difference between the EWO and the EWA: '*With an EWO she would be coming into school perhaps once a week and she won't really know what's happened until the following week when she had gone in.*'

Whilst the EWO felt that being school-based made the use of the EWA superior to other strategies, s/he also felt that it was important that the EWA was also independent from the school for them to be able to work in the interests of pupils and parents. School personnel, with limited time themselves, agreed that the hands-on work undertaken and the dedicated time for attendance issues were key factors. First-day response, to which a lot of time was reported to be devoted, was also highlighted as a key feature by the EWA and school staff. The importance, in pupils' eyes, of the EWA not being a member of school staff was confirmed as vital by a pupil and her mother, who both noted that the confidential sessions had been an important influence on her return to school:

> *The pupils get somebody to actually talk to because there are certain things that* [X] *wouldn't tell me about but she would tell a complete stranger, because she knows that a complete stranger doesn't know her from ...* [The EWA] *isn't going to come back and say 'Did you know this about* [X]*?* (parent).

The close relationship that the EWA developed with pupils was touched on by both pupils interviewed, with one stating that: '*Well, I like it 'cos she's really a close friend.*' Persistence, in pupils' eyes, meant that someone cared for them: '*Well, I know I'm wanted, but somebody does actually really want to help me and it just makes me think, if she's making that effort, why I should make the effort as well.*' This pupil also indicated that, once a pattern of attendance was established, she actually liked going to school: '*Once I kept coming and coming for a couple of weeks and I got into it, then I was enjoying it more.*' The value of persistence with parents was also raised by school staff: '*You know, so it's the continual not allowing anything to slip, not allowing parents to think it doesn't matter*' (senior teacher).

EWS staff raised the need for a good relationship between the EWO and the EWA. For the EWA, it was important that they did not tread on each other's toes. One EWA felt that how schools perceived the EWA was important, because they might be suspicious and defensive and think they were being checked up on. School staff reinforced this point and raised a number of issues concerning the personality, qualities and skills of EWAs, including the need for them to be trusted, respected by pupils, organised and efficient, trained in counselling, able to undertake detailed and thorough record keeping and to have a clear procedure set up for sharing information.

OVERVIEW

The initiatives identified within this LEA highlighted a three-step response to targeting resources effectively. In the first instance, the database was introduced as a means of enabling LEA services to evaluate their overall performance and to target their resources more effectively. The main effects of having the EWS database were for the EWS to be able to target resources where they were needed, adopt a more focused approach to attendance problems, share good practice and provide a consistent service to schools.

Having identified areas of weakness or of need within the service as a whole, other strategies were then employed to address these issues. Attendance audits provided a whole-school strategy to identify strengths and weaknesses in dealing with attendance issues in schools. Indeed, audits were reported to have been most effective where they were targeted at schools which had significant attendance problems, as well as where school staff were able to recognise their weaknesses and were committed to raising attendance levels.

EWAs, in contrast, were employed as a direct, hands-on approach to assist schools considered to be 'failing' or struggling in terms of attendance, particularly, it would seem, those with a significant number of casual admissions and therefore disaffected pupils, in order to raise their attendance levels. Rather than deal with extreme cases of non-attendance and those mainly focused on dysfunctional family systems, which remained the realm of the EWO assigned to the school, EWAs most effectively dealt with cases where problems with and particular patterns of attendance were just starting to arise. In this way, they were able to raise the attendance of a significant number of pupils by some degree and this contributed to an overall school attendance improvement of a few per cent, perhaps significant enough to impact on their place within the league tables and to impact on LEA targets.

Placing these initiatives in the context of the LEA, overall, with limited EWS resources and a limited number of particular 'hot spots' of attendance difficulties, the LEA had developed an effective strategy for combating these problems. It achieved this by focusing on attendance matters (particularly unauthorised absence) and having in place initiatives which identified where resources were needed and then targeting specific strategies at schools in those areas. The three initiatives discussed were commensurate with this overall strategy, whilst at the same time identifying needs and providing support at different levels – the database focusing on service delivery, attendance audits at school level and the use of EWAs at both school and individual pupil level.

CASE STUDY TWO

LEA CONTEXT

Three initiatives were nominated as examples of effective practice within this authority. The parents' support group and primary–secondary transition scheme were illustrations of early intervention approaches, working with vulnerable groups to minimise the likelihood of attendance problems later on. The third project offered an initial response to absence, in the form of first-day contact. To describe the projects within the context of the local authority, the following section highlights some of the LEA's defining features.

Recent years had seen major changes for the service, with the LEA acquiring unitary status and the head of service leaving post. Before local government reorganisation, the EWS had found it useful to share practice with services in other districts. Post-reorganisation, these links were lost, although, more recently, efforts had been made to re-establish them. Today, the service falls under the umbrella of the Pupil Service Division, which encompasses the Behaviour Support Service, Learning Support Service, the Educational Psychology Service, Inclusions, Admissions, Awards, Transport and the SEN Section.

Compared to other authorities, staffing levels were low, with one EWO to 4,009 pupils. However, the levels of unauthorised absence were also low. Socio-economic wealth in the region was said to vary, with areas of significant deprivation. It was in these pockets, that the three initiatives operated.

Overall, the orientation of the service was described as 'preventative'. In particular, time was invested in preventing situations from deteriorating and evolving into more complex social problems. To achieve this, emphasis was placed on liaising with other agencies, who possessed the expertise to address specific issues, e.g. bereavement counselling, services for autistic children. Indeed, multi-agency work was perceived to be an essential element of the service, with plans to take more and more on board. In the mean time, multi-agency representation was encouraged at all meetings to obtain a full overview of any given situation.

In terms of service development, the service had become increasingly qualified, offering social work skills, rather than pure enforcement. Previously, a significant proportion of work entailed ex-police personnel knocking on doors and chasing up truants. The present service now viewed attendance problems as a symptom of underlying social difficulties and, if these could be alleviated, children would return to school. The manager of the Education Social Work Service recognised that, with the current Government emphasis on targets and preference for rapid-response schemes, the service may go full circle, with a return to knocking on doors.

THE PARENTS' GROUP

Information on the parents' group was acquired through interviews with the two joint coordinators – an Education Social Work Assistant (ESWA) and a nursery teacher, and additional insight provided by interviews with three parents.

How did the parents' group operate?

The parents' group was convened first thing on a Thursday morning in the local primary school, with up to eight parents attending. Eight parents was the optimum number, partly because of space restrictions and partly because any more would hinder a discussion. Sessions began with tea and coffee and, where mothers had young children, a toy box was put out to keep them occupied. Issues covered included attendance, the importance of getting children to school on time, the procedures used by school if a child does not attend, drugs on the estate and how they could protect their children from the drug culture and anti-bullying policies in schools. Outside speakers were invited to the group, although their contributions were entirely at the discretion of the parents. They would be informed on the day that a visitor had come to speak to them and asked whether or not they would like to listen. There was never any pressure to stay and the coordinators were careful not to cover any 'contentious issues'.

What was the rationale for the parents' support group?

In the first instance, the purpose of the parents' group was to:

- entice parents into school
- encourage parents to see school as a place of support
- enable parents to meet with the EWS
- spread positive EWS and school relations in the community
- discuss parenting skills.

By achieving these goals, it was hoped that the parents' group would fulfil a preventative function, securing good attendance amongst the children of those involved. Generally, poor attendance in the area was attributed to a lack of motivation amongst parents, with parents staying up late watching TV, which made it difficult to get up the next day. At secondary level, the nursery teacher also felt economic factors came into play, with children unable to go to school because they did not have the bus fare, money for cooking or even the proper uniform.

In terms of the particular approach chosen, the nature of the group was very much related to the characteristics of the area. The area was beset with social problems – crime, drugs and unemployment were endemic to the estate. Previous years had seen rioting and, prior to regeneration, the area was said to be '*like Beirut on a bad day*'. Over the last four years, however, large parts of the estate had been demolished and remodernised and it was from the attached funding that the parents' group was initially set up. For the EWS, a particular challenge concerned the high levels of suspicion felt towards authority figures in the community. Those that lived on the estate were described as '*very, very suspicious people; they don't like change, they don't like people coming in nosing and you have to get accepted and you are not always accepted*'. Families were said to be particularly wary of Social Services and the ESWA involved went to great lengths to clarify her exact role:

> *We must look a threat to them ... It's trying to get through to them that we're only here to help and assist and advise ... We're authority and a lot of people on these sort of estates have had bad experiences of authority ... They're always frightened you're going to take their kids off them and, you know, it's trying to get through to them that I work for Education is my biggest problem, you know, because they don't see Education, they see social worker – you're Social Services, you're coming to take my kids away* (ESWA).

Because of this mistrust, teething problems were experienced in setting up the group. Initially, letters were sent out inviting parents to participate. This generated a zero response. A more personal touch was needed and it was therefore decided to base the group at the nursery school, meeting parents as they dropped their children off.

Once parents were persuaded to attend, the approach remained informal and the agenda was very much determined by the mothers' particular needs and interests. If the coordinators wished to raise particular issues, they would bring them up casually in conversation, perhaps with reference to something on TV, which would then steer the conversation in the desired direction. Anything more structured would simply not work and they would 'lose them'.

A focus on parenting skills arose because families on the estate were often large, many were headed by single mothers and it was recognised that they did not always possess the skills to cope with their children. The initiative therefore endeavoured to provide practical advice on bringing up children, such as using behaviour charts to positively reward good behaviour.

What were the effects arising from the parents' support group?

Parents benefited from the support group in many ways. The nursery teacher saw increased confidence as the biggest effect, which had enabled mothers to access courses as part of their own personnel development. A number had completed courses for crèche workers and one hoped to gain employment in this area. Previously they had lacked the necessary self-esteem to push themselves forward and were happy to remain in the maternal role: '*They felt they couldn't do anything else.*' Following encouragement within the parents' group, however, the mothers had enrolled on courses (computing, maths, literacy, childcare) and had used the mutual support of the group to attend. The coordinator sought to build up the parents so '*that they are able to do other things than just have children and take them to school*'.

In terms of their perceptions towards school, the nursery teacher believed that the parents now saw teachers as more approachable and that they appreciated the value of education. The nursery teacher reported that: '*They're more willing to come into school and talk about any issues with the headteachers, the class teachers; they see them as much more approachable than they did before.*' Many had become involved in the school as volunteers and one parent had even become a parent governor: '*The parents that come have a really good relationship with the school*' (ESWA).

Despite living in a community where education was not prioritised, the mothers' attitude to school seemed much more positive. To some extent, the cycle of negativity and non-attendance had been broken. Only one of the mums had gained any qualifications at school and most had not attended regularly. Instead, they had had to look after children at home or their parents had simply not been interested in getting them to school. Their involvement in the parents' group, however, emphasised the positive aspects of school and all the mothers' children were reported to be good attenders.

From the parents' perspective they seemed to particularly appreciate the opportunity to share worries within a group situation: '*Something to look forward to, through the week. It really does help, if you've got a problem, to sit down and chat.*' Through the group the mothers had forged close friendships and were able to support one another in times of stress. One particular member had gone through a rough patch and the parents rallied round, picked up the children from school, gave children their teas and generally supported them.

The coordinators conceded that, to a certain extent, they were not reaching the parents they really need to reach, because those parents would never agree to come to a parents' group. However, those who did attend were '*the voice in the community, that know we are OK*' and it was hoped that, at the very least, their positive experiences of school and the EWS would spread by word of mouth to other parents.

Why was the parents' group effective?

As alluded to previously, a key element of the parents' group was its informality. This was a common thread that ran throughout all the interviews. Its confidentiality, voluntary participation and the fact that it was seen as parent-led were also cited as effective factors. Even the parents themselves acknowledged the benefits of a laid-back atmosphere:

> *This way, it's dead casual. You feel more relaxed, so you want to come – something that you have a set thing to do. It's a bit like coming to school really – wouldn't not want to come.*

The nursery teacher believed it was important having a core group of parents who were ready to talk, so that, should new people wish to join, they would find themselves coming in to a friendly, welcoming atmosphere. The nursery teacher also recognised her own role in facilitating the group, in that, having been at the school for some time, she was accepted by the parents and could therefore extend an invitation to the group. An invite from an outsider would most likely be rejected.

FIRST-DAY RESPONSE

> *You've got to be cheeky and push yourself forward until they get sick of you basically ... You've got to be persistent; you've got to be like a detective* (ESWA).

These are the qualities required to effectively administer a first-day response scheme – an unwavering determination to follow up and question every absence. The Government is currently keen to promote such an approach and Case Study Two provides an example of its use. Comments were invited from the ESWA responsible for the scheme, a headteacher from a primary school, a deputy head and an attendance coordinator from a secondary school and two parents.

How did the first-day response scheme operate?

In the secondary school, the ESWA went through the registers every morning and compiled a list of pupils who were absent. She then checked the list against those pupils that had signed in late. Stage three involved taking phone calls from parents whose children were absent because of illness. Finally, the serious incident book was checked to see if any pupils had been sent home because of an incident in school. For those remaining on the list, the parents were contacted by phone. If no response was received, the ESWA would go out to visit and again, if no one answered, a card was posted informing them of the visit. In the primary school, where absence was not such a problem, the school staff compiled a list for the ESWA. This was discussed with the school secretary and, where necessary, visits were made. When speaking to parents, the ESWA tried to establish the reason for absence and work towards a solution. At the end of the day, all contacts were logged and a copy of the information faxed to the schools. It should also be noted that the ESWA in this scheme did not purely chase up cases of non-attendance. Time was also invested in establishing relationships with children, escorting children to school and addressing family problems which impacted on attendance. Children therefore benefited from more direct support, to promote their regular attendance.

What was the rationale for the first-day response scheme?

The first-day response scheme covered both primary and secondary schools. It was in the secondary school that the transition project also operated and the geographical locale for these two projects therefore overlapped. The setting was described as one of social deprivation, high unemployment (up to 50 per cent in some areas) with '*a sizeable minority of children who come from extremely poor backgrounds*'. Teaching staff at the secondary school spoke of a pervading cultural view which deterred pupils from achieving. Whilst parents were generally supportive of school, they had few academic aspirations for their children and, consequently, children did not perceive a future for themselves outside the immediate area:

> *They see themselves working where their dad works. They don't see themselves becoming nurses; they see themselves become nursery nurses ... when you get down to the nitty-gritty, they don't think a lot of their skills and talents. They're quite dismissive of themselves.*

With low expectations, the children were said to be underachieving and teachers therefore strove to challenge and stretch the pupils so that they could realise their full potential. The setting of the primary school was similar in that, according to the ESWA, parents did not see education as a priority because they were simply '*caught up in this cycle of deprivation*'. Again, it was hard to make education seem relevant as '*they know they're never gonna get a job; they know they're never gonna get off the estate, so why bother*'. That was thought to be the '*general attitude*'. This description was confirmed by the headteacher of the school who explained that attendance was not seen as a critical issue by parents, overridden instead by more pressing concerns, e.g. getting cheap shoes on market day.

It was in such a setting that the first-day response scheme operated. More specifically, the following comments were given as rationale for adopting this approach:

- responding to DfEE guidelines
- the success of first-day contact
- avoiding more serious attendance problems later on

- having dedicated personnel to follow up non-attendance
- allowing ESWs to undertake more in-depth work.

The manager of the Education Social Work Service saw first-day response as observing DfEE guidance. The approach had been tried initially two years previously, with considerable success. At the time, the service was not '*100 per cent for it*' but realised that for those children who have the odd day off, '*if you keep on at them long enough, they give up and come in*'.

For the primary school head, it demonstrated to parents and children that services were communicating with one another and that non-attendance would not be permitted. S/he also felt it was important to address attendance issues at primary level, to establish good habits and to prevent attendance problems transferring to secondary school. From the secondary school perspective, it was useful to have someone with the time to follow up non-attendance, because teachers often had so many other priorities.

On reviewing the scheme, there were implications for how the EWS service was structured. The ESWA mentioned having to liaise closely with the school ESW to avoid double-up and dealing with the same children. Anything that was thought to be beyond the remit or capabilities of the ESWA would be referred to the ESW. The manager of the service was therefore considering the possibility of a two-tier service, with ESWAs following up initial absence, leaving ESWs to work with more in-depth cases.

What were the effects arising from the first-day response scheme?

To a certain extent, the effects of first-day response varied according to the type of school. At primary level, attendance is rarely such an issue as it is in secondary and, perhaps for this reason, the effects arising from the scheme pertained more to awareness and promoting good habits. Parents and children soon picked up that attendance was being monitored: '*It's increased awareness. I've used it as a tool to increase the awareness between the rest of the community about the importance of attendance*' (headteacher, primary school).

Input from the EWS was also welcomed because it showed parents that another service was monitoring absence and that it was not just a case of school '*bashing them for attendance*'. Instead, the system allowed the school to share responsibility with another service.

At secondary level, attendance figures had risen one per cent per annum and for particular pupils, where it had fallen to 30–35 per cent, attendance was now running at 60–70 per cent. The deputy head conceded that it took a long time for parents to realise that they must send their child to school, but the unrelenting nature of first-day response had gradually raised attendance levels. Should first-day response cease, the deputy head felt certain that attendance levels would rapidly slip.

Although first-day response schemes were generally concerned with attendance, in the context of this particular school, the scheme was also seen as fundamental to the overall attainment of the pupils. The school was above the national average for GCSE results (A–G), despite high levels of special needs and this was attributed to children completing coursework and attending examinations. Without good attendance, children's education was said to suffer, leading to poor exam results and reduced life opportunities:

> *I would say attendance is crucial to social and education inclusion. If children are allowed to drop out of school, the chances of them getting certification are very much reduced and then that can have a blighting effect on the rest of their lives* (deputy head).

From parents' perspective, whilst some may have resented phone calls home, other parents were said to appreciate that the school cared enough to follow up absence. One parent who was interviewed explained how the ESWA would visit every morning if her son did not arrive at school. Escorted attendance, whilst not the ideal, at least encouraged a pattern of regular attendance. In this case, persistence paid off and the child's attendance eventually improved. Also, as a consequence of first-day response, parents communicated more readily with schools and this enabled staff to get to the bottom of non-attendance, rather than letting the problem drift along.

As discussed in Chapter Seven, a common side effect of first-day response schemes was that they exposed gaps in the registration system. Indeed, in this case, when the scheme first started, the ESWA often contacted parents of children who were actually in school, but had been marked absent. Unnecessary phone calls irritated parents and teachers were therefore advised to be more meticulous when completing registers.

For which pupils was first-day response most/least effective?

First-day response was deemed to be successful for those children who had the odd day off here and there, rather than the most entrenched non-attenders. Both children and their parents soon realised that a system was in place which would consistently challenge their non-attendance:

> *If you are continuously on at them every single day, they get fed up and think 'Oh, God, we might as well ... we are not going to get away with this; we might as well get them into school'* (ESWA).

In more extreme cases, though, the ESWA spoke of older children who were '*really out of control*', whose parents were unable to exert any influence over their behaviour:

> *They will go out to school on a morning and disappear, and, as far as that parent is concerned, they are in school and so really you go round and you feel sorry for the parents, because you feel there's nothing you can do about it* (ESWA).

In these situations, first-day response was unlikely to make a significant impression.

Why was first-day response effective?

There was an overwhelming consensus as to the feature which made first-day response effective – plain and simple '*doggedness*'. Interviewees spoke of a day-after-day commitment in pursuing absence and the importance of an immediate response:

> *S/he is there, bang on every morning; s/he's there getting to know the kids. S/he has the time. It's consistent* (attendance coordinator, secondary school).

> *I think it's the information being received and passed on. The speed of that process is obviously more immediate and the feedback that you get from information from the visits is more immediate* (primary headteacher).

In many ways, the system was preventative because it allowed problems to be picked up before they escalated further. The ESWA explained that, on occasion, s/he would visit a family and find homes infested with lice, where there was no food or heating. Having to follow up an absence had therefore alerted him/her to some serious difficulties, which could then be resolved. Without first-day response, the situation would have gone undetected and it may have been some considerable time before the non-attendance reached a point for it to be referred to the ESW. In this sense, first-day response served as an early warning system.

The ESWA also commented on the advantages of being school-based, with instant access to the surrounding community. It enabled him/her to be deployed immediately in the event of an emergency:

> *I'm on site more or less. I'm there all morning and I phone the primaries every day, or I come in and I'm there instantly.* [XX school] *have rung up and said to me 'Can you get across here now? I've got a problem with' ... I can go straightaway and be there in a few minutes, whereas* [the ESW] *tends to have pre-arranged appointments all the time, so s/he may not always be able to be got hold of.*

THE TRANSITION PROJECT

This particular initiative was unusual in that it was led by the Youth Service, rather than EWS personnel. Using Year 10 pupils to mentor new arrivals in Year 7, the initiative endeavoured to ease the transition from primary to secondary school, a time of potential stress. Interviews were carried out with the Youth Service coordinator, mentors, mentees, a deputy head and two teachers assisting with the scheme.

What was the transition project?

Already Chapter Eight has given a brief summary of the project featured in this case study. Other aspects of the project, though, are worth highlighting. The focal point of the project was the residential during the school holidays, which brought together the Youth Service, junior leaders, mentors and mentees. A five-week training programme was provided for the mentors using techniques such as role play to explore relevant issues, e.g. bullying. Mentors visited primary schools to meet potential mentees and to perform a play on bullying. Although pupils were initially identified for support during the transition, once at secondary school the project worked on a drop-in basis with open access every Wednesday lunchtime. If a child wished to attend a session, they had to ask their form tutor for a pass. Initial sessions were kept informal, with orange juice, biscuits and a CD player provided. Mentors built up their relationship with the mentees through communication games and fun activities. Mentors were given badges so that the younger pupils could identify them as mentors. At the time of the NFER visit, plans were afoot to make the sessions increasingly structured in the form of a homework club. Two teachers helped coordinate the project, dealing primarily with communication in school and encouraging children to attend. The scheme was publicised around school with posters and the teachers involved would attend Year 7 assemblies to promote the scheme.

What was the rationale for the primary–secondary transition project?

When asked to outline the rationale for setting up a transition project, future attainment levels were seen as a bigger priority than future attendance levels. The school involved clearly had a strong focus on raising standards and the teachers helping to run the scheme explained that: '*They come in very fresh faced and they want to do well and they do all their homework and they reach about Year 9 and things begin to waver a bit.*' By providing support during the transition phase, it was hoped that the children would be less 'traumatised', maintain their concentration and commitment levels and therefore continue to do well throughout school:

> *Our main concern is with the dip which seems to occur in children's attainment after they've finished key stage 2 exams, and we think that a good transition from primary school will help introduce children gently to a secondary school and maybe offset the trauma of moving schools* (deputy head).

So, whilst certain pupils were identified as potential attendance concerns and therefore targeted for the project, the '*main initial thrust was raising standards*' (teacher). Overall, the ethos of the school towards improving attendance was that a systematic approach was best, one which involved parents, form tutors, year tutors and senior management in order to achieve long-term effects – essentially, the school advocated a whole-school approach.

From a Youth Service perspective, their involvement stemmed from a desire to move away from a centre base and work with specific types of pupil to raise standards in schools. The Youth Service coordinator had previously worked for the EWS and could therefore appreciate the upheaval some children experience when they move school. A key priority therefore was to reduce this transition anxiety.

Pupil mentors were used, as opposed to adults, because they provided older children with the opportunity to take on additional responsibilities, which in turn would contribute to their own personal development. Indeed, pupils selected as mentors were doing well at school, but were not particularly involved in extra-curricular activities. Through the scheme, the confidence and self-esteem of the mentors was said to improve.

What were the effects arising from the transition project?

In some respects, it was hard to evaluate the impact of the scheme, because it had only run for two terms. Within this short period, however, attendance at the drop-in sessions was such that they were said to be '*splitting at the seams*'. In fact, word had spread to other year groups and they also wanted to participate because they saw it as a fun thing to do. For the mentees, the project had encouraged them to mix with children from other form groups and, as a result, supportive friendships had developed.

When interviewed, the mentees in Year 7 spoke of their concerns in transferring to a new school. Namely, they were worried that they would not make friends, they thought they might be bullied and '*the last night that I was at my last school, I was very nervous*'. Through their involvement in the scheme, however, they said they had made friends with other people, that the mentors were looking after them and that, if needed, they could get extra help with their school work. When questioned on their attendance, one interviewee proudly announced that '*we get 100 per cent attendance*'.

The mentors too had prospered from their involvement. Shouldering additionally responsibilities, they had become increasing organised and their communication skills had improved. In organising the sessions, they were required to negotiate with both teachers and mentees and agree amongst themselves over who did what. One mentor explained:

> *I think I'm a bit more confident now. I'm not as shy as I used to be. Before, when I organised the games when we first started it, I used to be really red and feel stupid organising it. But now I'm a bit more confident.*

A teacher also reported that, amongst the current mentors, there were individuals who wished to continue with the scheme and train to be junior mentors.

For which pupils was the transition project most/least effective?

Additional support and an opportunity to mix with other children were seen as particularly important for one individual, who was described as '*quite a lonely kid*' and a victim of bullying. Access to the transition project enabled him to feel included: '*On a Wednesday he comes in and he just feels he's part of it really.*' Without this safety net, a teacher feared that such pupils would quickly fall by the wayside:

> *For somebody like* [X] *– if he didn't start to mix with other people, if he went through Year 7 with the problems he's come into school with and nobody did anything to address those problems, then he could become one of the kids that maybe just didn't want to come and he would drift away, we might lose him.*

Why was the transition project effective?

Three aspects of the scheme were singled out as features which contributed to its success. Firstly, value was placed on the scheme being run by youth workers, with direct input from young people. The coordinator maintained that: '*You've got to have the right key skills in working with young people and that's our job as youth workers.*' She went on to say: '*It needs an external body, because teachers are always going to be teachers.*' This view was confirmed by one of the participating teachers, who attributed success to good relationships and said that, in cases where children did not want to talk to teachers, they at least had peers to speak to instead.

The teacher also acknowledged the importance of creating a 'safe haven' within school. Moving to secondary school can be an overwhelming experience, with more pupils, more teachers and bigger buildings. Children therefore needed to feel '*that school belongs to them and that school is a safe place to be in*' and '*there are places where they can go where nobody is going to pick on them and that they can safely talk to older pupils*'. The transition project, based in an annexe away from the main building, was thought to offer such a place.

Finally, the youth worker running the scheme placed an emphasis on building firm foundations, whereby mentors were properly trained and their commitment to the project secured. In this way, they were appropriately equipped to offer support to the mentees. The whole process was described as a '*chain*', with staff supporting the junior leader, the junior leader supporting the mentors and then the mentors supporting the mentees.

OVERVIEW

In terms of general approach, this authority was oriented more towards welfare-based work than pure enforcement. Accordingly, the service responsible for raising attendance assumed the title of Education 'Social' Work Service, within which social work skills were employed to tackle the problems which often underlie poor attendance. However, it was recognised that Government-set targets may signal a return to a greater enforcement role. Indeed, in response to recommendations from the DfEE, first-day response schemes had been established and, whilst the service reported apprehension at the beginning, their undeniable success justified their use. The service was also described as preventative, focusing on the warning signs of poor attendance. Consequently, the other two initiatives identified as examples of effective practice took the form of early intervention strategies – one, targeting parents living on a socially deprived estate and the other working with vulnerable children during the potential unsettling transition to secondary school.

A parents' support group was set up in an area where authority was viewed with suspicion and resentment. A challenge for the EWS, therefore, was how to access the community and build positive relations. The approach chosen was very informal, unimposed and based entirely on the needs of parents. As a result, the group had proved a success – mothers were more confident, they had enrolled on courses, and, perhaps most importantly, they were increasingly involved in school life, which, in the long run, would hopefully secure their children's attendance.

The transition scheme was managed and delivered by the Youth Service, a feature which was ascribed to its success. Children were said to respond to youth workers who were not teachers and the scheme employed young people as mentors for the same reason. School personnel saw the scheme as preventative, keeping young people on track and avoiding a decline in both attendance and attainment.

The success of the first-day response project hinged on the tenacity of the EWA – following up every incidence of non-attendance. For EWOs this meant that they were able to take on more in-depth work and, for a secondary school involved, good attendance was seen as a prerequisite for exam success – the two were felt to be inextricably linked. Whilst offering an initial response to absence, first-day response was also preventative, as it brought children to the attention of the EWO who otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

CASE STUDY THREE

LEA CONTEXT

Two initiatives were highlighted as particularly effective within this authority. These were the Transition Inclusion Project, an initiative aimed at early intervention with vulnerable pupils, and the attendance blitz, which focused on pupils with identified attendance problems.

The authority was a medium-sized, inner London LEA in a deprived area with unemployment well above the national average. The population, mixed in terms of ethnicity, was described as '*turbulent*' and '*very mobile*'. In particular areas, there was reported to be a resistance by parents to regular school attendance and study because it clashed with their lifestyle. Schools in these areas had difficulty stimulating parental motivation and support. Parentally condoned absence and punctuality were felt to be particular issues.

The EWS had recently been located within Social Services, and there was a hesitant, but positive, feeling about the move. Six schools were highlighted by the DfEE as requiring specific attention on attendance matters and the service was targeting resources by conducting attendance audits within such schools. Emphasis was placed on support for parents because, as the PEWO stated '*if you have got parents on your side, you have done most of the work*', and this is reflected in the two initiatives highlighted. Family work was encouraged in the early years, whilst intensive individual work tended to be a feature of the later years of secondary schooling. A lot of court work was undertaken and felt to be important in demonstrating the seriousness of non-attendance. Although six ESOs were in place at the present time, the PEWO felt that they weren't thought to be particularly effective because '*the problems you are dealing with will overwhelm what you put into it*'. Whilst the PEWO held a strong belief in the value of multi-agency work, s/he reported that this was difficult to achieve and it was hoped that the broader perspective within Social Services might facilitate this process. Unusually, truancy patrols were said to be held every day. IT systems were reported to be outdated. In summary, the PEWO stated that the service attempted to balance discipline and structure with support and empowering: '*I wouldn't think the service was doing its job if it only did one and not the other.*'

The PEWO perceived both projects highlighted to be aimed at early intervention and commensurate with their focus on targeting parents. With limited resources ('*it's a very tight pinch*'), projects of this nature were said to allow the service to focus attention on areas where they are unable to fulfil their statutory responsibility with the established staff. Projects also tended not to be multi-agency because this was much harder to achieve with limited resources. In comparison with other strategies adopted, these initiatives were managed by the service and therefore not felt to make demands on schools. In one school now involved in the Transition Inclusion Project, first-day response, for example, had failed because '*it's an extra job for them to do quickly in order for them to mobilise us*'. The issue of status of the EWS in relation to other services was also raised by the PEWO: '*How easy it is for* [a service] *like ours to be used as the handmaid really, trotting around delivering messages, escorting people to and from meetings, which is not what we are about.*'

THE TRANSITION INCLUSION PROJECT

In connection with the Transition Inclusion Project, the following people were interviewed:

- the PEWO
- an ESW
- the headteacher of a primary school
- the deputy head of a secondary school
- a classroom assistant
- eight pupils
- two sets of parents.

What is the Transition Inclusion Project?

Brief details of the project were presented in Chapter Eight. The role of the ESW was vital as a link between the pupils, parents, the school and the classroom assistants involved in the project. Thus administrative and organisational skills, as well as interpersonal skills, were felt to be vital for effective coordination and the ability to be persistent, yet sensitive, with parents in order to engage them in the project was considered essential.

Each classroom assistant supported about ten or 12 pupils in a secondary school. All those interviewed reiterated the wide range of support the classroom assistants were able to offer pupils: help in the classroom with schoolwork, involvement in extra-curricular activities, provision of a homework club, informal activities (e.g. parties, quizzes), links with home, reports for parents, discussion with school staff, as well as always being available to help pupils and parents sort out any specific problems in relation to school. They had weekly meetings with the ESW to discuss their work and fortnightly meetings with the school SENCO to discuss cases. In addition, they liaised with form tutors (usually during registration time) and with the classroom assistants employed by the school.

The multi-agency aspect

Whilst multi-agency input was not an integral part of the initiative, links with other agencies were made in order to provide further support to pupils and parents. The Interpreter Service, for example, had been utilised to communicate with some parents, and some pupils had been referred to the Child Guidance Service. The primary headteacher, when asked about other agencies which might be involved, felt that having too many people involved at such a busy time of year for them might be both impractical and counter-productive.

What was the rationale behind the Transition Inclusion Project?

As well as being, to some extent, parent-focused and a supportive approach (in contrast to the blitz project discussed next), the EWS had examined why pupils excluded themselves from education at age 14 and felt that this was linked with disturbed transition and lack of support from parents at this stage. The aim was therefore to focus resources, by providing one-to-one support at this stage, and to save money later. A pilot project was conducted and shown to be successful.

The classroom assistant interviewed worked in an area reported to have similar problems to that of an inner-city borough. S/he felt that the project gave disadvantaged children in this area an opportunity to make a smooth transition. The parents of pupils in the primary school (involved with the project for two years) were reported by the headteacher to be '*ambivalent*', with very low aspirations and sometimes unrealistic expectations of the school: '*They want their children to be happy, but don't really want to know much more.*' Whilst the biggest concern of OFSTED was the low attainment of pupils, levels of attendance (90.2 per cent last term) were also felt to be low, although increasing. As part of the new EAZ, attendance was now a major focus of the school and the headteacher stated that they were now picking up on all attendance below 90 per cent. The secondary school, also part of the EAZ, was also reported to have low levels of attainment, high truancy and poor attendance (now 87.5 per cent), although rising. Parents were felt to have a bad perception of schooling and most absence

was reported to be condoned: '*They didn't attend school. Why are they going to encourage their children to?*' (deputy headteacher).

Both schools focused on a positive approach to attendance and pupils' enjoyment of school. In the primary school, direct contact with parents was felt to be important where there were concerns which were addressed through the SEN Code of Practice (even where attendance alone was an issue). The headteacher reported that they had been asked to be involved in the Transition Inclusion Project and that it had been reassuring to pass their concerns about vulnerable pupils on to someone who might support these children: '*We never doubted the benefits.*' They recognised that this might be a difficult time for pupils and that it was important that the positive approach fitted with their own, one that the children were used to: '*It didn't bring us into the realms of something we weren't doing already. I think from the children's point of view that was important, that they saw it as more of the same. They need that, don't they?*' The deputy head within the secondary school felt that it was more productive to focus on pupils, even though it was only a small group, rather than the parents, when their attitudes were so ingrained:

> *If we get parents in and say 'Look, their attendance is appalling. You have got to do something about it', that won't work. The parents have worked with us on it, but when the children are saying 'No, mum. I have got to go in. I want to go in. I can't stay and sort this out', that works better.*

There was overall general agreement that the main aim of the project was to support and monitor pupils identified as vulnerable through the transition, although the classroom assistant, working directly with the pupils, and the primary headteacher, identified more specific objectives:

- to ensure good attendance
- to encourage pupils to want to go to school
- to build pupils' self-esteem
- to adopt a youth-work approach (as opposed to authoritarian)
- to make pupils feel safe
- to give pupils an adult they can relate to.

What were the effects of the Transition Inclusion Project?

All interviewees identified that the attendance of pupils on the project (over 100) had been good. The deputy head of the secondary school reported that attendance had been 85 per cent and upwards per cohort, when they had been potential non-attenders. Whilst many pupils reported that they had been nervous to begin with, they clearly enjoyed their involvement with the 'club'. Parents too were reported by both the primary headteacher and the classroom assistant to be suspicious to begin with. The headteacher felt that the limited time for planning and the name afforded to the project had not facilitate this process: '*They don't really like their children being picked out or made different in any way.*'; '*I think, anything that says social worker they are very suspicious ... and the name 'TIP' has caused some problems.*' Areas of improvement in pupils (highlighted by parents and pupils themselves, as well as others) included their:

- attendance
- schoolwork
- enjoyment of school
- behaviour
- socialisation
- confidence
- involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Attendance:
'I always come now. I used to bunk school all the time.'
Schoolwork:
'When the teachers come in our class, we can read much better because they tell us to sound out the words instead of skip it.'
Enjoyment of school:
'I didn't use to like science or geography, but where the classroom teachers would come and they would sit there and you would feel better, but now I just like most of my subjects now and they don't come in the lessons no more.'
Behaviour:
'I just ignore everyone else now, just get on with my work and leave them all to get into trouble.'
Socialisation:
'He has his own little group of friends and all that, because a lot of kids from [his primary school] *didn't go, so he was worried about that at first, but when he went to this bowling before it started with he TIP club and met the rest and all that'* (parent).

Parents had noticed increased confidence and independence in their children, illustrated by one mother whose child had, of his own volition, helped a new pupil to settle into school and whose mother had thanked her: *'I was really proud. I felt ten feet tall coming out of that school gate.'* School staff, on the other hand, referred to the extra-curricular activities pupils had been involved in. Parents also described the significant impact their child's involvement had on the family (*'If he was miserable at school, then we would all suffer'*) and how this had given them peace of mind and reassurance:

> *It made life easier. It stopped me worrying so much and getting stressed out and I weren't really in a state to worry about anything because I just couldn't think, so it's sort of done wonders for me. Seeing him go and being so happy about going ... it's just done it for me.*

Despite this impact, the primary headteacher reported, somewhat disappointedly, that a wider impact on parenting, and therefore on other siblings, had not been achieved.

The secondary headteacher found the liaison between the Transition Inclusion Project worker and the staff had been helpful, made the school a better place and promoted achievement, and therefore the whole school had benefited. EWS staff, in addition, highlighted a positive impact on schools in that they had seen that having help from outside had been useful, that pupils with serious difficulties were identified and, overall, the reputation of the service had improved.

For whom was the Transition Inclusion Project most/least effective?

The support offered through the project was targeted at pupils thought to be vulnerable to later attendance problems. Schools with poor attendance and exclusions figures were selected to participate. Pupils with a range of special needs (social, emotional, behavioural), usually on the SEN Code of Practice, were chosen. The headteacher of the primary school reiterated this, saying that they examined every aspect of the pupils' lives. This was therefore by no means an homogenous group. The classroom assistant reported that some had specific attendance problems, others behavioural difficulties, some were victims of bullying, whilst others had a background of traumatic family circumstances. This range was born out in the pupils interviewed, which included pupils who:

- were not attending regularly:
  'In primary, I didn't like it and sometimes I just didn't go.'
- struggled with schoolwork:
  'I always used to have problems and I always get panicky if I can't do something.'
- were worried about being bullied:
  'I thought they were going to beat me up and that.'
- were worried about not having friends:
  'I just thought I would have no one to know. I would just be there on my own.'
- exhibited poor behaviour:
  'I used to always have fights ... used to get sent out of class.'

There was often a history of attendance problems and other problems within the family, for example, one parent had experienced mental health difficulties. The deputy head of the secondary school also referred to an example of a pupil who lacked support from home because of the birth of a new baby. A

common factor amongst pupils, however, was felt to be their lack of self-esteem and it was for these pupils the classroom assistant thought the intervention to be particularly effective. On the other hand, the primary headteacher concluded that, overall: '*They are often the "odd bods" in some way. They have got some quirky way about them.*'

Why was the Transition Inclusion Project effective?

Having the extra person within school to support these pupils was felt to be in itself one of the key elements by all those involved. The fact that the parents and the child knew them before they began attending the secondary school and had time to develop a good relationship with the child was felt to be important and to provide the pupil with a sense of security and safety:

> *It gave him a lot of confidence because there is someone there if he gets into any problems and can go and talk to him about it or, if he doesn't understand the homework thing, he can go there. I think that's probably helped him settle at* [the secondary school] *better because that pressure has been taken off* (parent).

For this reason too the continuity of the person was also felt to be important by the primary school headteacher. The skills and qualities of the worker, such as having high expectations and being able to communicate effectively with the family, were thought to be of prime importance by the deputy head of the secondary school. Their approach, particularly with the type of parents they were dealing with, was specifically highlighted: '*If you approach our parents with that kind of heavy-handed attitude, you get absolutely nowhere. One, they are likely to punch you, but they have got to feel that you are on their level.*'

Pupils, on the other hand, when asked what had made a difference, referred to the range of support that the classroom assistant was able to offer them – help with schoolwork, reminders about behaviour, linking with home and help with sorting out specific problems in school. Above all, from their perspective, two factors were vital: that the Transition Inclusion Project worker was available whenever help was needed (the immediacy of the response) and that they were not teachers (a point also raised by others interviewed).

Immediacy: '*They don't say don't worry about it, I will talk to you later on, come back at break time or something like that. You can interrupt them in their lunch and they still won't be really bothered.*'
Not being teachers: '*You know that when you come down they are not going to go and talk to another teacher. They are not going to go and spread it. You know what's going to happen*' (pupil). '*I think having the classroom assistant instead of the teacher, it gives them more confidence if there is a problem, to talk to them rather than a teacher and them being laughed at or picked on because they went to the teacher*' (parent).
The range of support offered included: • reminders about behaviour: '*Because she would come in when she thought we were going to be naughty. She told us to move away from someone and things like that.*' • help with work: '*Because some of your teachers don't help you, do they? I don't mind going into* [lessons] *anymore because* [the classroom assistant] *comes in and helps us.*' • links with home: '[The classroom assistant] *passes messages on to my mum, like if I have been naughty ... if you are good.*

Pupils also highlighted the way that the group supported each other, e.g. with bullying, and this was reiterated by school staff who felt that the bonding with the rest of the group and the sense of belonging this gave pupils was also a key factor. Other key elements raised by staff included close monitoring and the small group.

THE ATTENDANCE BLITZ

The attendance blitz used a graded series of letters to target parents of pupils with different levels of absence. In connection with the attendance blitz, the PEWO and the ESW were interviewed.

What is an attendance blitz?

The attendance blitz was described in some detail in Chapter Nine. Pupils and parents were informed before a blitz was about to take place. The court officer and an ESW conducted the blitz. In most schools, the process entailed three stages so that it fitted into a term, with three weeks' attendance examined each time, but this was flexible. Overall, a four-week cycle was described – a week for doing the list of pupils, doing the letters, getting the letters out and then examining the next three weeks' attendance and then a week off. A tight schedule was followed. Further follow-up, whilst thought to be advantageous, was not possible because of lack of funding. Reports were written and fed back to schools. In order to cut down on the time involved, pupils were not perceived as 'cases' and therefore home visits and discussions with year heads were not conducted, although the ESW met with headteacher to check that they wanted court letters to go out to certain cases.

The multi-agency aspect

Although there was no direct multi-agency involvement, the process involved identified pupils receiving and in need of support from other agencies. Liaison with magistrates raised issues of lack of consistency in approach and a lack of understanding of educational responsibilities of parents. It was felt that small fines often undermined the intensive and time-consuming work the EWS had put in.

What was the rationale behind the attendance blitz?

The attendance blitz was thought to offer a contrast to the more supportive approach of the Transition Inclusion Project, whilst both were commensurate with the EWS's focus on parents. The ESW described, on the one hand, the '*short sharp shock*' and the '*hard line*' of the blitz as complementary to the '*real nurture stuff*' of the Transition Inclusion Project: '*We completely come in at opposite ends of the spectrum.*' The attendance blitz was thought to help combat a culture of parents reluctant to take responsibility for their children '*especially when it comes to horrible things like having to fight with them to get them out of bed*'.

Historically, the EWS had examined school registers and written to parents where attendance was below 80 per cent, but, following staff cuts, they were no longer able to implement this strategy. Constant developments in education also meant that schools allowed these pupils to slip through the net. A lot of pupils were now being missed whom the EWS would previously have picked up, leading to more long-term difficulties: '*By the time they came to our notice it was two or three years down the line, bad habits had got ingrained, they had got themselves into a lot more trouble and it was almost impossible to work with*' (ESW). In addition, limited resources had left some schools with no EWS provision. The attendance blitz was therefore introduced as an efficient way of targeting certain schools. The ESW interviewed also described the need to take a more hard-line approach because of the extent of the problem in some schools:

> *We weren't just going to have polite reminders because I knew the state that some schools were in. You have got some secondary schools with 20, 30, 40 kids who are never there, unauthorised absence week after week. So we wanted something, as well as a polite reminder for those having the odd day; we wanted something that amounted to a court warning.*

What were the effects of the attendance blitz?

Schools were reported to have welcomed the 'attendance blitz' approach and to have seen an impression on their overall attendance. Figures collected showed that, at primary level, roughly 50 per cent of pupils dramatically improve their attendance, and, out of the other 50 per cent, a lot of them improved but required further monitoring. Whist there was some improvement at stage one, the second stage had a major impact. At secondary level, there was less of an impact. This was felt to vary with

the school and was tied in with them taking responsibility and developing their own monitoring systems (see later). Where these were less effective, typically, 100 or more letters went out at stage one, 40 or 50 at stage three and, in one school, over 20 court summonses. Whilst there was an improvement, having so many cases remaining at the final stage was not thought to be beneficial. The effect on attendance was felt by the ESW to be long-term: '*The effect echoes around for another year or so after that.*'

In addition to raising attendance levels, the PEWO reported that the process had made a big difference to the way schools worked and had a '*rejuvenating*' effect on ability in schools. An impact on the systems and communication both within school and between parents and school was noted. For example, poor communication between office staff and form tutors and inaccurate marking of registers were highlighted. More specific problems, where pupils were having difficulties with one teacher, for example, were also highlighted. Whilst teachers were reported to be likely to feel threatened by this process, meetings at the beginning were felt to reassure them if they were uncertain. It was explained that: '*We are going to be picking up what you are doing wrong, but it's not a witch hunt.*'

For which schools/pupils was the attendance blitz most/least effective?

Attendance blitzes were targeted at specific schools, both primary and secondary, although it was felt to work better in primary schools, as it was easier for parents to get their children into school. Apart from the pilot school (reported to be '*middle of road*' on most statistics, including attendance) every school was either on special measures or 'at risk', as identified mainly by the LEA, but in one case, by OFSTED, and those with less than 90 per cent attendance. Six schools were identified through the DfEE, with attendance more than three per cent below the national average for two years or more. Schools were, however, reported to vary in the extent of their social problems, although some were in areas which were very socially deprived: '*A large estate near the school that's actually known as the drugs supermarket of the south east and that's the parents and grandparents of these children that are running that.*' However, the intervention had not worked as well where '*they have such social deprivation in their intakes that it's a struggle to own that problem because they have got so much else they are dealing with*'. The need for schools to own the problem was thought to be a major factor in its success. The project was also less successful where there was a breakdown in communication within the school. This was reported to impede the process and result in practical difficulties because of the volume of work. On the other hand, where schools already focused very much on attendance matters, '*it doubles the effect*'.

Non-attendance, on the whole, was thought to stem mainly from parents' lack of motivation and responsibility for their children, with them wanting someone else to do the hard work for them. Parents often had unmet emotional needs of their own and were therefore unable to parent properly. The attendance blitz was reported to result in marked improvements in the attendance of pupils whose families were '*on the periphery*', but not the '*hard core*'. The PEWO felt that parentally condoned absence (including extended holidays and shopping trips, for example), in particular, was addressed by this initiative and that there was often a major improvement in those families that have been very casual about school attendance:

> *When the second letter goes out, which is harsher in tone and repeats the fact that the child is on 65 per cent or whatever since the first letter was sent, that's when you get a major improvement, but not across the board. You get a major improvement in those families that have been very casual, about 'Oh, you needn't go in today'. Now the reductions are much less after that, as you get towards the hard core, but at that stage you are looking at reasons why these children aren't in and should they be dropped from this particular programme anyway? The ones we end up with are serious non-attenders* (PEWO).

Why was the attendance blitz effective?

An attendance blitz was thought to be effective because:

- the school had to focus on attendance
- it had a high profile with parents
- of the consistent approach to policy and practice in schools that resulted
- of the graded level of response and its relentlessness

- of the immediacy of the response
- it was able to cover a lot of pupils
- it set a benchmark and only decent improvement allows someone to drop out of the process
- it had a good reputation in schools.

OVERVIEW

Both the initiatives highlighted were commensurate with the LEA philosophy of focusing on parents, as parental motivation was felt to be a particular issue in some areas and children's attendance at school difficult to secure without their support.

There was a high level of authorised and unauthorised absence, but the authority was fairly well resourced in terms of EWS staff. They had selected as effective one strategy aimed at early identification and prevention of future attendance problems which offered one-to-one support for vulnerable pupils at the transition from primary to secondary school. Indeed, the project was reported to have impacted on many aspects of vulnerable pupils' lives, as well as reassuring their parents that they could cope within school and ensuring that these pupils have good attendance at their secondary school.

In contrast to this supportive approach, the attendance blitz tended to take a more hard-hitting approach with parents of pupils with different levels of non-attendance. In schools where there were significant attendance problems, this approach enabled the EWS to cover a lot of ground in a short space of time. It had an effect on the individual attendance of a large number of pupils and was therefore seen as an efficient way of raising school attendance levels. The service had used this as a way of addressing schools with particular attendance problems identified by the DfEE and OFSTED. It was thought to be a particularly effective way of combating parentally condoned absence, reported to be a particular problem in the authority. It was recognised, however, that it might not tackle cases of serious non-attendance, which then had to be dealt with by other strategies which addressed the cause of the problem.

Together, therefore, these two initiatives reflected the balance between discipline and support that the PEWO hoped to achieve in the overall work of the service.

CASE STUDY FOUR

LEA BACKGROUND

For the purpose of this case study, three specific projects were nominated as examples of effective practice within this authority – a truancy sweep, a project focusing on the school transfer of looked-after children and an initiative linking attainment with attendance.

This LEA was faced with the formidable challenge of having to elevate pupils' attendance and attainment levels from near the bottom of the league tables. Historically, attendance had always been low. This possibly reflected the setting – one of deprivation, a large percentage of council housing and high unemployment. The city was described as a '*city without suburbs*'. The decline of a major industry, which had dominated the region, saw job prospects rapidly dwindle, although, more recently, the spread of employers was said to have diversified. Previously, jobs were easy to come by and people often left school early, secure in the knowledge that work was available. Interviewees thus spoke of a culture in the city where education was simply not valued and estimated that 95 per cent of non-attendance was, in fact, parentally condoned. As a consequence, prosecution rates for parents were very high, although this was in proportion to the scale of the problem.

Relatively well resourced, with one EWO to 2,340 pupils, the EWS fell under the umbrella of School Services. Although non-attendance amongst pupils placed the LEA near the bottom of the league tables, it was stressed that attendance had actually been improved year on year, but, compared to other areas, it remained low. A recent OFSTED inspection had commended the way in which the service chose to respond to such high levels of non-attendance.

In terms of emphasis, there was a distinct orientation towards attendance, as opposed to more welfare-based social work. Whilst it was thought that the Education Service and schools had an obligation to promote and encourage attendance in order to achieve a cultural change, given the scale of the problem, there was, at the same time, a need to actively utilise powers of enforcement. This was felt to be entirely consistent with the supportive, yet challenging, culture being developed by the authority. In fact, an evaluation of prosecution showed that, in 60 per cent of cases, the attendance had actually improved and interviewees also commented on the way in which the effects of prosecution rippled throughout the community, with children suddenly returning to school. By forming a consistent approach, it was hoped that the importance of school attendance would permeate to parents around the city.

The extent of non-attendance clearly had implications for how the service chose to allocate its resources. To maximise the use of limited resources and minimise the number of referrals, the service strove to work 'strategically' with schools, to ensure that they made the best use of their own systems, in order to promote good attendance.

THE TRUANCY SWEEP

As consequence of the Crime and Disorder Bill, police were given the authority to remove truants from the streets and return them to school. This LEA highlighted a truancy sweep which had made use of these new powers and had proved effective in addressing non-attendance. The principal EWO, an EWO and a policeman involved were interviewed about the sweep.

How did the truancy sweep operate?

The sweep concentrated on the catchment area of a designated secondary school with a history of non-attendance, although children were sometimes picked up from other schools. The surrounding estate comprised mostly council houses and was described as an area with significant social and economic problems. Families were said to be on very low incomes, crime rates were high and drug use was a particular issue. The causes of non-attendance corresponded to those given for the rest of the city, where the prevailing attitude was that education did not matter. In fact, the scale of parentally condoned truancy surprised the police involved, in that '*60–70 per cent of children that we picked up on the streets, the parents knew they were absent*'. This served to demonstrate that, for the EWS, parentally condoned absence was their major category of absence.

Chapter Seven has already given a brief description of how the scheme operated. However, particular aspects warrant further coverage. Firstly, a police officer involved in the sweep stressed the importance of coordination. It simply was not enough to take the children back into school. A pilot project had suffered because sometimes the police were left waiting around with children, while arrangements were made for their return to class. Hence, for the most recent sweep, senior management at the school had devised a timetable whereby a member of staff would always be on hand to receive the children.

In this sweep, a decision was made to send police officers out, unaccompanied. For the EWS, this provided the opportunity to reinforce the importance of school attendance for the family, with police escorting the child back to school one day and the EWOs making a home visit the next. In order to be effective, it was felt that the importance of surprise when undertaking a truancy sweep could not be underestimated. Consequently, media coverage did not begin until partway through the sweep, by which time word of mouth had already taken effect. Media coverage was then seen as a tool to further reinforce attendance, not only in the area where the sweep was taking place, but also in other parts of the city.

What was the rationale for the truancy sweep?

In the short term, the sweep returned children to school and, in this way, guaranteed their safety. At the same time, the threat of future sweeps was believed to deter children from truancy, thereby raising attendance figures. The Principal EWO considered it an effective use of EWO time, as the results were more rapid than working with families who would not necessarily respond to a social work approach.

The police viewpoint was that, in some respects, it did compromise their service, because the sweep was costly in terms of staffing, using up to 300 hours of police time. Yet, the police service was said to be accountable to the public and concerns had been raised over the numbers of children loitering around the estate. Thus, police involvement in the scheme provided public reassurance that something was being done and which in turn, provided them with good 'PR'. The police officer interviewed also recognised that, by reducing the numbers of children out of school, a lot of nuisance problems would also diminish (e.g. shoplifting, vandalism, etc). He acknowledged that an EWO may find it logistically difficult to round up truants and now that the police were armed with the necessary authority, it made sense for the two services to work in partnership.

What were the effects of the truancy sweep?

In terms of quantifiable impact, the sweep returned 120 truants to school in a week. However, interviewees also stressed the importance of the impact on other pupils, who may have been considering truanting but for whom there was no quantifiable measure. For those who were picked up,

it was a '*sobering experience*'. Not only were they escorted back to school in a police car and handed over to senior teachers, but the school also wrote to their parents and an EWO visited their home the following day.

Both the EWO and the Principal EWO reported that it made parents understand the consequences if their child was not in school and it perhaps forced them to question their acceptance of non-attendance. Police involvement, in particular, was thought to reinforce the message.

Finally, the police officer interviewed saw the effects as reducing nuisance on the estate, children were less vulnerable and, in the long term, the sweep would have a knock-on effect on crime rates, with children achieving better at school, thus halting the drift into offending.

Why was the truancy sweep effective?

Already some of the effective features have been discussed. For instance, the police officer stressed the need to plan for a coordinated approach to children once they had returned to school. The EWS highlighted the double effects on parents and children of police intervention, followed by EWO involvement. In addition, the use of plain-clothed spotters was considered invaluable given that a uniformed police officer would be somewhat conspicuous to truants once a sweep was underway. Good communication between participating agencies, namely the school, EWS and police, was also highlighted.

Finally, whilst the truancy sweep offered a no-nonsense approach to absence, the EWO emphasised that the sweep was not a negative one. Again, it was important that schools were ready to welcome the children back and that they were positively reintegrated.

THE LOOKED-AFTER PROJECT

The looked-after project offered early intervention to a particular group of pupils, who, due to their circumstances, were considered vulnerable and therefore possible non-attenders. In connection with this project, the PEWO, a senior EWO, a Social Services manager and two looked-after children support teachers were interviewed.

What was the looked-after project?

The project drew its target group from across the city and dealt with any looked-after child transferring to a new school. Since the project started in September 1998, 60 children had passed through the system.

The basic structure of the project was outlined in Chapter Eight. In summary, the project consisted of two main components. Firstly, in the event that a child was changing schools, Social Services completed a form and contacted the EWS. The EWS then set up a pre-admission meeting which enabled the child's individual needs to be discussed and arrangements made to ensure that the child made a smooth transfer to their new school. To improve communication between Social Services and the EWO, each children's home manager was given a team leader as a named individual to contact in the event of queries.

The second aspect of the initiative took the form of two looked-after children support teachers who attended the pre-admission meetings, provided advice on curriculum matters, as well as offering ongoing support to children in school. Employed by the Special Educational Needs Support Service, the teachers familiarised themselves with the child's history, assessed what the child was capable of and therefore made suggestions which would ease their move, e.g. extra literacy lessons or a reduced timetable. If mainstream school was not appropriate, then the teachers would endeavour to find an alternative placement. Recently a Social Services employee was seconded to education to work alongside the looked-after teachers on joint issues, e.g. devising leaflets for foster carers around education matters, looking into books for children in homes. In every respect, therefore, this initiative constituted a joint venture between Social Services and Education.

What was the rationale for the looked-after project?

The predicament of looked-after children is a national issue, yet in this authority circumstances arose which generated the need for a specific project targeting this group. Firstly, the LEA had one of the highest number of children in the care system (2.2 per cent above the national average). At one time, a lot of those children were outside the authority in agency placements and, following an inspection, Social Services were directed to return those children to the city and accommodate them. Consequently, Education and Social Services were faced with large numbers of children suddenly returning and a decision was made to initiate a project which would facilitate that process.

With respect to the specific target group, the EWS confirmed that looked-after children often do have attendance difficulties and that the coordination between the two departments and schools had helped to ensure the good attendance of children in the looked-after system.

In terms of the particular approach chosen, the pre-admission meeting enabled a picture of the whole child to be presented. In turn, this meant that all factors could be taken into consideration to ensure that the child was successfully reintegrated into the school. A Social Services representative saw the looked-after teachers as 'conduits' and problem solvers, who possessed the educational background to liaise effectively between the children's homes and school staff. Their professional expertise therefore enabled them to communicate on the same level as teachers and they were able to pass on their knowledge to Social Services staff, who thus developed a better understanding of the education system. Indeed, the teachers were said to plug an identifiable gap and as a consequence Social Services had seen much better attendance and better outcomes for the children concerned.

Generally, interviewees seemed to share a common view that a key component of the project was its ability to build bridges, in particularly between Education and Social Services. The looked-after support teachers saw themselves in an overarching role, working to bring all the relevant professionals

together. Specifically, they explained their contribution as:

> *We are trying to improve attendance in* [the authority's] *schools, with a view to going into the school, advising staff in preventative measures of an exclusion. We are doing preventative work around putting in strategies to try and keep the children in school, trying to maintain them. I think there's almost a more overarching role, though that's really important in that we're not always working directly with the children but we are working in a facilitative way to bring everyone together, so that we can build together a package that will support the children at home and in school.*

What were the effects of the looked-after project?

Interviewees firstly confirmed that the attendance of looked-after children had risen as a result of the intervention. The Principal EWO had access to the looked-after register from Social Services, which showed that since Education and Social Services united, the average attendance figures had improved. In one children's home, attendance was reported to be 100 per cent.

A team leader drew attention to the preventive aspect of the project, whereby they were alerted to children whose attendance was just starting to slip. The same EWO stated that the initiative had eased the transition to new schools. Previously there had been no consistent approach and social workers would ring schools, explain the circumstances of the child and more often than not, the headteacher would respond by saying that the school was full. With the additional support provided by the looked-after teachers, schools were given more information on the child's needs, advised how to manage their transfer and were therefore more happy to take these children on roll.

Enhanced multi-agency liaison was raised by all interviewees. Now, however, it was understood that both agencies sought to address their needs. The Principal EWO confirmed healthy relations, at operational and management level, because the problems of looked-after children were of relevance to both agencies. Should any difficulties arise, a resolution was more attainable given that Social Services now had a named individual within Education Welfare whom they could contact and who would take immediate action.

Finally, the looked-after support teachers observed improved self-esteem amongst the target group. They also felt that schools were more aware of their particular needs and were therefore more caring and prepared to listen to what the children were saying.

For which pupils was the project most/least successful?

Four interviewees agreed that older children and those with more deep-seated problems were much more challenging to work with. A Social Services representative conceded that '*there are a group of children who, with the best will in the world, ... struggle to sustain them in mainstream school*'. The older children were considered problematic because often they had adopted a routine of inappropriate behaviour and non-attendance. Meanwhile, children who had perhaps never attended mainstream education were said to find it difficult to adapt to a school regime. Such individuals were said to have low self-esteem and were dismissive of their abilities. Consequently, they would give up and reject school entirely.

Why was the looked-after project effective?

To some extent, the effective elements of the scheme have already been raised. Whereas the transfer system for looked-after children had previously been *ad hoc*, there was now a formal, agreed procedure which managed their integration. The Principal EWO highlighted the rigour of the current system, one where each agency knew its role and rapid follow-up ensured that children were not left outside the system, guaranteeing continuity in their learning.

A specific project for looked-after children was also said to have raised the profile of this vulnerable group, alerting other EWOs to their needs and that there was a system to deal with any problems. The looked-after teachers highlighted their child-centred approach, their ability to build a relationship with children and the support given to teachers in school.

In summation, this project seemed to prosper from its multi-agency framework, which had succeeded in breaking down barriers and deconstructing some of the myths that surrounded looked-after children. References were made to bridges, to conduits of information and to overarching roles, illustrating the way in which agencies had come together to tackle a shared problem. One of the support teachers summed up the value of the project: '*I think the fact that we are making everything we do multi-agency and that's really the feature.*'

ATTENDANCE LINKED WITH ATTAINMENT

Government reports on non-attendance have recently underlined the implications for attainment. Quite simply, if a child is not in school, they cannot learn, therefore they cannot achieve. This association was taken on board by the LEA of this case study and a project subsequently devised which directly related attainment to attendance. In connection with this project, the PEWO and an attendance coordinator and a year head in a secondary school were interviewed.

How did the attendance-attainment project operate?

All 16 secondary schools in the city were invited to participate. For the purposes of the research, however, one particular school was visited, situated in a '*fairly middle-class residential area*', although pupils were drawn from other districts. Again, the prevalence of parentally condoned truancy was evident. The school interviewees reported that they were finding parents less and less cooperative and that often parents knew their child was not in school, but were prepared to cover for them. In addition, being a girls' school, the teachers described occasions where pupils would be kept off school to look after children or because their mothers were ill.

The EWS saw this initiative as an example of joined-up thinking, whereby the Advisory Service and the EWS shared expertise to identify those pupils who could potentially achieve, if their attendance improved. Those pupils were then prioritised for monitoring, first-day contact and, if necessary, home visits.

In the school visited, the authority had identified 11 pupils, whilst the school added an extra four who they felt were grade C/D borderline pupils and whose attendance was slightly down. Typically, though, attendance levels for the target group fell below 80 per cent. The reasons for non-attendance were, however, diverse. For further details of how the scheme operated, please refer to Chapter Nine.

What was the rationale for the attendance-attainment project?

The aims of the scheme were twofold – one, to raise Year 11 attendance and two, to raise achievement. It was stressed that equal emphasis should be given to both aims. Year 11 in particular was targeted because of the characteristic attendance dip that tended to occur in that year.

Prior to the scheme, the EWS took the decision to try and work with other teams within the LEA and share resources to meet common goals. Beforehand, the Principal EWO spoke of a tendency for the EWS and the Advisory Service to work in isolation, when in fact their respective concerns of attendance and attainment were intimately linked.

What were the effects of the attendance-attainment project?

In the first instance, attendance amongst the target group was said to have improved and, in the opinion of the EWS, the project had contributed to the overall gains made in attendance across the city. Teachers reported that it had alerted both pupils and parents to the fact that they were considered capable of succeeding and had pointed out to them the extent of their absence. The odd day here and there may seem insignificant, but the total number of days could quickly accumulate.

EWS involvement enabled the school to make a greater impression on the parents and present them with the consequences should their child's attendance remain poor. This was thought to make parents realise that it's not just the school who are concerned, but also the education authority, and to emphasise to them the possibility of going to court for their child's non-attendance. In addition, this led to an understanding that the school was working in partnership with other organisations to address the problem.

As is so often the case with attendance initiatives, whilst focusing on the pupils' attendance, the schools' attendance procedures also came under scrutiny. The Principal EWO explained that they would sometimes discover high levels of absence which had been authorised by the school. This, in effect, rendered the EWO powerless and headteachers were therefore asked to consider carefully when to authorise absence. Therefore, the initiative had encouraged greater consistency in registration procedures.

For which pupils was the attendance-attainment project most/least successful?

In some respects, the target group was considered a receptive audience, in that they were C/D borderline pupils, and, according to the teachers, were '*fairly caring about their education*'. The interviewees suggested that the scheme may be less successful, therefore, with less able students who perhaps do not see the importance of achieving.

Why was the attendance-attainment project effective?

The success of the scheme, from the school perspective, centred around making the pupils aware that somebody was taking the time and trouble to monitor their attendance and that they had been selected as potential achievers. Equally, it was important to make parents appreciate the link between good attendance and future exam performance. All too often, parents were alerted to problems in school, such as poor attendance, yet this scheme shifted the focus on to a more positive dimension, that of exam success. In this way, parents may be willing to come on board and cooperate with school requests.

The EWS concurred with the view of the school with regard to effectiveness and in particular highlighted letters to parents as a key component of the initiative. In these letters, the link between attendance and attainment was spelt out. In addition, with Year 11 being the final year of compulsory education, the EWS spoke of an attitude where, if attendance was poor, it was often considered too late in the day to do anything. However, this scheme had provided a means of raising attendance amongst a particular cohort of Year 11 pupils and demonstrated that attendance is as important in Year 11 as it is in any other year, if not more so.

OVERVIEW

High levels of non-attendance within this authority had a direct bearing on the philosophy and approach of the EWS. EWOs battled against a pervading cultural view which dismissed the value and relevance of education. Consequently, parentally condoned absence was widespread and the EWS invested considerable time in conveying the importance of attendance. In terms of strategies identified as effective, three initiatives were nominated which dealt with various levels of non-attendance – an initial response to absence, an early intervention strategy and work with pupils with identified attendance problems.

The truancy sweep offered an alternative to working intensively with families and was therefore considered an effective use of EWO time. Furthermore, the effects of the sweep were seen to ripple throughout the community, stirring the consciences of both parents and children. The involvement of police, in particular, was thought to reinforce the importance of attendance.

Whilst the sweep engendered a catch-all response to non-attendance, the second project in this authority homed in on a specific group of vulnerable children. Looked-after children typically lack stability and continuity in their lives, not least with regard to0 their education. They may therefore find it harder to settle into school and attend regularly. Because of large numbers of children in care and the recognised difficulties faced by looked-after children, this authority established a project to specifically address their needs and to ensure a smooth transfer into new schools. The project arose from a genuine union between Social Services and Education and, as a result, shared agendas had cemented relations between the two and enhanced interagency communication. At the same time, the additional support received by looked-after children and the extra consideration given to their transfer needs, meant that children were being given a better start at school and the likelihood of future non-attendance greatly reduced.

Lastly, a project was highlighted which capitalised on the relationship between attainment and attendance. It offered a way of raising the attendance amongst Year 11 pupils, a notoriously difficult target group to influence. This was accomplished by focusing on the positive potential to achieve rather than the negative behaviour of non-attendance. Pupils were made aware that they had the ability to succeed, their parents were informed likewise and this was the carrot used to raise their attendance.

CASE STUDY FIVE

THE LEA CONTEXT

The two initiatives highlighted as effective in this authority were the use of Education Supervision Orders, a strategy aimed at pupils with identified attendance problems, and the provision of an alternative curriculum for disaffected students.

The LEA, a medium-sized metropolitan authority, was described as an authority with a socio-economic mix, with areas of affluence, but also pockets of some of the most seriously deprived areas in the county, together with high unemployment. There was a small, almost negligible ethnic population. Some parents were reported to be extremely supportive, whilst for others, education was not a high priority and often they did not perceive attendance at school as their responsibility. Attainment was reported to be variable within the authority, for example, some schools in extreme areas of deprivation had good National Curriculum key stage test scores, whilst others did not.

The LEA had a relatively low number of pupils to one EWO, and therefore might be considered well resourced in comparison with other EWSs. Although the overall level of attendance was reported to be regularly within 0.1 per cent of the national average, 25 of the 70 to 80 primary schools were reported to have attendance levels below the national average, some as low as 89 per cent. What was described as the '*not overly high level of unauthorised absence*' had recently gone down.

The senior manager of the EWS reported that the focus for addressing attendance issues was on secondary school key stage 4, as this impacted greatly on both attendance and achievement figures, and that an emphasis was placed on supporting schools with the greatest need. The EWO reported that strategies were adopted to address identified gaps in provision and that there was a move towards coordination and '*pulling everything together*'. An emphasis on multi-agency work was felt by the EWO to reflect the lack of qualified social workers within the service and the limit to what the EWS could achieve alone. A wide range of strategies was identified. The LEA was examining school partnerships and allocation of workers according to need at a whole-service level. A wide range of strategies was aimed at preventative work in primary schools (e.g. a specific post appointed, parents' groups, incentive schemes, attendance policies, as well as termly audits). Schools of concern were encouraged to adopt first-day response. Multi-agency input was adopted in the early identification of pupils of concern (in the form of multi-agency groups) and in secondary schools with low attendance figures (in the form of social inclusion teams). For pupils with attendance problems, the main strategies included two PRUs, work-related learning, several multi-agency forums, as well as the use of ESOs. The court process was considered the bottom line. Similarly for disaffected pupils, the PRU, the alternative curriculum and group work by the Careers Service were noted. There was a set LEA procedure for chronic non-attenders, who met with an EWO and a senior EWO to ascertain their difficulties and, if there was no improvement, went to a central panel to determine if court action was to be taken.

EDUCATION SUPERVISION ORDERS

In connection with ESOs, the following people were interviewed:

- the senior manager of the service
- the EWO with sole responsibility for ESOs
- the deputy head of a comprehensive school with a pupil on an ESO
- the headteacher of a junior school with a pupil on an ESO
- a social worker for the siblings of one of the pupils on an ESO
- a social worker within a specialist service for young people with social and welfare difficulties which provided support for one of the pupils on an ESO
- two pupils on ESOs and their carers (a grandparent and a foster carer).

What does an Education Supervision Order (ESO) entail?

Brief details of what an ESO entailed were provided in Chapter Nine. Through the case study interviews, however, the intensive level of support able to be offered through the provision of an ESO became evident. The EWO, if necessary, was able to provide support to pupils and their families every day when and where it was most needed (home or school). This included visiting the family at home, taking pupils to school, providing support in school, accessing services from other agencies and undertaking a variety of activities with the child. The ready availability of the EWO was confirmed by carers, who reported that they contacted the EWO any time for matters concerning school, that they received practical help, such as buying a school uniform, and that the EWO had developed a close relationship with the child and the family.

The multi-agency aspect

Also through the case-study work, the multi-agency aspect of the ESO became more apparent. The EWO accessed a wide range of other agencies to support the child and their family and this was reported to be facilitated by having the ESO. Regular multi-agency reviews of pupils' progress were undertaken. Multi-agency involvement, however, raised a number of key issues for schools and Social Services staff. School staff highlighted the need for one person to coordinate interventions, the danger of too many agencies being involved and responsibility being shelved, and the fact that sometimes the passage of information, particularly between Social Services and Education, was thought to be one-way. The need for excellent communication between agencies for ESOs to be effective was raised by staff from Social Services, who also felt that having an informative and balanced view from the school should be taken into account when considering the placement of a child. One social worker reported that more direct liaison with the school might have been beneficial. However, s/he highlighted that the different regimes adopted by Education and Social Services and their different priorities in terms of young people's behaviour often presented an obstacle to this. S/he gave a clear example when s/he stated that, whilst s/he might be more interested in why a child attends school, the school would be more interested in how often they attended. S/he also reflected on the difference in how problems were perceived and suggested that teachers, understandably, because of the pressures placed upon them, found it easier to eliminate the problem rather than deal with it.

What was the rationale behind the use of ESOs?

The main aim of ESOs was to get pupils back to school, although the social workers interviewed also emphasised raising pupils' confidence as an important objective.

For the LEA?

When asked about the rationale, the EWS manager indicated that the use of ESOs reflected the ethos of the Children Act, which was to be supportive, and that, whilst it had been difficult to create meaningful change when they were used with older pupils, by focusing on pupils in primary school and the first few years of secondary school, they had been found to be more effective.

For Social Services?

The family social worker's concerns centred around maintaining the children within the home, parenting and socialisation issues, and s/he reported that they would only become involved with attendance issues when there were underlying issues, such as child protection or where families moved into the area with a history of non-attendance. The specialist Social Work Service, on the other hand, became involved with non-attendance because emotional development was perceived to be getting in the way of pupils accessing school effectively and non-attendance was thought to have serious implications for family dysfunction and involvement in crime. When asked about the rationale behind their involvement, ESOs were reported to benefit Social Services by providing:

- an additional means of support that the agency could tap into
- someone (the EWO) to hold and monitor situations
- a means of getting into a family
- supervision for a family without the stigma attached to Social Services.
- referrals to the specialist service
- preparatory work with young people, who might then be able to access other agencies/services.

For schools?

Both the comprehensive and the junior school, each with a pupil presently on an ESO, had a mixed socio-economic intake, and mixed parental attitudes, and were reported to be schools with difficulties. The junior school had previously been under special measures. Within a recent OFSTED inspection, pupils were found to be literacy-deprived. Attendance had been identified as a problem by OFSTED in the comprehensive school, although the quality of teaching was noted to be high.

The junior school had an absence rate of around four per cent, whilst the comprehensive school had an attendance rate of 88 to 89 per cent. The strategies adopted to address attendance problems in the junior school were reported to reflect the positive ethos of the school (e.g. raising awareness, incentive schemes, an attendance policy) and the need for close monitoring (examination of attendance profiles of each class each half-term). The headteacher's view was that children should want to come to school and enjoy it. In the comprehensive school, a positive approach (raising awareness of the value of education) was also highlighted and emphasis was placed on the school's pastoral system and day-to-day contact with parents. In both cases, identified attendance problems were reported to be dealt with mainly through the school-based EWO and multi-agency case reviews for individual pupils. Disaffected pupils in the comprehensive school accessed other schemes through the EWO or followed the set LEA procedure for chronic non-attenders. The headteacher did not feel that disapplication of pupils from the National Curriculum was the way forward, although s/he gave no reason for this. Both school staff indicated that ESOs were seen as addressing the problems of a very small number of pupils with home difficulties and extreme levels of non-attendance compared to other pupils.

What were the effects of having an ESO?

The main effects reported by the EWO involved, as outlined previously in Chapter Nine, were a dramatic improvement in individual attendance and pupils' raised self-esteem and confidence. The former was supported by all those interviewed, whilst the latter was also raised by parents/carers and the pupils themselves. Parents/carers and pupils confirmed improved attendance rates from between nil and 30 per cent to almost 100 per cent and one foster carer reported that the child had been '*brought out of herself*'. When asked herself what difference it had made to her, the pupil replied '*Just when she talks to us and that. I wasn't confident before.*' In addition, within the case study interviews, further effects, on pupils, schools, parents and other agencies were highlighted.

On pupils?

School staff reported mainly effects on the pupils themselves, including improvements in academic progress, motivation for involvement in school activities, and improved attitude, behaviour and relationships at school, all of which were also confirmed by parents/carers and pupils. One pupil, for example, referred to the activities in which she was now involved: '*I read in the morning. I used to miss that when I lived with me ma. I used to miss assembly. I used to miss loads of work because*

sometimes me ma kept us off.' She also stated that: '*I want to come to school now*' and that she was keen to get on with her work.

On parents?

In addition to the relief from prosecution and being grateful for the extra support, the EWO, school staff and social workers all reported a marked impact on parents/carers. Above all, parents/carers were reported to take an interest in their child's education, to have become more involved and to take it more seriously. School staff reported also that parents/carers had a better attitude towards the school and were more organised.

On schools and other agencies?

The EWO noted how the ESO raised the profile of pupils' attendance in the eyes of schools and other agencies and made it more likely that they became involved to help address pupils' difficulties.

> *I know from experience with families where I don't think the child is at risk, but definitely a child in need, if services are stretched, Social Services probably wouldn't take the case on and put extra support in there. It's down to resources. With an ESO, every time I have been able to enlist the support of Social Services and it has proved to be absolutely necessary and I have a feeling without the supervision order, I wouldn't have got that* (EWO).

The ESO for one pupil, for example, had led to disapplication of the National Curriculum (something which the EWO felt the school would not have done without the ESO) and had prevented exclusion.

For which pupils/families were ESOs most effective?

The EWS, schools and social workers agreed that ESOs should be targeted at younger pupils with chronic levels of non-attendance (i.e. 40 per cent or under in secondary school and 80 per cent or under in primary schools) or those whose attendance might deteriorate very quickly. One pupil, for example, had not attended at all in reception and only ten per cent in Year 1, whilst the highest attendance rate for a pupil prior to the ESO was given as 47 per cent. The majority of families involved tended to be in areas of poor housing and unemployment – all parents of pupils at present on ESOs, for example, were reported to be unemployed. There was also general agreement (including by carers) that ESOs were most effective with pupils who were motivated to attend school, but who were prevented from attending by a lack of structure and support within the home environment. A foster carer, for example, who reported that the child's mum never got out of bed to get her up, emphasised that s/he had always wanted to go to school: '*It wasn't a child that didn't want to go to school. If you've got a child that doesn't want to go to school, that's a different kettle of fish, but this child wanted to go to school, loved school.*' This was further exemplified by the backgrounds described by carers, which highlighted poor organisation, lack of interest in the children, poor living conditions and lack of boundaries within families.

Social workers found these children to be lacking in self-esteem and commonly reported a breakdown in the relationship between the parents and the child, whilst school staff stated that these pupils were unable to respond to more positive strategies in place within the school, such as incentive schemes, and were pupils who might benefit from their unmet social and emotional needs being addressed through a multi-agency approach. In all cases, it had taken the EWO a while to access parents as they were reluctant to have contact with outside agencies. However, when given the option of extra support rather than prosecution, this was found to make a difference. School staff supported the view that families were often anti-authority and uncooperative and therefore unlikely to listen to the views of schools or EWOs, and Social Services staff also highlighted a lack of commitment and motivation on the part of parents, perhaps through drug dependency.

Why were ESOs effective?

Although the EWO felt that the level of support offered was the key to the success of ESOs, social workers and school staff nominated a range of other factors. Overwhelmingly, the wider and more serious legal implications of ESOs compared to other strategies, which stressed the seriousness of the

situation, not only to the family, but to all those involved, were raised. This was confirmed by a grandmother who stated that they had not realised the seriousness of the situation before the provision of the ESO. School staff felt that ESOs '*suddenly upped the ante*', reported to be necessary because of the type of families involved. School staff and social workers also agreed that the multi-agency approach, the provision of a whole package and being able to offer a variety of interventions, was important. They highlighted the fact that a consistent message about attendance was provided from all the agencies involved, thereby reinforcing each other's stance. Social workers and parents/carers, in contrast to school staff, also felt that the development of a trusting relationship between the EWO and the child was vital, with social workers highlighting that this had an important knock-on effect for workers from other agencies. Parents/carers also highlighted the provision of boundaries, someone to advise them on school matters, the EWO's detailed knowledge of the family background and an understanding that there were underlying issues and that the child did want to go to school.

THE ALTERNATIVE CURRICULUM

In connection with the alternative curriculum, the following people were interviewed:

- the EWS manager
- the EWO with sole responsibility for coordinating the alternative curriculum
- a member of staff from a training provider offering pupils a range of training opportunities
- a member of staff from the training agency delivering employment skills and work experience to pupils on the programme
- the headteacher from a secondary school who had a pupil on the programme
- two pupils who had been on the programme and one of their parents.

What did the alternative curriculum entail?

Details of the alternative curriculum were provided in Chapter Ten, although, within the case study, further details were given by the training organisations involved. One of the training providers was reported to be able to offer a very varied range of training opportunities for youngsters, for example, in retail, business administration, IT, catering, care, mechanics, plastering, joinery and decorating. The training agency, on the other hand, offered life skills, work experience, employment skills and health and safety issues. The aim was to bridge the gap between education and employment and to provide young people with the necessary skills to make them employable. Flexibility was built into the programme so that, for example, young people who struggled to undertake a number of days in the workplace spent more time within the training centre. Pupils interviewed confirmed that the programme included basic skills alongside a work experience placement, for example, in the warehouse of a printing company. One pupil had attended work for four-and-a-half days and the centre for half a day, whilst the other, who had moved to the area at the end of Year 10, undertook two days a week at the centre and two at the work placement. Whilst schools were reported to be reluctant to refer pupils initially, they had now seen that it worked and this year they interviewed 94 pupils for 50 places. Pupils were expected to sign a contract, particularly with regard to their behaviour, when out in places of work and, if they did not attend, after one or two chances, they were asked to leave.

The multi-agency aspect

In addition to the major role of the training providers in offering a service and helping pupils find employment, the EWO reported that they liaised with the Careers Service to find work experience, colleges to help with education background and the police, who ran a few projects for young people on the fringes of crime. Issues raised with regard to multi-agency work focused on links between the training providers and schools or other agencies. Training provider staff felt that they often did not receive enough information about the young people before they came on the programme and provided examples where, given more information, they might have approached pupils in a different way and where this had inhibited their work and pupils' progress on the scheme. Social Services' reluctance to relinquish control of cases was also thought to prevent effective communication. They reported little liaison with schools, which, in some cases, were thought to see the alternative curriculum as a '*baby-sitting service*'. However, having made this point, one of the staff did not see the point in more contact with schools: '*If they haven't done anything in the first place, why should they be interested now?*' Apart from this, good contacts with a range of other agencies were reported.

What was the rationale behind the alternative curriculum?

Whilst the objectives in the EWO's eyes were to re-engage pupils in education by providing them with a relevant and appropriate curriculum, for the training provider, objectives were very individual in nature. It was reported, for example, that for some of the youngsters it was a major achievement just to actually get them to attend the centre, especially if they had not attended school.

For the LEA?

The EWS manager stated that, in practice, the LEA had little to offer Year 10 and 11 pupils who were dropping out or excluding themselves from education and for whom it was too late to produce any

meaningful change through other strategies. Having decided to take a more long-term standpoint, they focused on training and employment. It was also thought that addressing the needs of this group of pupils would have a significant effect on school attendance levels. The EWO reported that some of these 'drifting' pupils had expressed an interest in doing more practical work and that emphasis was placed on giving them a choice of what they wanted to do.

For the training agencies/providers?

Disaffected youngsters were a major part of the training provider's contract with the TEC and this area of work was reported to be expanding. This project with the authority was only one aspect of their provision for disaffected pupils. Interviewees reported that they had developed a good reputation for their work with disaffected youngsters and it had proved to be a very successful area of their work. Without this programme, they felt that there would be nothing for some of these youngsters.

For schools?

The school with a pupil who had attended the programme was a large comprehensive school with 1,350 pupils on roll from mixed backgrounds and a very small minority of pupils of ethnic origin. Academic ability was reported to be across the board, although they had a smaller group of below-average ability than other schools in the authority. There was only a small, hard core of parents who considered education a low priority. The recent OFSTED report was very good and the average attendance level was very high (93.5 per cent). The main strategy employed to address non-attendance was reported by the headteacher to be the use of the pastoral system, developing a close relationship with parents and encouraging a culture of attendance. S/he also reported a close relationship with the EWO, who visited the school three or four times a week to address the pupils with identified attendance problems, who were reported to be well known. The alternative curriculum was perceived as addressing the needs of a small minority of pupils with extreme disaffection or non-exam pupils struggling with the curriculum.

What were the effects of the alternative curriculum?

A marked improvement in individual pupils' attendance was cited by the EWO and the training providers. One pupil, for example, not seen since Year 7 in school, had achieved 100 per cent attendance since the introduction of the alternative curriculum. As some schools may have a number of pupils on the programme, this was also reported by the EWO to have a major effect on school attendance levels, as pupils were no longer counted as absent. Not surprisingly, with pupils removed from school and offered individual support in a new environment, a major impact on pupils was reported. Training providers and school staff, as well as the EWO involved, reported a positive impact on pupils' confidence and self-esteem, because they had been able to succeed. A number of other effects on pupils were noted. The EWO reported improvements in social skills, motivation and behaviour, the last also noted by training providers as a consequence of them realising what employers wanted. School staff commented that pupils had matured as a result of the opportunity to experience the world of work. The development of trusting relationships with adults and peers was particularly highlighted by the training providers. Following the course, the majority of pupils remained with their employer and some went to college.

Additional effects were noted by the EWO on others, such as parents (because of improved relationships at home), the community (because pupils were no longer wandering the streets and getting into bother) and the training providers themselves, who, although it was challenging and exhausting work, it was felt received job satisfaction. When the parent of one of the pupils was asked about the programme's impact, s/he focused on the fact that their child no longer came home frustrated and angry because he could not do the work and that she was no longer worried about his future. The pupil himself noted that he had learnt many new skills, improved his confidence and was now employed by the company full-time, as was also the other pupil interviewed.

For which pupils was the alternative curriculum most effective?

The alternative curriculum was originally targeted at disaffected pupils with a history of non-attendance, those out of the education system altogether and needing the world of work and an adult environment. However, this strategy was also found to be effective for pupils attending school, but not entered for exams, although those youngsters who had nothing and were not in school at all were given

priority. Some schools were reported to be particularly good in selecting pupils who they thought might benefit from the programme rather than just any non-attender and had provided a lot of input beforehand. The EWS, school and training provider staff agreed that the cause of non-attendance for these pupils was that they were bored and unmotivated by, and often behind with, the school curriculum, although they did not necessarily have literacy and numeracy problems. This was confirmed by the pupils interviewed, one of whom had struggled to keep up with the curriculum because of his academic difficulties and the other who had stopped attending school in Year 9 and then moved to the area at the end of Year 10: '*I thought it was boring, pointless.*' Training providers also referred to pupils who, in some cases, had:

- serious social problems
- a more mature attitude
- moved around a lot and not had any set schooling
- not got on with teachers
- found school very oppressive and regimented
- lacked trust in adults
- no one to talk to
- a poor attitude to work routines
- parents who were not interested in their education.

One training provider, for example, described their success with a non-exam pupil with significant emotional and family problems:

> *We've gone through major depressions with him, wanting to commit suicide. He didn't want to work; all he wanted to do was to go into a black hole with the lid on and not talk to anybody. With the help of* [an independent organisation] *and an after-care worker, he's going to a place which is sheltered accommodation and we have managed to fix him up with a job and the difference in him the last six weeks has been amazing. He's smiling again. He's happy.*

The headteacher felt that the provision was appropriate for a range of pupils. S/he referred to both extreme non-attenders and those just starting to not attend, as well as those who were anti-authority and therefore unable to be accommodated within school. S/he also referred to pupils who were able to get more out of practical activities than academic activities and whose parents or carers were unable to enforce attendance and where it was too late for court action.

Whilst the alternative curriculum provision was reported by the EWO to be flexible enough to meet the needs of a lot of young people, s/he felt that they had to have the right attitude and, above all, be motivated to attend: '*They will not get anything out of it if they don't enjoy it and put something in.*' When asked about pupils for whom it was least successful, one of the training providers reiterated this point and referred to some pupils who had been accepted on the course and who were taking school examinations: '*Their attitude was not right. They had high expectations. Their attendance was poor. Their behaviour was appalling.*' Where there were two or three pupils from one school, this had also created the potential for problems.

Why was the alternative curriculum effective?

For the EWO, as well as the intensive support offered by his/herself and the training providers, the fact that pupils had chosen to undertake the programme was a key factor:

> *It's the first time, I think, the majority have been given a choice ... It's made quite clear at the interview process that it doesn't matter what I think or their mum or school. If they don't want to do it that's fine, no one's going to fall out with them or anything, because you just can't drag them in screaming. It just doesn't work* (EWO).

Both the EWO and the training providers highlighted as foremost for the success of the alternative curriculum the individualised approach (also cited as one of the most challenging aspects) and the flexibility of the programme. School staff, as well as training providers, identified also the adult environment (a factor also raised by one of the pupils) and the experience of the real work situation as key in changing pupils' behaviour. School staff, as well as the EWO, highlighted as important the

opportunity for pupils to succeed where they had failed previously. Apart from these, all those involved referred to other, different aspects. Whilst the EWO focused on the skills and personalities of staff, the training providers centred on the different environment, trusting relationships and the fact that staff were not teachers. The headteacher, on the other hand, referred to the narrow focus, not having to read and write and a new direction for pupils. Interestingly, both pupils highlighted the practical focus of the activities (a point touched on only by the headteacher) as a key factor for them: '*It's like stripping down a starter motor. It's different from writing a book, like writing and that. It's better doing things with your hands.*'

OVERVIEW

ESOs were found to be effective because they brought home to those involved the seriousness of non-attendance. They were considered most effective where they were used with younger pupils who were motivated to attend school, but whose non-attendance was caused by a lack of structure and organisation within the family.

On the other hand, the alternative curriculum was found to be effective where the cause of non-attendance was related to boredom with the curriculum, either because pupils were unable to do the work or because the curriculum lacked relevance for pupils and the school environment was too constrained. Pupils therefore benefited from access to activities with a more practical focus, a new direction and a new environment.

The LEA, not surprisingly, in an authority with significant attendance problems overall, chose to highlight effective strategies aimed at pupils with extreme attendance difficulties. With what might seem adequate resources in terms of staffing, they could afford, therefore, to take a long-term strategy and input intensive resources at an early stage, as with the ESOs, in the belief that this might prevent a cycle of non-attendance within families. In fact, a lot of work was highlighted which was of a preventative nature and which was targeted at primary schools in the authority. On the other hand, by also targeting the larger group of disaffected pupils in Years 10 and 11, a marked impact on school attendance and levels of achievement might be made. Schools might usefully tap into this resource for a minority of pupils with extreme disaffection or pupils struggling with the curriculum because of academic difficulties. By identifying a gap in provision and adopting a strategy to address this, the LEA was able to make significant inroads into raising school attendance levels. Having one EWO assigned to these two areas of work and offering intensive support again highlighted the resources the authority were able to pull on to adopt such approaches.

Both strategies too reflected the LEA focus on multi-agency working, thought to be essential for dealing with disaffected pupils with extreme and often complex difficulties. Both initiatives, but particularly the way in which ESOs were used, highlighted the way in which the LEA took a coordinating role and pulled in other agencies to support them with their work and to address the underlying causes and the social and emotional needs of pupils with the symptom of non-attendance.

CONCLUSION

- A wide array of activities in which Education Welfare Service staff were involved, whilst initiated by non-attendance, required EWS staff to be multi-skilled professionals capable of engaging in a diverse range of interventions and with an equally diverse range of people.

- Within the present climate of targets and performance measures (and in some areas, diminishing resources), services have had to become more efficient in their work and this has led to an increasing focus on whole-school attendance matters. The need to target resources at schools with the most pressing attendance problems, and, in some services, a move away from traditional approaches to service organisation, were in evidence.

- EWS staff engaged in activities at a number of different levels (e.g. LEA, school, family, pupil) and through a range of approaches (e.g. preventative, early intervention, strategies to address disaffection). They were dealing with the symptoms or actuality of non-attendance, as well as addressing the causes of non-attendance.

- Effective preventative intervention focused on creating a climate that encouraged pupils to come to school, made it difficult for them to absent themselves from school and addressed low-level absence.

- Effective intervention with pupils with identified attendance problems and disaffected pupils, on the other hand, focused on assessment of the causes of individual non-attendance and addressed the needs of this group of pupils.

- Work with pupils with long-term, ingrained attendance problems, who had often developed associated social, emotional or behavioural difficulties, was noted to be particularly challenging.

- The distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence and the Government focus on the latter made it more difficult for the EWS to tackle attendance problems, which were often masked by schools' reluctance to challenge parents with regard to authorised absence.

- Advantages and disadvantages of EWOs being school-based were highlighted. On the one hand, being school-based was felt to facilitate an effective working relationship with schools and an immediate response to non-attendance problems. On the other, it was thought that being school-based might jeopardise the neutral stance of EWOs and render less effective their relationship with pupils and their families, making their mediatory role more difficult. In addition, it was felt that

being school-based might lead to EWS staff becoming isolated professionals with limited access to appropriate training for the job.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- LEAs might reflect on the range of strategies they have adopted to address non-attendance and consider whether they have achieved an appropriate balance between preventative (focused on the symptom of non-attendance) and remedial (focused on the causes of non-attendance) approaches.

- Education Welfare Services might reflect on their present working practice with pupils with identified attendance problems and consider how they might further effectively diagnose the causes of non-attendance and address pupils' needs accordingly.

- The Government might consider whether the present distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence, by which the success of schools and the EWS are judged, is an appropriate one and one which elicits the most effective working practice. However, given this present distinction, LEAs might reflect on how best to encourage schools to be open and honest about their attendance problems so that they can work in an effective partnership with them to address these difficulties.

- In the present climate of change and uncertainty, there is much evidence of the wide range of provision and the pool of expertise and skills that Education Welfare Services are able to provide. When faced with forthcoming challenges, they therefore should feel positive and confident about the service they are presently able to offer.

- The move to make EWOs school-based needs to take into account not only the immediate gains for schools, but also the long-term effects on pupils and their families and the long-term effects on the range of skills and strategies that EWOs might be able to offer. In addition, the long-term impact for the Education Welfare Service as a whole needs consideration. With the advent of new initiatives, such as Connexions and the new Youth Advisory Service, LEAs might need to consider where the main role of the EWS lies and where the extensive skills and knowledge of this professional group might best be targeted.

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APPENDIX 1

DATA RELATING TO THE SAMPLE OF 20 LEAS IN PHASE TWO

1. TYPES OF LEA

Table 1.1 Types of LEAs nationally and in the sample

Type of LEA	National		Sample	
	(N)	%	(N)	%
New	(65)	36	(7)	35
Metropolitan	(37)	21	(6)	30
Welsh	(22)	12	(2)	10
County	(15)	8	(2)	10
Outer London	(20)	11	(2)	10
Inner London	(13)	7	(1)	5
Northern Ireland	(5)	3	(0)	0
Other	(3)	2	(0)	0
Total	**(180)**	**100**	**(20)**	**100**

All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number
Source: NFER database

2. SIZE OF LEAS

Table 1.2 The size of LEAs nationally and in the telephone sample

Size of LEA	National		Telephone sample	
	(N)	%	(N)	%
Small	(60)	33	(4)	20
Medium	(100)	56	(14)	70
Large	(20)	11	(2)	10
Total	**(180)**	**100**	**(20)**	**100**

All percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number
Source: NFER database

3. UNAUTHORISED ABSENCE FIGURES

The categories for unauthorised absence were as follows:

- Low 0.3 – 0.8 percentage of half days missed
- Medium 0.9 – 1.3 percentage of half days missed
- High 1.4 – 3.9 percentage of half days missed

Table 1.3 Levels of unauthorised absence nationally and in the sample

Level of unauthorised absence	Nationally		Sample	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Low	50	33.3	9	45
Medium	50	33.3	6	30
High	50	33.3	3	15
Uncategorised (Welsh)			2	10
Total	**150**	**100**	**20**	**100**

Sample percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number
Source: DfEE pupil absence tables for the 1997/8 school year

4. AUTHORISED ABSENCE FIGURES

The categories for authorised absence were as follows:

- Low 6.4 – 7.4 percentage of half days missed
- Medium 7.5 – 8.2 percentage of half days missed
- High 8.2 – 12.1 percentage of half days missed

Table 1.4 Levels of authorised absence nationally and in the sample

Level of authorised absence	Nationally		Sample	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Low	(50)	33.3	2	10
Medium	(50)	33.3	12	60
High	(50)	33.3	4	20
Uncategorised (Welsh)			2	
Total	**150**	**100**	**20**	**100**

Sample percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number
Source: DfEE pupil absence tables for the 1997/8 school year

5. NUMBER OF PUPILS TO ONE EWO

- Range: 1 EWO to 1,416 pupils to 1 EWO to 5,672 pupils
- Mean: 1 EWO to 2,925 pupils
- Median: 1 EWO to 2,421pupils

The categories for numbers of pupils to one EWO were as follows:
(these were constructed using data from Phase One of the study)

- Low 1,028 – 2,310 pupils to 1 EWO
- Medium 2,311 – 3,334 pupils to 1 EWO
- High 3,335 – 8,517 pupils to 1 EWO

The sample in Phase Two has been compared with the sample in Phase One of the project in the following table as no national figures were available for these data.

Table 1.5 Number of pupils to one EWO in the sample in Phase One and Phase Two of the study

Level of authorised absence	Sample in Phase One		Sample in Phase Two	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Low	(29)	33.3	7	35
Medium	(29)	33.3	6	30
High	(29)	33.3	5	25
Uncategorised	19		2	10
Total	**106**	**100**	**20**	**100**

Sample percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number
Source: DfEE pupil absence tables for the 1997/8 school year

APPENDIX 2

THE INITIATIVES UNDER STUDY IN THE 20 LEAS VISITED

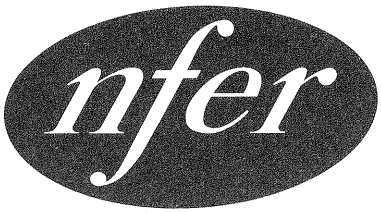
SERVICE-LEVEL DEVELOPMENTS	**2**	**INITIAL RESPONSES TO ABSENCE**	**8**
Allocation of resources	2	First-day response to absence	5
Service-level agreements	0	Truancy sweeps	3
PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES	**12**	**IDENTIFED ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS**	**9**
Raising awareness in the community	1	Interventions linked with achievement	1
The development of attendance policies	1	Support for parents	2
Attendance audits	2	Multi-agency or multi-disciplinary forums	1
School computerised information systems	1	Group work for pupils	2
Whole-school team approaches	2	Intensive EWO/ESW support for pupils	2
Attendance incentive schemes	2	The use of ESOs and prosecution	1
Other preventative strategies aimed at pupils	3		
EARLY INTERVENTION	**5**	**WORK WITH DISAFFECTED PUPILS**	**4**
Support for parents of vulnerable pupils	1	Alternative curricula	2
Support for vulnerable pupils	2	Other interventions with disaffected pupils	2
Support for vulnerable pupils at transition	2		

Source: NFER: The LEA Role on Reducing Truancy Project: telephone interviews in the initial phase of the study, 1999

APPENDIX 3

DETAILS OF THE LEA CONTEXT AND THE INITIATIVES IN EACH OF THE CASE STUDIES

	The LEA	The initiatives
Case study One	A large county LEA with low levels of authorised and unauthorised absence and a high number of pupils to one EWO	• an EWS database • attendance audits • the employment of attendance workers
Case study Two	A small, new authority with medium levels of authorised absence, low levels of unauthorised absence and a high number of pupils to one EWO	• first-day response • a parents' group • a transition project
Case study Three	A medium-sized, inner London LEA, with medium levels of authorised and unauthorised absence and low number of pupils to one EWO	• a transition project • an attendance blitz
Case study Four	A medium-sized, new authority with very high levels of authorised and unauthorised absence and a medium number of pupils to one EWO	• a truancy sweep • looked-after pupils project • attendance linked to achievement
Case study Five	A medium-sized metropolitan LEA with high levels of authorised and unauthorised absence and a low number of pupils to one EWO	• the use of Education Supervision Orders • an alternative curriculum



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A Detailed Study of Education Welfare Service Working Practices

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