

RAISING ATTENDANCE

1.

Working Practices and Current Initiatives
within
the Education Welfare Service

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) describes the findings from Phase One of a study into the role of Education Welfare Services and the effectiveness of the contribution which LEAs make to improving attendance and reducing truancy. The findings from Phases Two and Three of this research will be reported in *Raising Attendance 2*, to be published later this year.

Phase One of the study comprised telephone interviews with senior managers from EWSs in 106 LEAs, self-selected by having identified initiatives within their authority that they considered to be effective in improving attendance and as such worthy of our attention. Within the telephone interviews, senior managers were asked about the role of the EWS, as well as issues relating to the initiatives highlighted. This report is therefore divided into two parts: the first considers EWS working practices; and the second describes the initiatives and their perceived effectiveness in improving attendance. The final report will further elaborate and build on both these areas.

EWS WORKING PRACTICES

The key points to emerge from this chapter of the report are summarised below:

- Although attendance issues are their central concern, EWS staff identified a broad range of activities in which they were involved. School attendance was cited first and foremost, followed by child employment and child protection and then child entertainment licensing and special educational needs, as well as other key areas.
- LEAs differed in the extent to which EWS staff were involved in certain key areas of work. For example, within some authorities, the EWS appeared to have quite a substantial role in addressing exclusions and, whilst the role in child employment was reported as being purely administrative in some, in others, a designated child employment officer made every effort to be proactive and liaise closely with local employers.
- In addition to these key areas of work, EWS staff mentioned a large number of other activities when discussing their areas of responsibility. These included work related to different types of pupils, school-related issues, family-focused work, personal and social issues and welfare concerns, as well as work with a multi-agency focus.
- EWS personnel were reported to liaise with a wide range of other services and agencies, reflecting to some extent the activities they were involved in.

- The most commonly cited LEA services with which they communicated, in rank order, were the Educational Psychology Service, the Special Educational Needs Service, the Behaviour Support Service, admissions, the Advisory Service and the Youth Service.
- Where the EWS was located within the LEA varied within different authorities, although most frequently the service fell under the same umbrella as the Educational Psychology Service. Two services were notable in that they were part of Social Services rather than the LEA.
- In terms of external agency liaison, Social Services ranked most highly, suggesting that a close relationship exists between the EWS and Social Services, which is further emphasised by some services assuming the title Education Social Work Service rather than EWS.
- Other external agencies with which EWS staff reported liaison, in rank order, were the police, the Health Service, voluntary organisations, the Probation Service and Youth Justice.

CURRENT INITIATIVES WITHIN THE EWS

A wide range of initiatives, aimed at different levels of attendance difficulties, was highlighted. These were grouped into a typology which included the broad areas of service-level developments, preventative strategies, early intervention, initial responses to absence, strategies aimed at pupils with identified attendance problems and those aimed at disaffected students. The key points to emerge from this stage of data collection are summarised below:

- As well as a variety of interventions aimed at pupils with identified attendance problems and their parents and disaffected students, EWS staff highlighted a large number of initiatives focused on prevention and early intervention as effective.
- Effectiveness was articulated by interviewees in a variety of ways: impact on individual pupils, parents, schools and, in some cases, members of the wider community and impact on statistics of national significance in relation to present Government targets, such as attendance figures and exclusion rates, etc. Effectiveness was more often expressed, however, through subjective comments rather than through formal evaluation criteria and it was often difficult when interventions were either indirect or long-term to gauge effectiveness in terms of their impact on attendance figures.
- Transition schemes, truancy sweeps and first-day response schemes were the most frequently identified strategies presented by EWS respondents as examples of effective practice.
- First-day response schemes, although considered resource-intensive, featured highly and were considered by EWS respondents to be particularly effective in

terms of their impact on attendance figures, as were also attendance incentive schemes.

- There was a recognised need for support during the transition from primary to secondary school, which could be a particularly difficult period for some vulnerable pupils. Transition schemes were thought by EWS staff to have improved or maintained the attendance of individual pupils and were considered to be one way of tackling problems before they became too entrenched.
- On the other hand, whilst truancy sweeps featured highly in the sample, there was little evidence that EWS staff considered them to be particularly effective in improving attendance, and, in a few cases, whether they were an effective use of resources was questioned.
- A move towards whole-school responses to attendance, such as the development of attendance policies and the conducting of attendance audits, was a notable feature.
- In addition, a move towards the allocation of EWS resources in terms of need rather than blanket EWO cover for schools was also highlighted. This was indicated by interviewees' general comments, as well as by the implementation of some strategies, such as attendance audits, where they were used to address issues within schools that were felt to be of greatest need. This was considered to lead to more effective use of resources.
- Education Welfare Assistants (EWAs), as well as being appointed to carry out some of the day-to-day work of the EWO, also had a role to play in some of the initiatives identified (e.g. first-day response schemes), although they had been used in different ways in different authorities.

CONCLUSION

Whilst there is no doubt that the major focus of EWS work is on attendance, the diversity of underlying and associated problems and the various levels at which interventions can be targeted mean that EWOs have to be multi-skilled, adaptable professionals with the ability to develop effective working relationships with pupils, parents, a wide range of school staff and a variety of other agencies. In the face of increasing problems of attendance and dwindling resources, services appear to have adapted by becoming more needs-led, more focused on attendance and whole-school issues, and through more links with other agencies and the appointment of assistants to undertake lower-level work.

In addition to the findings presented here, interviewees also raised a number of key issues which impact on their general working practice. These included the lack of recognised training and qualifications for EWS staff, achieving a balance between welfare and enforcement, the use of the terms authorised and unauthorised absence and the increasing national focus on reducing truancy in the face of dwindling resources. At this stage in the research, it is not possible to discuss these in depth, but they will be explored further in the face-to-face interviews with EWS personnel in the

next phase of the study and the findings presented in the final report. The final report will also further elaborate on the initiatives identified here, in particular, their impact and effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Pupil non-attendance has been an ongoing issue of public and Government concern. Recent developments, such as the establishment of a clear link between truancy and crime (Audit Commission, 1996) and the publication of the Social Exclusion Unit report (1998) on truancy and exclusions, have again brought this issue to the fore. The report commits the Government to the goal of a one-third reduction in the level of truancy by the year 2002 and details plans for this to be translated into targets at both LEA and school level.

The role of the Education Welfare Service (EWS) in monitoring and promoting attendance has long been established. The Social Exclusion Unit proposed Standards Fund money to support good practice and initiatives aimed at reducing truancy and for truancy to become an important feature of the work of Education Action Zones (EAZs). It also highlighted the importance of Education Services working collaboratively with other agencies. This was further supported by recently published guidance on support for vulnerable pupils (GB. DfEE, 1999a) which emphasised the need for effective links with other agencies and for the development of joint action plans to improve attendance. The guidance outlined the need for a clear role for Education Welfare Services (also highlighted by OFSTED in 1995) and mechanisms for regular review, monitoring and evaluation of services. It stressed the importance of an effective working relationship between the EWS and schools and suggested strategies and community-based action that might be adopted. A report by the Audit Commission (1999) focused on the LEA management of school attendance and encouraged a greater emphasis on intervention at school level, with Education Welfare Services advising on policies, procedures and the use of data. It is suggested, therefore, that effective working entails striking a balance between individual casework with pupils and providing greater support to schools. The report also highlighted a training need for EWOs around the use of new computerised registration systems and the need for more detailed analysis of attendance data at group, pupil and school level, in order to understand and therefore tackle the causes underpinning non-attendance.

It is also important to note that, whilst this report was being written, the Government published a new strategy document entitled *Tackling Truancy Together* (GB. DfEE, 1999b). This focused on three proposals: the need for dissemination of good practice, increased penalties for school attendance offences and, more controversially, the need to gather views on whether EWS resources at secondary level should be placed under the management of schools.

This study examines the contribution that various LEA services, in particular the EWS, make to improving attendance. The project endeavours to:

- identify a range of activities undertaken by the EWS in improving attendance, including innovative approaches at school and community level;

- audit multi-agency approaches and examine how these affect attendance rates;
- investigate the 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 relation to improving attendance;
- examine the overall contribution of LEA services to improving attendance.

The research consists of three phases and it is the purpose of this interim report to present the findings of Phase One of the study.

At the beginning of the summer term 1999, Education Welfare Services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were contacted by letter and invited to complete a simple pro forma, highlighting examples of effective and innovative practices aimed at improving attendance in their LEA. By the end of July, returns had been received from over 100 LEAs, and senior officers in 106 Education Welfare Services were then contacted by telephone. A short telephone interview was conducted with respondents, the aim of which was to elicit a brief overview of LEA activity in relation to attendance, and to determine the nature of specific initiatives or practices which LEA personnel perceived to be effective in improving attendance.

Chapter One of the report presents information on the working practices of services: their size, key areas of work, inter-LEA and inter-agency liaison. Chapter Two moves on to present an audit of initiatives which were described by the interviewees as effective, in terms of their impact on attendance levels. The study sample proved to be representative of LEAs nationally, in terms of size, type and the levels of authorised/unauthorised absence, and further details on the sample characteristics can be found in the Appendix on page 47.

It should be noted that throughout the report, for ease of reading, the terms Education Welfare Service (EWS) and Education Welfare Officer (EWO) have been used, although some services were titled Education Social Work Services and their staff Education Social Workers (ESWs).

CHAPTER ONE

EDUCATION WELFARE SERVICE WORKING PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the working practices of the Education Welfare Services in the sample. During telephone interviews with EWS staff from the 106 LEAs, a range of issues relating to their working practice was discussed. These included:

- the size of services;
- key activities; and
- liaison with other services and agencies.

The findings are presented here.

1.1 SIZE OF SERVICE

Information was obtained from EWS chief personnel on the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff within each service. The staffing base within LEAs ranged from three to 120 FTE employees. More revealing, however, is to consider the ratio of the pupil population within the LEA to EWS staff, as this reflects the available staffing resources. Data from the DfEE and the Education Departments in Wales and Northern Ireland were obtained for this purpose and the figures are presented according to the number of pupils per Education Welfare Officer (EWO).

Service staffing ranged from the most favourable ratio of one EWO to 1,028 pupils up to the least favourable ratio of one EWO to 8,517 pupils. The value of the most favourable ratio is more evident when one considers that this amounts approximately to one EWO for each secondary school, whilst the least favourable ratio amounts to approximately one EWO for the equivalent of four large secondary schools. On average, one EWO worked with a number of pupils equivalent to three secondary schools (although this may comprise, as is often the case, a secondary school and their feeder primary schools). The majority of the services fell close to the middle point of one EWO to about 3,000 pupils, as indicated by the mean (one EWO to 3,091 pupils) and the median (one EWO to 2,919 pupils) being very close together, although the figure is slightly higher than the median. It must be stated also that these figures do not take into account that staff with a managerial or specialist role may not undertake case work or work with schools directly, so in fact the ratios are probably less favourable than presented here. However, the considerable disparity in staff resources from one authority to another is evident and this must have implications for effectively dealing with attendance issues.

1.2 AN AUDIT OF KEY ACTIVITIES

To audit the key activities undertaken by Education Welfare Services, personnel were asked to list their main areas of work. Although attendance issues are central to the work of Education Welfare Services, employees of the service identified a broad range of activities. Some of these duties were statutory, such as the issuing of child entertainment licences, whilst others related indirectly to attendance concerns or the welfare of young people generally.

1.2.1 The main activities highlighted by EWS respondents

Identified below in Table 1.1 are the 12 most frequently cited activities, in rank order, together with the number and percentage of EWS respondents highlighting them:

Table 1.1 Activities identified when EWS respondents were asked to list their main areas of work

Type of activity	The number of EWS respondents citing this activity	
	(N)	(%)
School attendance	105	99
Child employment	73	69
Child protection	72	68
Exclusions	50	47
Child entertainment licensing	37	35
Special educational needs	24	23
Looked after children	22	21
Education otherwise than at school (EOTAS)	17	16
Welfare issues	17	16
Prosecutions	16	15
Juvenile offending/youth crime	13	12
Pupil and family support	10	9

Source: NFER: The LEA Role in Reducing Truancy Project – telephone interviews in the initial phase of the study, 1999.

In nearly all 106 LEAs, school attendance was seen as the ‘bread and butter’ of the EWS and as such, it was cited first and foremost by all but one interviewee in the sample (99 per cent). Interviewees then chose to mention their statutory functions, such as child employment and child protection, which ranked almost equally behind school attendance (69 and 68 per cent respectively). Nearly half of the interviewees also chose to mention exclusion matters within their working remit and this was the next most commonly cited activity. In addition, a role in the field of special educational needs was highlighted by over one-fifth of EWS respondents (23 per cent).

School attendance

Within the telephone survey, interviewees were encouraged to itemise in more detail the activities undertaken to fulfil their primary function around school attendance. Senior managers described a variety of working practices which allowed them to monitor, investigate and promote regular school attendance. This included:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • liaison with parents • school visits • home visits • register checks • education supervision orders (ESOs) • following up first-day absence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prosecution of parents • work with targeted schools • development of attendance policies • group work with non-attenders • truancy watch schemes • preventative work
--	---

In terms of working practice concerning attendance matters, EWS respondents indicated that some services operated a case-load system. Some services were school-based, while others were organised centrally, with responsibilities allocated for specific schools, e.g. a secondary school and its feeder primary schools. When talking about their attendance role, some EWS staff also made reference to service-level agreements (SLAs), between the Education Welfare Service and their partners (schools and parents). These agreements set out their respective roles and responsibilities in order to clarify expectations and ensure harmonious working relationships.

Child employment

The second most commonly cited focus concerned child employment, which is a statutory function of the EWS. Interviewees described the issuing of work permits, liaison with local businesses and theatres, following up complaints regarding underage employment and protecting children from exploitation. Within some services, senior staff commented that this role had become one purely of administration, whilst in others there was a designated child employment officer who made every effort to liaise closely with local employers.

Child protection

Involvement in child protection entailed either a training function and/or attendance at case conferences and strategy meetings. Interviewees spoke of training other education staff within the LEA, governors and school staff. In some cases, the EWS was the nominated lead agency within the LEA in respect of child protection issues.

Exclusions

About half of the interviewees highlighted exclusions as a main area of their work, suggesting that, within some authorities, the EWS has quite a substantial role to play in addressing exclusions. Where it was cited by telephone respondents, the service role covered the prevention of exclusions, support for families during the exclusion process, visits to the homes of permanent excludees, and monitoring the application of appropriate exclusion procedures. In one authority, the service was said to be responsible for the management of the entire exclusion process, from decision making through to provision of alternative education.

Special educational needs

Interviewees indicated involvement with special educational needs (SEN) and this took the form of providing support and advice to parents as their child progressed through the assessment process.

The main areas of activity highlighted suggest that EWS staff must liaise closely with other services within the LEA and outside agencies. In their role in supporting children with special educational needs and their parents, for example, they would need to liaise closely with the SEN department within the LEA. In the case of child protection, for example, they would need to liaise closely with Social Services.

1.2.2 Additional areas of work highlighted by EWS staff

In addition to these key areas of work, interviewees cited some 52 other activities in relation to their areas of responsibility, although a single service would be unlikely to cover all 52. These activities are depicted in Table 1.2, where they are presented in alphabetical order. Some respondents described work that addressed the needs of **specific types of pupil**, such as pregnant schoolgirls, travellers and young carers. Other activities were **school-related**, e.g. training for governors, group work in schools and tackling behaviour problems. Some senior officers spoke of **family-focused work**, in the form of parent groups and home-school liaison. Other EWS staff highlighted a role in addressing **personal and social issues**, such as drugs, domestic violence and bullying. Some services were reported to deal with **welfare concerns** that included the administration of free school meals and processing of hardship applications. Lastly, a number of activities mentioned were **multi-agency based**, involving liaising and working alongside other organisations.

Table 1.2 Additional activities mentioned by EWS respondents

Advice and consultancy	Maximising educational opportunities
Advocacy/negotiation (school/parents)	Medicals
Agency work/liaison	Movement and disappearance of pupils
Behaviour problems in school	Necessities/clothing
Benefits	Parents groups
Bullying	Pregnant schoolgirls/pupil parents
Chairing and attending panels	Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) referrals
Children in need	Quality assurance
Children out of school	Refugees
Cleanliness and hygiene	Reintegration
Community support initiatives	Residential homes (liaison)
Coordination of alternative curricula	School INSET
Development work in primary schools	School meals
Domestic violence	School transfer and admissions
Drugs	School visits and journeys
Early years and childcare	Setting up databases/statistics compilation
EAZ – social inclusion	Special project work
EBD pupils	Statutory responsibilities/corporate role in the LEA
Education supervision orders	Support to schools (talks, PSE input, group work)
Escort work for SEN	Support for the transfer system
Free school meals administration	Transition work for Years 6–7
Governor training	Travellers
Hardship applications	Truancy patrols
Holidays/group activities	Tuition Service input
Home–school liaison	Young carers
Home–school transport	
Involvement in LEA plans/policies	

1.2.3 Comment

While the primary role of the EWS is generally perceived as one of improving school attendance, the wide range of activities EWS interviewees chose to mention demonstrates the enormous diversity in terms of the client group and the range of functions performed. Education Welfare Officers are in contact with a range of young people, including travellers, young carers, pupils with behavioural problems and pregnant schoolgirls. Poor attendance is rarely a solitary problem, but more often a symptom of other underlying difficulties. Consequently, the EWS deals with issues that extend far beyond those concerned purely with attendance and the activities this sample chose to highlight reflect this point. Given that the causes of non-attendance can also be complex, the solutions necessitate equally diverse and multifaceted approaches and service staff reported working with and alongside pupils, parents, schools, other LEA services and outside agencies and organisations. Clearly, those working within the EWS need to possess a number of different skills and qualities in order to perform such a multi-functional role. The qualities and skills required by staff will be explored further in the final report. The range of services and agencies with which they liaise is considered next.

1.3 LIAISON WITH OTHER SERVICES AND AGENCIES

Interviewees were asked to list those services and agencies with which they commonly liaise and to distinguish between services within the LEA, other local authority directorates and agencies from other sectors.

1.3.1 LEA services

The 12 most commonly cited services within the LEA are shown in Table 1.3 below, together with the number and percentage of EWS respondents reporting them.

Table 1.3 LEA services with which EWS respondents reported they commonly liaise

LEA services	EWS respondents reporting liaison	
	(N)	(%)
Educational Psychology	73	69
SEN department/service	48	45
Behaviour Support Service	32	30
Admissions	25	24
Advisory Service	20	19
Youth Service	18	17
Hospital and Home Tuition Service	16	15
Pupil Referral Service/Unit	15	14
Pupil Support/Pupil Services	13	12
Schools	13	12
Inspectorate	11	10
Learning Support Service	10	9

Source: NFER: The LEA Role in Reducing Truancy Project – telephone interviews in the initial phase of the study, 1999.

Reference to the above table shows that the most frequently cited contact by far was with the Education Psychology Service (69 per cent). This was followed by SEN departments or services, which were cited by just under half (45 per cent) of the interviewees and Behaviour Support Services, cited by almost a third (30 per cent) of EWS staff interviewed. These main services reflect to some extent the primary activities undertaken by the EWS identified earlier, for instance their role in SEN and exclusions. Links with the admissions department within the LEA were mentioned by almost a quarter of the interviewees, highlighting the EWS role in ensuring that pupils receive their entitlement to education through appropriate educational placement. Liaison with the Advisory Service and the Youth Service were mentioned by just under a fifth of the interviewees. The main function of the Advisory Service relates to the 'raising standards' agenda and liaison within this sample appeared to be quite common, perhaps reflecting a growing emphasis on linking academic achievement with attendance. It is worth noting at this stage that a few initiatives highlighted by EWS staff in this study utilised an explicit link between attendance and achievement and these are discussed in Chapter Two of this report. Links with the Youth Service perhaps reflect the increasing role of youth workers in supporting schools with problem pupils, particularly those who are excluded, through the provision of group work and alternative provision.

In terms of structural organisation, it is worth noting that 22 of the Education Welfare Services were subsumed by an umbrella service. For example, in one authority, the EWS fell under Pupil Services, which also encompassed the Educational Psychology Service, the Behaviour Support Service and specialist teachers. In another authority, the service formed part of the Learning Support Service, which comprised the SEN Service, the Behaviour Support Service, the Education Psychology Service and education for pupils out of school. Of all the linked services, the EWS was most frequently found under the same umbrella service as the Education Psychology Service, 12 cases in total. Two services were not situated within the LEA, but were instead part of Social Services. Where the EWS sat within the local authority therefore varied and different arrangements will affect the operation of the services and their work with other agencies. This will be explored further in the final report.

EWS personnel also mentioned other LEA services with whom they liaised and these are presented in Table 1.4, in their entirety and in alphabetical order. Senior officers spoke of liaising with services catering for **specific types of pupils**, such as those dealing with excluded pupils, pregnant schoolgirls and children being educated at home. Other services could be classed as **administrative**, dealing with, for example, student awards, complaints and statistics. A number of services, referred to EWS staff, were concerned with **post-16 education**, such as FE colleges and lifelong learning. Lastly, a number of personnel and services highlighted were linked with the **'raising achievement' agenda**, such as school improvement officers, the quality assurance section and the school effectiveness unit.

Table 1.4 Other LEA services with which EWS respondents cited liaison

Access and development team	Post-16, lifelong learning
Assessments	Pregnant schoolgirls/young mothers
EOTAS	Pupils out of school
Careers Service	Quality assurance section
Child and Family Services	Quality Learning Service
Child employment	Reducing disaffection team
Child guidance	Research and statistics
Child psychiatry	School effectiveness unit
Complaints	School improvement officers
Councillors	Sensory Impairment Service
Curriculum management team	Services for excluded pupils
Education support team	Specialist teachers
FE colleges*	Staff development and training
Government bodies	Staff section
Inclusions officer	Statementing
LAC (looked after children) team	Student awards
Other LEAs	Training and Enterprise Councils*
Outreach service	Traveller/multicultural Education Services
Panels (attendance/out of school)	Youth access/special projects
Parent partnership	Youth and Community Service
Portage	

Source: NFER: The LEA Role in Reducing Truancy Project – telephone interviews in the initial phase of the study, 1999.

* *Cited by interviewees under both LEA liaison and external liaison, or cited as an LEA agency when in fact an external agency.*

Table 1.4 serves to further underline the diversity of work and professional contacts that exists within the EWS. Whilst pupils are most frequently referred to the service because of their poor school attendance, EWOs are required to consider the child holistically and this may entail addressing other difficulties within children's lives. EWOs therefore need to liaise with, and refer children on to, a wide range of other services within the LEA.

1.3.2 Agencies and organisations outside the LEA

Interviewees were then asked to specify external agencies with which they worked. Again, the 13 most common agencies/organisations mentioned by EWS staff are listed in Table 1.5, together with the number and percentage of EWS staff citing them.

Table 1.5 Agencies outside the LEA with which EWS respondents cited liaison

External agencies	EWS respondents reporting liaison	
	(N)	(%)
Social Services	101	95
Police	78	74
Health	43	41
Voluntary organisations	37	35
Probation	24	23
Youth Justice	16	15
Youth Offending Panels/Teams	15	14
Careers Service	13	12
Youth Service	13	12
Housing Service	13	12
Mental Health	8	8
School nurses	8	8
Child and Family Services	8	8

Source: *NFER: The LEA Role in Reducing Truancy Project – telephone interviews in the initial phase of the study, 1999.*

In terms of external agency liaison, Social Services ranked as the most frequently cited agency, mentioned by 95 per cent of EWS staff in total. This suggests that a close relationship exists between the EWS and Social Services and this is further emphasised by the decision in some areas to assume the title of Education Social Work Service, rather than EWS. Given the EWS role in supporting 'children in need', in helping schools address issues of child protection and their concern for the general welfare of children, this does not seem surprising. It is probable that many cases are referred on to Social Services for more focused work and in some cases, joint working is necessary. Liaison with the police was mentioned by almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of the sample, reflecting the large number of EWS staff also highlighting a truancy watch scheme as an initiative operated in conjunction with the police (see Chapter Two, page 29). This may be a response to the new police powers to pick up truants. Two-fifths (41 per cent) of the sample cited contact with the Health Service, whilst a small percentage mentioned mental health specifically. This again suggests the diverse needs of the pupils with whom they come into contact. Over a third (37 per cent) reported liaison with voluntary organisations, perhaps connected with the increasing role of such organisations in providing alternative curricula for those out of school, and thus fulfilling an important function in relation to the duty of the EWS to ensure educational entitlement for all pupils.

In addition, some senior officers spoke of liaising and communicating with a number of other services and these are listed in Table 1.6, in alphabetical order. Some of these services were concerned with **criminal justice**, e.g. magistrates and the Juvenile Bureau. Others were **youth-related**, e.g. the Youth and Community Service, while a number of services and personnel were **health-related**, e.g. the Community Drugs Service and health visitors.

Table 1.6 Other external agencies with which EWS respondents cited liaison

Befriending Service	Magistrates/courts
Community Drugs Service	Mediation Service
Community Safety Team	Multi-disciplinary projects
Crime prevention	Psychiatric social work
Domestic violence/women's refuge	Psychology Service *
Environmental Health	Schools *
FE colleges*	Special projects
Fostering agencies	Training and Enterprise Councils*
Health visitors	The Royal Navy
Juvenile Bureau	Welfare rights
Leisure	Youth affairs
Local community	Youth and Community Service*

Source: NFER: The LEA Role in Reducing Truancy Project – telephone interviews in the initial phase of the study, 1999.

* *Cited by interviewees under both LEA liaison and external liaison, or cited as an external agency when in fact part of the LEA.*

1.3.3 Comment

This chapter has relayed the working practices of the EWS and the services and agencies with which they liaise. What becomes clear is the multiplicity of roles performed by EWOs, the breadth of their work and the wide range of professional contacts they experience. This reflects in part the determinants of attendance behaviour, namely the interacting forces of home, school, community and the individual, and the variety of possible causes of attendance difficulties, as well as their role in other areas of work. In an effort to tackle problems initially identified as attendance, EWOs are required to work in a number of settings, alongside a variety of professionals, adopting a range of approaches. At the same time, however, Education Welfare Services across the country take on additional duties. Some are heavily involved in the exclusion process, some take a lead role in child protection, and others appoint child employment officers. If the factors which EWS staff chose to highlight can be considered a true reflection of their priorities, it is clear that the balance of activities varies from one authority to another and, in terms of the national picture, a defined and coherent role for the EWS is unclear. While most EWS staff agreed that attendance remains a central concern, the evidence suggests that authorities differ in the extent to which they operate in other areas.

In addition to the findings presented here, interviewees also raised a number of key issues with regard to general working practice. These included the lack of recognised training and qualifications for EWS staff, achieving a balance between welfare and enforcement, the use of the terms authorised and unauthorised absence and the increasing national focus on reducing truancy in the face of dwindling resources. At this stage in the research, it is not possible to discuss these in depth, but they will be picked up in the face-to-face interviews with EWS personnel in the next phase of the study and the findings presented in the final report.

Having examined the general working practices that EWS staff reflected upon, we now go on to discuss the initiatives that they identified as examples of effective practice in raising attendance levels.

CHAPTER TWO

CURRENT INITIATIVES AIMED AT IMPROVING ATTENDANCE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter of the report focuses on the initiatives identified by interviewees in the second part of the telephone interview, in which they were asked to identify one or two projects or practices that, in their view, were particularly innovative or effective in improving attendance. In total, 191 different initiatives were identified. Interviewees were then asked to elaborate on the nature of the intervention, the agencies involved, the pupils targeted, and the effectiveness of the initiative.

2.1 OVERVIEW OF THE INITIATIVES

A wide range of projects and practices was identified as effective practice and they were classified into the following types:

- **service-level developments**
In these initiatives, the main focus was on the restructuring of services, reallocation of resources or the use of service-level agreements (SLAs).
- **preventative strategies**
EWS respondents identified a wide range of projects and practices aimed at preventing attendance problems. These included those aimed at raising awareness about attendance issues, the development of effective systems within schools and the development of attendance incentive schemes.
- **early intervention**
A number of initiatives were aimed at early identification and intervention with pupils of concern, that is those considered vulnerable to later attendance problems or disaffection.
- **initial responses to absence**
In these initiatives, resources were focused on making an immediate response to pupil absence. They included 'catch-all' systems, the aim of which was to act as a deterrent to pupils who absent themselves from school.
- **strategies aimed at pupils with identified attendance problems**
A wide range of different strategies was reported within this category. These initiatives were mainly aimed at working directly with pupils where attendance problems had already been identified, although some were focused on parents of pupils with attendance problems.

- **initiatives aimed at disaffected pupils.**

These initiatives focused on providing intervention for pupils often described by interviewees as 'disaffected', those with long-term attendance problems and usually associated difficulties, such as emotional, social and behavioural problems.

Further sub-types were then identified within each of these groups. To provide an overall picture, the number and percentage of initiatives within each type are presented in Table 2.1.

A large and varied number of initiatives and practices were highlighted, 191 in total within the 106 LEAs. A number of interviewees raised concerns about the inability of the EWS to be proactive in dealing with attendance problems because of the present strain on resources and the present focus on reducing levels of unauthorised absence. Despite this, when invited to identify innovative and effective practice, a large number of LEA personnel spoke of service-level developments, preventative approaches, early intervention strategies and those aimed at providing initial responses to pupil absence, as effective practice. Such approaches accounted for almost 70 per cent or 131 out of the 191 initiatives identified, compared with about 30 per cent or 60 out of the 191 initiatives aimed at pupils with attendance problems and those considered 'disaffected'. This suggested, therefore, a widely held belief that, in order to be effective, interventions need to take place before attendance problems have become too entrenched.

The different types of initiative will now be discussed in more detail and their main features highlighted. Types of intervention were cross-tabulated with LEA characteristics, such as size and type, and levels of authorised and unauthorised absence. The size of the Education Welfare Services was also considered and, for this purpose, services were categorised as having a low pupil to staff ratio (one EWO to 1,028–2,310 pupils), a medium ratio (one EWO to 2,311–3,353 pupils) or a high ratio (one EWO to 3,354–8,517). Where characteristics were found to be significant, they are noted within the text.

The focus of this study is on effective practice. Interviewees' views of the effectiveness of the initiatives are therefore highlighted separately and where an outcome was mentioned by more than one interviewee, this is signalled by the number in brackets throughout.

Table 2.1 Number of initiatives identified by interviewees as effective practice

SERVICE-LEVEL DEVELOPMENTS	N = 191	%	INITIAL RESPONSES TO ABSENCE	N = 191	%
TOTAL	9	5	TOTAL	38	20
Allocation of resources	5	3	First-day response to absence	20	11
Service-level agreements	4	2	Truancy sweeps	18	9
PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES			IDENTIFIED ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS		
TOTAL	48	25	TOTAL	38	20
Raising awareness in the community	7	4	Interventions linked with achievement	3	2
The development of attendance policies	4	2	Support for parents	5	3
Attendance audits	5	3	Multi-agency or multi-disciplinary forums	10	5
School computerised information systems	5	3	Group work for pupils	8	4
Whole-school team approaches	9	5	Intensive EWO/ESW support for pupils	5	3
Attendance incentive schemes	11	6	The use of ESOs and prosecution	7	4
Other preventative strategies aimed at pupils	7	4			
EARLY INTERVENTION			WORK WITH DISAFFECTED PUPILS		
TOTAL	36	19	TOTAL	22	12
Support for parents of vulnerable pupils	6	3	Alternative curricula	10	5
Support for vulnerable pupils	11	6	Other interventions with disaffected pupils	12	6
Support for vulnerable pupils at transition	19	10			

Source: NFER: *The LEA Role in Reducing Truancy Project – telephone interviews in the initial phase of the study, 1999.*

Note: Due to rounding, percentages do not sum to 100.

2.2 SERVICE-LEVEL DEVELOPMENTS

The introduction of Government targets, translated into local LEA targets, has inevitably impacted on the work of the EWS, and the service-level developments identified as effective practice in this study to some extent reflect this move. A general trend, highlighted by a number of interviewees, concerned the allocation of resources to schools or areas with the greatest need within LEAs. In addition, the use of service-level agreements to 'sharpen' the focus and clarify the responsibilities of both schools and Education Welfare Services for attendance issues was also identified.

Service-level developments were highlighted in nine LEAs, which ranged in size, type (although no metropolitan authorities were noted) and levels of authorised and unauthorised absence. One LEA cited more than one initiative within this category. Effectiveness in these cases was felt to be difficult to judge as they were, in the main, long-term initiatives that had only recently been introduced.

2.2.1 Allocation of resources

In all five initiatives within this group, the main focus was on targeting EWS resources to schools with the greatest need. 'Need' was typically based on a combination of authorised and unauthorised absences (more often the latter) and/or other measures of social deprivation, such as the number of pupils entitled to free school meals. Alternatively, more resources were allocated to schools deemed as 'failing' or those under special measures, as determined by recent OFSTED inspections. EWS assistants had been used in three of these initiatives as an additional support to schools. Their role included supporting vulnerable pupils, helping to reintegrate pupils out of school and developing links between school and home.

Effectiveness

Needs-based allocation of resources was perceived by EWS respondents to have:

- **improved attendance figures**, where there was a full-time EWS project worker in a 'failing' school
- **facilitated their ability to offer intensive support to vulnerable pupils where and when it was most needed**, where EWS assistants had been used
- **benefited other services**, such as the Behaviour Support Service, where EWS assistants had been used.

2.2.2 Service-level agreements (SLAs)

These four service-level initiatives focused on SLAs and developing clear guidelines and expectations for schools on the role of the EWS and the role of the school in addressing attendance issues. In one case, for example, the service had outlined a

five-staged procedure for schools to adopt in response to attendance problems, with the service's input featuring at stage three of this process.

Effectiveness

EWS respondents considered that:

- having a clear, written procedure for involvement of the EWS in schools tightened up the process, cut down the time spent at different stages of their involvement and facilitated their ability to move cases on
- having a clear, written procedure for the school to adopt raised the profile of attendance within the school
- having a written policy and a practice document tightened up the relationship of the EWS with schools, placed more responsibility on schools for attendance issues and in this way made the work of the EWS more effective.

2.3 PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES

Preventative strategies were highlighted in just under half (45 per cent) of the 106 authorities. Preventative initiatives included a wide range of approaches with varying focuses: community-level interventions, e.g. strategies for raising awareness of attendance issues within the community, whole-school level interventions, e.g. the use of attendance audits, and those focused on individual pupils. Initiatives aimed to raise awareness of attendance issues, to develop effective school systems for dealing with absence and to provide pupils with incentives to attend school and means of dealing with their general concerns whilst at school. Attendance incentive schemes were the most prominent feature of all the initiatives in this category, found in almost one in ten (11) of the 106 authorities, although the use of whole-school team approaches also featured highly.

2.3.1 Raising awareness in the community

The seven initiatives in this category were aimed at raising awareness of the importance of regular school attendance and the impact of non-attendance on pupils, the family and the local community, e.g. on pupils' academic attainment and crime within the local area. All the EWS interviewees who highlighted these initiatives were from small, new authorities or medium-sized, metropolitan authorities, often with high levels of unauthorised absence. This tended, therefore, to be a strategy adopted in smaller, compact areas where attendance problems were more concentrated, but widespread within the community. The focus of different initiatives varied. Four of the seven were aimed at raising the awareness of the local community. The need for community commitment to school attendance and the involvement of the community in the implementation of attendance initiatives was highlighted by one interviewee, who considered these to be important factors for effectiveness in dealing with attendance issues. Community members involved included local shopkeepers, a local newspaper, various community groups, a residents' committee, housing, the police, Social Services and leisure services. In two cases, local shopkeepers were provided with details of school uniforms and school contact numbers (a feature also of some of the truancy watch schemes, discussed later in this chapter) so they could notify schools of absent pupils. In another initiative,

police, housing and the caretaker on a local estate were provided with a referral route to the EWS. In those with a community focus, encouraging pupils to design posters to promote an awareness campaign was a key feature.

Two of the seven initiatives, on the other hand, targeted parents through booklets/leaflets aimed at detailing the positive impact of regular attendance, although the focus for one of these was specifically on extended absence within the Asian community, a factor highlighted as a major issue within the area. It was felt that this not only impacted on individual pupils' educational achievement but also on the ethos of the whole school and it was noted that, increasingly, more parents were taking pupils on holiday in term time. In support of this, the LEA concerned had set an upper limit of 20 days, after which the school was able to take pupils off roll. The remaining initiative was aimed at raising the awareness of other agencies within the local area through a conference on school attendance.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness was felt to be variable and, in some cases, the impact on attendance difficult to quantify. In individual cases, however, initiatives were reported by EWS respondents to have:

- raised awareness of attendance issues within the community and thereby reinforced 'the right message'
- almost eliminated crime on one particular estate
- reduced the number of referrals to the EWS
- provided shopkeepers with information about schools which they found useful
- successfully informed parents about extended absence and led to a consistent approach to extended absence across schools.

2.3.2 Attendance policies

There were four initiatives within this group. Two of the initiatives involved the EWS in developing authority-wide attendance policy and practice documents, and two involved the development of whole-school attendance policies. In all cases, policies were being developed within all schools within an authority. The rationale for this approach was to provide schools with clear guidelines on when to involve the EWS and to develop a common framework within which schools could operate. Details noted within the policies included guidance on taking term-time holidays, a checklist of what to do in the case of absence, suggestions for looking for patterns of absence and the early warning signs of attendance difficulties.

Effectiveness

The development of attendance policies was thought by EWS respondents to have:

- made the overall work of the EWS more effective
- provided consistency in practice across the authority
- made clear to schools what they had to do before getting the EWS involved, whereas previously this had been unclear to year heads
- given schools more of the responsibility for attendance issues
- resulted in many examples of schools making improvements to their systems.

It was reported, however, that it was sometimes difficult to maintain the progress made once the policy had been set in place and the EWS had withdrawn from the school.

2.3.3 Attendance audits

Five initiatives concerned attendance audits conducted by the EWS and focused on in-school systems and procedures relating to attendance. Most of the authorities where these initiatives were highlighted were large and had a high- or medium-rated number of pupils to one EWO. Typically, audits examined systems and procedures and made recommendations to the school through a report, although in two, school staff and student views were also canvassed. This was seen as a way of addressing weaknesses within the school system that allowed pupils to 'drift' rather than have their needs addressed. One interviewee suggested that the teachers often lacked understanding of the role that they themselves played in attendance and that the teachers and managers within a school often had different expectations. Audits went some way, therefore, to addressing these difficulties. Where stated, the length of time spent in each school ranged from one day to one week. In two cases, audits were carried out by EWS managers only, whilst in one, an EWO and a deputy head had been seconded to conduct them as part of a project. In three out of the five authorities, the EWS undertook audits in all schools (although in two cases, these were secondary schools only), whilst two focused on schools with particular problems with attendance.

Effectiveness

The use of attendance audits was considered to have been '*very successful*' by EWS staff in three of the authorities (in the other authorities it was thought to be too early to say). Attendance audits were considered by EWS respondents to have:

- **raised attendance figures** by two to three per cent within a few weeks
- tightened up the systems for dealing with attendance issues within the school
- made the governors more aware of attendance issues
- helped develop effective communication within the school
- made attendance a high priority in the school
- raised schools' awareness of the range of interventions the EWS could offer.

2.3.4 Computerised information systems

These five initiatives focused on the incorporation of information systems, which were either school-based (three) or service-wide (two), and were used for collation and handling of attendance data, monitoring attendance and, in some cases, targeting resources more effectively within services. Interviewees highlighting this as effective

practice were mainly from within small LEAs. Information technology staff and clerical staff were involved in setting up the systems, although clerical or administration staff within the schools or the LEA usually operated them. In two cases, information systems had been introduced into secondary schools experiencing a particular problem with post-registration truancy, as a way of monitoring and tackling this. Another had been introduced into a secondary school on special measures and its feeder primary schools. On the other hand, two initiatives involved a whole-service system detailing all clients of the EWS.

Two information-recording and data-collection systems were in use: the SIMS package and BROMCOM, with one school using both systems. Systems were used for a range of functions, including:

- monitoring attendance on a daily, weekly, monthly, termly and annual basis;
- producing standard letters;
- constructing graphs correlating attendance with attainment;
- creating league tables and performance graphs;
- monitoring attendance targets for individual pupils; and
- identifying attendance problems at an early stage.

In addition, BROMCOM was used to log information on homework scores and grades and it also incorporated pagers for teachers that were used to convey important messages, such as alerting others when they were having difficulties with a pupil. The EWS-wide systems were able to retrieve information using a range of variables and the data obtained was used to track pupils, take action with individual cases and to inform policy and practice. One system incorporated specific targets for the EWS, both for individual cases and for collective referrals to the service, a factor considered both innovative and important by the senior staff member concerned.

Effectiveness

In four of the authorities, EWS respondents stated that information systems were flexible and versatile and facilitated access to a wide range of attendance data. EWS interviewees also highlighted that information systems:

- **made 'a significant impact' on post-registration truancy (2)**
- **allowed them to monitor attendance effectively and thereby led to a consequent improvement in attendance (2)**
- enhanced their ability to identify trends and patterns of absence and allocate resources or strategies accordingly
- enhanced their ability to identify attendance problems early.

Where a system was produced specifically as a whole-school registration package and provided access to a wide range of relevant facilities, it was considered more useful by some interviewees. Interviewees noted the need for training and IT support.

2.3.5 Whole-school teams

These nine initiatives included those where teams had been established to work in schools on attendance issues using a whole-school approach, such as the development of attendance policies and the introduction of whole-school strategies. All except one

of the nine authorities where EWS respondents cited this as an effective approach were medium or large in size and most were new authorities. The majority of teams (seven of the nine) involved EWS staff only, although one was multi-agency with representation from Social Services, the Youth Service, and the Educational Psychology Service, and the other involved behaviour support teachers and had a multi-agency steering group. One interviewee, however, thought that other agencies were unlikely to be interested in working collaboratively where the focus was on attendance alone. Typically, teams were adopted as a means of assisting schools with the greatest need or the highest absence or exclusion levels. However, in one authority, it was noted that, in order to adopt this approach, resources had to be withdrawn from other schools and this had led to poor relationships in some instances.

In all nine cases, teams focused on whole-school attendance issues, such as the development of attendance policies and the introduction of whole-school strategies (e.g. first-day response and incentive schemes, discussed as separate initiatives later). Two teams focused more on disaffection than attendance. Most were able to offer a range of approaches depending on the needs of the school, a feature viewed as important in addressing the wide range of needs of pupils with potential attendance problems, discussed earlier in Chapter One. In one EWS, there was a division of labour between an 'attendance team' which dealt with whole-school issues and short-term cases and a 'casework team' which undertook more intensive long-term intervention with individual pupils.

Effectiveness

In three initiatives, improved attendance figures were reported by EWS staff, in one case by eight per cent across the five schools involved and in another, attendance for a school on special measures had improved after only eight weeks intervention. A whole-school team approach was also found by EWS respondents to have:

- made more effective use of EWS resources (3)
- highlighted areas of difficulty with attendance in schools (2)
- allowed in-depth support to be made available where it was needed
- reduced permanent exclusions to virtually zero, where behaviour support teachers had also been involved
- provided a range of interventions
- highlighted underlying problems that resulted in poor attendance
- enabled schools and the EWS to take a broad view of attendance problems
- generated a response from pupils and parents, where teams incorporated a blitz on non-attendance
- resulted in other spin-offs (2), such as joint working with teachers and the funding of other schemes concerned with attendance.

2.3.6 Attendance incentive schemes

These 11 initiatives involved schemes set up in schools to reward pupils with good attendance or those making progress with attendance. It could be argued that attendance should be expected rather than rewarded, but the effectiveness of some of these schemes had convinced some EWS staff of their value. As one interviewee stated: *'It may seem like bribery, but it works!'* Over half of the 11 LEAs in this

group were metropolitan authorities and over half had high levels of authorised absence. This approach therefore appeared to be highlighted as effective practice in inner-city areas, where, within communities experiencing socio-economic deprivation and unemployment, there may be less favourable attitudes towards education and this might be seen as going some way towards encouraging pupils to attend.

Whilst the EWS was involved in establishing incentive schemes within schools, once they were up and running, the majority of the schemes were operated by the schools themselves. In four of the 11 LEAs, schools with the worst attendance were targeted for schemes, whilst in an equal number, they were adopted by all schools. In three, schemes were operating in primary schools only, whilst two authorities operated separate schemes for primary and secondary schools. In one case, schools had to buy into the authority's scheme. The focus varied from whole-class incentives for a full week's attendance to rewarding individual pupils with 100 per cent attendance or those making progress despite personal problems.

Rewards sometimes took the form of authority-wide reward ceremonies, trophies, certificates, awards, and a non-uniform day, whilst in other schemes, more material rewards were evident. Stickers, pens and pencils, trips out, vouchers for McDonald's, a gladiator event day and being entered for a draw for a computer were all utilised. In four of the 11 schemes, local businesses, football clubs or a local leisure centre provided rewards. One interviewee stressed the importance of rewards being age-appropriate and a genuine incentive to pupils.

Effectiveness

The ability to express effectiveness in terms of attendance figures was most evident within this group, and **in seven out of the 11 initiatives, respondents reported an improvement in attendance figures.** Schemes were said to have been '*very effective*' and to have raised attendance figures by one or two per cent or '*significantly*'. In one authority, attendance had improved across all schools (those with the worst attendance figures) by two per cent, despite the scheme only being targeted at Years 5 and 6 pupils. Improvement in attendance figures was particularly noted in schemes where more material rewards had been used. Incentive schemes were also said by EWS respondents to have:

- raised the profile of attendance within schools and the community (4)
- helped establish a regular pattern of attendance in individual cases
- raised the number of pupils receiving awards each year
- capitalised on peer pressure, where whole-class incentives were used
- enhanced pupils' social skills, where trips out were used as an incentive.

2.3.7 Strategies aimed at raising pupils' awareness and addressing their concerns

These seven initiatives encompassed those strategies aimed at raising pupils' awareness about attendance issues and the consequences of non-attendance, and providing general support and a safe place to discuss their problems. In LEAs where these strategies were identified as effective practice, either high or medium levels of unauthorised absence were evident.

In three of the seven initiatives, pupils' awareness of attendance issues was raised, either through PSHE sessions on attendance or attendance conferences, and emphasis was placed in all cases on an interactive approach. Topics included, for example, what to do in the case of absence, where to go to discuss personal problems, bullying and keeping safe.

The other four initiatives focused on providing pupils with an opportunity to raise their concerns. This was achieved either through drop-in centres, training other children as befrienders or, in one case, through providing a children's parliament where concerns raised by pupils in different schools were brought together and presented to a management forum within the authority.

A range of agencies, in addition to the EWS, was often involved in delivery, including the police, health professionals, an educational psychologist and behaviour support teachers. In one initiative, for example, an independent voluntary organisation provided staff to operate a drop-in centre for pupils, although the EWS, school health, the youth court team and the police also provided input.

Effectiveness

These types of approaches were considered by EWS respondents to have:

- **resulted in a marked improvement in attendance** (where materials had been developed for use in PSHE lessons), with most impact in Year 11, where connections were made between employers' needs and pupil attendance
- the most impact on pupils with general poor attendance rather than the hard-core cases
- a dramatic effect on bullying and behaviour and therefore an indirect effect on attendance, where pupil befriending had been implemented
- given pupils a chance to be heard, thus '*empowering*' them, through attendance conferences
- provided pupil feedback to schools, thus enabling them to respond to their needs
- been easily incorporated within existing school provision and had not involved schools in any extra work (where PSHE lessons were targeted)
- brought in people from outside the school, which was seen as beneficial in itself.

One interviewee, however, noted that PSHE input on attendance was aimed at '*changing attitudes rather than attendance short-term*'.

2.4 EARLY INTERVENTION

Initiatives aimed at early identification and intervention, highlighted by just over a third (36) of the 106 LEAs, were focused on pupils considered vulnerable to attendance difficulties and their parents. Support for vulnerable pupils through the transition from primary to secondary school was identified as effective practice in 19, or just under a fifth, of the 106 authorities. This would appear to support the view that primary to secondary transition can be a particularly difficult stage for many pupils, and that the input of resources at this point is warranted as it can prevent more serious problems at a later stage.

2.4.1 Parental support

These six initiatives focused on support for pre-school, primary and secondary school parents in order to deflect problems of attendance. The importance of parental responsibility for attendance was noted. In four cases, the EWS was the key agency involved, whilst in two examples, the EWS worked in conjunction with a voluntary agency and one, focused on adult literacy, involved input from the Health Service, the Careers Service and local colleges. In four authorities, disadvantaged areas or the schools with the worst attendance figures were targeted for intervention. They catered for the parents of those pupils showing signs of disaffection or those known to other agencies. One, on the other hand, which was aimed at addressing the cultural differences between home and school in preparation for school, was specifically aimed at Bengali parents.

Four out of the six initiatives consisted of parent support groups, although their focuses tended to differ. Two, for example, placed emphasis on parenting skills and improving self-esteem, whilst two focused on education (e.g. raising awareness about drugs, welfare benefits and educational law). Parents, especially in disadvantaged areas, were often noted to be suspicious of education and the importance of holding parent groups in non-threatening places and, in one case, enticement by the provision of tea and cakes, were factors raised by interviewees. Other interventions included the use of parent pagers and individual support for parents of pre-school children. The majority catered for primary and pre-school parents, reflecting a view held by some interviewees that, by the time pupils reached secondary school, many parents had already lost control of their children.

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of parent support at an early stage can be difficult to judge in terms of attendance figures, because, as raised by interviewees, the focus is not overtly on attendance, and cultural and attitudinal factors are generational and take a long time to change. However, four of the initiatives were considered by EWS respondents to be effective in that:

- parent groups were thought to be *'very effective'* or *'extremely useful'* (2) and, in one case, **non-attendance in the primary schools improved *'quite dramatically'***, to the extent that, for one school, the EWO was able to say they no longer had a problem with non-attendance
- there were knock-on effects for some parents who had gone on courses or got jobs following attendance on a programme of support groups (2)
- schools liked parent support groups to the extent that one school went on to fund one themselves and, as a strategy, it was spreading across the authority
- the use of pagers provided a quick response, was better than using the telephone, placed the onus on parents and saved EWO time (this is commensurate with findings where pagers were used to support parents of pupils with established attendance problems – see Section 2.6.2, on page 33).

2.4.2 Support for vulnerable pupils

These 11 initiatives included interventions aimed at addressing the needs of pupils considered vulnerable to attendance problems in both primary and secondary schools. Five out of the 11 LEAs referring to this approach as innovative/effective practice,

were new authorities and, where figures were available (not for the Welsh authorities), over half of the authorities (five) had high levels of authorised and unauthorised absence. In these LEAs, therefore, attendance was an issue of significant concern and a move towards early intervention was perhaps facilitated by a focus on reviewing and developing services, as is often the case in new authorities.

Different groups of pupils were targeted. Interventions aimed at 'looked after' pupils focused on identifying key issues common to Education and Social Services, and children's homes having a named contact in schools. In one authority, with a major initiative focused on 'looked after' pupils, attendance targets were set for each home and all pupils below a certain level were investigated by EWS staff. Where secondary pupils with low self-esteem and problems at home were targeted, strategies varied. Remotivating pupils, boosting their self-esteem (through Duke of Edinburgh Awards, for example) adult mentoring, providing opportunities to discuss problems, anger management and group work were key features. Other initiatives targeted primary pupils showing early signs of disaffection or behavioural problems. In these, intensive work with families, group work, self-expression, coping strategies and building self-esteem (through after-school clubs, for example) were common. Where stated, all these interventions catered for small numbers of pupils (eight to ten).

In addition to the EWS, a range of other agencies was involved, including, in more than one case, the Youth Service, voluntary agencies, the Educational Psychology Service, Social Services and health professionals. Others included the police, a mediation service and the Youth Justice Service. In one authority, the EWS conducted joint work with the Youth Service and group work involved health professionals. In another, a voluntary agency and Social Services were running groups, whilst the EWS offered family work alongside.

Effectiveness

Many of these initiatives had recently been established and interviewees found it difficult to comment on effectiveness. However, they identified:

- that, where 'looked after' pupils were the focus, one initiative had been successful in bridging the gap between schools and children's homes, with every 'looked after' pupil now on a school roll and less likelihood of a breakdown in the relationship between schools and homes
- anecdotal examples of pupils who had successfully returned to school
- that an anger management intervention had been useful to the school and, as a result, referrals for behaviour support had decreased.

2.4.3 Transition schemes

These 19 initiatives specifically focused on providing support for vulnerable pupils across the transition from primary to secondary school. They were identified in just under a fifth (19) of the 106 LEAs. The majority were located in small or medium-sized authorities where the collaboration across phases required for effective intervention might be easier, given the smaller number of schools. One interviewee highlighted the reluctance of some primary schools to refer pupils to the EWS and considered this approach to be one way of combating this problem. The issue of

short-term funding for projects was raised in one authority where, despite being proved to be effective, funding for the scheme had been withdrawn.

Typically, vulnerable pupils in Year 6 were identified and then supported and monitored in Year 7. Almost half of the initiatives (nine), worked with pupils from schools with high unauthorised absence levels. A few (three), catered for pupils with attendance below 90 per cent, whilst one targeted all pupils using a transition resource pack. Three of the schemes had utilised mentors (adult, pupil or sixth-form mentors) to support pupils and in two, attendance assistants had been used to support pupils. In the few cases where other agencies were involved, these included the Youth Service, the police and Social Services. Common features, found in the majority of schemes, included visits to secondary schools, group work and interventions focused on strategies for coping. Other forms of support included family work, outdoor activities, in-class support in secondary school, intensive individual work with pupils, the adoption of transition plans, peer group support, the use of incentives, a transition training pack for schools and pupil questionnaires used to obtain information about the effect of the transition on pupils.

Effectiveness

Indicators of effectiveness identified by EWS respondents included:

- **improved or maintained attendance (3)**
- that expected problems with pupils in secondary school had not materialised (2)
- that the EWO had established a relationship with pupils (2)
- virtually no truancy and no exclusions in one secondary school
- that problems were tackled before they became entrenched
- that, in one case, non-targeted pupils had also benefited.

However, one interviewee noted that, with intense support in primary, they were able to 'keep the lid on things', but this could be lost at secondary school. Whilst some interviewees felt that pupils can cope eventually without extra support, others felt that it was difficult to maintain their attendance once support had been withdrawn.

2.5 INITIAL RESPONSE TO ABSENCE

The two different types of intervention classified as initial responses to absence (first-day response and truancy sweeps) were both found in a large number of authorities (20 and 18, respectively). In total, therefore, these initiatives were identified in over a third (38) of the 106 LEAs. First-day response was the most frequently identified strategy, thought to be effective practice in just under one-fifth of all the authorities. Again, this reflects the recognition of a growing need to respond quickly to absence in order to prevent the development of more entrenched attendance problems. First-day response was identified as a particularly effective strategy in improving attendance figures, although considered by some EWS staff as resource-intensive. The manner in which this was conducted and those responsible for first-day contact in practice did, however, raise some issues, discussed in detail later. On the other hand, although highly represented, interviewees found it more difficult to articulate effectiveness in relation to truancy sweeps. Even where rigorous procedures had been adopted, whether they were a valuable use of resources was questioned.

2.5.1 Truancy sweeps

Truancy sweeps, identified by EWS staff in a total of 18 authorities, were often introduced in response to the new police powers to pick up truants, although in one case this power had deliberately been kept separate. The majority of LEAs where this was identified as an effective strategy were small or medium-sized authorities and, where figures were available, the majority had either medium or high rates of unauthorised (14) and authorised (12) absence. This might indicate that, where absence was of significant concern, the need for such a 'catch-all' approach was greater and the limited size of the authorities might make it easier to operate this effectively. The tendency for pupils to go to other pupils' homes was noted by one interviewee from a rural area, who considered this a more difficult problem to combat.

Typically, truancy sweeps entailed pupils out of school, without adequate reason, being approached by staff from the EWS and the police, who then returned them to their school. Parentally condoned absence was a particular problem in some areas, described by one interviewee as '*a contentious issue*', and a few EWS staff indicated that they approached pupils accompanied by parents as well. Two schemes targeted secondary pupils only, whilst one interviewee referred to a high percentage of primary pupils found to be out of school (12 out of the 150 picked up). This raised issues of child protection for the EWS staff member concerned. In conjunction with truancy sweeps, a few authorities had introduced a school pass scheme at the same time to facilitate the process. Whilst one interviewee specifically stated that patrols were random, another stated that the LEA and the police agreed certain areas and a certain week, and did not conduct them at random.

EWOs and the police conducted the majority of schemes (18 out of the 20) together. Exceptions either involved the EWS alone (because of the difficulty of getting police to devote time to it) or the police alone. The latter was a deliberate strategy adopted to preserve the relationship of the EWS with pupils and parents. In six initiatives, local shopkeepers or businesses were also involved. Usually they were provided with information about school holidays and school uniforms, and given school contact numbers so that they could report their concerns about pupils. In one notable case, shopkeepers had been trained in how to approach pupils and two had widened their strategy so that members of the general public were able to report their concerns in relation to truancy. In a few cases, truancy sweeps had been linked in some way with community publicity drives, with one interviewee describing it as '*high-profile*'. In contrast, another stated that the EWOs went out with police in unmarked cars and they '*do not publicise it*'.

In some authorities (seven), specific geographical areas, such as shopping centres and town centres, and, in one case, specific schools, were targeted. Where noted (only in a few cases), sweeps were conducted once or twice per term. About half of the interviewees specified that pupils were returned to school, whilst in one case, they were returned home and in another, to '*a central point*'. In one authority, a clear procedure was adopted and schools were contacted prior to pupils' return so that a designated member of staff was there to receive them. Different forms of follow-up were highlighted: parents were contacted, a home visit conducted or there was other EWO or school follow-up, particularly if problems were identified, such as bullying.

Effectiveness

Five of the EWS interviewees reported that truancy sweeps were 'very effective' or 'working well'. Truancy sweeps were also reported by EWS respondents to have:

- raised the profile of attendance within the community (5)
- allowed them to pick up between 50 and 300 pupils in one patrol (4)
- satisfied shopkeepers, because pupils were not hanging around shopping areas (4)
- helped to reduce shoplifting in the area (3)
- been expanded to other areas (3)
- been effective in helping to combat parentally condoned absence (3), because parents 'get a jolt' and know that they will be stopped
- been effective in deterring other pupils from truanting, by showing them that it was not condoned (3)
- resulted in pupils returning to school (68 per cent of pupils the same day or the day after the home visit)
- resulted in a slight increase in the number of pupils in school
- highlighted pupils who were working when they should not be.

2.5.2 First-day response

These initiatives, highlighted as effective practice in 20 LEAs, involved responding to the first day of absence of any pupil, usually either with a phone call, a letter or a home visit. This was identified, therefore, in just under one-fifth of the 106 LEAs. Over half of these authorities had high or medium rates of authorised and unauthorised absence and might therefore have adopted this 'catch-all' intervention in response to these concerns.

Personnel responsible for making the initial contact with parents, where stated, included EWOs (four), Education Welfare Assistants or EWAs (five), form tutors (two), secretarial or administration staff from the school (two), staff specifically employed by the school (four), as well as, in one case, volunteers (retired EWOs, police and social workers) and, in another, BT operators. This suggested that, in some cases, first-day contact was considered a relatively low-level task within the EWS and one that could be safely delegated to others as more highly qualified EWS staff came under increasing pressure. Where EWAs undertook the task, if they encountered further problems they passed the case over to the EWO allocated to the school. In one authority, assistants also conducted follow-up work, such as group work, mentoring and work with families. Where school staff were used, one interviewee highlighted that it was important for them to be committed. They were therefore specifically trained to undertake the task and form tutors with this responsibility were encouraged to liaise with EWS staff. In one initiative, implementation of the first-day response was part of a whole package developed by the EWS for form tutors, which included incentives for attendance, targets for tutor groups and follow-up by the EWO. Four interviewees stated that cases were referred on to the EWS if initial contact was unsuccessful or if there were other problems. The use of BT operators for an initial response to pupil absence was notable.

The majority of LEAs (17 out of the 20) where first-day response initiatives were highlighted targeted specific secondary schools with poor attendance and some also targeted specific pupils, for example, those with between 50 and 90 per cent

attendance or specific year groups. Only a quarter of the initiatives were LEA-wide. In one authority, a 'blitz' week system was operated. The overall task was reported generally to take between two to three hours each day.

In the majority of cases, contact with home was initially made by telephone, with one interviewee stating that they did this even if they knew the reason for the absence. In a few cases, however, letters were sent home, sometimes asking parents to come into school. In over half of the initiatives, the EWO, EWAs and/or school staff, and, in one case, the community police officer, also conducted home visits, usually where telephone contact was not possible. Where the EWS was conducting primary 'blitz' weeks, all absences were followed by a home visit. This was an exception, however, and one interviewee stated that, while the EWO could do some follow-up visits, they were usually unable to visit them all.

Effectiveness

Whilst interviewees recognised that this approach was resource-intensive, all considered it to be effective or successful. **The ability to express effectiveness in terms of improved attendance figures was particularly evident and this was reported by interviewees within eight of the initiatives**, for example, with rises from mid-80 to 90 per cent and of ten per cent in a couple of weeks. First-day response was also reported by EWS respondents to have:

- raised the awareness of parents regarding their children who were truanting (2)
- resulted in schools wanting to buy in more hours
- encouraged parents to take responsibility for contacting school in order to avoid being contacted by the EWS
- made schools more accountable and aware of attendance issues
- raised the profile of the EWS
- developed relationships with families of pupils with poor attendance who would not normally come into school
- reduced fixed-term exclusions.

It was noted that, where telephone operators were used, this was advantageous because they were not '*dragged into broader family issues*'. One interviewee highlighted that it could be difficult to maintain improvements and another that it could be '*disastrous*' if it was not well organised. The assumption that parents were on the telephone and concern that it could block up the only telephone line into the school were also noted.

2.6 IDENTIFIED ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

These initiatives accounted for those highlighted as effective practice in just over a third (38) of the 106 LEAs. Within the initiatives aimed at addressing the difficulties of pupils with identified attendance problems, a number of different types of intervention were noted. Although these were mainly focused on the pupils themselves, support for parents and multi-agency and multi-disciplinary forums for making decisions about these pupils and about provision for them were also highlighted. Multi-agency forums featured particularly highly and were noted as effective practice in ten authorities. In the present climate of 'joined-up' thinking and multi-agency working, this does not seem surprising. This also reiterates the fact that

many pupils with attendance problems also have associated needs, such as social and emotional needs, that are unable to be addressed by education services alone. The range of agencies identified in Chapter One with which the EWS liaises, also highlighted this point. With the present Government focus on raising standards, three initiatives were notable in that they involved interventions in which an explicit link was made between attendance and achievement and this had been utilised as a means of improving attendance. The use of education supervision orders (ESOs) and prosecution are particularly contentious issues within the EWS, but despite this, some interviewees were able to point out examples of effective practice within these areas.

Table 2.2 shows the types of pupils specified by interviewees as targeted in the different types of initiatives identified.

Table 2.2 Types of pupils specified as targeted in different types of initiatives

Initiatives	Types of pupils specified included:
Interventions linked with achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year 11 pupils • Primary pupils
Support for parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary pupils • Pupils with over ten per cent unauthorised absence • Where legal action was threatened
Multi-agency or multi-disciplinary forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pupils with below 70 per cent attendance • Where other strategies had failed • Pupils at risk of disengagement • Pupils involved in offending • 'Looked after' pupils
Group work for pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary pupils • Pupils with below 60 per cent attendance • Those at risk of exclusion
Intensive EWO/ESW support for pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary pupils • Below 70–80 per cent attendance • Years 9 and 10 only • Pupils with emotional and social problems
The use of ESOs and prosecution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary pupils and pupils in the early years of secondary school • Families who were very anti-school

Source: NFER: The LEA Role in Reducing Project – telephone interviews in the initial phase of the study, 1999.

The majority of these initiatives were aimed at secondary-aged pupils, although effective use of ESOs targeted pupils at the primary stage and families that tended to be very 'anti-school'. Whilst it is difficult to generalise because of the small number of initiatives within each group and because the circumstances will inevitably vary from one school to another, and from one LEA to another, it is worth highlighting the

following points. Intensive EWO support was noted to be offered to pupils with between 70 and 80 per cent attendance, whilst multi-agency or multi-disciplinary forums seemed to be utilised where pupils were at more serious risk of becoming disaffected and where other strategies had failed. However, it would appear overall that there is little consistency or clarity within this group of initiatives with regard to what might constitute effective strategies with pupils at different stages of disengagement from school, or in different circumstances.

2.6.1 Interventions linked with achievement

The three initiatives in this category were exceptional in that, as stated previously, an explicit link was made between the attendance of pupils and their academic achievement and they were evident in authorities with a high level of unauthorised absence. However, all three were notably different. In one, EWOs were used as link workers in targeted primary schools to engage parents in their children's education. The focus was on highlighting where pupils had not made progress because of their poor attendance. In another, the National Curriculum key stage 3 test scores at the end of Year 9 were used to target pupils in Year 10 who might achieve GCSE qualifications if their attendance improved (not the worst attenders). The parents of these pupils were contacted by letter and the pupils themselves were then tracked through Year 11. In the third initiative, pupils with both academic and social difficulties struggling to continue in Year 11 in one secondary school were offered one-to-one counselling with an EWO for one morning a week, focusing on strategies for revision and study skills. A package of support materials was also produced.

Effectiveness

Where the focus was on engaging parents of primary pupils, EWS respondents thought the initiative had:

- raised the kudos of EWS staff with both parents and teachers
- enabled them to reach parents who were normally hard to contact
- emphasised to parents that attendance leads to achievement and that achievement can be a way out for these children.

Where one-to-one counselling was offered to pupils, EWS respondents reported that:

- 97 per cent attendance across the whole year group was achieved
- by the end of the sessions, pupils were '*queuing to get in the door!*', although they had initially been directed to attend counselling.

Where pupils' National Curriculum key stage 3 test scores had been used to identify and target parents of pupils whose GCSE results may improve if their attendance improved, the interviewee reported that HMI were impressed with this 'joined-up' approach, although there was no evidence of its impact at this stage.

2.6.2 Support for parents

In these five initiatives, support for parents of pupils with identified attendance problems was offered. Many of the LEAs in this group were metropolitan, with high or medium levels of both unauthorised and authorised absence and these strategies might be seen as a way of addressing this problem. One interviewee thought that parental support had a vital role to play in empowering parents to deal with their children's problems of non-attendance.

Three of the five initiatives involved parental contact regarding absence, either through pagers or letters. Where parent pagers were used, targeting the appropriate parents – those who were supportive and '*prepared to take action*' – was thought to be important. In some, the use of pagers had been rendered more effective through links to school computerised attendance systems. One authority operated an attendance 'blitz' where a staged series of letters was sent to parents depending on their child's percentage of absence, starting with those with over ten per cent unauthorised absence. This provided a clear method of responding and, except where there were extenuating circumstances, a clear role for court proceedings to be initiated where no improvement was noted.

One initiative, on the other hand, involved an assertiveness group, run by a drama therapist, which was designed to improve parenting skills and to role-play situations in a safe environment. This intervention was often used where legal action had been threatened and parents had difficulty controlling their children and so were unable to enforce attendance. A 12-week rolling programme with ten parents at a time was conducted. The final initiative involved family conferencing, overseen by a multi-agency steering group and conducted by independent coordinators, in which families devised a plan to solve their own problems. This form of radical approach was targeted at pupils from Years 5 to 8. They could be referred by any educational professionals and then referrals were filtered by the project manager. The EWS respondents concerned noted that the adoption of family conferencing as a strategy required a radical philosophical shift for many professionals.

Effectiveness

EWS respondents highlighted different areas of effectiveness in different initiatives within this category. **The use of parent pagers and the staged process of letters to parents had both improved attendance.**

The use of parent pagers was considered by EWS interviewees to have:

- been successful in improving attendance and empowering parents where they needed a bit of support
- provided a '*quick and dramatic response*'.

Pagers, however, were not thought to be effective for addressing condoned absence and one interviewee reported most success with parents of primary pupils where they were used in a more preventative way.

The staged process of letters to parents, whilst time-consuming, was felt to have:

- led to a significant improvement in attendance
- been a way of '*hitting more parents more quickly*'
- made schools tighten up their procedures
- highlighted bad practice in school processes for dealing with attendance issues.

The family conferencing scheme was reported by EWS interviewees to have:

- reduced truancy
- reduced exclusions
- been extended county-wide
- resulted in positive feedback from families
- highlighted that sometimes very simple solutions were the answer.

The assertiveness group for parents previously threatened with legal action was considered to have demonstrated marked success, with 12 out of the 13 children reintegrated back into school, although it was uncertain if this would be maintained long-term.

2.6.3 Multi-agency or multi-disciplinary forums

In these ten initiatives, identified as effective practice, multi-agency or multi-disciplinary panels were convened for discussion and making decisions with regard to the most appropriate provision for pupils with attendance problems. There were no large authorities within this category and a high proportion of the LEAs where this strategy was highlighted were new authorities. A climate of recent change and personal links between agencies, as might be more likely in small authorities, may make it easier for LEAs to adopt this type of approach. In one authority, the problem of parentally condoned absence was raised, whilst another interviewee highlighted the dilemma of a punitive versus a supportive approach. Multi-agency panels enabled information from a range of sources to be considered, an informed decision to be made and the most appropriate course of action taken to address pupils' difficulties. The focus was on support and target setting, although, in some cases, panels also dealt with prosecution. In two of the initiatives, the panel dealt with cases from a specific school, one with poor attendance and the other with a high level of authorised absences on medical grounds. The EWS and schools made most of the referrals.

Six of the ten initiatives highlighted were LEA-based, whilst four were school-focused. The majority were multi-agency (only three multi-disciplinary) and included input from Social Services (seven), the Health Service (five) (in three cases, this was the school nurse) and the police (four). Others involved included the Careers Service, the Youth Service and the Probation Service. Panels targeted a range of pupils including those:

- with below 75 per cent attendance;
- where other strategies or EWO input had failed;
- at risk of disengagement;
- 'looked after' by the local authority;
- with offending behaviour'
- excluded in key stage 3;
- disaffected in key stage 4.

Of the LEA-based panels, four adopted a post-EWO intervention stance, where strategies were devised and targets set for pupils and parents when other interventions had failed, the next step being prosecution. In one authority, a range of multi-agency forums focusing on pupils with specific needs (e.g. offenders, 'looked after' pupils and excluded pupils) had been set up, and these accessed alternative provision for these pupils. Three of the school-based panels held case conferences to discuss cases and implement support, including access to alternative provision, where appropriate. Where medical absence was the main focus, a home visit by the EWO and the school nurse was conducted to gain a better understanding of the problems involved.

Effectiveness

EWS respondents noted that the multi-agency focus meant that:

- they could offer a range of strategies to tackle attendance problems, such as accessing alternative provision through the Careers Service
- the responsibility for individual cases was spread amongst the different agencies
- the need for statutory input was reduced
- the process underlined parental responsibility
- the process was clear with regard to court procedures and the implementation of strategies for attendance.

It was also noted that the threat of prosecution was often effective and that most success was achieved with pupils from Years 4 to 8, where parents are able to take more responsibility for attendance. This was thought to become more difficult as pupils got older.

2.6.4 Group work

Group work conducted by the EWS and staff from other agencies with pupils with identified attendance problems was a feature of effective practice identified within eight authorities, all with high or medium levels of authorised and unauthorised absence. Group work often had a PSE focus and was aimed at raising self-esteem and confidence and at equipping pupils with coping strategies. Additional forms of input included drama therapy, improving learning, trips out and outdoor pursuits. In over half of these initiatives, the Youth Service was involved in providing group work and,

in others, Youth Justice, the police, the Careers Service, Social Services and Health Service staff (the school nurse) were involved. In one authority, however, the EWO and the deputy head ran a group work scheme.

Where stated, input entailed one day a week for ten weeks, two hours a week for a year or one day a week for a year. One intervention took place after school. Group sizes ranged from six to 12 pupils at any one time. All catered for secondary pupils, three in selected schools with attendance problems, within which different year groups were targeted. In all cases, the criteria for referral included poor attendance, with one targeting those below 60 per cent attendance. Other criteria for selection included disaffection, 'vulnerable' pupils, excluded pupils and those at risk of exclusion.

Effectiveness

Five of the group work interventions were reported to have improved attendance significantly, for example, the attendance of seven out of the nine pupils '*improved dramatically*' and individual improvements, e.g. from 30 to 100 per cent attendance, were noted. In addition, EWS respondents reported that group work interventions had:

- facilitated reintegration of pupils into mainstream school
- improved pupils' self-esteem (evaluated through entry and exit questionnaires)
- a greater impact than individual intervention and were thought to be more cost-effective because more pupils could be reached.

However, it was also noted that it could be difficult to maintain improvements in attendance and that reintegration of pupils may be difficult where school places were limited.

2.6.5 Intensive EWO support

In these five initiatives, more intensive forms of EWO support were offered to pupils with identified attendance problems. The EWS was the key agency in all but one of the initiatives, where a project team, including a project worker, teacher and two assistants, was appointed and the EWO worked alongside. In one of the initiatives, the EWS worked with key stage coordinators in schools and, in another, with staff from the PRU. Where specifically stated, all the initiatives catered for pupils with below 70 to 80 per cent attendance and the number of pupils targeted ranged from 12 to 65. Most interventions catered for secondary pupils of all ages, whilst some targeted different year groups for whom varying rationales were presented. For example, in one, Year 9 pupils received support because this was seen as the age when disaffection sets in and in another, Year 10 pupils were targeted in order to get them back into school before Year 11 – although, in the latter case, the interviewee noted that part-time reintegration into mainstream school may be all that can be realistically hoped for.

Interventions were diverse: key skills, building self-esteem, personal target setting, action planning, addressing issues such as bullying and behaviour, anger management, assertiveness, feelings and coping strategies. In one initiative, emphasis was placed on the development of a good relationship between the EWO and the pupil and another interviewee stressed the importance of giving responsibility to pupils and

empowering them. Family work was also incorporated into some of the programmes and the importance of involving the family in order to change behaviour was noted. In one case, the EWO offered this work alongside a project worker.

Effectiveness

Where intensive EWO support was offered, this was reported by EWS staff to have improved attendance in four out of the five initiatives, including 85 per cent compared to 35 per cent attendance for some pupils, and sufficient improvement in one project, where personal attendance targets had been set, to raise the threshold for referral from 80 to 85 per cent attendance after the first year. In individual cases, initiatives were also reported by EWS respondents to have:

- given rise to anecdotal examples of success
- prevented some pupils from being excluded
- given pupils responsibility and empowered them, where they set their own targets
- freed the EWO to work in depth with those pupils that needed it
- offered continuity and structure, where emphasis was placed on developing the EWO-pupil relationship
- enabled EWOs to respond quickly, so that families felt well supported
- been a more valuable use of EWO time than home visits.

2.6.6 Use of education supervision orders (ESOs) and prosecution

The use of ESOs and prosecution is a controversial issue, but EWS interviewees in seven authorities identified initiatives where these strategies were used effectively to support pupils and their families. Interestingly, all except one of these authorities had high or medium levels of authorised absence. Two LEAs had developed specialist teams with responsibility for ESOs and the focus was on their effective use with primary pupils and those at the lower end of secondary school. ESO work was recognised as challenging, as it often involved parents with very negative views of education, and was considered resource-intensive. In one case, individual schools in poor socio-economic areas where there were particular problems with attendance were targeted.

In authorities where initiatives focused on prosecution and court proceedings were identified, a poor relationship between magistrates and the EWS had been identified, often with them working against one another. Interviewees stated, for example, that parents were not fined or the fines imposed were so small that they had little impact. EWS staff were, therefore, examining the court process and the aim was to make more effective use of prosecutions rather than use them as a last resort. In one authority, the EWS utilised a 'fast track' to court with parents where this was thought to be beneficial and the service had even arranged for all court cases to be heard on one day. In another LEA, on the other hand, research was being conducted on the effects of prosecution on attendance.

Effectiveness

Where ESOs were being used with primary pupils and those lower down the secondary age range, they were reported to be very effective at getting some pupils back into school, because parents tended to be more cooperative. One interviewee noted that it was important to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of ESOs because they were so resource-intensive.

Initiatives focusing on prosecution, on the other hand, were hoping for long-term attitudinal change, although the use of a 'fast track' route to court was seen as high-profile and was thought to be a deterrent to many parents.

2.7 WORK WITH DISAFFECTED PUPILS

Finally, initiatives aimed at pupils considered to be 'disaffected' were highlighted as effective practice in just over one-fifth (22) of the 106 LEAs. Pupils with long-term attendance difficulties and entrenched problems were often noted by EWS staff to be the most difficult group to support and the most challenging to work with. Other strategies for re-engaging these pupils in the educational process had often been tried and failed. Although these pupils still fell within the remit of the EWS because of their often long-term attendance problems, at this stage, practitioners frequently sought multi-agency input because they found it difficult to address these pupils' difficulties alone. Multi-agency approaches were, therefore, a feature of this group. Thus, EWS staff also identified a range of strategies thought to be effective in helping pupils with the most complex and ingrained difficulties, notably the most challenging group of pupils.

2.7.1 Coordination of alternative curricula

By far the most evident single effective strategy, highlighted by EWS staff within ten LEAs, was that of offering pupils access to an alternative curriculum, usually in conjunction with local colleges and training providers. The rationale behind this strategy was that by providing a more relevant curriculum, pupils might be motivated to attend. Typically, this involved college placement, in the form of vocational courses or tasters (e.g. hairdressing, photography and car mechanics), vocational training, work experience, basic skills, personal and social development and leisure activities, sometimes alongside a core curriculum within a mainstream school. Other forms of support and monitoring were also considered important for the intervention to be effective, such as careers counselling, group work, pastoral support, social skills development and community projects. Whilst the simplest initiative involved pre-vocational college courses only, others were able to provide more complex packages which met individual needs. In a few of the initiatives, EWS staff referred to forms of accreditation received by pupils, including the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, RSA and vocational certificates.

In all of the initiatives, local colleges offered alternative provision, whilst in some, local businesses (three) and training providers (three) were also involved. Others involved included the local TEC, the Youth Service, the Careers Service, voluntary agencies, the LEA and educational psychologists. Typically, the EWS role was one of coordination, monitoring and referral, although a difficulty, noted by one interviewee, could arise because the school had to approve the placements, as they

were responsible for part-funding them. One programme was coordinated through a multi-agency team, one through a Youth Access coordinator as a link to service providers and another had a multi-agency steering group.

All the initiatives in this category were reported to cater for disaffected pupils, those with attendance or behaviour problems, in key stage 4. Three, however, took only Year 11 pupils for whom all other educational provision had failed, one rationale being that it was difficult to sustain this type of provision for any length of time. In one case, criteria for selection included pupils with below 35 per cent attendance, indicating the extreme nature of their difficulties. In another authority, a risk assessment indicator was used to select pupils.

Effectiveness

Alternative curricula were reported by EWS respondents to have vastly improved attendance rates for some pupils: 'up to 80 to 90 per cent', 'good in about 95 per cent of cases' and 'an average attendance rate of 76 per cent'. Alternative curricula were also thought to have:

- led to a high percentage of pupils going on to FE or training alternatives
- resulted in all pupils leaving with qualifications and extended vocational experience
- resulted in positive feedback from colleges and work providers
- enabled schools to have a tighter view of what was happening to pupils not in school
- provided pupils with the support they needed and allowed them to see the benefits of education
- led to an increase in the number of pupils accepted because of their success
- led to an enormous long-term saving.

Two interviewees, however, noted that this approach worked with some pupils but not with others, whilst another highlighted that there can be difficulties with exchange of information between the school and the college.

2.7.2 Intensive work with disaffected pupils

Other initiatives targeted at disaffected pupils, highlighted by EWS respondents in 12 LEAs, included group work, intensive individual support and attendance at a special unit (usually a PRU). These largely reflected strategies previously identified for pupils with attendance problems, with attendance at an off-site unit being an additional feature, although more intensive support might be offered. Intensive work by the EWS included home-school support for reintegration, providing a range of outside activities, multi-agency counselling and support, community work, after-school group work, mentoring and the use of EWAs as 'buddies' to support pupils. One interviewee highlighted the importance of the responsibility of schools for disaffected pupils, despite the fact that provision may be off site and another noted that, even if the initiative was found to be effective, the funding may run out.

A key feature of these interventions was that they dealt with pupils who were totally disengaged from the school system, either through exclusion or through self-exclusion, and thus catered for the most challenging pupils and those with the most complex difficulties. Whilst five catered for excluded pupils and those with

attendance problems (those in danger of going to court, in one case), three focused on excludees only, two on youngsters involved in crime (although the correlation with attendance and behaviour problems was noted), one on 'entrenched refusers' and one on 'those with poor attendance and unable to cope with the curriculum'. Interestingly, one interviewee stated that pupils often 'have a positive attitude to education, but a negative attitude to their school', thus indicating the need for an alternative education away from the school environment. Another suggested that there was often a 'clash between what school demands and what pupils can deliver'.

In four of the 12 initiatives, a discrete intervention rather than ongoing support was offered. This entailed six to ten weeks on a programme or at a PRU. This type of intervention was viewed by one interviewee as an alternative to prosecution, which might not be appropriate because of the child's circumstances. In the majority of the initiatives (nine out of the 12), the EWS had enlisted input from other agencies, thus reflecting the complex nature of these pupils' problems. Outside agencies involved included Social Services (four), the Health Service (three), the Youth Service (three), the Careers Service, the police, the Probation Service, the Youth Justice Service and an external organisation. The Educational Psychology Service and PRU staff were also involved in support for these pupils.

Effectiveness

Different forms of intensive support for disaffected pupils were thought by EWS respondents to have:

- **improved attendance (2), at least during the life of the project**
- had a knock-on effect for attendance, where excluded pupils were targeted
- improved relationships with parents of excluded pupils
- promoted good will amongst agencies, where there was multi-agency input
- improved pupils' self-esteem
- provided effective support for schools
- reduced the danger of exclusion (one interviewee suggested that schools often lost sight of the impact of exclusion on pupils and their families)
- resulted in encouraging figures about re-offending
- provided continuity, where provision was extended post-16
- been a 'godsend' as EWOs were cheap, trained in counselling and could take the pressure off school staff.

One interviewee noted that the EWS had to be school-based to have sufficient status to be effective in providing for excluded pupils. The provision of a unit attached to a school was reported to be costly because it was operated by senior staff.

2.8 SUMMARY

- As well as a variety of interventions aimed at disaffected pupils and those with identified attendance problems and their parents, EWS staff highlighted a large number of initiatives focused on prevention and early intervention as effective.
- Effectiveness was articulated by interviewees in a variety of ways: impact on individual pupils, parents, schools and, in some cases, members of the wider

community and impact on statistics of national significance in relation to present Government targets, such as attendance figures and exclusion rates, etc. Effectiveness was more often expressed, however, through subjective comments rather than through formal evaluation criteria and it was often difficult, when interventions were either indirect or long-term, to gauge effectiveness in terms of their impact on attendance figures.

- Transition schemes, truancy sweeps and first-day response schemes were the most frequently identified strategies presented by EWS respondents as examples of effective practice.
- First-day response schemes, although considered resource-intensive, featured highly and were considered by EWS respondents to be particularly effective in terms of their impact on attendance figures, as were also attendance incentive schemes.
- There was a recognised need for support during the transition from primary to secondary school, which could be a particularly difficult period for some vulnerable pupils. Transition schemes were thought by EWS staff to have improved or maintained the attendance of individual pupils and were considered to be one way of tackling problems before they became too entrenched.
- Whilst truancy sweeps featured highly in the sample, there was little evidence that EWS staff considered them to be particularly effective in improving attendance, and, in a few cases, whether they were an effective use of resources was questioned.
- A move towards whole-school responses to attendance, such as the development of attendance policies and the conducting of attendance audits, was a notable feature.
- In addition, a move towards the allocation of EWS resources in terms of need rather than blanket EWO cover for schools was also highlighted. This was indicated by interviewees' general comments as well as by the implementation of some strategies, such as attendance audits, where they were used to address issues within schools that were felt to be of greatest need. This was considered to lead to more effective use of resources.
- Education Welfare Assistants (EWAs), as well as being appointed to carry out some of the day-to-day work of the EWO, also had a role to play in some of the initiatives identified (e.g. first-day response schemes), although they had been used in different ways in different authorities.

2.9 COMMENT

Although there is concern that the focus of the work of the EWS tends to be with cases where attendance problems have already been identified, a large number of initiatives considered to be effective focused on prevention and early intervention.

Many of these initiatives were possible through Standards Fund money, but this meant that sometimes, although they could be shown to be effective, they had to be discontinued when funding ran out. This left EWS staff feeling disheartened and undervalued. In addition, whilst indirect and long-term interventions might be considered a valuable use of resources by EWS staff and an effective use of their time, in the light of the present focus on Government targets to improve attendance (against which services will be judged), is it likely that these will be able to continue? It appeared that LEAs had attempted to make more effective use of existing EWS resources in a number of ways. In comparison to casework, for example, the move towards whole-school responses to attendance could be considered as a more cost-effective use of resources (particularly where EWS staff numbers have been reduced), together with a way of shifting more responsibility for attendance issues to schools. With increasing pressure on over-stretched resources within the EWS in many areas, some authorities had attempted to solve this problem through allocation of EWS resources to schools according to need, whilst others had appointed EWS assistants or attendance workers. These working practices will be explored in greater depth in the next phase of the study, along with the impact and effectiveness of a selection of the initiatives. It is hoped that personal interviews with EWS staff involved directly in the initiatives will illuminate further exactly what it is about the initiatives that brings about change.

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APPENDIX

THE TYPES OF LEAS IN THE TELEPHONE SAMPLE

Table A.1 below shows the breakdown of LEAs nationally by type as a percentage of the overall total, and, similarly, the breakdown of LEAs within the telephone sample by type as a percentage of their overall total. The criteria used were as follows: inner and outer London boroughs, metropolitan, new, county, Welsh, Northern Ireland and island LEAs.

Table A.1 Types of LEAs nationally and in the telephone sample

Type of LEA	National		Telephone sample	
	(N)	%	(N)	%
New	(65)	36	(42)	40
Metropolitan	(37)	21	(21)	20
Welsh	(22)	12	(14)	13
County	(15)	8	(8)	7
Outer London	(20)	11	(10)	9
Inner London	(13)	7	(7)	7
Northern Ireland	(5)	3	(3)	3
Other	(3)	2	(1)	1
Total	(180)	100	(106)	100

All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: NFER database.

Table A.1 shows that the percentage of inner London boroughs and Northern Ireland LEAs in the NFER telephone sample was the same as the national percentage. Metropolitan, county, Welsh and island LEAs were also within one per cent of the national percentage, while that of outer London boroughs was within two per cent of the national percentage. The percentage of new authorities in the NFER sample was slightly higher than was the case nationally. Overall, therefore, the sample can be considered to reflect the national picture in terms of the types of LEAs represented.

THE SIZES OF THE LEAS IN THE TELEPHONE SAMPLE

Table A.2 shows how far the telephone sample was representative of the sizes of LEAs nationally. The size of the LEA was calculated according to the number of state primary and secondary schools (including grant-maintained) within it. It was decided that:

- 1 to 80 schools constituted a 'small' LEA;
- 81 to 300 schools constituted a 'medium' LEA; and
- 300 and above schools constituted a 'large' LEA.

Table A.2 The sizes of LEAs nationally and in the telephone sample

Size of LEA	National		Telephone sample	
	(N)	%	(N)	%
Small	(60)	33	(32)	30
Medium	(100)	56	(60)	57
Large	(20)	11	(14)	13
Total	(180)	100	(106)	100

All percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number.

Source: NFER database.

Table A.2 shows that the percentage of small LEAs in the NFER sample was slightly lower (by three per cent) than was the case nationally, while the percentage of medium and large LEAs was slightly higher (by one and two per cent respectively) than was the case nationally. Overall, however, a comparison of percentages demonstrates that the sample in this study is representative, in terms of the sizes of LEAs.

Table A.3 LEA types and sizes: nationally and in the telephone sample

Type of LEA	Small				Medium				Large			
	National		Sample		National		Sample		National		Sample	
	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%
New	(25)	41	(14)	44	(29)	29	(20)	33	(11)	55	(8)	57
Metropolitan	(4)	7	(1)	3	(32)	32	(19)	32	(1)	5	(1)	7
Welsh	(10)	17	(8)	25	(12)	12	(6)	10	(0)	0	(0)	0
County	(1)	2	(0)	0	(7)	7	(3)	5	(7)	35	(5)	36
Outer London	(9)	15	(5)	16	(11)	11	(5)	8	(0)	0	(0)	0
Inner London	(8)	13	(3)	9	(5)	5	(4)	7	(0)	0	(0)	0
Northern Ireland	(0)	0	(0)	0	(4)	4	(3)	5	(1)	5	(0)	0
Other	(3)	5	(1)	3	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0
Totals	(60)	100	(32)	100	(100)	100	(60)	100	(20)	100	(14)	100

All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: NFER database.

Table A.3 illustrates the breakdown of LEAs nationally and of the NFER telephone sample, both by type and by size. It is also possible to see that no authority was significantly under-represented in the telephone sample, the majority being within three per cent of the national percentage for that size of LEA. Where the difference was greater than this, as with small Welsh, and medium-sized new LEAs, the

percentage in the NFER sample was generally higher than was the case nationally. Exceptions to this were small inner London boroughs, small metropolitan and large Northern Ireland LEAs, although they were still quite close to the national percentage.

LEVELS OF AUTHORISED AND UNAUTHORISED ABSENCES

In order to establish the representativeness of our sample in terms of attendance levels, percentages of authorised and unauthorised absences for all English LEAs were obtained from the DfEE pupil absence tables for the 1997–98 school year (unfortunately data for the Welsh and Northern Ireland LEAs were unavailable). This data was therefore available for only 87 of the LEAs within the sample. For both authorised and unauthorised absence figures, LEAs were grouped so that equal numbers fell into the categories of low, medium and high levels and the resulting cut-off points were then applied to the sample.

The categories for **authorised** absence were as follows:

- Low 6.4–7.4 percentage of half days missed;
- Medium 0.9–1.3 percentage of half days missed; and
- High 1.4–3.9 percentage of half days missed.

Table A.4 shows the levels of authorised absence both nationally and in the sample in each of these three categories.

Table A.4 Levels of authorised absence nationally and in the sample

Level of authorised absence	Nationally		Sample	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Low	(50)	33.3	30	34
Medium	(50)	33.3	26	30
High	(50)	33.3	31	36
Total	150	100	87	100

All percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number.

Source: DfEE pupil absence tables for the 1997–8 school year.

The sample contained slightly more authorities in the categories of low and high authorised absence levels, and slightly less in the medium category. However, almost equal numbers of LEAs appeared in each category, confirming that the sample in this study reflected the range of authorised absence levels in England.

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; and
- High 1.4–3.9 percentage of half days missed.

Table A.5 Levels of unauthorised absence nationally and in the sample

Level of unauthorised absence	Nationally		Sample	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Low	50	33.3	30	34
Medium	50	33.3	28	32
High	50	33.3	29	33
Total	150	100	87	100

All percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number.

Source: DfEE pupil absence tables for the 1997–8 school year.

While almost equal in distribution across the categories of unauthorised absence, Table A.5 above shows that the study sample contained slightly more authorities in the category of low unauthorised absence levels. Overall, however, the sample again appears to be representative.

