



Local Government Association

school phobia and school refusal: research into causes and remedies

by Tamsin Archer, Caroline Filmer-Sankey and Felicity Fletcher-Campbell
National Foundation for Educational Research

LGA educational research programme



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Tamsin Archer
Caroline Filmer-Sankey
Felicity Fletcher-Campbell



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



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Executive summary

Introduction

The publication of school attendance figures has led to schools being increasingly aware of the reasons for pupils' non-attendance, particularly for unauthorised absences. Within the category of non-attenders, there may be pupils labelled as school refusers or school phobics who display a range of profiles. They include those who may simply not want to attend school, as well as those who may show signs of anxiety if school attendance is suggested. Owing to the individual nature of pupils' problems it is difficult to establish a firm definition of school phobia and school refusal, and thus to identify and assess the pupils affected. Highly complex collaboration between schools and other agencies is necessary to address the needs of individual pupils and to put appropriate support in place.

There has been little educational literature on the causes of school refusal or phobia and also little research into the strategies that can be adopted by LEAs and schools to support pupils affected by the problem. The aim of this research, commissioned by the Local Government Association, was to increase knowledge about, and understanding of, pupils identified as school refusers or school phobics, in order to enhance professionals' approaches to support them. The specific areas of investigation were: identification and assessment, causes of school refusal and phobia, provision for pupils affected, and training and monitoring structures.

Methodology

The research was undertaken in three strands. The first strand involved a questionnaire survey to all LEAs in England. A total of 60 LEAs returned the questionnaire. The second strand involved a questionnaire survey to 600 schools in

England, including primary, secondary, special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs). A total of 280 schools returned questionnaires, but only 48 schools distinguished school refusers or phobics from other non-attenders. These schools were also asked whether they would be willing to take part in further case study work. The third strand involved case studies in 16 schools where school refusers or school phobics had been identified. Interviews were conducted with a range of school staff, LEA representatives, professionals from other agencies, and with some of the pupils identified as school refusers or phobics, and their parents or carers.

Key findings

Definition of the cohort(s)

- ◆ The research revealed no clear definitions among practitioners in LEAs and schools distinguishing between school phobics and school refusers. Common descriptions were of the broad group of pupils to whom practitioners applied the terms 'phobic' and 'refuser'. These descriptions included pupils with acute anxiety about attending school, pupils who cannot face school, and pupils who persistently refuse to attend.
- ◆ Generally, school phobics were seen as a subset of school refusers, and there was a distinction in the descriptions of school phobics and school refusers, in that school phobics were perceived as those with anxieties (either rational or irrational) about attending school, and school refusers were perceived as those who chose not to attend for whatever reason. There was a degree of overlap for those pupils who chose not to attend because they had an anxiety – for example, they were anxious about not meeting curriculum challenges or about being bullied.

Initial response to identified difficulties

- ◆ What was significant in terms of response to these pupils was that there were common strategies which were applied regardless of the particular category in which they might nominally be put.
- ◆ A common response was that a generic problem of attendance would be identified from analysis of attendance registers. Investigation of reasons for poor patterns of attendance, either internally by the school's pastoral staff or externally by the attached education welfare officer (EWO), would then identify specific problems of refusal or phobia. In the schools participating in the research, school pastoral staff worked closely with the relevant LEA support services – usually the education welfare service (EWS).

The profile of identified pupils

- ◆ As definitions were so indecisive, there was no possibility of quantifying cohorts of refusers and phobics. However, there did seem to be evidence that more pupils were identified with attendance problems in the higher key stages (in the secondary phase of education). There seemed to be a higher degree of identification in those schools where there was specific provision to support them – for example, where there was a separate unit or a member of staff with specific responsibility or interest. The question remains as to whether this level of identification was because these schools were more sensitive to needs which might not have been identified in other situations, or because the provision was taken up merely because it was available.
- ◆ The main causes of the problem at school appeared to be social anxiety, change of pupil groupings and fear of the school environment. However, it was generally felt that, while school factors could trigger school refusal or phobia, the origins of the problem usually lay in the home.

Provision for school refusal or phobia

- ◆ Strategies centred around prevention and addressing needs once they were identified. Preventative measures included early action on non-attendance, extensive pastoral consultation within the school, support at school from another pupil (through peer mentoring schemes) or adult, provision of a safe environment in school, and whole school behaviour and anti-bullying policies (though there were no specific policies on school refusal or phobia).
- ◆ The strategies considered effective in supporting pupils once the problem had arisen were similar to those for prevention. Gradual reintegration was favoured. This might entail a part-time timetable, provision of a place other than the classroom where the pupil would feel safe, or extra support in class. In addition to this it was important that pupils knew what was expected of them, and that a trusting relationship with staff was established and maintained.
- ◆ The application of specific strategies was determined, ideally, by analysis of individual need, usually undertaken by discussion amongst all those involved in the school, and discussion with external agencies as appropriate. While a multi-agency approach was favoured, the route of prosecution was not considered to be effective. In some cases, response to a pupil's difficulties was determined by the provision that was available within and outside school. The sequence of support was fairly uniform across schools.
- ◆ For strategies to be effective long-term, support (pastoral and academic) needed to be maintained.

Training issues and monitoring structures

- ◆ Approaches to refusal and phobia were unsystematic across local authorities and schools participating in the research. Schools had received very little training on issues related to school refusal and

phobia. Any training which was mentioned, was generally within the framework of school attendance.

- ◆ While attendance was routinely monitored through statutory attendance registers, closer monitoring and action as a result of scrutiny of data depended on the size of the school, the availability and interest of staff, and the way in which pastoral structures operated in the school. In smaller schools and schools with a separate unit, it was possible to monitor the progress of school refusers and phobics more closely.
- ◆ Schools did not routinely monitor the academic progress of school refusers and phobics as a separate cohort. However, when these pupils were in a separate unit, the relevant pupils were monitored more closely. Staff were able to talk to the pupils daily about their perceptions of the school.
- ◆ Separate support units, and schools with a designated member of staff responsible for school refusal and phobia, considered that their focused support was effective in encouraging reintegration.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The statutory requirement to publish attendance figures, and to record non-authorized absence, has made schools increasingly aware of the range of reasons why pupils attend school irregularly or not at all. If schools are to reduce non-attendance and reach government targets, it is particularly important that they understand the reasons for non-attendance so that the appropriate remedial strategies can be put into operation. The reasons include school factors such as bullying, inability to cope with school work or peer group pressure, and home factors such as family break-up, illness in the family or outside employment (Kinder *et al.*, 1995; O'Keeffe and Stoll, 1995; Atkinson and Hornby, 2002). Among the pupils who do not attend school, there may be pupils labelled as school refusers or school phobics who exhibit a wide range of profiles. Some may simply not want to come to school, and others may not attend because they cannot face the prospect of school and will exhibit symptoms of stress if attendance is suggested. The problems these pupils experience and their personal circumstances are so individual that it is difficult to arrive at a firm definition of school phobia and school refusal. This means that not only is identification and assessment of such pupils challenging, but also a range of support services may be required to address the needs of different pupils, and support for them may entail highly complex interdisciplinary collaboration between schools and other agencies. Arguably, any label such as school phobia or school refusal ought to be meaningful and attract a common interpretation so that it indicates an appropriate and helpful response. There is no point in labelling if the label merely generates untested assumptions and/or does not indicate the sort of action that would address the problem.

Traditionally, the problem of school refusal and school phobia has been located in the child or in family circumstances, but there is now increasing awareness that the problem can affect any pupil regardless of background, and that factors at school play an important part (Atkinson and Hornby, 2002). There is, however, very little educational (rather than psychological) literature on the causes of the problem, and also very little research into the strategies and interventions that can be adopted by schools and other agencies to support pupils who are anxious about attending school.

1.2 Aims of research

The Local Government Association commissioned the NFER to undertake a research project. The broad aim of the project was to increase knowledge and understanding of pupils identified as school phobics or school refusers in order to enhance professionals' approaches to these pupils. Its specific aims were as follows:

- to explore different perceptions of school refusal and school phobia and the effect that these have on identification and assessment
- to describe the range of profiles which represent pupils identified as school refusers or phobics
- to describe the approaches and action taken by LEAs and schools to support school refusing pupils and their families
- to identify training and staff development needs with respect to meeting the needs of school refusers and school phobics
- to identify preventative measures and good practice in this area.

1.3 Methodology

There were three strands to the research - a survey of LEAs, a survey of schools, and case studies in a sample of schools.

1.3.1 LEA survey methodology and response

An eight-page questionnaire, directed to the principal educational psychologists, was sent to all 150 LEAs in England during the autumn term 2002. The questionnaire sought information on the following:

- LEAs' definition of school refusal and school phobia
- policies relating to the issue
- numbers of pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics within the authority
- evidence of the causes of the school refusal or phobia within the school
- school-based strategies to support pupils with school refusal or phobia
- support available to pupils, families and schools
- collaborative activity with outside agencies to support these pupils.

The LEAs were also asked to nominate schools that they felt had been effective in addressing the problem of school refusal or phobia, and in encouraging pupils to return to school.

A total of 60 questionnaires were returned (40 per cent response rate). Data from the LEA survey are displayed as frequencies and not as percentages, owing to the small number of cases. It should also be noted that, although the questionnaire was directed to the principal educational psychologist within the LEA, it was often passed on to another colleague who worked specifically in this area, such as an EWO or a home tuition manager.

1.3.2 School survey methodology and response

A nine-page questionnaire was sent to a sample of 600 schools in England during the autumn term 2002. The random sample

consisted of 175 primary schools, 175 secondary schools, and 250 special schools and PRUs. The questionnaire sought information on:

- whether schools had a definition of school refusal and/or school phobia
- the numbers of pupils identified as school refusers or phobics
- schools' experiences of the causes of school refusal or phobia
- approaches to dealing with the problem within and outside of school
- the schools' collaboration with outside agencies to support individual pupils.

The schools were also asked whether they would be willing to participate in further study, as part of the case study sample of schools.

The questionnaire asked schools to provide information on attendance and then asked whether they identified school refusers or school phobics as a separate category of non-attenders. Only those who did distinguish school refusers or phobics were required to complete the remainder of the questionnaire. A total of 280 questionnaires were returned (47 per cent response rate) of which only 48 (17 per cent of the achieved sample, and eight per cent of the total sample) completed the whole questionnaire. This response rate can be viewed as a finding in itself. This finding might suggest that the problems of school refusal or phobia do not affect all schools or only affect a small number of pupils at any one time. However, it may be that other schools simply do not label pupils in this way. Secondly, the finding also suggests that it is necessary to involve a large sample of schools to achieve a small response, when the issues in question may not be at the top of schools' agendas.

Table 1 Number of returned questionnaires

Breakdown by school type	Frequency	%
Mainstream primary schools	101	36
Mainstream secondary schools	84	30
Special schools and PRUs	95	34
N = 280		

A single response item

Only 48 of the 280 responding schools (17 per cent) noted that they distinguished school refusers or phobics from other non-attenders. Therefore the majority of the questionnaire analysis is based on the responses from 48 schools. For this reason the data in the subsequent chapters are displayed as frequencies and not as percentages.

1.3.3 Interview methodology

Schools which completed the schools' questionnaire were asked if they would be prepared, in principle, to take part in further case study work. Of those who responded positively, approximately 20 schools were contacted. These were schools with a range of pupils identified as school refusers or phobics and with a variety of different approaches to the problem. After initial negotiation, a final sample of 16 schools was identified. These included seven secondary schools, two middle schools, two primary schools, three special schools and two PRUs. There was a geographical spread across the country and a wide variety in size. The largest school had 1,700 pupils, and the smallest was a PRU with six pupils. Five secondary schools in the case study sample had separate units wholly or partly dedicated to supporting school refusers and phobics.

In initial telephone calls with the schools, researchers identified which professionals were most concerned with school refusers or phobics in each school and arrangements were made to interview them. Those interviewed included in-school staff, such as classroom teachers, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and learning support

assistants, LEA staff such as EWOs, and representatives from other outside agencies such as social services, the health authority or voluntary organisations. Headteachers and/or relevant senior staff were interviewed about whole school approaches to school refusal, including pastoral and curriculum support, whole school behaviour policies and attendance policies. Finally, interviews were sought with parents and carers and, where possible, with the children themselves.

The interviews were carried out in an eight-week period in the spring term 2003 and focused on four main areas:

- identification and assessment
- factors that precipitate school refusal or phobia
- provision for school refusal or phobia
- monitoring and evaluation structures.

1.4 The report

The report is arranged around the four main areas of research listed above. Chapter 2 discusses issues of identification and assessment, including the varying definitions of school phobia and refusal and the different means by which pupils are identified. Chapter 3 focuses on the factors that precipitate school phobia and refusal at school and at home. Chapter 4 describes provision for pupils identified as school phobics and refusers, and Chapter 5 examines structures in place for monitoring and evaluating their progress. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the conclusions from the research and poses key questions for consideration by LEAs and schools.

2 Identification and assessment

A series of questions were asked at local authority and school level, by questionnaire and in interview, in order to find out about different definitions of school refusal and phobia and means of identification. In addition, respondents were asked if there was anyone with specific responsibility for pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics and whether they could give numbers of pupils affected by the problem within their school or LEA.

2.1 LEA survey

2.1.1 Definitions of school refusal and phobia

LEAs in England were asked how they defined school refusal and phobia and whether they identified pupils with school refusal or phobia as a separate category within the broader group of non-attenders.

Table 2 Identifying school refusers or phobics

Are school refusers or phobics identified as a separate category of non-attenders?	Frequency
Yes	34
No	26

N = 60

A single response item

Just over half of the LEAs which responded indicated that they did distinguish school refusers and phobics from other non-attenders. The most common phrases used in their definitions tended to allude to the reasons why a pupil was not attending school. They included:

- pupils with a psychiatric diagnosis
- pupils with acute anxiety about attending school
- pupils who do not attend for emotional rather than behavioural reasons

- pupils who do not attend for psychological reasons.

It should be pointed out that these were respondents' perceptions of the characteristics of pupils displaying the particular non-attendance problem. It is not clear that these are, indeed, separate categories. For example, the acute anxiety may be perfectly rational and explicable given certain environmental features (and disappear once these features have been amended) or it may be deep-seated, and the observed behaviour resulting from a psychiatric condition. Equally, the 'emotional reasons' could be the result of a child's stressful domestic situation (a parent with a medical condition, for example) and disappear once the parent's health had improved or when day care for that parent was guaranteed. Or the reason could be because the child had experienced significant abuse, when very much more than a change of environment would be needed to help that child return to mental health.

Just under a third of LEAs which responded also said that they had specific written guidance for school staff or parents on school refusal or phobia. It covered areas such as the symptoms and causes of school refusal or phobia, and information on strategies that might be employed to support pupils.

2.1.2 Responsibility for school refusers and phobics

Over half of the LEAs which responded to the survey indicated that there was someone within the authority who had a specific responsibility for pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics, however, there was no consistency as to who this was. In some LEAs it was the EWS that was responsible, in others it was the educational psychology service (EPS). In some cases, the responsibility at LEA level lay with a particular member of staff, for

example, the head of the PRU or a designated teacher within the education other than at school team (EOTAS).

2.1.3 Numbers of pupils identified as school refusers or phobics

The LEAs were also asked whether they routinely collected information on the numbers of pupils within the authority who were identified as school refusers or phobics. Just over one-quarter indicated that they did. In these cases, the data collection task seemed to be performed by the service with the responsibility for school refusers or phobics, that is, the EWS or the EPS. A small number of LEAs stated that information on the causes of the refusal or phobia was held on a database that was centrally retained.

The LEAs which did keep data on the number of pupils within the authority regarded as school refusers or phobics were asked to provide numbers of pupils within each key stage, according to the most recent data collected. Only 14 authorities provided this information.

Table 3 shows that there were greater numbers of pupils identified in key stages 3 and 4.

Table 3 Number of pupils identified as school refusers or phobics

Within each LEA	Minimum number	Maximum number	Median number
Key stage 1	0	2	0
Key stage 2	1	10	2
Key stage 3	1	71	4
Key stage 4	1	154	12
N = 14			

The numbers also varied considerably across local authorities. This is likely to relate to the definition of school refusal or phobia that each LEA adopted as well as the means of identification. Some LEAs pointed out that they were not clear whether school refusal and school phobia were the same. Others

commented that there seemed to be wide fluctuation in both the diagnosis and treatment of school refusal or phobia. If there is a lack of clarity at the level of the LEA, it is not surprising that there was confusion within schools – as is reported below.

2.1.4 Means of identification

LEAs were presented with a list and were asked to indicate how schools in their authority identified pupils with school refusal or phobia by ticking ‘often’, ‘sometimes’, or ‘never’ next to each means of identification. Table 4 illustrates the most common means of identification.

Table 4 How schools identify pupils with school refusal or phobia

Means of identification	Frequency			
	Often	Sometimes	Never	No Response
Assessment by EWO	27	24	2	7
Attendance registers	27	17	6	10
Psychological assessment	17	33	6	4
Teacher nomination	12	30	5	13
Parental nomination	11	32	7	10
Other in-school identification	9	29	6	16
Assessment by Special Educational Needs (SEN) services	3	25	19	13
Pupil self-nomination	3	21	21	15
N = 60				

A series of single response items

The most common methods of identifying pupils as school refusers or phobics were through school attendance registers and assessment by the EWS. Other means of identification mentioned were referrals to the health service, and specifically to child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). Only 12 authorities referred to CAMHS, which may suggest difficulties in accessing the service.

2.2 School survey

The survey for schools asked for similar information as the survey for the LEAs.

2.2.1 Definitions of school refusal and phobia

The schools were asked whether they used the attendance registers to identify reasons for poor attendance and whether they viewed pupils with school refusal or phobia as a separate group within non-attenders in general.

Table 5 Use of attendance registers by schools

Do you use attendance registers to identify the reasons for poor attendance?	%
Yes	83
No	15
No response	2
N = 280	

A single response item

The majority of schools, including mainstream primary, mainstream secondary, special schools and PRUs, did use the attendance registers to examine the reasons for poor attendance. However, only 17 per cent (48 schools) stated that they identified school refusers or phobics as a separate category of non-attenders, as is shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Identifying school refusers or phobics

Do you identify school refusers or phobics as a separate category of non-attenders?	%
Yes	17
No	74
No response	9
N = 280	

A single response item

The remainder of the school survey analysis is based upon data from these 48 schools.

Although survey response rates were very similar from each category of school (as

shown in Table 1), the number indicating that they identified school refusers or phobics as a separate group was higher in some types of schools than others. Nearly two-thirds (30 schools) of those who did identify school refusers or phobics as a separate category were secondary schools, just over one-quarter (13 schools) were special schools or PRUs, and there were only five primary schools, as shown in Table 7. The fact that school refusal or phobia appeared to be more of an issue at secondary level is shown by evidence from this questionnaire survey to schools and from the interview data reported later in this chapter.

Table 7 Identifying school refusers or phobics

Breakdown of school types	Frequency
Mainstream primary schools	5
Mainstream secondary schools	30
Special schools and PRUs	13
N = 48	

A single response item

There were common phrases used by these schools to define the pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics. Many of the schools noted that they did not have a formal definition, but would describe the individuals as 'persistently refusing to attend school'. Some schools used phrases such as 'pupils who can't face school', or with 'acute anxiety about attending school'. On the whole, the schools recognised that the definition of school refusal or school phobia was vague. Furthermore, there was no consensus over the terms school refusal and school phobia. Some schools noted that they did not use the term school phobia, some used the terms synonymously, and others distinguished between school refusal and school phobia. The issue of definitions regarding school refusal or phobia is also discussed in the case study section of this chapter.

Out of the 48 schools, only one indicated that it had written guidance on school refusal or phobia. The purpose of this guidance was to provide information on actions to take.

2.2.2 Numbers of pupils identified as school refusers or phobics

The 48 schools were asked to provide the number of pupils within each key stage of their school that they regarded as school refusers or phobics.

Table 8 Number of pupils identified as school refusers or phobics

Across all 48 schools	Number of pupils
Key stage 1	2
Key stage 2	28
Key stage 3	114
Key stage 4	149
N = 48	Total = 293

In any one of the schools, the number of pupils identified as school refusers or phobics ranged from none (in a primary school) to 47 (in a secondary school). It may be that the latter was using a broader definition of school refusal or phobia, or that they interpreted school refusal or phobia purely in terms of pupils who had attendance problems.

Obviously the size of the participating schools also varied considerably. It should also be noted that there were also fewer key stage 1 and key stage 2 schools in this sample of 48.

2.2.3 Responsibility for school refusers and phobics

The schools were asked who was primarily responsible for supporting pupils with school refusal or phobia within their school. Schools could list as many personnel as applicable.

Table 9 People primarily responsible for supporting school refusers or phobics

Within schools	Frequency
EWO	38
Head of year or head of key stage	30
SENCO	23
Headteacher or deputy headteacher	22
N = 48	

A multiple response item

Most schools noted that the EWO attached to the school had a responsibility for pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics. However, there was a slight difference across school phases in other personnel with responsibility. In primary schools and special schools it was usually the headteacher or the deputy headteacher who took responsibility, whereas in the secondary schools it was more commonly the head of year or head of key stage.

2.2.4 Means of identification

Similarly to the LEAs, schools were presented with a list of different means of identifying school refusers or phobics and were asked to tick 'often', 'sometimes' or 'never' depending on how frequently they used each method within their school.

Table 10 How schools identify pupils with school refusal or phobia

Means of identification	Frequency			
	Often	Sometimes	Never	No Response
Attendance registers	41	4	0	3
Assessment by EWO	23	12	2	11
Teacher nomination	22	16	3	7
Parental nomination	14	17	8	9
Other in-school identification	13	17	6	12
Psychological assessment	6	22	7	13
Assessment by SEN services	6	20	9	13
Pupil self-nomination	2	20	12	14
N = 48				

A series of single response items

Most of the 48 schools noted that they used attendance registers as a means of identifying pupils as school refusers or phobics. They also referred to the EWO for assessment and to the teaching staff for comments.

Approximately one-third of the 48 schools noted that they collected information on the causes of the school refusal or phobia. On the whole the information was supplied by the parents, the pupils and the EWS. Their observations on the possible causes of the problem are examined in detail in Chapter 3.

2.3 Interview data

2.3.1 Definitions of school refusal and school phobia

The school interviews gave further evidence that there was little common understanding amongst practitioners about the phenomena associated with the terms school refusal and school phobia. The majority of the staff interviewed did perceive school refusers differently from school phobics, although the schools did not tend to have written definitions. There were a few interviewees who did not distinguish between school refusers and school phobics, and who said that they treated each case individually. One middle school teacher was not sure what a school phobic was, another did not think school phobia existed. On the whole, those who did distinguish the two terms viewed school phobics as:

- pupils with anxieties about school in general (not specific to a particular school)
- pupils with psychological problems regarding school
- pupils who want to learn and want to attend school but cannot.

Definitions of school refusers tended to be broader. In some schools definitions suggested that school phobia would fall under the umbrella term of school refusal, whereas in others school refusers were viewed as a different cohort. School refusers were described in a range of ways including:

- pupils who refuse to access education, including those who are disaffected – this could include condoned absences from parents who do not value education

- pupils who *choose* not to attend school for a particular reason – for example, because of bullying issues
- pupils who genuinely do not like school and the way it operates
- pupils who are afraid of leaving a parent alone at home, for fear of what he/she might do, or what might happen to him/her.

Some of the above descriptions allow for overlap in the terms – for example, a pupil who has suffered prolonged bullying may choose to refuse school for this reason, but may also develop anxieties about attending school because of these experiences. While they were not presented as such in the interview, it seemed that definitions of the phenomena could be placed on a continuum, the axes of which are, broadly, ‘rational fear’ and ‘irrational fear’. Placement on this continuum is important for the information this provides about appropriate response strategies and which services the pupil should be involved in. For example, arguably those at the ‘irrational fear’ end need referral to CAMHS staff or the EPS, while the needs of those at the ‘rational’ end may be met by a functional adjustment to the environment – though this may only be effected by a multi-agency approach. Some reported characteristics could clearly lie on various places on the continuum (for example, ‘pupils with anxieties’).

One teacher who was head of key stage 3 in a mainstream secondary school explained how she viewed the differences in groups of non-attenders:

There are a number of children who aren't coming to school, which includes truants, school refusers and school phobics. There are different reasons for each. I think school refusers are those who don't come in for social reasons and school phobics are those who have panic attacks if they come in.

Although the majority of schools noted the differences between school refusers and school phobics, this was not so evident in

practice. The pupils seemed to be viewed as having problems attending school and were then treated individually. This became apparent when different staff members within a school were asked how many school refusers and phobics there were in their school, because the numbers given did not often match. The specific labels did not appear to be frequently used within the schools although staff members had similar conceptions of the terms. There was a general consensus, however, that there were very few genuine school phobics.

2.3.2 Numbers of pupils identified as school refusers or phobics

As mentioned above, interviewees were asked whether they knew how many school refusers and phobics there were in their schools at that time, how many boys and girls there were, which year groups they were in and whether numbers varied from year to year. Their responses indicated that exact numbers were not always known and that even within schools there was no consensus as to how many there were. This appeared to be because schools did not necessarily have a clear-cut definition of the phenomenon and so were unable to label pupils as school refusers or phobics. Schools viewed pupils individually and saw school refusal or phobia as just one of the problems with which pupils had to contend. It is important to note here that schools perceived the response as more important than the label. In such schools, where individual pupils' difficulties were profiled, the label of refusal or phobia was largely unnecessary. These schools also regarded the behaviour of refusal as part of a cluster of characteristics around that particular pupil, as opposed to the principal phenomenon. The second reason that the numbers varied was related to the size of the school and the nature of provision for school refusers and phobics within it. For example, in schools with a special unit, staff were more aware of how many refusers or phobics there were because they were dealing with them every day. At the same time, as this secondary teacher explained, the very existence of a

special unit, possibly caused more referrals to be made:

We have approximately ten, a mixture of boys and girls right across all the year groups. The number is fairly constant over the years but since we've had the LSU [learning support unit] we've probably found out about more. Maybe in the past they were just hidden. Since the unit's been set up, the staff know they can refer kids to us.

This comment is interesting insofar as it raises questions as to whether the specific problem of refusal or phobia was identified because the provision was available and the label was available to be applied, or because staff were more sensitive to the pupils' particular needs. In another secondary school, the EWO had been allocated time and resources to work with five pupils in each year group and so a maximum of five pupils per year group were identified. In this case, there are questions as to whether cases were created in order to fit the resources available. The two special schools in the sample, which had a system of taking pupils to and from school by bus, tended to define school refusers and phobics as those who did not attend at all. This case also shows that definitions shifted according to environmental features – pupils at special schools tend to have less opportunity for non-attendance unless this is condoned at home. In this case the school refusers or phobics were those with no attendance rather than those with poor or eccentric attendance, as might be identified in mainstream schools.

2.3.3 Means of identification

School refusers were normally first identified from the attendance registers. Once a pattern of non-attendance had been detected, the matter would be investigated further by form tutors, heads of year or dedicated attendance workers. Usually it would be the school that identified the non-attendance and then the matter would be discussed with the EWO. In all cases the EWO would do regular register checks and consult with teachers. In the primary schools in the

sample, where numbers of pupils were smaller, teachers would notice immediately when a pupil was not there. In general, the speed with which pupils would be identified and action taken was related to the work load of the EWO, the frequency of their visits and the number of staff in the school involved.

This chapter has examined the varying perceptions of school refusal and phobia across the LEAs and schools in the survey, and the ensuing difficulties in identifying and assessing pupils affected. Chapter 3 examines the factors at home and at school perceived to cause problems of school refusal or school phobia.

3 Factors that precipitate school refusal or school phobia

This chapter focuses on the factors that those participating in the research felt precipitated school refusal or phobia, both within and outside school. It also includes information collected on the reasons why pupils were afraid to attend school, and on the groups of pupils felt to be particularly susceptible to the problems of school refusal or phobia. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 provide an overall picture of the views from LEAs and from schools, based on the questionnaire data. Section 3.3 focuses on these issues in more detail, using the interview material.

3.1 LEA survey

3.1.1 Factors precipitating school refusal or phobia

LEAs were asked to indicate from a list, the factors at school they felt precipitated school refusal or phobia by specifying 'often', 'sometimes' or 'never'. They were also given the opportunity to specify other factors. The responses are shown in Table 11.

More than half of the LEA respondents felt that social anxiety often seemed to trigger school refusal or phobia, and approximately one-third felt that a change of school was often a factor. In their additional comments to this question, some noted that the transition to key stage 3 and to key stage 4 could cause problems. Other factors mentioned by the responding LEAs were mainly home-related factors including separation anxiety, bereavement, and other family issues. Some LEAs stated that factors outside school were more important than those in school.

Table 11 School-related factors that precipitate school refusal or phobia

Factors	Frequency			
	Often	Sometimes	Never	No Response
Social anxiety	36	21	0	3
Change of school	18	37	0	5
Fear of failure in class work or tests	13	38	2	7
Fear of specific places	10	38	2	10
Anxiety about the journey to school or travel sickness	10	38	2	10
Reaction to a specific incident or lesson	8	40	3	9
Fear of lesson time	7	39	3	11
Changes in pupil groupings	5	43	3	9
Fear or dislike of a specific adult	5	40	5	10
Fear or dislike of a specific subject	5	38	7	10
N = 60				

A series of single response items

3.2 School survey

3.2.1 Factors precipitating school refusal or phobia

As in the LEA survey, schools were asked to note the factors that they felt precipitated school refusal or phobia. They were asked about school-related factors first and then about factors outside school. Their responses are shown in Tables 12 and 13.

Table 12 School-related factors that precipitate school refusal or phobia

Factors	Frequency			
	Often	Sometimes	Never	No Response
Social anxiety	27	19	0	2
Reaction to a specific incident or lesson	8	26	3	11
Fear of specific places	8	20	9	11
Fear of lesson time	7	26	6	9
Fear of failure in class work or tests	7	25	7	9
Fear or dislike of a specific adult	7	24	8	9
Anxiety about the journey to school or travel sickness	7	20	13	8
Change of school	5	33	3	7
Fear or dislike of a specific subject	4	29	6	9
Change in pupil groupings	3	27	7	11

N = 48

A series of single response items

The majority of participating schools felt that social anxiety was often or sometimes a precipitating factor. This was very similar to the views of the LEAs. However, the schools and LEAs views differed slightly with regard to the effect of changing schools. The schools were less inclined than the LEAs to note this as a factor.

Table 13 Home-related factors that precipitate school refusal or phobia

Factors	Frequency			
	Often	Sometimes	Never	No Response
Family conflict	24	18	0	6
Traumatic event at home	17	26	1	4
Pupil illness (physical or mental)	15	28	0	5
Violence or abuse	9	30	2	7
Special educational needs	6	31	4	7
Illness or death in the family	5	35	2	6
Birth of a sibling	0	27	11	10

N = 48

A series of single response items

A conflict within the family, a traumatic event at home or pupil illness were the three main external factors that schools felt triggered school refusal or phobia. Some schools also noted that parenting issues and parents' mental health were other factors.

3.3 Interview data

Data gathered in interviews with headteachers, in-school support staff, EWOs and outside professionals provided information on:

- how information was collected on the reasons why pupils were afraid to attend school
- the groups of pupils who were thought to be susceptible to the problem of school refusal or phobia
- the factors perceived to precipitate school refusal or phobia.

3.3.1 Collection of information on reasons for school refusal and phobia

In most cases, detailed information on the reasons why pupils were refusing school was gathered once the attendance problem was identified in the registers. Once a pattern of non-attendance had been noted, either the school would telephone home to investigate the reasons for the non-attendance or the EWO would contact the family and possibly make a home visit. Information would also be sought from class teachers and learning mentors. In one large secondary school where there was a unit specifically for school refusers and phobics, the teacher in charge, together with a clinical psychologist, had devised a questionnaire that would give her information to use when devising strategies and targets to reintegrate the pupils. In another case the EWO would ask identified pupils a set of questions from a 'life events' questionnaire on a home visit to see if there were factors in the past which might have contributed to the problem. In just one of the schools, (a special school), detailed

computerised records were kept on the reasons for non-attendance.

3.3.2 Profiles of school refusers and phobics

Staff were asked whether the problem of school refusal or phobia was more prevalent in any one group of pupils and, though there was some variation from school to school, their responses indicated on the whole that boys and girls were equally affected by the problem and that there was a spread of age ranges. In the secondary schools it was felt that the problem was more acute in key stage 4. Pupils had more exciting things to do out of school and were less able to cope with pressures of course work and examinations if they had been absent for periods of time. This illustrates how a vicious circle of non-attendance may emerge, because poor attendance leads to problems in school (for example, uncompleted course work), and this could lead to further attendance problems and fear or dislike of school because of this failure.

A number of teachers felt that school refusers and phobics were more likely to come from disadvantaged or dysfunctional backgrounds where school was not valued. As one senior teacher in a large school explained:

Social outcasts. Without a shadow of a doubt, it's always about children (though there are always exceptions) who come from deprived backgrounds, whose parents don't really understand the process of education, children who don't look the same, who haven't got the money to wear the same, who haven't succeeded throughout life, who don't succeed within their own family, and I'm not talking about academic pressures here.

Children with psychological problems themselves, or from families in which there were psychological problems, were also felt to be more susceptible to the problem. One EWO in a middle school felt that the child's problems could be reinforced by the family:

I find that the families in some ways, not consciously, actually feed the young person's anxiety. So they might be overprotective, they might be reinforcing the anxiety every time the child comes home.

3.3.3 Factors precipitating school refusal or phobia

When teachers and other professionals were questioned further about specific factors that contribute to the problem of school refusal or phobia, their comments reinforced the data from the schools' questionnaire. Both school and home factors were seen as important in contributing to the problem. The school factors mentioned included:

- The size and layout of the school. Pupils were anxious about moving around the school, coping with long crowded corridors and going into specific places such as the canteen or classrooms.
- The structure of the school day. Pupils were anxious about unstructured or uncontrolled time, the journey to and from school, break times and lunch times.
- Conflicts with teachers. Pupils might dislike a particular teacher or teaching style or there may have been a particular incident with a teacher.
- Transition periods, for example, when pupils move from primary to middle or secondary school, or at the options stage in secondary school. Pupils could be anxious when unfamiliar with new pupil groupings.
- Fear of specific subjects, particularly PE, where pupils might have a low body image and inhibitions about getting changed in front of others.
- Academic pressures. Pupils might be struggling with the work, particularly with end of key stage tests in years 6 and 9.
- Bullying or perceived bullying.
- Friendship problems, particularly in adolescence and with girls.
- Inappropriate provision – *'the wrong child in the wrong school'*.

- The knock-on effect of repeated absence. The fact that a pupil was frequently absent would make it more difficult to come back to school. At secondary level a pupil who had missed a lot of school would find it hard to catch up with the work. At primary level a pupil might find it hard to maintain friendship groups, as one primary headteacher explained:

They have a difficulty with relationships because they are absent so often and their friends get used to playing with other sets of children and they come back and it's difficult for them to feel comfortable with their friends again.

This is how one teacher summed up the problems for school refusers in a large secondary school:

Size of school. The way the buildings are set up. The corridors in this school can be quite intimidating at the end of a break time. Lots of big bodies moving down very small corridors. Class sizes are significant with school refusers. They do need more individual attention and sometimes this is not possible. Lack of knowledge on the part of the teachers on how to deal with pupils who don't want to come to school. Sometimes it's seen as being something wrong or something's wrong with the child.

Many of those interviewed felt that factors at school could trigger a period of school refusal or phobia but that factors at home were more likely to be the root cause of the problem. Where a child was refusing to come to school because of something that had ostensibly arisen at school, it was generally the case that there were already issues within the family. A number of home factors were mentioned:

- problems in the child such as low self-esteem, anxieties about physical appearance, lack of social skills and special educational needs
- psychological problems in the parent affecting the child (such as depression) and anxieties which the parent might communicate inappropriately to the child

- family breakdown, separation and divorce, and single parent families
- traumatic events at home such as bereavement
- violence and abuse in the home
- separation anxiety experienced by the child. In some cases the child might act as a young carer and have fears for the parent's health. One EWO in a middle school felt that:

if there are problems at home, children don't want to come to school, because they're frightened of leaving their parents at home by themselves

- separation anxiety experienced by the parent. A number of school refusers in the sample were the youngest child in the family and it was felt that parents were unwilling to let them leave the home
- situations where the child was required to look after a younger sibling
- inadequate parenting, lack of organisation and of sustained support. In some cases the school refuser might have siblings who were also school refusers. One EWO explained:

With all my cases home factors are more important. If they're not encouraged to come to school or to do their homework or to get in on time. It's a pattern that's set at home and it is something that runs in the family. I think it's all family – a lot don't have the attitude that school's important. They take the child shopping or out of school on holiday.

- poverty, for example, where the family was not able to afford school meals or the uniform.

To conclude, data from the LEA and school questionnaires were corroborated by data from the interviews. What emerged in discussions with teachers and support staff was that any number of factors at school or at home could contribute to problems of school

refusal or phobia, and that for any individual child it would most likely be a complex combination of internal and external factors. Most interviewees felt, however, that while school factors could trigger or exacerbate the problem of school refusal, the origins of the problem usually lay in the home. This

suggests that the phenomenon is probably a symptom of other factors and signals extreme vulnerability in those children. Furthermore, it indicates that schools should seek support for these families from external agencies (for example, CAMHS), as well as addressing the school-related factors.

4 Provision for school refusal or school phobia

This chapter focuses on the provision for pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics, particularly the strategies for preventing problems of school refusal or phobia and the strategies for supporting pupils with these problems, including reintegration strategies. It also includes information on the outside agencies that LEAs and schools use to support school refusers or phobics. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 are based on the questionnaire responses from the LEAs and from schools. Section 4.3 addresses the issues in more detail using data from the interviews.

4.1 LEA survey

4.1.1 Strategies for dealing with school refusal or phobia

The LEAs were presented with a list of school-based strategies and were asked which they felt to be effective in preventing the problem of school refusal or phobia and in addressing the needs of the pupils affected. Table 14 shows the strategies that were considered to help with prevention.

Table 14 Strategies for preventing refusal or phobia

Strategies	Frequency		
	Effective	Not sure	Not effective
Early action on non-attendance	55	5	0
Support from other pupils	48	11	1
Creation of a less threatening environment	47	12	1
Support from an adult	46	14	0
Behaviour and anti-bullying policies	44	15	1
Alternative curricular/extra-curricular provision	32	24	4
Extra support in literacy and numeracy	29	27	4
Change of class/tutor group	23	33	4
N = 60			

A series of single response items

Nearly all responding LEAs felt that taking early action on non-attendance was effective. In addition to this, providing support to the individual from other pupils or from an adult, for example a classroom assistant or counsellor, was also considered effective as well as creating a less threatening environment or a safe place in school for the pupil. Whole-school strategies such as behaviour and anti-bullying policies were also thought to help in preventing the problem.

The strategies considered effective in prevention were similar to those considered effective in addressing the needs of pupils with school refusal or phobia, that is, support from an adult or other pupils, the creation of a less threatening environment, and taking early action on non-attendance, as shown in Table 15.

Table 15 Strategies for addressing the needs of school refusers or phobics

Strategies	Frequency		
	Effective	Not sure	Not effective
Support from an adult	50	10	0
Creation of a less threatening environment	50	9	1
Early action on non-attendance	47	12	1
Support from other pupils	43	15	2
Alternative curricular/extra-curricular provision	41	16	3
Change of class/tutor group	25	32	3
Extra support in literacy and numeracy	25	29	6
Behaviour and anti-bullying policies	20	27	13
N = 60			

A series of single response items

Another strategy that was noted by some LEAs was a gradual reintegration programme. Some LEAs also felt that the emotional or psychological issues needed to be addressed first, before such strategies were adopted.

4.1.2 Educational provision for pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics

The type of provision offered by LEAs is shown in Table 16.

Table 16 LEAs with specific educational provision for school refusers or phobics

Type of provision	Frequency
Home tuition service	50
Alternative curricular provision	45
PRU	34
N = 60	

*A series of single response items
Frequencies reflect LEAs with the provision*

The majority of the participating LEAs offered a home tuition service that pupils who were identified as school refusers or phobics could access. However, there were no data on the extent of the provision, for example, on the number of hours of support available. Three-quarters of the LEAs offered alternative curricular provision for these pupils and over half offered provision at a PRU. Some LEAs referred to other specific provision, for example, hospital schools, and some noted that the individual schools were expected to provide appropriate support, for example, through learning support units (LSUs) or inclusion units.

4.1.3 External support

The LEAs were also asked to indicate which other services within the region were used to support pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics (see Table 17).

The majority of the LEAs noted that they often used the EWS to address pupils' needs. Services such as the CAMHS and the EPS were used at least sometimes by the participating LEAs to support pupils with school refusal or phobia. However, some LEAs noted that they had found it difficult to access CAMHS provision for these pupils, as suggested in Section 2.1.4. A few LEAs also noted that they referred to the Connexions service for support. On the whole, a multi-agency approach was recognised as an effective

means to support pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics because of the complex nature of the problems.

Table 17 Services used to support pupils with school refusal or phobia

Services	Frequency		
	Often	Sometimes	Never
EWS	50	10	0
CAMHS	29	31	0
EPS	27	33	0
Learning and behaviour support service	11	37	6
Health service	8	38	5
Counselling service	5	27	14
Voluntary organisations	2	27	17
Social services	1	38	12
Youth service	1	36	14

N = 60

*A series of single response items
Missing data not included*

4.2 School survey

4.2.1 Strategies for supporting pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics

In order to compare the strategies considered effective by the LEAs with the strategies used by schools, the schools were asked which strategies they actually used to support the pupils.

Table 18 Strategies used by schools for supporting school refusal or phobia

Strategies	Frequency
Early action on non-attendance	48
Support from an adult	46
Behaviour and anti-bullying policies	41
Creation of a less threatening environment or safe place in school	36
Extra support in literacy or numeracy	36
Change of class or tutor group	36
Alternative curricular or extra curricular provision	33
Support from other pupils	30

N = 48

A multiple response item

All schools stated that they took early action on non-attendance, which was also considered one of the effective strategies by the LEAs. On the whole, most schools used a variety of strategies for supporting pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics.

As a variety of strategies were used, schools were asked how they decided on appropriate strategies for individual cases. Their responses showed that the main procedures involved were:

- discussions with the pupil concerned
- considering each case individually
- discussions with parents
- discussions with all school staff
- involving the EWS
- consultation with outside agencies.

Most participating schools which had experience of dealing with pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics felt that there were strategies that they considered to be effective in the reintegration of pupils after a period of absence from school. These included:

- devising a part-time timetable
- providing one-to-one support from an identified adult
- devising a specific reintegration programme for the individual
- liaising with the parents involved.

4.2.2 External support

The schools were also asked to list the outside agencies with which they collaborated to support pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics. As Table 19 shows, the outside agencies involved were in line with those used by the LEAs. As before, the EWS was the one used most often to support school refusers and phobics.

Table 19 Services used to support pupils with school refusal or phobia

Services	Frequency		
	Often	Sometimes	Never
EWS	42	6	0
Learning and behaviour support service	16	20	4
EPS	15	27	2
Health service	14	27	4
CAMHS	9	21	7
Social services	8	28	4
Counselling service	7	26	6
Youth service	2	13	18
Voluntary organisations	2	10	19

N = 48

*A series of single response items
Missing data not included*

4.3 Interview data

4.3.1 Internal school support

When schools were questioned about the place of school refusal or phobia in their overall pastoral structures, it became clear that this varied immensely according to the size and phase of the school and to whether there was separate provision for school refusers or phobics in the form of a special support unit in school. Some general trends, however, could be identified. In most cases the issue would be discussed along with behavioural and non-attendance issues at regular (weekly or fortnightly) senior management team meetings attended by heads of year and key stage coordinators. In some cases there was a pastoral coordinator whose responsibility was to liaise with heads of year, and through them to appoint tutors, attendance officers and EWOs. Pastoral coordinators also had specific responsibility for liaison with the families and outside agencies as appropriate. In some schools it was the deputy headteacher or a senior teacher who assumed this role, and in others it was the SENCO. In the five schools where there was a separate support unit, the

manager of the unit would be the one to liaise with the mainstream school, families and outside agencies. One manager's view, however, was that while pastoral staff bore the main responsibility, all staff in the school were responsible, and there should be flexible arrangements for consultation and communication at all levels.

We need to avoid contrived structures. When things need reviewing, we should be aware of it and review it, not necessarily wait for some appointed time. We need to be more responsive than that. I think we have a collective responsibility and it should be based less on old ideas of demarcation.

On an administrative level, several schools had staff specifically responsible for monitoring attendance on a daily basis. They would trawl through registers, telephone home on the first day of absence and chase up with letters and telephone calls if there was no satisfactory explanation for non-attendance.

4.3.2 External support

All schools in the sample worked with LEA staff to support school refusers and phobics. Those most involved were the EWOs, whose statutory role was to monitor attendance, but schools also worked with educational psychologists, school nurses, special educational needs support services and the tuition service. In many cases, central LEA staff were based in the same building and this facilitated liaison between different services. In addition to this, schools in the sample liaised with outside agencies as and when the need arose. These included CAMHS, social services, the health service, child prostitution agencies, counsellors, clinical psychologists, EOTAS, Connexions and social inclusion officers. In special schools, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists were also involved.

None of the schools in the sample had specific policies on school refusal or phobia, though

several stressed that they adopted a positive approach to school refusers and phobics by welcoming them back on their return. All, however, had positive behaviour and attendance policies and anti-bullying policies in place.

4.3.3 Support processes and strategies

In order to decide what kind of support to provide in individual cases, schools said they spent a lot of time with pupils and found out as much as possible from the parents about the causes of the problem. They would then tailor their support to the individual need and involve outside professionals as appropriate. Some pupils would need emotional support, and others would need extra support with work.

The strategies that were considered to be effective were varied and many, but the most important approach was to establish a close contact with the pupil and with their home. Schools would attempt to gain the trust of the students by listening to what they had to say and by being prepared to listen to the situation from their perspective. It was important not to be figures of authority and to work with the pupil – a role which staff felt was easier for learning support assistants than for teachers. As one home-school support worker in a PRU explained:

I think listening and accepting where they're at. Taking what they say at face-value, until the point when they manipulate or over-simplify something. Then I will point out what we need to do together. It is very effective to point out that you're not the teacher – you're concerned about their education as well as them as whole people.

It was important that pupils knew what would be expected of them and that it was within their limits. It was also considered vital that the support and trust was maintained, even when the pupil was back at school and attending normally.

Most schools in the sample felt it was preferable to get the child back into school full-time if possible, because it established a routine and a basis on which to build up the support. This suggests that provision such as the home tuition service should only be considered as a temporary measure. In some schools a restricted timetable was offered and potential sources of anxiety removed. As one pastoral coordinator explained:

If you keep them in school you can initially withdraw the problem and you get them into a routine where they are in school and mixing and their confidence is increasing. For example, if I have a kid whose problem is PE then we can remove PE for a while but make it very clear to the child that this is not a long-term solution, it's support.

In other schools, pupils were allowed to come into school slightly later, or through a different entrance, to register separately, and to leave earlier to avoid the rush. This might make all the difference to pupils who were anxious in crowded areas or the classroom. As one fifteen-year old explained:

The unit is a wonderful way of getting someone back into school. It got me right back into school anyway. It's so good - the timing - you go in there at half nine in the morning, you leave at three so there's no registration.

In one school, school refusers and phobics attended every morning and were collected by a parent at lunchtime. Part-time attendance was not always an option though, as one rural school explained, because transport in country areas was either difficult or non-existent during the day, and not all parents could drive or were available to deliver or collect their child.

Large schools, in particular, provided a 'safe place' in school for pupils who could not face going into classes. This could be a particular room that they could go to or even an adult that they knew would always be available should they need support. In the schools with a separate support unit for school refusers or

phobics, pupils would be based in the unit and attend mainstream lessons if they felt they could cope. While in the unit, they would be taught in smaller groups and supported by learning mentors who would escort them to lessons if needed.

Another strategy mentioned by several of the schools was to provide extra support in class. This might be through learning mentors, who would talk to pupils about any problems they might have, or through classroom assistants, who would provide support with the work. As one EWO explained:

[You need to give] as much support in the class as you can because that's the bit we have to be concerned with. We may not be able to change what is happening at home, although I'd like to if I could, but if the work is too difficult and they need someone sitting with them to differentiate the activities, that might just hold them.

This illustrates that schools acknowledged that they could only support children at school. Other agencies would need to be involved if there were problems at home.

Some schools operated a buddy system, pairing up pupils with another child who could support them.

Despite the fact that recent research (Kendall, White and Kinder, 2003) showed education welfare staff to be generally supportive of prosecution in cases of non-attendance, this study revealed that prosecution was not thought to be effective for school refusers or phobics. The EWOs often noted that they had a statutory role to enforce school attendance. They would work to get non-attenders back into school, but when this was unsuccessful they would be required to take legal action. This became problematic when dealing with school phobics. As one EWO explained:

With this case of a school phobic I was seriously considering going to court with it, but I've now put my hand up and said I can't, because I think he is a genuine school phobic.

Box 1 explains how one school organised its provision for school refusers and phobics.

Box 1 11 – 16 secondary school

In this large secondary school a separate unit for school refusers and phobics had been set up on the suggestion of an EWO who was now seconded to the school and coordinator of the unit. The unit was known as the Vulnerable Pupils Unit but the pupils referred to it as the Very Important Pupils (VIP) room. It functioned alongside a separate learning support unit for pupils with learning difficulties and was housed in a spare classroom. There was a staff of two, the coordinator herself and one full-time learning mentor. Once pupils with identified attendance problems were referred to the unit, usually by a head of year, the coordinator would give them a questionnaire about their anxieties and discuss their problems with them. This would enable her to devise targets for individual pupils and strategies for reintegration. The sequence of support was entirely tailored to the individual and there was no pressure on pupils to return to the classroom.

Pupils would be based in the unit and could remain there until they could face returning to normal lessons. They would register in the unit and the staff would arrange work for them to do there. The eventual aim was to get the children back into normal lessons by providing a safe route and at a pace with which they felt comfortable. They would try to build up attendance across the timetable, by asking the children which lessons they felt comfortable with, escorting them to lessons if necessary and, once the children was back in class, by finding another pupil in the same class who could support him/her during the lesson. If necessary the learning mentor could accompany pupils during the lessons as well. It was

important to give support but not create dependency. There were approximately 18 pupils in the unit at the time of the interview, most of them full-time, and it was possible to monitor their progress closely because the numbers were so small. If a pupil did not attend, the staff of the unit would telephone home immediately and, if necessary, make a home visit.

This is how the learning mentor described the strategies they employed:

Our strategies are different for every case. To get them back in we do it really slowly. We'll discuss the problems, we'll ask them what the main problems are, what they feel comfortable doing while they are in school, and which lessons they feel comfortable with. Generally we start out going to these lessons with them. We'll look to see if there are any people in the lessons that they know and we'll manipulate the timetable around that. We'll take them out of difficult classes and put them in easier groups. We'll do that in conjunction with the heads of year so we have to have quite strong links with them. We make them feel like they can come back to the unit and it's like they're on hallowed ground, they're safe there.

Both members of staff in the Vulnerable Pupils Unit felt that the support they were providing was successful in encouraging pupils to return to school, but they also felt that attendance was liable to slip back once pupils left the unit. The success of the unit was such, however, that they were hoping to expand to provide support for new referrals as well as for pupils in years 10 and 11 who needed more specific curricular support. The mix of ages in the unit was felt, however, to have positive benefits because the older children supported and helped the younger ones to overcome their anxieties.

Though strategies to support school refusers and phobics were very much designed around individual pupils, the sequence of support was fairly uniform across schools in the sample. Attendance patterns was identified from registers and if there were cause for concern, schools would contact the parents and speak to the pupil to establish reasons for non-attendance. On the whole, schools would liaise with the family first. As one EWO explained:

School attendance is a school issue and there is an expectation that the school has actually tried to resolve the issues themselves first, because that's where the relationship is, between school and home. I come in to mediate. The school will do first day response. It's a good way to bring about change. It could be a letter, it could be a meeting or a home visit. They do a lot of liaison themselves.

If the problem stemmed from home it would be the EWS which would liaise with the family. All schools would aim to get the pupil to attend, even if they did not go to lessons. This might entail offering a partial timetable or extra pastoral support in and out of lessons. Once the child was back in school they would encourage them to go to lessons they felt comfortable with and find them activities for the remaining time. The emphasis, however, was to build up confidence by regular attendance rather than put pressure on work. Once back in school the pupil would be supported by learning support assistants or mentors.

The interview data have provided many insights into the ways in which school refusers and phobics were supported in mainstream or special units within the school. Two of the establishments in the sample, however, were PRUs outside schools which had been set up specifically for school refusers and phobics. The strategies to support pupils in one of these are described in Box 2.

Box 2 PRU for key stage 3 pupils

This unit was set up to cater for up to six key stage 3 pupils identified as having anxiety problems and who were failing to get to school because of this. This included pupils regarded as school phobics and refusers. The unit was originally set up as a project by the health service but was now operating as part of the PRUs. It was funded jointly by the education service, which paid the teaching staff salaries and the running costs, and the health service, which housed the unit in a hospital and paid for interventions. Children all had a psychiatric diagnosis, and could be referred to the unit from two LEAs via their GPs and the child and family guidance clinic. In addition to the teachers, the multi-disciplinary team in the unit included a consultant psychiatrist, a trainee registrar, two nurses, an occupational therapist, a psychologist and a psychotherapist. The main aim of the unit was to reintegrate pupils into full-time school. This might be a different school from that attended previously or a special school, but it was made clear to parents and pupils in the unit that they would lose their place there if they refused to try to reintegrate. The pupils had to remain on a school roll whilst attending the unit and the staff were very clear that it was not an alternative to school, but a package to help reintegration.

The teacher in charge described the four stages of the reintegration process. In the first stage they would try to let the pupils establish themselves within the small group in a safe setting, so they felt comfortable doing educational activities, going out and about and interacting with their peers. This would help to raise their self-esteem because they were always

with the same people. Pupils would be expected to attend regularly but without other school pressures like the bell ringing, changing classrooms and school uniform. Pupils were also taxied to school to remove the pressure on them. At the beginning of the week sessions would start at lunchtime but by the end of the week they would start at 9.30am. The pupils would follow the key stage 3 curriculum and have specific lessons. However, the timetable was flexible enough to allow time to deal with the pupils' anxieties and work through reintegration strategies. During the second stage of the reintegration process, staff would talk to the pupils individually about going to the school gates with one of the school nurses. Once they felt comfortable enough, and this was very individual, staff would select a lesson that they felt the pupil might be able to cope with. The classroom assistant from the unit would go with him/her and would sit in the background, or with him/her, as necessary. When the pupils were ready, time in school would be extended and their timetable would be filled with periods in the unit and periods in school. By stage three they would be attending almost 100 per cent and managing to

take themselves to and from school. In the final stage, management would be handed over to the school. The staff in the unit would meet the pupils occasionally or telephone them to find out how they were, until the pupils said they no longer needed that support. They would also keep in close contact with the pupils' teachers and work with the educational psychologist.

The length of time the reintegration process lasted varied from two school terms to as long as two years. The unit did not cater for key stage 4 pupils so it aimed to reintegrate the pupils prior to the start of key stage 4. On the whole, the teacher in charge felt that their support was effective. They could only cater for a few pupils but getting a child with a psychiatric diagnosis back into school was a tremendous achievement.

This chapter has documented general strategies employed by schools to support school refusers and phobics and the sequence of support in two of the sample schools has been described in more detail. In Chapter 5 training issues related to school refusal and phobia are briefly examined, as well as structures for monitoring the progress of pupils affected.

5 Training issues and monitoring structures

Within the questionnaire surveys, both LEAs and schools were asked about whether there had been any training relating to school refusal or phobia. This issue was also followed up in the interviews at school level. These also explored the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the progress and attendance of pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics, which is described in Section 5.3.2.

5.1 LEA survey

The LEAs were asked whether they regularly organised any in-service training (INSET) on issues relating to school refusal or phobia.

Table 20 Training on issues relating to school refusal or phobia

Focus of INSET	Frequency
Awareness raising on school refusal or phobia	14
The causes of school refusal or phobia	11
Strategies to support pupils with school refusal or phobia	11
N = 60	

*A series of single response items
Frequencies reflect LEAs that had organised specific training*

Some LEAs indicated that there had been training on the issues surrounding school refusal or phobia but this had not been the case across the board. Some LEAs also noted that training was available for specific services, such as the hospital outreach service or the EPS. Some LEAs stated that INSET was planned or that there had been INSET on school refusal or phobia for schools which had requested it.

5.2 School survey

Only a small number of the schools who identified school refusers or phobics as a separate category of non-attenders stated that they had received INSET on the issues surrounding school refusal or phobia.

5.3 Interview data

5.3.1 Training issues

Schools in the case study sample were asked whether they had had any INSET on the subject of school refusal or phobia but none of those interviewed had taken part or provided any training specifically on this theme. Several teachers, however, stated that they had participated in courses where the issue of school refusal or phobia had been mentioned within the wider framework of school attendance.

5.3.2 Monitoring and evaluation structures

Interviewees were also asked whether they monitored and evaluated the progress of school refusers or phobics. On an everyday basis, schools monitored pupils' attendance and non-attenders were identified from the registers either by attendance workers in the school or by EWOs. In all cases, meetings were held between pastoral staff in the schools and EWOs to discuss attendance in general and the progress of individual pupils. The frequency of these meetings was dependent on EWOs' caseloads and the availability of staff. Closer monitoring was dependent on the size of the school and the provision in place. In schools with separate

units staff would have daily contact with pupils. They would be able to observe progress at first hand and there would be ample opportunity to talk to pupils about their perceptions of the school and their progress. In the two primary schools in the sample each pupil was known individually. On the whole, the academic progress of pupils remained the preserve of subject teachers and it was not monitored by pastoral staff. In schools with separate units, however, where learning mentors supported pupils in and out of lessons, staff were able to see how pupils were progressing with their work.

Schools with separate units, in particular, felt that the support they gave was very effective in encouraging pupils to reintegrate. This was due to factors such as the favourable adult:pupil ratio, the more relaxed atmosphere and the 'semi-family' setting. In one of the units, staff commented on the positive effects of having vulnerable pupils together because they supported each other. In one of the PRUs, where staff had set up parent support groups, it was felt that individual attention to pupils and families was successful in understanding school refusers better, even if they did not manage to get them back to school.

6 Conclusions

This chapter presents the key findings from the study and suggests a number of questions for LEAs and schools to consider in relation to the support they provide for pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics.

6.1 Key findings

6.1.1 Definition of the cohort(s)

- ◆ The research revealed no clear definitions among practitioners in LEAs and schools that distinguished between school phobics and school refusers. Common descriptions were of the broad group of pupils to whom practitioners applied the terms 'phobic' and 'refuser'. These descriptions included pupils with acute anxiety about attending school, pupils who cannot face school and pupils who persistently refuse to attend.
- ◆ Generally, school phobics were seen as a subset of school refusers, and there was a distinction in the descriptions of school phobics and school refusers. The school phobics were perceived as those with anxieties (either rational or irrational) about attending school, and school refusers were perceived as those who chose not to attend for whatever reason. There was a degree of overlap for those pupils who chose not to attend because they had an anxiety – for example, they were anxious about not meeting curriculum challenges or about being bullied.

6.1.2 Initial response to identified difficulties

- ◆ What was significant in terms of response to these pupils was that there were common strategies which were applied regardless of the particular category in which a child might nominally be put.

- ◆ A common response was that a generic problem of attendance would be identified from analysis of attendance registers. Investigation of reasons for poor patterns of attendance, either internally, by the school's pastoral staff, or externally, by the attached education welfare officer (EWO), would then identify specific problems of refusal or phobia. In the schools participating in the research, school pastoral staff worked closely with the relevant LEA support services – usually the EWS.

6.1.3 The profile of identified pupils

- ◆ As definitions were so indecisive, there was no possibility of quantifying cohorts of refusers and phobics. However, there did seem to be evidence that more pupils were identified with attendance problems in the higher key stages (in the secondary phase of education). There seemed to be a higher degree of identification in those schools where there was specific provision to support them – for example, where there was a separate unit or a member of staff with specific responsibility or interest. The question remains as to whether this level of identification was because these schools were more sensitive to need which might not have been identified in other situations, or because the provision was taken up merely because it was available.
- ◆ The main causes of the problems at school were reported to be social anxiety, change of pupil groupings and fear of the school environment. However, it was generally felt that, while school factors could trigger school refusal or phobia, the origins of the problem usually lay in the home.

6.1.4 Provision for school refusal or phobia

- ◆ Strategies centred around prevention and addressing needs once they were identified. Preventative measures included early action on non-attendance, extensive pastoral consultation within the school, support at school from another pupil (through peer mentoring schemes) or adult, provision of a safe environment in school, and whole school behaviour and anti-bullying policies (though there were no specific policies on school refusal or phobia).
- ◆ The strategies considered effective in supporting pupils once the problem had arisen were similar to those for prevention. Gradual reintegration was favoured. This might entail a part-time timetable, provision of a place other than the classroom where the pupil would feel safe, or extra support in class. In addition to this it was important that pupils knew what was expected of them and that a trusting relationship with staff was established and maintained.
- ◆ The application of specific strategies was determined, ideally, by analysis of individual need, usually undertaken by discussion among all those involved in the school and with external agencies as appropriate. While a multi-agency approach was favoured, the route of prosecution was not considered to be effective. In some cases, response to a pupil's difficulties was determined by the provision that was available within and outside school. The sequence of support was fairly uniform across schools.
- ◆ For strategies to be effective in the long term, support (pastoral and academic) needed to be maintained.

6.1.5 Training issues and monitoring structures

- ◆ Approaches to refusal and phobia were unsystematic across local authorities and schools participating in the research.

Schools had received very little training on issues related to school refusal and phobia, and any training which was mentioned was within the general framework of school attendance.

- ◆ While attendance was routinely monitored through statutory attendance registers, closer monitoring and action as a result of scrutiny of data depended on the size of school, the availability and interest of staff, and the way in which pastoral structures operated in the school. In smaller schools and schools with a separate unit, it was possible to monitor the progress of school refusers and phobics more closely.
- ◆ Schools did not routinely monitor the academic progress of school refusers and phobics as a separate cohort. However, where these pupils were in a separate unit, the relevant pupils were monitored more closely. Staff were able to talk to the pupils daily about their perceptions of school.
- ◆ Separate support units and schools with a designated member of staff responsible for school refusal and phobia considered that their focused support was effective in encouraging reintegration.

6.2 Key questions for consideration

On the basis of the research evidence, we suggest that the following questions might be useful to practitioners.

6.2.1 Questions for LEAs

- ◆ Is there any LEA guidance to schools or parents about issues of attendance generally and, within these, on any distinctive characteristics of school refusal and school phobia? Are there any good school policy documents or guidance which could be shared within the authority?

- ◆ What part is currently played by the EWS in cases of school refusal and phobia?
- ◆ What part is currently played by the EPS to support schools' approaches to school refusal and phobia? Could this be developed?
- ◆ What input do other agencies (for example, CAMHS, social services) make in supporting pupils with school refusal and phobia? Could a stronger multi-agency approach be usefully developed?
- ◆ What strategies are in place to support school phobics and refusers in school? Is there, for example, a peer mentoring system?
- ◆ What ongoing support is there for pupils once they have been reintegrated, after a period of absence? Are pupils clear about what is expected of them?
- ◆ How are parents involved in attendance difficulties?
- ◆ To what extent are pupils involved in addressing issues of school refusal and phobia, both for themselves, and in relation to difficulties which their peers might have? Is there a system for accessing pupils' perceptions of school?

6.2.2 Questions for schools

- ◆ Is there any school policy or guidance regarding issues of school refusal and phobia? Is this located within other broader documentation or within a specific document?
- ◆ Who is responsible for the analysis of registration data? Is there an effective means for collating, and taking action on, the results of any such analysis?
- ◆ Has there been any recent training for the whole school or individual members of staff with regard to pupils with problems of refusal or phobia?
- ◆ Is there a clear line of responsibility for these pupils? Are all staff aware of this?
- ◆ Is there evidence that school systems are reformed if a pupil's non-attendance is the result of a 'rational' fear? This might be due to bullying or particularly unpleasant places or situations in school, such as unruly corridor behaviour, break times in confined spaces, or disorder in dinner queues.
- ◆ Which LEA support services or outside agencies can be accessed to support pupils regarded as school refusers or phobics?

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For further information, please contact the
Local Government Association at:

Local Government House, Smith Square,
London SW1P 3HZ
Telephone 020 7664 3000
Fax 020 7664 3030
E-mail info@lga.gov.uk
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