

# Improving Pupil Attendance at School

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

NIA 122/03, 4th November 2004





Northern Ireland Audit Office

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General  
for Northern Ireland

# Improving Pupil Attendance at School

NIA 122/03

BELFAST: The Stationery Office

£16.00

This report has been prepared under Article 8 of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 for presentation to the Northern Ireland Assembly in accordance with Article 11 of that Order.

*J M Dowdall CB*  
Comptroller and Auditor General

Northern Ireland Audit Office  
2nd November 2004

The Comptroller and Auditor General is the head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office employing some 145 staff. He, and the Northern Ireland Audit Office, are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of all Government Departments and a wide range of other public sector bodies; and he has statutory authority to report to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and other bodies have used their resources.

For further information about the Northern Ireland Audit Office please contact:

**Northern Ireland Audit Office**

106 University Street

BELFAST

BT7 1EU

Tel: 028 9025 1100

email: [info@niauditoffice.gov.uk](mailto:info@niauditoffice.gov.uk)

website: [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk)

# List of Abbreviations

DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EOTAS	Education Other Than At School
ESO	Education Supervision Order
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
EWS	Education Welfare Service
GATE	Getting Ahead Through Education
MORI	Market and Opinion Research International
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PAM	Primary Attendance Matters

# Table of Contents

	Page	Paragraph
<b>Executive Summary</b>	7	1
<b>Part 1: What Information is available on pupil attendance and how is it used?</b>		
What is the definition of absence?	18	1.2
What information is available on absences?	20	1.8
Has anybody seen....?	23	1.13
How great is the challenge of improving attendance?	24	1.15
Persistent absenteeism is a growing problem	27	1.20
What are the impacts of non-attendance?	30	1.24
Why do pupils skip school?	32	1.27
<b>Part 2: How effective are the strategies in place to improve attendance and tackle absence?</b>		
The role of the Education Welfare Service	34	2.2
Referrals	36	2.7
Casework	34	2.8
Education Supervision Orders	37	2.9
<b>Departmental Initiatives</b>	40	
The Group 1 Initiative	40	2.16
Key Stage 4 Flexibility Initiative	41	2.18
Education other than at school	42	2.21
Funding for initiatives on absenteeism	42	2.22

# Table of Contents

	Page	Paragraph
<b>EWS Initiatives</b>	44	
All Boards: Primary Attendance Matters (PAM) Pilot Project	45	2.28
Belfast Board	45	2.29
North Eastern Board	46	2.32
Southern Board	46	2.32
South Eastern Board	46	2.33
Western Board	47	2.34
<b>School Initiatives</b>	47	
First Day Contact	47	2.36
Rewarding Attendance	48	2.37
Out of School Activities	48	2.39
Case Example: Corpus Christi College, Belfast	49	2.40
The problem of condoned absence	50	2.41
Working with other agencies	52	2.44
Absence levels remain high despite measures to improve attendance	53	2.47
<b>Appendices:</b>		
Appendix 1: Schools visited by NIAO	58	
Appendix 2: Recommendations of the Education and Training Inspectorate from its survey of the Education Welfare Service in Northern Ireland, 2002	59	
Appendix 3: Audit Commission Checklist	60	
Appendix 4: How School based intervention fits into the process	64	
List of NIAO Reports	65	

# Executive Summary

## Improving Pupil Attendance at School

### Background

1. Currently, in Northern Ireland, there are over 165,000 pupils (years 1-7) enrolled in 911 primary schools and over 155,000 pupils (years 8-12) enrolled in 233 secondary and grammar schools. An important aspect of these pupils' access to education is the amount of time they actually spend in the classroom, as when they are absent from school they forego opportunities to learn. Levels of pupil absence from school have been a matter of concern for some time both here and in Great Britain and the Government has made reducing the rate of unauthorised absence one of its priorities.
2. Absences from school may be for legitimate reasons or otherwise; the latter type of absence is often called unauthorised absence. The most obvious legitimate reason is ill-health. Unauthorised absentees include both pupils who are absent from school purely by their own initiative (truanting), and those whose absence is condoned by parents, for example for holidays during term time. Pupils may also be excluded from their schools either for a fixed-period or permanently. **This Report does not deal with pupils excluded from school.**
3. Any time pupils are out of school is costly. In terms of education resources, annual spending by the Department of Education (Department) and the five Education and Library Boards<sup>1</sup> is based on the assumption that there will be over 300,000 primary and post-primary pupils to be taught in over 1,100 schools. Once committed, virtually all this money will be spent regardless of how many children are actually attending school. The cost of poor attendance, therefore, can be measured in terms of resources expended for education that does not take place. Unauthorised absence is particularly costly as it also requires schools to

---

1. While the Department carries central responsibility for schools, five autonomous Boards are statutorily charged with the delivery of education services in their respective areas. Schools are funded by the Department, either directly or through the Boards. From their budgets, schools can decide on their own spending priorities.

devote resources to contacting and meeting with parents and guardians, disciplining pupils, if appropriate, and documenting cases of persistent absenteeism for referral to the Boards' Education Welfare Service (see paragraph 5).

4. In terms of wider social costs, high unauthorised absence rates have been linked to low academic achievement among pupils<sup>2</sup>, while truancy before the age of 16 has been identified<sup>3</sup> as a risk factor for not being in education, employment or training at age 16-18. Research<sup>4</sup> also indicates that truancy can lead to more tangible forms of delinquency such as theft, criminal damage and abusive conduct.

### Who is responsible for school attendance?

5. **Parents** have prime responsibility for a child's attendance at school. Under the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, parents/carers must ensure that their child, if of compulsory school age (four years to 16 years), receives full-time education either through regular attendance at school or otherwise. **Schools** are responsible for maintaining registers of pupils and are the only legal authorisers (or not) of absence. While the **Department of Education** carries central responsibility for schools, **the Boards** have a duty to provide a sufficient number of school places to meet the needs of all children in their respective areas and provide alternative education for some pupils not in school. The Boards discharge their duties and responsibilities in respect of attendance through the provision of **Education Welfare Services (EWS)** to families and

---

2. Improving attendance and behaviour in secondary schools, Office for Standards in Education, London: OFSTED, 2001

3. Literature review of the cost of "not being in education or training" at age 16-18, B.Coles, S.Hutton, J.Bradshaw, G.Craig,C.Godfrey and J.Johnson, Research Report 347, Nottingham: Department of Education and Skills, 2002

4. Together we can tackle it: a checklist for police and schools working together to tackle truancy, crime and disorder, Department for Education and Employment and Home Office, London: DfEE, 2001



schools. The fundamental purpose of the EWS is to discharge the Boards legal duty to ensure that all registered pupils of compulsory school age attend regularly and punctually. Schools also have a role to play here in that part of their function of deciding whether absences are acceptable or not may involve deciding on which pupils need to be referred to the EWS.

## What our study covered

6. This report examines what is being done to improve pupils' attendance at school. We looked specifically at:
  - What information is available on pupil attendance and how it is used (Part 1); and
  - the effectiveness of action taken to promote school attendance (Part 2).
7. In the course of our examination, we interviewed Departmental and Board officials, visited a number of schools, and surveyed a sample of schools in order to establish the levels of pupil absence. Professional advice in relation to the report was provided by Anne Sutherland from the Graduate School of Education, Queen's University Belfast.

## Substantial numbers of pupils miss school everyday

8. Every day in Northern Ireland, thousands of children are absent from school, many with no valid reason. Unauthorised absence, either condoned by parents or not, has long been identified as a key predictor for negative outcomes in education and employment. It is also important to recognise that unexcused absences are only part of the problem. Many pupils can have patterns of absence but are not considered truants because their absences have been authorised by

their schools. However, if pupils are not in school (regardless of the reason), they miss out on valuable educational experiences and are at risk of the same negative outcomes as those who are absent without a valid reason. With investment in education growing and the Chief Inspector reporting<sup>5</sup> generally improving standards at all levels of schooling it is vital that every child takes advantage of this.

### **There is a need to develop a strategic approach in dealing with the problem of school absence**

9. This report has focussed on the performance of the Department, Boards and schools in acting as agents of change and in supporting and monitoring improvement in school attendance. In the first place, we identified the need for the Department and Boards to develop a more strategic perspective on attendance problems. This would allow them to outline their aims and priorities and to include targets for achieving improvements in attendance. We also suggested that as part of this process the work of the Department and the Boards should focus more on bringing about change in school policy and procedures and disseminating good practice ideas for managing attendance in schools. In taking this approach forward, the existing Chief Education Welfare Officer forum provides a platform for promoting a strategic debate about the developing role of EWS services.

### **More effective collection and use of data is required**

10. Underlying the development of a strategic approach, we have emphasised the importance of using data to plan effective initiatives to deal with the problem of low attendance. The Department and Boards need to know the levels of authorised and unauthorised absence in individual schools in order to be able to identify patterns and trends and to work with schools to understand the factors affecting levels of school attendance. Without this basic understanding, they cannot develop appropriate strategies nor set realistic targets for improvement.

---

5. Chief Inspector's Report 1999-2002, Education and Training Inspectorate, Department of Education, 2003.

## Despite successful local initiatives, unauthorised absence from school remains a significant problem

11. Although our review of initiatives aimed at tackling attendance problems found substantial evidence of effort, innovation and success at local level, it was perplexing that this impact did not appear to be reflected in any reduction in the levels of unauthorised absence revealed by our survey of schools. While initiatives were found to have had a generally positive impact on encouraging school attendance, changes in the causes and categories of non-attendance may be masked by the statistics. This emphasises the importance of having in place effective information systems which will provide a basis for a comprehensive assessment of the scale and nature of non-attendance and the efficacy of methods adopted to combat it.

## Main Conclusions and Recommendations

### What information is available on pupil attendance and how is it used?

#### Greater clarity is needed on the interpretation of absence

12. In our view, the current distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence can be unhelpful because schools may apply the terms in different ways. As a result, we recommend that the Department and Boards should review the reasons for pupils being absent from schools and provide schools with greater clarification of the definitions of authorised and unauthorised absence and how these should be interpreted (paragraph 1.6).

#### While tackling unauthorised absence is a priority, it is important not to lose sight of overall absence levels

13. A specific focus on pupils whose absence is unauthorised is important as these are the ones most likely to be affected by non-attendance at school. However, we recognise that there is a risk that the distinction between authorised and

unauthorised absence may mask the scale of the problem faced by schools if recording attendance focuses on the presentation of statistics rather than on seeking solutions to the attendance problem. Any time out of school can be detrimental to a pupil's future prospects so, in our view, it is also important that Boards and schools place emphasis on improving overall attendance figures rather than just unauthorised absence (paragraph 1.7).

### **Much more needs to be done with the information available on school attendance and absence**

14. We recognise that implementing effective, data-driven methods for tracking the occurrence of unauthorised absence is a challenge for the education services. However, the lack of appropriate systems for collecting and analysing this data has meant that the Department, the Boards and schools have had difficulty in effectively identifying causes of absenteeism, applying approaches to address its causes and targeting resources. We recommend that the Department and the Boards should take steps to ensure that the proposed networking of C2K - the administrative support system for schools - is completed as swiftly as possible in order to assist themselves and schools in monitoring levels and patterns of school absence and in informing intelligent strategy formulation (paragraph 1.12).

### **The use of IT has potential for combating post-registration truancy**

15. In schools identified as having particularly poor attendance records, the Department has made funding available for the introduction of electronic registration systems in schools. This use of information technology has the capacity to improve the tracking of attendance on a lesson-by-lesson basis and to provide speedy retrieval and analysis of data. In our view, the Department should evaluate the use of electronic registration in order to determine if its potential can be realised in significantly reducing levels of unauthorised absenteeism, and of post-registration truancy in particular. Schools would then have to balance the cost and intrusion into lesson times of such a system against the level of post-registration truancy they experience (paragraph 2.14).

### How great is the challenge of improving attendance?

16. Neither the Department nor the Boards was able to provide us with any analysis of the split between authorised and unauthorised absences, despite the fact that schools classify absences on the basis of these categories on the C2K system (paragraph 1.10). Instead we approached a sample of schools directly for this information. Our survey results indicated that on any one day, of 9,800 primary school pupils who are not at school, around 1,300 could be absent with no valid reason and of 11,600 post-primary pupils who are not at school, around 3,600 could be absent with no valid reason. As primary schools are allocated, on average, funding of around £1,600 for each pupil they enroll and post primary schools an average of £2,600, this means that, annually, resources amounting to around £12 million are provided for these absent pupils. The Department has pointed out that it is inappropriate to attempt to quantify the cost of poor attendance in such monetary terms as the cost of educating a class remains the same irrespective of the number of pupils absent on any one day. The Department contends that the real cost of poor attendance is to be found in the consequences for the individual pupil of the lost learning opportunity later in life with poor employment prospects or in the resources required to sustain social policies intended to remediate poor educational outcomes for adults (paragraph 1.19).

### Persistent absenteeism is a growing problem.

17. Other statistics held within the Boards provide some further insight into the scale of the problem of unauthorised absences. These relate to persistent or chronic non-attenders who are referred to the Education Welfare Service by schools. This data shows that in 2002-03, 1.8 per cent of primary school pupils (3,012) have given their schools cause for concern while an alarming 5.6 per cent of post-primary school pupils (8,732) are considered to be persistent non-attenders. The percentage of pupils who meet the criteria of persistent absentee has also risen steadily over the last three years which would appear to demonstrate that pupils are absent without excuse more frequently. This is worryingly demonstrated by the 70 percent increase in referrals among primary school pupils at Key Stage 1 (paragraphs 1.20 - 1.24).

### **Target setting is an important element in controlling non-attendance**

18. In our view, the Department needs to implement a targeting strategy similar to that in place in Great Britain. As achieving targeted reductions in school absence will require action at local level, the Department should work with the Boards to develop a clearer understanding of school attendance issues, including factors affecting absence levels in different areas and sectors of the school system. The starting point in such an exercise has to be the gathering of up-to-date data on levels of authorised and unauthorised absence within schools. On the basis of this, Boards would be asked to identify those schools that have above average rates of unauthorised absence in order to begin discussion about target setting. These targets need not be dictated centrally but would be agreed between the Boards and schools and would be suitable for the individual school. This will provide a basis for developing local strategies and setting local targets to reduce unauthorised absence. Using school-level targets, the Boards could then establish absence targets aimed at improving general school attendance in their area. This layering of targets should enable the Boards to tackle absence in a holistic fashion, while maintaining a pressure on the serious problem of unauthorised absence (paragraph 1.24).

## **How effective are strategies in place to improve attendance and tackle absence?**

### **In some cases a shortage of EWOs has delayed action on referred pupils**

19. Given that only persistent non-attenders are referred to the EWS, we find it surprising that in some instances cases are simply placed on a waiting list. While we understand from the Boards that, in part, this is an issue of recruiting and retaining the qualified staff to meet the increasing demands being placed on EWS, we recommend that Boards should take urgent action to allocate any

referrals held on waiting lists to another EWO, where possible. We also recommend that, in the pursuit of a more joined-up service, the Boards should identify those schools whose intake covers more than one Board area and investigate the feasibility of having only one EWS providing support (paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6).

### **EWS needs to take a more strategic view on school absence**

20. We acknowledge that the management of attendance and absence is a collaborative effort shared between parents, schools and EWS. We consider that, in order to realise the full benefits of their role, EWS needs to develop more its function as a source of expertise on strategy, procedures and data analysis. The starting point in developing a strategy for improving attendance has to be an analysis of the attendance/absence problems faced by the Boards and schools. To do this the Boards need to monitor patterns and levels of absence in schools in order to be able to identify trends and to set targets for achieving improvements in attendance across the Boards, for specific schools or groups of schools. Key to such a structured approach is the availability of basic data: for example, on levels of authorised and unauthorised absence; comparisons between schools; and the extent of improvements (paragraph 2.12).

### **Failure to fund research into school absence may be a false economy**

21. NIAO welcomes the Department's recent attempt to obtain funding for an initiative to promote the successful transition into secondary education for a number of pupils. However as the bid was unsuccessful we would encourage the Department to continue its efforts to secure funding for development work on preventative initiatives. We recognise that there are many competing demands on the Department's own funding and that such work can be deferred without immediate adverse consequences. However, one of the themes emerging from our review is that school absence is expensive. Failure to undertake a proactive approach to preventative measures such as this could be

regarded as a form of disinvestment which is ultimately a false economy. We recommend, therefore, that funding for development work in the area of absenteeism should be reviewed by the Department, taking into account the possible additional future costs which might accumulate for the taxpayer if absence levels continue at their current levels (paragraph 2.23).

### **The Department can also do more to help in promoting attendance**

22. In view of the experience in Great Britain, it is our view that the Department needs to play a more active role in assisting in the development of structures that promote the identification of attendance problems in Northern Ireland; in ensuring that the necessary support is available for vulnerable young people; and in the development of preventative strategies aimed at engaging young people in learning. Likewise, we recommend that the Department should take steps to increase its profile in tackling attendance issues in Northern Ireland by issuing appropriate guidance and acting as a source of accessible best practice (paragraph 2.25).

### **Parental toleration of school absence must be challenged**

23. While we recognise that punitive measures against parents have a role to play in dealing with the most intransigent non-attenders, these have to be balanced by a focus on support and promoting awareness of the problem. If parents have a negative attitude towards schooling, we consider that there is an obligation on the Boards and schools to take responsibility for breaking down such a barrier, perhaps by mounting parenting skills classes. In terms of publicising attendance issues, we would commend the practice where schools produce leaflets for parents highlighting parental responsibility for ensuring regular attendance at school. In addition, we see a complementary role for the Department/Boards in raising the profile of school attendance issues, perhaps through a poster campaign and /or utilising local radio and press. Moreover, in terms of the specific issue of staggered school holiday periods, we consider that the Boards and Department should jointly seek to address greater harmonisation of these with schools (paragraph 2.43).



### **Absence levels remain high despite measures to improve attendance**

24. We found that the Department, Boards and schools have devised numerous measures to encourage good attendance and deal with poor attenders. We found many of these to be innovative and pursued with vigour by committed staff. In many instances these measures seemed to be working well and people had high hopes of them. In others, the impact of the initiative was more patchy. In general, however, we found that even where the view was that initiatives were successful in tackling absence, there was a lack of statistical evidence of improved attendance. Indeed it is worrying that indicative statistics generated through our survey of schools show that among post-primary schools, the problem of unauthorised absence remains at a relatively high level compared with Great Britain (paragraph 2.47).

### **More effective use of data is fundamental to combat poor attendance**

25. In this context, we reiterate the recommendation at paragraph 2.12 on the need to remedy this deficiency. Board EWS's need to be able to use data to ensure that resources are clearly targeted on schools where attendance is problematic. They also need to be able to use data to monitor the effectiveness of the attendance management systems in operation in schools and the measures adopted to combat poor attendance. Only in this way will they be able to develop suitable local standards and targets (paragraph 2.49).



# Part 1

## What information is available on pupil attendance and how is it used?

### Introduction

- 1.1 The first step in developing a strategy to tackle pupil absence from school is to establish reliable information on the scale of the problem. Information about attendance should be easily accessible and provided in a format which enables the regular review of pupil absences at school, Board and Departmental level. This information can then be used to consider how absence rates compare across Board areas and school sectors; to set targets and monitor their achievement and to identify ways in which non-attendance may be reduced.

### What is the definition of absence?

- 1.2 All schools are required to take an attendance register twice a day: at the start of the morning session and once during the afternoon session. This register will show whether a pupil is present, engaged in an approved educational activity off-site, or absent. If a pupil of compulsory school age is absent, the register must show whether the absence was authorised or unauthorised: authorised absence relates to instances where a school has either given approval in advance for a pupil to be away, or has accepted an explanation offered afterwards as satisfactory justification for absence (for example, due to illness, religious observance, or family bereavement). All other absences are treated as unauthorised.

- 1.3 However, the definitions of these two categories, “authorised and unauthorised”, are not without their problems. Unauthorised absence refers to absences from school which a school has not approved. However, this definition can cover the long-term non-attendance of a persistent absentee; the occasional truant; the child kept at home by a parent to help care for siblings; and the child taken out of school for a family holiday during term-time. In addition, there is the problem of post-registration truancy where pupils absent themselves after being marked present or only absent themselves from certain lessons or groups of lessons.
- 1.4 Defining what constitutes authorised absence may also be contentious. Although only schools, and not parents, may authorise absence, the problem of parentally condoned absence persists. Parents whose children were absent for reasons which the school would not accept as legitimate can seek to avoid confrontation by providing false explanations of which the school would approve. In Great Britain, a report by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in 2001 (see paragraph 4) notes that “some of the plausible, or at least practically irrefutable explanations which schools receive for absence, which they then classify as authorised, are questionable.” Moreover, in September 2002 in Great Britain, the Association of British Travel Agents assisted the Government with a MORI poll, which asked parents who had been on holiday about their attitudes to taking children out of school for holidays. This found that 62 per cent had at some point taken, or would consider taking their children out of school to go on holiday with 8 per cent having already taken them without permission. It also found that 40 per cent of those who had taken their children away did not believe that it would have an impact on their education.
- 1.5 Separating the two categories of authorised and unauthorised absence statistically can be difficult. Schools differ in the degree to which they accept reasons for absence as legitimate. As a result there can be wide and implausible variation in the categorisation of absence among schools with similar overall levels of attendance. For instance, in the data collected from our survey of schools (see paragraph 1.16), we found instances where schools had categorised

no absences as unauthorised. Unless schools use the same criteria for distinguishing authorised from unauthorised absence, few safe conclusions can be drawn about the extent of the absence problem or the efficacy of methods adopted to combat it.

### **Greater clarity is needed on the interpretation of absence**

1.6

In our view, the current distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence can be unhelpful because schools may apply the terms in different ways. As a result, we recommend that the Department and Boards should review the reasons for pupils being absent from schools and provide schools with greater clarification of the definitions of authorised and unauthorised absence and how these should be interpreted.

### **While tackling unauthorised absence is a priority, it is important not to lose sight of overall absence levels**

1.7

A specific focus on pupils whose absence is unauthorised is important as these are the ones most likely to be affected by non-attendance at school. However, we recognise that there is a risk that the distinction between authorised and unauthorised absence may mask the scale of the problem faced by schools if recording attendance focuses on the presentation of statistics rather than on seeking solutions to the attendance problem. Any time out of school can be detrimental to a pupil's future prospects so, in our view, it is also important that Boards and schools place emphasis on improving overall attendance figures rather than just unauthorised absence.

### **What information is available on absences?**

1.8 Currently, administration in schools is supported by a computerised service known as C2K<sup>6</sup>. This system includes an attendance module that is used for managing schools' attendance registers. School registration information is

---

6. The C2K project is a ten-year government initiative designed to provide communication and information technology within a managed learning environment for all schools in Northern Ireland. It will provide the content necessary to support the curriculum, professional development and school administration and management. It is a development of the Computerised Local Administration System for Schools (CLASS), the original system in place to support schools.

transferred onto this system either from manual registers or optical mark recognition sheets. The information held on C2K is used by schools primarily to monitor attendance and identify persistent non-attenders. Information can be generated at individual pupil, class and year levels. During our review, we visited a number of schools (see Appendix 1) who told us that the reports generated by the system were user-friendly and provided detailed information to enable the school to monitor attendance levels. These reports are also used to identify patterns of non-attendance such as where pupils regularly miss a particular day in the week. In cases where a pupil was persistently absent from school the reports were also shown to parents. Schools told us that parents could easily understand the information contained within them.

1.9 Data from C2K is also collated and used to inform the Department of the overall level of school attendance and absence in secondary schools. (This is not done for the primary school sector, as not all primary schools are connected to the system.) Using this attendance data, Table 1 provides a breakdown of absence rates within the Boards’ post-primary schools along with comparators from Great Britain.

**Table 1: Northern Ireland post-primary schools compare favourably with their counterparts in Great Britain**

	1997-98 %	1998-99 %	1999-00 %	2000-01 %	2001-02 %	2002-03 %
Belfast	8.0	8.1	8.0	8.4	8.1	8.0
North Eastern	6.8	6.8	7.0	7.3	7.3	7.2
South Eastern	7.7	7.8	7.9	8.2	8.1	7.9
Southern	6.9	7.2	7.1	7.4	7.4	7.5
Western	7.4	7.6	8.4	7.5	7.4	7.2
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>7.6</b>
England	9.0	8.9	8.6	9.0	8.7	8.3
Scotland	11.1	10.9	10.6	11.1	10.8	10.5
Wales	10.5	10.6	10.1	10.5	10.1	9.6

Source: Department, DfES, Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly.

- 1.10 In terms of overall attendance, the data shows that, in general, Northern Ireland schools compare favourably with their counterparts in Great Britain. However, overall absence statistics such as these tell only part of the story. For instance, the Northern Ireland post-primary absence rate of 7.6 per cent (equating to 12,000 of the total post-primary pupil population) does not necessarily mean that this number of pupils is absent on a daily basis; the missing 7.6 per cent could come from a small number of pupils with lengthy absences or from a higher percentage of pupils with brief absences. Moreover, neither the Department nor the Boards were able to provide us with any analysis of the split between authorised and unauthorised absences, despite the fact that schools classify absences on the basis of these categories on the C2K system. This information is readily available from the websites of the respective Departments in England, Scotland and Wales. We asked the Department why this information was not available in Northern Ireland. It told us that, historically, it had not considered it appropriate to record absence under these categories, but pointed out that the current development of C2K should make such a breakdown possible.
- 1.11 Although information about school attendance and absence is plentiful within C2K, there is no remote access facility to allow analyses of aggregate school-level data or to compare data between schools or groups of pupils. Access is only possible within individual schools. While C2K maintains a detailed log of the attendance records of all pupils attending schools, currently it does not provide strategic information or information at Board or school sector level. Instead, C2K is used by individual schools primarily to monitor attendance and identify persistent non-attenders. We understand that proposed networking arrangements within the C2K project will enable remote access to be made available. However, this facility is not likely to be available in the short-term. It seems important to us that the Department and Boards should have similar management information available to them as their counterparts in Great Britain.

## Much more needs to be done with the information available on school attendance and absence

1.12

We recognise that implementing effective, data-driven methods for tracking the occurrence of unauthorised absence is a challenge for the education services. However, the lack of appropriate systems for collecting and analysing this data has meant that the Department, the Boards and schools have had difficulty in effectively identifying causes of absenteeism, applying approaches to address its causes and targeting resources. We recommend that the Department and the Boards should take steps to ensure that the proposed networking of C2K is completed as swiftly as possible in order to assist themselves and schools in monitoring levels and patterns of school absence and in informing intelligent strategy formulation.

### “Has anybody seen....?”

1.13 While there are problems in defining and categorising absences, the system of morning and afternoon registration at least provides for the measurement of whole-session absences: pupils are marked absent in a document that exists solely to detect absence. What can be more difficult to measure is “post-registration” absence, i.e. unauthorised absence from certain lessons or groups of lessons. In these instances pupils will normally have been marked officially present. The reliable measurement of this type of unauthorised absence is dependent on the degree to which schools collect attendance information on a lesson-by-lesson basis. In theory, this enables schools to spot any internal truancy or instances where pupils leave the school premises, as well as to identify patterns associated with, for example, particular subjects, teachers, times of day or groups of pupils. In practice, we found that in many of the schools we visited, teachers did take a register during lessons for their own purposes and that this data was used to monitor post-registration absences. However, we were unable to judge how widespread this practice is given the likely time implications for the teachers involved in undertaking follow-up action. Moreover, because this data does not find its way onto the C2K system, there is no way of gauging the potential scale of the problem.

## The use of IT has potential for combating post-registration truancy

1.14

In schools identified as having particularly poor attendance records, the Department has made funding available for the introduction of electronic registration systems in schools. This use of information technology has the capacity to improve the tracking of attendance on a lesson-by-lesson basis and to provide speedy retrieval and analysis of data. In our view, the Department should evaluate the use of electronic registration in order to determine if its potential can be realised in significantly reducing levels of unauthorised absenteeism, and of post-registration truancy in particular. Schools would then have to balance the cost and intrusion into lesson times of such a system against the level of post-registration truancy they experience.

## How great is the challenge of improving attendance?

1.15 The last major study of absenteeism in Northern Ireland was carried out in 1992<sup>7</sup>. At that time, some 3 per cent of compulsory school age pupils were classified as persistent non-attenders i.e. absent for about 25 per cent or more of the term. The findings indicated that around 1.3 per cent of pupils were absent from school for reasons which would be unacceptable such as condoned absence, truanting or under age employment. The study also showed that the pattern of absenteeism for unacceptable reasons increased with age, peaking at 4.6 per cent in the final two years of compulsory schooling.

1.16 The accuracy of schools' recording of pupil absences cannot always be guaranteed (see paragraph 1.5) but an analysis of the split between authorised and unauthorised absence is a crucial starting point in the measurement of the levels of children truanting or being kept off school by their parents without permission. In order to gain a better understanding of the nature of school absences we decided to approach schools directly for this information. In conjunction with the Department we identified a statistically valid random sample of schools, covering all Boards, which were then asked to supply details

---

7. Persistent School Absenteeism in Northern Ireland 1992, A.E. Sutherland (1995), Belfast: NICER Research Unit, School of Education, The Queen's University of Belfast.



of authorised and unauthorised absences for the 2002-03 school year. In total, 202 schools were surveyed - 102 post-primary (95 per cent response rate) and 100 primary (51 per cent response rate). The results of this exercise are illustrated in Tables 2 and 3 which also provide a comparison with data from Great Britain.

**Table 2: Levels of Authorised and Unauthorised Absence in Primary Schools Responding to Survey**

	Total Absence %	Authorised Absence %	Unauthorised Absence %	Total Attendance %
Belfast	7.63	5.51	2.12	92.37
North Eastern	5.09	4.77	0.32	94.92
South Eastern	5.46	4.67	0.79	94.54
Southern	5.43	5.28	0.15	94.57
Western	6.02	5.35	0.67	93.98
<b>Northern Ireland Average</b>	<b>5.92</b>	<b>5.11</b>	<b>0.81</b>	<b>94.08</b>
England	5.81	5.38	0.43	94.18
Wales	*	*	*	*
Scotland	5.10	4.76	0.34	94.90

Source: NIAO, DfES, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Executive \* Information is not currently collected on Welsh primary schools

**Table 3: Levels of Authorised and Unauthorised Absence in Post-Primary Schools Responding to Survey**

	Total Absence %	Authorised Absence %	Unauthorised Absence %	Total Attendance %
Belfast	8.53	5.83	2.71	91.46
North Eastern	7.47	5.39	2.09	92.52
South Eastern	8.29	5.88	2.41	91.71
Southern	8.14	5.28	2.86	91.86
Western	6.32	4.38	1.95	93.67
<b>Northern Ireland Average</b>	<b>7.46</b>	<b>5.11</b>	<b>2.35</b>	<b>92.54</b>
England	8.28	7.21	1.07	91.72
Wales	9.60	8.00	1.60	91.40
Scotland	10.53	9.32	1.21	89.47

Source: NIAO, DfES, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Executive

- 1.17 On the basis of our sample, we found that absence in the primary sector amounted to 5.92 per cent in 2002-03. The figure for post- primary is 7.46 per cent, which accords with the attendance figures for the sector produced by the Boards (see Table 1, paragraph 1.9). A further analysis of Board data carried out for us by the Department, showed that the best attended schools tended to be from the voluntary grammar sector, as may have been expected, where absence levels can be as low as three to four percent. On the other hand, poorer performing secondary schools have absence rates ranging between 11 to 30 per cent. The existence of such sectoral extremes, however, may give an inaccurate picture of absence rates in post-primary schools. A greater readiness among voluntary grammar schools to exclude children with attendance problems will inevitably lead to secondary schools in the controlled and maintained sectors having to accept such pupils if they have spare capacity. This can distort the overall attendance rates of such schools.
- 1.18 In terms of overall absence, the statistics in Tables 2 and 3 seems to indicate that Northern Ireland performs favourably in comparison with Great Britain, particularly so at post-primary level as already pointed out at paragraph 1.10. However, the breakdown of the composition of recorded absences within schools in Northern Ireland reveals that unauthorised absence levels tend to be higher, around twice the level recorded for England in both the primary and post-primary sectors. Indeed, at the extreme, our survey found unauthorised absence in two schools in the Belfast Board to be as high as 11 per cent. We have already acknowledged (see paragraph 1.5) the possible limitations of statistics in terms of potential inconsistency in reporting within schools. Similarly, this would have to be recognised as a limiting factor in comparisons between Northern Ireland and other regions of the United Kingdom. At the same time, the Department has issued guidance to schools on the classification of non-attendance which should be adhered to.
- 1.19 As pointed out, also, at paragraph 1.10, the management information held on pupil absence rates does not readily translate into pupil numbers. However, the

survey results could mean that on any one day, of the 9,800 primary school pupils who are not at school, around 1,300 could be absent with no valid reason and of the 11,600 post-primary pupils who are not at school, around 3,600 could be absent with no valid reason. As primary schools are allocated, on average, funding of around £1,600 for each pupil they enroll and post primary schools an average of £2,600, this means that, annually, resources amounting to around £12 million are provided for these absent pupils. The Department has pointed out that it is inappropriate to attempt to quantify the cost of poor attendance in such monetary terms as the cost of educating a class remains the same irrespective of the number of pupils absent on any one day. The Department contends that the real cost of poor attendance is to be found in the consequences for the individual pupil of the lost learning opportunity later in life with poor employment prospects or in the resources required to sustain social policies intended to remediate poor educational outcomes for adults.

## **Persistent absenteeism is a growing problem**

1.20 There are statistics held within the Boards, however, which do provide some further insight into the scale of the problem of unauthorised absences. These relate to persistent or chronic non-attenders referred to the EWS by schools. Schools can do this when they have exhausted other means of intervention. The criteria for referral are as follows:

- when a pupil has a pattern of persistent absenteeism based on an attendance level of less than 85 per cent of available sessions;
- when a pupil is considered at risk of developing a pattern of persistent absenteeism i.e. an attendance level of less than 90 percent; or
- where there is a general concern about a pupil's attendance pattern.

The Department pointed out that while the trigger for a referral to EWS may be a concern about attendance, the underlying cause may not be down to a disinterest in school. In this regard, an analysis in a recent report by the Inspectorate<sup>8</sup> shows that at Key Stage Four attendance, per se, was not the primary difficulty in over 25 per cent of the cases referred to EWS: factors such as teenage pregnancy and behavioural problems were cited as being the predominant reason for a referral.

- 1.21 Table 4 provides a breakdown of the caseload of pupil referrals being dealt with by the Boards' EWS over the last three years. On the basis of this data, in 2002-03, 1.8 per cent of primary school pupils have given their schools cause for concern while an alarming 5.6 per cent of post-primary school pupils are considered to be persistent non-attenders. The data shows that the percentage of pupils who satisfy the criteria of persistent absentee has risen steadily over the period which would appear to demonstrate that pupils are absent without excuse more frequently. This is most dramatically and worryingly demonstrated by the 70 per cent increase in referrals among primary school pupils at Key Stage 1. This evidence lends support to the view, expressed by other researchers,<sup>9</sup> that strategies to deal with poor attendance should focus on younger children. The case for early identification and intervention, therefore, is very strong in order to help avoid the escalation of problems and the development of persistent non-attendance. We acknowledge that dealing with this problem currently forms an important element of the Boards' future work in combating unauthorised absence from school (see paragraph 2.28). It may also be the case that the spectacular increase in the number of Key Stage 1 pupils referred to EWS reflects a similar increase in awareness among primary schools of the need to act at an early stage in dealing with the problem.

---

8. Education Other Than At School/Special Support Programmes for Peace and Reconciliation, Education and Training Inspectorate, 2000.

9. More willing to school? An independent evaluation of of the DfEE's Truancy and Disaffected Pupils Programme, J. Learmouth, DfEE, 1995; and Focusing on the individual while ignoring the context: an evaluation of an attendance project, P. Easen, J.Clark and M. Wootten, University of Newcastle, 1997.

**Table 4: The number of pupils referred to the Education Welfare Service is increasing**

	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	% Increase Over Period
Primary:				
Key Stage 1	843	1,207	1,435	70.2
Key Stage 2	1,330	1,421	1,577	18.6
	<b>2,173</b>	<b>2,628</b>	<b>3,012</b>	<b>38.6</b>
Post-Primary				
Key Stage 3	3,864	3,944	3,965	2.6
Key Stage 4	4,308	4,519	4,767	10.7
	<b>8,172</b>	<b>8,463</b>	<b>8,732</b>	<b>6.9</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10,345</b>	<b>11,091</b>	<b>11,744</b>	<b>13.5</b>

Source: Department

1.22 Given that the quality and accuracy of data collected on school absence levels are inadequate for detailed analysis of the problem, the Department has been unable to take a pro-active, province-wide approach to identifying the level of unauthorised absence within schools and targeting its reduction. For instance, the current target set by the Department<sup>10</sup> focuses on the hardcore of persistent non-attenders referred by schools to EWS. It aims to reduce this in primary schools by 40 per cent and in post-primary schools by 20 per cent by 2004, compared with 2000-01. By contrast, because of the greater availability of data on levels and types of non-attendance in Great Britain, DfES has set a target to reduce the 1.1 per cent unauthorised absence in English post-primary schools by ten per cent by 2004.

---

10. Programme for Government Annual Report 2001-02, Northern Ireland Executive, 2002

## Target setting is an important element in controlling non-attendance

1.23

In our view, the Department needs to implement a targeting strategy similar to that in place in Great Britain. As achieving targeted reductions in school absence will require action at local level, the Department should work with the Boards to develop a clearer understanding of school attendance issues, including factors affecting absence levels in different areas and sectors of the school system. The starting point in such an exercise has to be the gathering of up-to-date data on levels of authorised and unauthorised absence within schools. On the basis of this, Boards would be asked to identify those schools that have above average rates of unauthorised absence in order to begin discussion about target setting. These targets need not be dictated centrally but would be agreed between the Boards and schools and would be suitable for the individual school. This will provide a basis for developing local strategies and setting local targets to reduce unauthorised absence. Using school-level targets, the Boards could then establish absence targets aimed at improving general school attendance in their area. This layering of targets should enable the Boards to tackle absence in a holistic fashion, while maintaining a pressure on the serious problem of unauthorised absence.

## What are the impacts of non-attendance?

1.24 Left unchecked, non-attendance at school can have negative effects on pupils, schools and the community. In the first place, after absence from school, it can be hard for pupils to catch up. If a pupil misses school he/she will miss lessons which may not be repeated. To put absence in context, there are 190 contact days in the school year. At the level of persistent absenteeism - i.e. less than 85 per cent attendance - this means that pupils will miss at least 28.5 days of available lessons. Even where a pupil's attendance is at the 90 per cent level, they will still be missing 19 days of available lessons.

1.25 As a result, children who consistently fail to attend school are unlikely to maintain academic pace with their peers. OFSTED (see footnote (2)), for example, argues that a good way for a school to improve attendance is to draw to pupils' attention the links at individual level between attendance and attainment. All potentially disaffected pupils could then appreciate the benefits

of coming to school. A possible association between truancy and crime has also been noted by the Department for Education and Science<sup>11</sup> in Great Britain. Locally, research<sup>12</sup> tracking the educational histories of young people placed in Juvenile Justice Centres also draws attention to the fact that few, if any, had attended formal education on a regular basis and many had been out of mainstream schooling for a substantial amount of time. Indeed, a MORI survey of young people in 2002<sup>13</sup> shows that those who play truant are more likely to offend than those who do not, with two-thirds (65 per cent) of truants having offended, compared with less than a third (30 per cent) of those who have not played truant. In addition, recent research<sup>14</sup> identifies truanting from school before the age of sixteen as a risk factor for not being in education, employment or training at age 16-18.

- 1.26 Non-attendance can be costly, not just in monetary terms but also in terms of the time teachers may have to spend in implementing procedures to encourage good attendance or in dealing with the consequences of poor attendance, for example re-integrating absentees and helping them catch up on missed work. Truants are often associated with disruptive behaviour and demand attention when they return to school. Pupils who attend school diligently have to cope with the adjustments that teachers have to make to try to accommodate those who miss school and have to catch up. Regular attenders, therefore, may have their own education diminished through no fault of their own.

- 
11. Tackling Truancy Together: a strategy document, Department for Education and Employment, London, 1999
  12. The Education Experience of Young People in Juvenile Justice Centres, R. Kilpatrick and D. Harbinson, Department of Education, 2003.
  13. MORI Youth Survey, Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2002
  14. Literature Review of the cost of “not being in education, employment or training” at age 16-18, B. Coles, S. Hutton, J. Bradshaw, G. Craig, C. Godfrey, and J. Johnston, Research Report 347, Nottingham, Department for Education and Skills, 2002.

## Why do pupils skip school?

1.27 Those pupils who are absent from school without valid reasons do not constitute a homogeneous group, capable of being tackled by one simple strategy. The differences within the group lie not only in the extent of non-attendance (occasional truant or habitual non-attender), but also in the causes of the truanting behaviour and, therefore, in the potential strategies to control it. Thus, an initiative such as OFSTED's suggestion (paragraph 1.25) of drawing pupil's attention to the detrimental effect non-attendance can have on educational attainment, may be heavily outweighed, for a significant number, by a complex range of other educational/social interactions.

1.28 Unauthorised absence from school can result from difficulties within school, within the home due to poverty and social exclusion, from individual problems, or a combination of any of these. Research<sup>15</sup> among children describes the main causes of truancy as follows:

- The influence of friends and peers, who are seen as encouraging truancy as a status-seeking activity or as a way of joining in or blending in, and sometimes teasing or goading a child to truant;
- Relationships with teachers, seen as lacking respect/fairness;
- The content and delivery of the curriculum, seen as lacking in relevance and stimulus;
- Family factors, either parental attitudes or family problems;
- Bullying; and
- The classroom context, either because of teachers' inability to control, or problems arising from the child's own personality or learning abilities.

---

15. Talking back: Pupil Views on Disaffection, K. Kinder, A. Wakefield and A. Wilkin , 1996, National Foundation for Educational Research.



1.29 Recent research by the Scottish Council for Research in Education<sup>16</sup> found that the causes of habitual non-attendance were contested. On the one hand, pupils and parents stressed school-related factors as the main causes of truancy: for example, inappropriate curriculum; boredom; problems with lessons and teachers; frustration at school rules and peer pressure. Education authorities and teachers, on the other hand, believed that parental attitudes and home environments were more influential: for instance, parents putting a low value on education, disorganised lifestyles and inadequate parenting.



16. Absence from School: A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs, Scottish Council for Research in Education, Research Report RR424, Department for Education and Skills, 2003

# Part 2

## How effective are the strategies in place to improve attendance and tackle absence?

2.1 Absentees do not form a homogeneous group. There are different types of absence and children give very different reasons for not coming to school. There are also different patterns of absence. As a result, the Department, Boards and schools need to employ a range of strategies aimed at improving attendance and tackling absence. Our outline of the the potential causes of pupils' failure to attend school at paragraph 1.28, suggests that initiatives for dealing with absence need to take into account the three main influences on children's behaviour: individual; family/social; and school factors.

### The role of the Education Welfare Service

2.2 A key element in influencing these three areas is the work carried out by the Boards' Education Welfare Services (EWS) which assist schools in monitoring and promoting attendance. All the Boards have clear and detailed service level agreements for the support given by their EWS and each school should have a named Education Welfare Officer (EWO) who works in partnership with the school authorities to promote regular attendance. Some 171 Education Welfare Officers are employed across Northern Ireland. Schools are aware of the service and how it should be used. The EWS works closely with schools, parents and pupils to try and sort out attendance issues, particularly in the case of pupils referred to them by schools because of concerns about their attendance.

- 2.3 In 2002, the Department's Education and Training Inspectorate surveyed the work of the Boards' EWS<sup>17</sup>. Overall, the survey found evidence of significant strengths in the service, in particular, the high standards achieved by EWS Officers in their professional attitude and commitment to the educational welfare of the pupils whom the service supports. This survey provides a fuller exposition of the role of EWS beyond the narrow parameters of school attendance covering the diversity of services it provides to support young people and families to engage in, and benefit from, education in every form. However, the survey also identified a number of areas of policy and practice in relation to school attendance which needed to be addressed in order to improve the effectiveness of the service. These are detailed at Appendix 2 and they are largely reflected in the findings and conclusions drawn by this report.
- 2.4 The majority of the schools we visited were very positive about the overall level of support they were receiving from the EWS. While most EWO time is spent on referrals, in schools where the EWO visited regularly and for longer periods it was evident that better relationships were developed with staff, pupils and parents. However, six of the 14 schools we visited did express concern at the high turnover of EWOs allocated to their schools and the detrimental impact this had on building relationships with pupils, school staff and parents. One school told us that due to staff shortages it had virtually no EWO cover for most of the school year. Two schools also raised concerns due to the fact that, as their intake of pupils came from two Board areas, they were served by two EWOs. One of these schools told us that one EWO responded to referrals quicker than the other, while the second school stated that it had no EWO cover from one of the Boards for six months. This gave rise to the situation where cases referred to that Board were placed on a waiting list with no indication of when they would be acted on, while a case referred by the same school, at the same time, to the other Board would be dealt with straight away.

---

17. Report of a Survey of the Education Welfare Service in Northern Ireland, Education and Training Inspectorate, April/May 2002.

## **In some cases a shortage of EWOs has delayed action on referred pupils**

- 2.5 Given that only persistent non-attenders are referred to the EWS, we find it surprising that in some instances cases are simply placed on a waiting list. While we understand from the Boards that, in part, this is an issue of recruiting and retaining the qualified staff to meet the increasing demands being placed on EWS, we recommend that Boards should take urgent action to allocate any referrals held on waiting lists to another EWO, where possible.
- 2.6 We also recommend that, in the pursuit of a more joined-up service, the Boards should identify those schools whose intake covers more than one Board area and investigate the feasibility of having only one EWS providing support.

## **Referrals**

- 2.7 Referrals to the EWS are usually made by schools, although there may be occasions when this is done by the social services or parents. The overwhelming majority of referrals to the EWS are made on the basis of pupils' non-attendance: for instance, when a pattern of irregular attendance has developed; when a period of absence has become established; or when there is a lack of parental co-operation in ensuring a child's regular attendance. Before requesting intervention by the EWS, a school will be expected to have first undertaken a number of steps to address the pupil's non-attendance, for example, action by class/form teacher and contact by the school with parents. It is important that schools and the Boards are clear about their respective responsibilities. These are set out diagrammatically at Appendix 3.

## **Casework**

- 2.8 EWS casework is undertaken with referred pupils and their parents in order to bring about a return to regular attendance, taking account of individual

circumstances. This casework will involve the setting of targets for improvement which are subject to regular review. In some instances EWS intervention may require only a single home visit by an EWO in order to remind parents of their legal responsibilities or to help resolve a particular identified difficulty. In other instances there may be complex and deep-seated reasons why a pupil is not attending. In these circumstances, the Officer may engage with other professionals within the Board, for example an educational psychologist, and negotiate a plan of support. This may also involve referring the case on to or the involvement of other agencies outside the Board, or convening a multi-agency meeting. Casework will also require close and continuous liaison with the pupil's school. In cases where the main causes of the non-attendance may be school-related, the EWO will discuss these with the school in order to develop strategies to overcome the difficulties.

## Education Supervision Orders (ESO)

2.9 The working practices of the EWS have evolved as a result of the implementation of the Children Order (1995) which empowered Education and Library Boards to apply for Education Supervision Orders (ESO) in order to improve the attendance of individual pupils. The purpose of an ESO is to place a child who is not being properly educated under the supervision of the local education and library board. It aims to ensure that the child receives full-time education and that he/she and the parents receive intensive support, advice and guidance from a supervising EWO. However there is no sanction imposed if the ESO is not adhered to. A report commissioned by the Belfast Board<sup>18</sup> in 2000 highlighted a number of areas for action in the future management of ESOs and the Inspectorate have endorsed the Board's concerns in the recommendations of its survey (see paragraph 2.3).

2.10 A Board will apply to a court for an ESO only when it is considered to be in the child's interest to do so: for instance, when all other attempts to improve the

---

18. Education Supervision Project Report, Unicorn Consultancy and Belfast Education and Library Board EWS, 2000.

pupil’s attendance have failed; when parents appear likely to co-operate with a structured programme of work; or when there has been consultation and support requested from the social services. If a child’s attendance does not improve or the directions issued by the supervising EWO are not adhered to, then the ESO will be considered breached and the EWS will initiate legal proceedings against the parents. In these circumstances, a child’s parents may be brought before a magistrates court where, if convicted they will be liable to a maximum fine of up to £1,000. Table 5 shows that recourse to legal proceedings has not been extensive in Northern Ireland and that the fines applied have been well below the maximum permissible.

**Table 5: Recourse to legal proceedings has not been extensive in Northern Ireland**

	No. of Cases	No. of Fines	Range of Fines £
Belfast	64	32	20-200
North Eastern	11	5	100-200
South Eastern	4	3	250-500
Southern	24	6	20-500
Western	39	N/A	100-500

Source: Boards

In Great Britain, the maximum fine is £2,500 or three months imprisonment. A high profile case there in May 2002 made full use of these penalties in the case of an individual held responsible for her daughter’s non-attendance at school. Moreover, earlier this year, the same individual received a further prison sentence for her failure to ensure that her second daughter attended school. Current Government proposals in Great Britain aim to introduce on-the-spot fixed penalty notices of between £25 and £100 for parents caught with a child out of school without permission.

2.11 While we acknowledge that individual casework is a core component of the service provided by EWS, we consider that this concentration limits its scope in

developing broader-based strategy work aimed at promoting improvements in schools' management of absence. A contributing reason for this resides in the fact that available management information systems have not facilitated effective data analysis across schools which would allow EWS to better identify and understand problem areas and to accurately target them. However, as noted at paragraph 1.11, proposed networking arrangements within the C2K project are intended to address the barriers limiting remote access to data within individual schools by allowing analyses of aggregate school-level data and the comparison of data between schools or groups of pupils.

## EWS needs to take a more strategic view on school absence

2.12

We acknowledge that the management of attendance and absence is a collaborative effort shared between parents, schools and EWS. We consider that, in order to realise the full benefits of their role, EWS needs to develop more its function as a source of expertise on strategy, procedures and data analysis. The starting point in developing a strategy for improving attendance has to be an analysis of the attendance/absence problems faced by the Boards and schools. To do this the Boards need to monitor patterns and levels of absence in schools in order to be able to identify trends and to set targets for achieving improvements in attendance across the Boards, for specific schools or groups of schools. The key to such a structured approach is the availability of basic data: for example, on levels of authorised and unauthorised absence; comparisons between schools; and the extent of improvements

2.13 The Chief Education Welfare Officers within each of the Boards meet regularly to share information and discuss issues of common interest. The Education and Training Inspectorate in its survey of EWS in 2002 (see paragraph 2.3) concluded that:

“(this forum)...has the potential to promote a strategic direction for the EWS on a regional basis, to further the dissemination of good practice, to achieve consistency and cohesion in EWS policies and procedures across Northern Ireland.”

- 2.14 We concur with this view and would commend that this forum takes forward our recommendations on developing and implementing an effective strategy and management information systems to address the problems of non-attendance within schools in general and unauthorised absence in particular.

- 2.15 In addition to intervention work with individual pupils, the EWS also works preventatively to promote and monitor attendance through the use of projects and a variety of support programmes for pupils and their families. Indeed a range of initiatives designed with truancy wholly or partly in mind are currently employed within schools, driven not only by EWS but also by the Department and schools themselves. These are explored further in the following paragraphs.

## Departmental Initiatives

### The Group 1 Initiative

- 2.16 The Department's "Group 1" initiative was introduced in the 1999-00 school year as a special initiative within the School Support Programme involving five schools in which progress in key indicators such as pupils' attendance, the quality of their learning and their achievements in terms of recognised qualifications were at best modest or not sustained. Based on an analysis of the challenges facing the schools and an identification of key areas of improvement, ideas for a way forward were developed and considered through consultations involving the schools, the relevant Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.
- 2.17 In 2002 the Education and Training Inspectorate<sup>19</sup> reported that, in addressing the problem of low attendance rates in these schools, a number of measures had been taken to improve pupils' behaviour, establish better parental contacts and improve community contact and involvement with schools. However, it found that:

---

19. The Group 1 Initiative: A Progress Report 2001-02, Education and Training Inspectorate, Department of Education, 2002.



*“Despite very considerable endeavour and attention from staff and other external support agencies, and the introduction of innovative procedures, it has proved very difficult to bring about a significant improvement in the attendance of those pupils who are regular and persistent absentees.”*

## Key Stage 4 Flexibility Initiative

- 2.18 In 2000 the Department invited post-primary schools to participate in a two-year initiative to increase flexibility and work-related learning in the Key Stage 4 curriculum. The initiative attracted the interest of 74 schools who saw it as an opportunity to improve curricular provision for those pupils who did not respond well to the traditional academic curriculum, or who had experienced little academic success, or who would gain from a curricular approach offering greater vocational interest and relevance. In seeking to develop alternative approaches at Key Stage 4, the schools hoped to improve poor behaviour, low self-esteem, underachievement and poor attendance.
- 2.19 An inspection report<sup>20</sup> in 2003 found that the evidence to date suggests that most participating schools had reported gains of some ten per cent when comparing the attendance of the pupils in year 11 with their attendance in year ten. Other schools compared favourably the attendance of the group participating in the initiative with that of previous groups of pupils of similar age, disposition and ability. However, the Inspectorate reported that, significantly, this improvement in overall attendance was reflected more in the pupils’ attendance at a college, or training organisation, or work placement than in their attendance at the school itself.
- 2.20 On the basis of their overall findings, the Inspectorate pointed out that these discrepancies in attendance patterns suggest that some pupils, at least, continue to see limited relevance and value in the traditional school-based curriculum. As a result it concluded that: *“...to stimulate and retain the interest, participation and attendance of these pupils, schools should reconsider the relevance of the curriculum, the*

---

20. Key Stage 4: Flexibility Initiative on Vocational and Work-Related Learning, Education and Training Inspectorate, Department of Education, 2003.

*nature and quality of pupil-teacher relationships and the appropriateness and effectiveness of teaching methods."*

### Education Other Than At School

2.21 The best place for the majority of pupils to be educated is at school. However, there are some for whom this is not possible. Education other than at school (EOTAS) caters for a small number of pupils of all ages who are out of mainstream school for a variety of reasons, including those who are awaiting a placement in a Pupil Referral Unit, or a special school. For pupils at GCSE level, where a placement in mainstream schooling cannot be sustained, mainly due to attendance or behavioural issues, alternative education provision is made. Through the Boards a broad-based educational programme is offered comprising the following key elements:

- Basic skills curriculum - students work towards accredited qualifications in literacy, numeracy and ICT;
- Personal and Social Education - training in personal, social and life skills; and
- Extended work experience - undertaken with local employers in the students' vocational area of interest.

The schools that we visited felt that this was a positive experience for those pupils who were able to attend such courses. However, the number of places is limited and many schools felt that they could benefit from more students being able to attend.

### Funding for initiatives on absenteeism

2.22 In June 2002, the Department submitted an unsuccessful bid for Executive Programme Funding to support an initiative aimed at providing direct support

to around 750 parents of Year 8 pupils in schools serving areas of social disadvantage. The level of funding sought was £0.6m over a 4 year period. The objectives of the project were defined as

- To reduce the number of young persons who are persistent non-attenders at school and who are suspended, and so improve their employability and life chances; and
- To promote the benefits of regular attendance at school and good behaviour through empowering parents to support their children with schooling.

## Failure to fund research into school absence may be a false economy

2.23

NIAO welcomes the Department's recent attempt to obtain funding for an initiative to promote the successful transition into secondary education for a number of pupils. However as the bid was unsuccessful we would encourage the Department to continue its efforts to identify funding for development work on preventative initiatives. We recognise that there are many competing demands on the Department's own funding and that such work can be deferred without immediate adverse consequences. However, one of the themes emerging from our review is that school absence is expensive. Failure to undertake a proactive approach to preventative measures such as this could be regarded as a form of disinvestment which is ultimately a false economy. We recommend, therefore, that funding for development work in the area of absenteeism should be reviewed by the Department, taking into account the possible additional future costs which might accumulate for the taxpayer if absence levels continue at their current levels.

2.24

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in Great Britain plays a key role in drawing together and disseminating guidance on reducing levels of unauthorised absence from schools, covering the responsibilities of parents; the role of schools; the role of EWS; and how schools should respond to different types of absence. A central element in DfES' approach is the operation of a website "Tackling it Together" ([www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolattendance](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolattendance)) and

accompanying handbook, which offer plentiful examples of good practice in improving school attendance and reducing absence levels.

### The Department can also do more to help in promoting attendance

2.25

In view of the experience in Great Britain, it is our view that the Department needs to play a more active role in assisting in the development of structures that promote the identification of attendance problems in Northern Ireland; in ensuring that the necessary support is available for vulnerable young people; and in the development of preventative strategies aimed at engaging young people in learning. Likewise, we recommend that the Department should take steps to increase its profile in tackling attendance issues in Northern Ireland by issuing appropriate guidance and acting as a source of accessible best practice.

2.26 The DfES website also provides a link to another relevant site run by the Audit Commission. In 1999 the Commission looked at the way local education authorities in England were combating truancy.<sup>21</sup> As a result of this review, the Commission designated part of its main website ([www.audit-commission.gov.uk/itc/attendance.shtml](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/itc/attendance.shtml)) to the provision of information and sharing of good practice on school attendance. In particular, the site identifies six key good practice principles for improving levels of school attendance. Each principle links to more information about good practice and a checklist of key questions. These are replicated at Appendix 3.

## EWS Initiatives

2.27 In our discussions with the Boards, we found that the EWS were involved in a wide range of measures to deal with absence in schools. In the first place, all the Boards have taken steps to raise the public's awareness of attendance issues

---

21. Missing out: LEA management of school attendance and exclusion. Audit Commission, London 1999

through the use of parental information booklets/leaflets. Beyond this, they also work closely with schools and other agencies in combating absence and details of some of the types of initiatives employed are described below.

### **All Boards: Primary Attendance Matters (PAM) Pilot Project**

- 2.28 As research confirms that early intervention with children can improve attendance throughout the period of compulsory schooling, setting high standards of attendance and punctuality in the early years is most important. In recognition of this, the Boards established a project, 'Primary Attendance Matters' (PAM) to develop a whole school approach to promoting the benefits of regular attendance at school and in 2003 it was piloted by 13 primary schools across Northern Ireland. The schools involved were supported by EWS staff to review their current procedures and practices in dealing with attendance issues. Feedback was positive and improvements in attendance recorded. Further development work on the resource pack and delivering the programme earlier in the school year will take place during 2004-05. It is intended to offer the programme to primary schools on a roll-out basis from September 2005.

### **Belfast Board**

- 2.29 The use of School Liaison Groups within schools provides a forum where different agencies, such as EWS, social work coordinator for education, the school nurse and a designated teacher can come together to share experiences and expertise and agree common action. One of this group's foci for intervention is pupil absences.
- 2.30 The Social Skills Project is considered by the Board to be an excellent exemplar of practice, in which an education welfare officer and a teacher from the Link Centre (the Board's Secondary Pupil Support Service) collaborated with a post-primary school to raise the attendance level of a year nine class in which difficulties had been encountered.

### **North Eastern Board**

- 2.31 A project and development team of one senior education welfare officer and two education welfare officers provide support to area teams within the Board and positive encouragement to young teenagers who have struggled for a variety of personal and social reasons to remain engaged with school. The work undertaken includes: parenting courses and a Looked After Children project. In its report in 2002, the Inspectorate (see paragraph 2.3) was impressed with the project approach adopted and felt that there would be value in the involvement of this Board's EWS in Project/preventative work across all the Boards.

### **Southern Board**

- 2.32 The EWS in the Southern Board has a number of projects underway which contribute to the work of engaging pupils with their schools. Examples include a school Group Conferencing Partnership involving the Board with the Southern Health and Social Services Board and Barnardos. The aim of such conferencing is to involve young people in taking responsibility for their actions and restoring the harm caused by their actions.

### **South Eastern Board**

- 2.33 The EWS in the South Eastern Board has embarked on a trial of Edutxt, an Internet based application which enables schools to contact parents or carers using text messages. This means that each time a child is absent, parents and carers will be discreetly contacted on their mobile phone with a text message tailored to the individual circumstances. The Board's EWS has also linked up with Childline to develop work with children who have been or are being bullied, an identified causal factor in instances of non-attendance at school. In addition, the Board also pointed to a partnership with Down and Lisburn Trust wherein senior managers from both organisations are charged with reporting to the Chief Executives Group on agreed priority areas which would encompass the issue of school non-attendance.

### Western Board

- 2.34 The “GATE” Project (Getting Ahead Through Education) is aimed at pupils with an exceptionally poor school attendance record. Education Welfare Officers work with these pupils after school hours. Emphasis is on modifying behaviour through leisure activities. Attendance at the project centre is usually 100 per cent. GATE works closely with the voluntary agency EXTERN which is engaged in similar work but with a particular focus on pupils who have been expelled for disruptive behaviour. Both GATE and EXTERN organize residential weekends in County Fermanagh. GATE began in Strabane, and because of its success it is now operating in all areas of the Board.

## School Initiatives

- 2.35 As described in paragraph 2.4, schools have a responsibility for promoting and monitoring regular attendance by pupils and intervening when they have concerns about pupil attendance. Appendix 4 shows how school based intervention fits into the process. As part of our review, we visited a number of schools (see Appendix 1) to explore how they are meeting this responsibility. We found many similarities in the approaches adopted by the schools we visited, but the common thread was the commitment of the principal and the teaching staff in promoting attendance among both pupils and parents. Attendance figures were prominently displayed and attention was frequently drawn to the importance of regular attendance in assemblies, parents’ meetings and published material. Even in those schools which had problems with attendance the dedication of the teachers was evident. The most common approaches we found are set out below.

### First Day Contact

- 2.36 A number of schools we visited had introduced “first day calling” which involves school administrative staff ringing parents on the first day of a pupil’s absence.

This has the advantage of alerting parents who are otherwise unaware of their child's absence. In some schools this process is automated through a centrally managed outbound phone service. Once an alert call to a parent's phone is picked up, an automated message is used to notify the parent of the child's absence with the name of the parent and the child read out from a computer database using text to-speech technology. All schools using first day calling found it successful, however it has the disadvantage of being resource intensive in terms of staff time and some schools felt that they might not be able to continue using it. An alternative method employed by many of the schools was to place the onus on parents and encourage them to contact the school early on the first day of any absence. Again the schools using this method found that, as with first day calling, it was successful in reducing absences.

### **Rewarding Attendance**

2.37 There were a number of ways in which schools rewarded attendance. All schools rewarded individuals for good, and often, improved attendance. Group awards were also made for improvements in class, and year attendance. Attendance was often considered as part of a merit system which also included punctuality, and good behaviour. Most schools visited offered rewards on a monthly, termly, and annual basis. Rewards offered included presentation of certificates, trips to the cinema, and meal vouchers.

2.38 While all the schools visited felt that the reward system was successful there were two main problems with it. Firstly the sustainability and affordability of the system where vouchers etc were used was mentioned as a cause of some concern. We found that several schools had arranged sponsorship from local firms to overcome this problem. Secondly, a number of schools identified difficulties finding appropriate rewards, particularly to encourage older pupils.

### **Out of School Activities**

2.39 Most of the schools visited offered out of school activities as a way of encouraging pupils to see school as a good place to be. Breakfast clubs were successful in many of the schools, as were homework clubs. After school



activities for pupils were offered by most schools and were felt to be a successful way of re-engaging some pupils. Courses and activities run on school premises were also offered to parents as a way of encouraging them to come to the school and meet the staff. Where this happened schools thought that this helped to build more positive, long term relationships with parents who would otherwise not have engaged with the school.

### Case Example: Corpus Christi College, Belfast

2.40 While definitive evidence does not exist to indicate which methods best reduce unauthorised absence and improve attendance, some schools have been successful in using a blend of different methods to bring about a positive impact on these problems. The case example below provides details of the experiences of Corpus Christi College, Belfast which we visited during our review.

1) Since 1995, the College had been involved in school improvement initiatives. As part of this process, particular attention had been paid to reducing absenteeism and truancy among the pupils. In 1998-99 it was included along with four other schools in the "Group 1" initiative which was introduced to deal with the specific problems these schools faced in bringing about improvement across a range of issues including attendance. By that time, declining attendance rates had fallen to 76 per cent, against a Northern Ireland average of 90 per cent.

2) However, by March 2003 the College had improved its attendance level to 86 per cent. While this is still below the Northern Ireland average, much has been gained according to a Quality Assurance inspection carried out by the Department of Education's Education and Training Inspectorate and the potential for further improvement is considered to be good. In addition to a deliberate management and staff focus on the problem of absence, improved links with external agencies and increasing contact with parents, the school identified a number of other factors which it felt had a particular impact on its attendance problem:

- **Targets/Rewards:** The school sets attendance targets which focus equally on the individual and the school community. Individual pupils receive merit certificates for good attendance and rewards such as footballs. There is also a class-based "attendance challenge" where classes compete against each other for rewards such as school trips. This forges alliances among pupils and encourages them to support each other.
- **Key Stage 3 Initiative:** In recognition that most of its pupils in year 8 require additional support to address difficulties in reading and writing, the school introduced such things as small teaching groups, the appointment of teachers who teach pupils for several subjects and the appointment of some classroom assistants. Year 8 pupils reported that they had settled well, liked school and had teachers and friends whom they could turn to if they required support.

- **Key Stage 4 Flexibility:** The school also targets year 11 and 12 pupils due to concerns about a lack of pupil engagement with, and interest in, the curriculum and poor patterns of behaviour and attendance. Central to its efforts has been the introduction of a vocational and work-related curriculum aimed at those pupils in years 11 and 12 for whom a more academic programme has not proved attractive or successful. Since the beginning of the initiative, there has been a steady improvement in the attendance of participating pupils which is up ten per cent over the previous academic year.
- **Electronic Registration:** The school invested in a computerised system for recording and analysing pupil attendance data made by Bromcom. Known as e-School, the system uses a network of transmitters distributed around the school which pick up short wave signals from electronic registers. All the teachers in the school have their own keypad with a screen and from this they can pull up the register and mark attendance. This information is automatically sent back to a central server which analyses the data. The system helps to highlight patterns in attendance so that designated teachers can monitor whether an absent pupil was in classes earlier in the day. Patterns of attendance begin to emerge and can be acted upon using solid documentation and appropriate pastoral care.
- **Automated Telephone Calling:** In addition to Bromcom, the school uses Truancy Call to inform parents of their child's absence by automatically communicating with them by telephone. The names and contact details of pupils's parents are identified from a central computer database and an outbound call initiated. Once connected, Truancy Call uses an automated message to notify the parent of the child's absence. The parent is required to provide a reason and an anticipated return date. This is stored back on the Truancy Call system as a voice message that is accessed and played back by the school. If the parent is unavailable, the system will automatically call again until contact is established or up until 8.30 in the evening.

### The Problem of Condoned Absence

- 2.41 Family attitudes can play a part in keeping children from school: for example, parents not valuing education, domestic problems, or inadequate and inconsistent parenting. In addition, as pointed out at paragraph 1.4, in certain circumstances it can be easier for parents to support their children's non-attendance by providing bogus explanations for it. Many of the schools we visited raised concerns about the growing problem of parentally condoned absence from school. While this mainly manifested itself in the form of term time holidays increasing problems were noted in the numbers of pupils taking time off

for medical and dental appointments, to care for younger siblings, shopping trips, and in a number of cases, taking the day off when it was the child's birthday.

- 2.42 While all the schools we visited actively discouraged such absences there are no sanctions which can be imposed on those parents who are aware of their children's absence, except where there is a chronic problem. One school visited requests that parents taking their children on holiday during term time write to the Board's Chief EWO explaining the reasons for this. Typical of many schools, another school visited produced an information leaflet for parents at the start of the school year detailing dates of school holidays together with examination dates, in the hope of discouraging term time holidays. In this regard also it is important to note that differing school holiday periods can lead to problems: where families have children at different schools they can be faced with a stark choice of whether to take a child out of school to fit in with the holidays of a family member attending another school.

### **Parental toleration of school absence must be challenged**

2.43

While we recognise that punitive measures against parents have a role to play in dealing with the most intransigent non-attenders, these have to be balanced by a focus on support and promoting awareness of the problem. Indeed, the case in Great Britain referred to at paragraph 2.10 shows that severe punishment may not have the desired effect. If parents have a negative attitude towards schooling, we consider that there is an obligation on the Boards and schools to take responsibility for breaking down such a barrier, perhaps by mounting parenting skills classes. In terms of publicising attendance issues, we would commend the practice noted above where schools produce leaflets for parents highlighting parental responsibility for ensuring regular attendance at school. In addition, we see a complementary role for the Department/Boards in raising the profile of school attendance issues, perhaps through a poster campaign and /or utilising local radio and press. Moreover, in terms of the specific issue of staggered school holiday periods, we consider that the Boards and Department should jointly seek to address greater harmonisation of these with schools.

## Working with other agencies

- 2.44 The Boards and schools recognise that joint action is required in order to bring about improvement where school attendance is poor. As outlined at paragraphs 1.28 and 1.29, the causes of non-attendance are complex. As a result, no single group or organisation can have all the solutions and the Boards and schools need to work closely with other local services and agencies. We found that there is a developing multi-agency theme to attendance matters within the Boards. For instance, most of the Boards are involved in a Juvenile Liaison Bureau which along with Board EWOs includes representatives from the Police Service for Northern Ireland, social services and hospital trusts. These bureaux aim to divert children from the juvenile justice system through a focused exchange of information. Within this inter-agency approach, one of the key aims is to meet the needs of pupils at risk of dropping out of school or becoming poor attenders.
- 2.45 Two other examples of inter-agency working which have implications for the issue of school absence are:
- the School Age Mothers' Programme; and
  - a regional Anti- Bullying Consortium.

The former provides support to young women who are pregnant or parenting to complete compulsory education and to remain in education beyond compulsory leaving age if they so wish. The Programme uses a multi-agency (education, social services, voluntary and community sector) approach and provides a mixture of personal, social and conventional education tailored to meet the individual needs of the young women. The latter is a grouping of statutory and voluntary agencies with a particular interest in tackling bullying and it meets under the aegis of Save The Children. The Consortium recognises that tackling bullying requires sustained efforts and that schools need support in maintaining an effective approach to the problem. The Consortium was responsible for overseeing the production of the materials pack 'Focus on Bullying' for post primary schools issued in 2002 and has other projects in hand.

2.46 Multi-agency working can be very worthwhile in addressing the many factors involved in pupil non-attendance and progress is being made in this area. However, it can be far from easy to implement and manage effectively. For instance, while the Inspectorate's survey of EWS (see paragraph 2.3) found examples of good co-operative practices between the Boards and Health and Social Services Trusts, it also concluded that the absence of formal mechanisms for routine information sharing and joint protocols to inform practice means that cross-departmental work is progressing at different rates across Northern Ireland.

### **Absence levels remain high despite measures to improve attendance**

2.47 As outlined above, the Department, Boards and schools have devised numerous measures to encourage good attendance and deal with poor attenders. We found many of these to be innovative and pursued with vigour by committed staff. In many instances these measures seemed to be working well and people had high hopes of them. In others, the impact of the initiative was more patchy. In general, however, we found that even where the view was that initiatives were successful in tackling absence, there was a lack of statistical evidence of improved attendance. Indeed it is worrying that indicative statistics generated through our survey of schools show that among post-primary schools, the problem of unauthorised absence remains at a relatively high level compared with Great Britain (see paragraph 1.18).

2.48 In our view, there is a need for the Department and the EWS across the Boards to measure the comparative effectiveness of different approaches and actions in improving the attendance of pupils. It is important to know which actions work best, in which circumstances and whether the service can concentrate resources in those areas. It may be that it is too early to detect improvements. Measures need time to bed in before successful outcomes can be identified: for example,

school registration follow-up procedures are relatively new and not employed by every school. Measures aimed at changing attitudes to education are unlikely to show quick results and building effective relationships with a range of other agencies takes time. However, we found little evidence of systematic evaluation of initiatives by EWS, although we recognise that this is hampered to some extent by the lack of an effective means of collating information on pupil attendance and the outcomes of intervention. This point was also highlighted in the recommendations of the Inspectorate's survey (see Appendix 2).

### **More effective use of data is fundamental to combat poor attendance**

2.49

In this context, we reiterate the recommendation at paragraph 2.12 on the need to remedy this deficiency. Board EWS's need to be able to use data to ensure that resources are clearly targeted on schools where attendance is problematic. They also need to be able to use data to monitor the effectiveness of the attendance management systems in operation in schools and the measures adopted to combat poor attendance. Only in this way will they be able to develop suitable local standards and targets.

2.50 The Audit Commission has identified Birmingham City Council Education Service as a best practice example in taking a lead role on pupil attendance. It is useful to describe some of the elements in its approach to dealing with school attendance issues<sup>22</sup>:

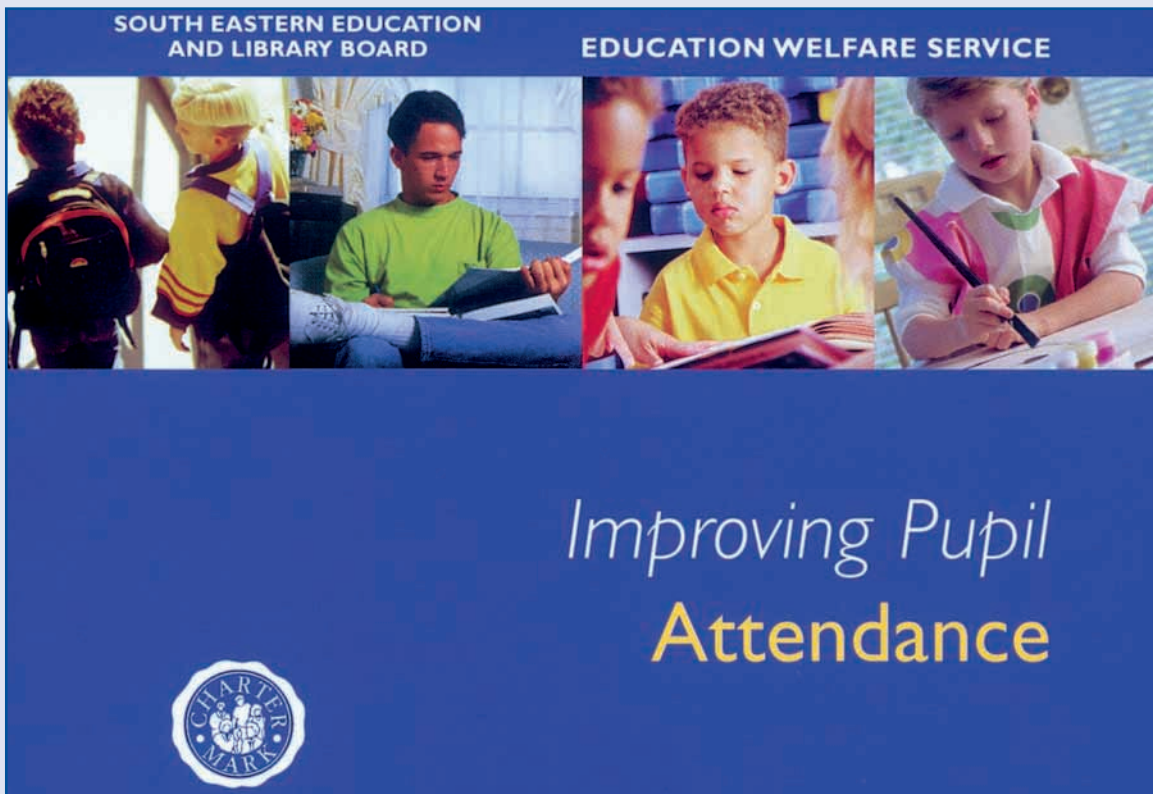
- The Council's EWS provides regular updates on pupil attendance data and trends. The service conducts termly attendance reviews in secondary schools and annual reviews in primary schools and offers a detailed "Framework for Attendance Data Analysis" and management review report to all schools recording less than 90 per cent attendance. The service has piloted a system for measurement of outcomes in individual referrals. The service

---

22. Promoting Social Exclusion: Attendance, Birmingham City Council, Education Service, August 2002.

also seeks to employ a broad range of strategies in response to referrals from schools. The outcome measuring system now in place will provide more accurate data on the varied actions used to improve attendance and their effectiveness;

- Targets for improving attendance have been set in agreement with schools and based on a thorough audit of attendance data and joint action plans;
- Deployment of support to schools is based on clear analysis of need and transparent criteria that have been agreed through consultation with schools. Full details of the allocation formula used, service deployment and allocations to schools for the coming academic year are published each June; and
- Good practice is effectively disseminated through the publication and annual review of a good practice guide and through a programme of inservice training for school and EWS support staff.







# Appendices

# Appendix 1

## Schools Visited by NIAO

Ashfield Boys' High School

Carrickfergus College

Castle High School

Corpus Christi College

Dunmurry High School

Garvagh High School

Limavady High School

Lismore Comprehensive School

Lisnasharragh High School

Shimna Integrated College

St Cecilia's Secondary School

St Joseph's Primary School

St Mary's Junior High School

Wallace High School

## Appendix 2 (paragraph 1.3)

### Recommendations of the Education and Training Inspectorate from its Survey of the Education Welfare Service in Northern Ireland, 2002

The Inspectorate recommended five critical areas of policy and practice which should be pursued in order to address effectively the issues raised by its survey:

1. the development of guidance and procedures for the EWS at a Northern Ireland level, involving Department of Education (DE), Department of Health and Social Services, HSS Boards and Trusts and the education and library boards (ELBs), to address the complex problems associated with school attendance, social inclusion and child protection and the sharing of information between HSS Trusts and the EWS;
2. the sharing and dissemination of good practice across ELBs, and the clarification and further promotion of developing service provision, eg preventative services, services for looked after children and traveller children;
3. the need to raise the awareness among schools and parents of the role of the EWS including the development of its services through project work and preventative approaches to working with children and their families;
4. the establishment of databases and ICT support to improve the efficient discharge of the service and to inform future planning and monitoring arrangements; and
5. the need to develop a more effective approach to the use of Education Supervision Orders (ESO) and to improve the resources to facilitate the EWS to implement, more effectively, its responsibility in respect of discharging duties associated with ESOs.

# Appendix 3

## (paragraph 2.26)

### Improving school attendance and behaviour

#### LEA self-evaluation

Improving school attendance and behaviour in schools is vital if all children are to make the most of their educational opportunities. Its importance has been underlined by the Government's decision to set targets for reducing levels of truancy and exclusions from school.

The Audit Commission has been actively promoting the good management of school attendance and behaviour by local education authorities.

- Missing Out, the Commission's report on LEAs' management of school attendance and exclusions, was published in October 1999.
- Auditors carried out reviews of the management of school attendance and exclusions at most LEAs in England and Wales during 2000.

The Commission has followed up this work to provide further advice to LEAs through its website. The website includes checklists which pose questions that LEAs can use to assess how well they are managing school attendance and behaviour. This self-evaluation document brings together those checklists to enable an LEA to carry out an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses.

#### How to use this document

The checklists are organised under three main headings - improving school attendance, helping schools to improve behaviour, and education for children out of school. Each checklist sets out the questions posed on the website, with

separate columns for the LEA to record its response and to note any actions which need to be taken.

In responding to a question, it is important to think about the evidence that would support the answer - in particular, tests of effectiveness. For example, Checklist A1, on the LEA's strategy to improve attendance, asks (Question 3) "What has the LEA done to ensure schools understand and support its strategy?". LEAs should think here not only about their actions - for example, distribution of copies of the strategy to all headteachers and governing bodies - but also about evidence that schools do understand and support the strategy.

It is for LEAs to decide how they want to use the document - for example, whether they want to involve schools or other partners in the process. Self-evaluation should lead to a plan of action to remedy any deficiencies. LEAs should also plan to review progress regularly.

CHECKLIST A1 - CLEAR STRATEGY TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE		
1	Has the LEA set out explicitly how it will improve school attendance?	
2	Is the LEA's strategy based on an analysis of local problems? Has the LEA also considered its performance compared to other LEAs? What specific problems have been identified?	
3	What has the LEA done to ensure schools understand and support the strategy?	
4	Does the strategy make clear the respective roles of schools and the LEA? What are identified as the key responsibilities of the LEA?	
5	Does the strategy set clear objectives? Have these been translated where appropriate into challenging targets for improvements in school attendance?	
6	Has the strategy been translated into plans for activities? What progress is being made in implementing these plans? What has been successful to date - and where are the problems?	
7	Is the strategy supported by other plans? Does it support other strategies? How are links made and maintained?	

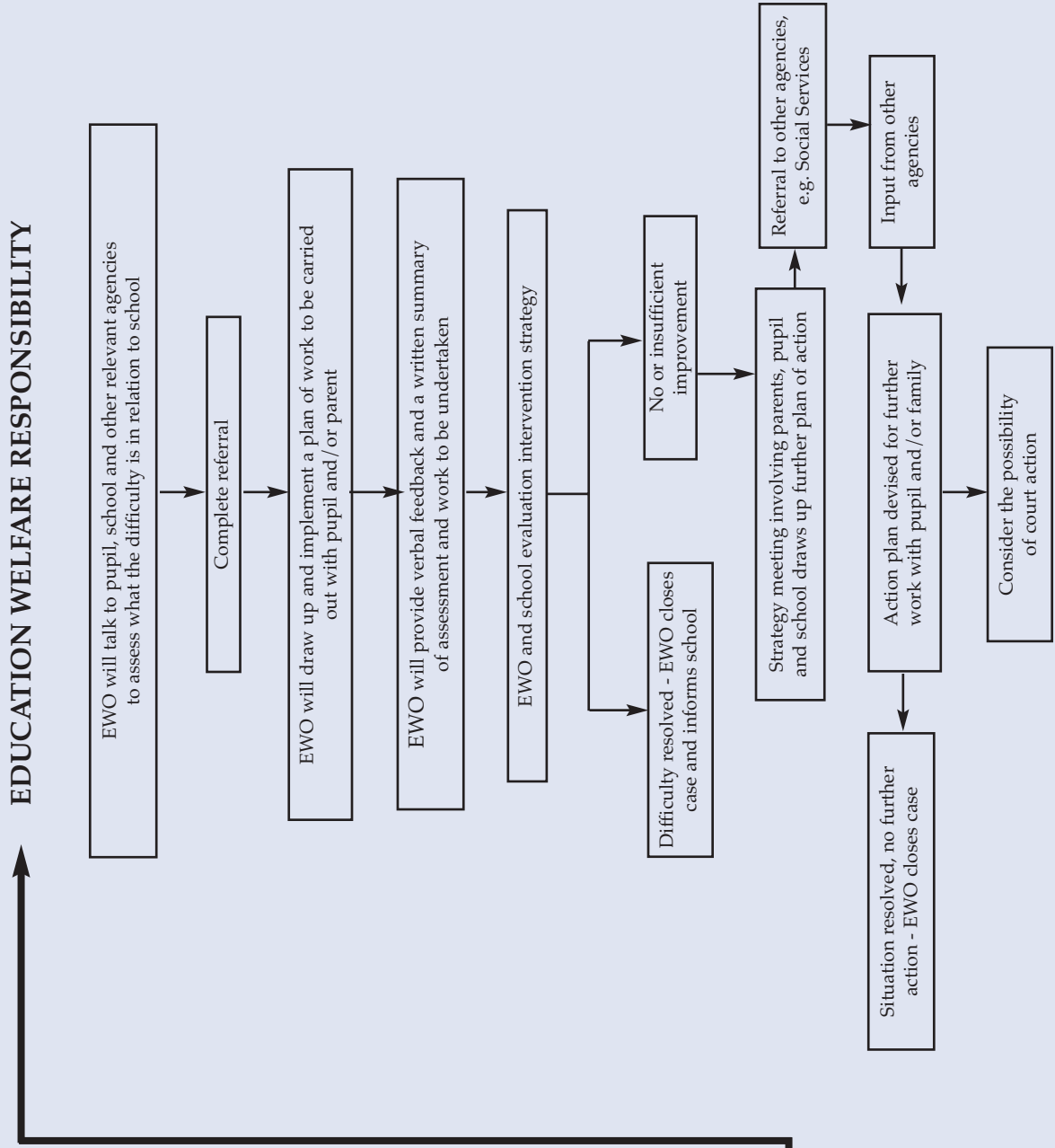
## IMPROVING PUPIL ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL

CHECKLIST A2 - MAKING GOOD USE OF DATA		
1	Does the LEA systematically collect and analyse data on school attendance? Does it know which schools face the greatest problems? Does it know what types of problems schools are facing?	
2	Has the LEA agreed arrangements with schools to share information? Does information from schools help the LEA to trace missing pupils?	
3	Does the LEA work with schools to help improve their collection and analysis of data on school attendance? Does it use school-based analyses to inform its own work?	
4	How well does the LEA monitor the effectiveness of its own services? Does this include evaluation of outcomes? Have practices been adjusted as a result of evaluation?	

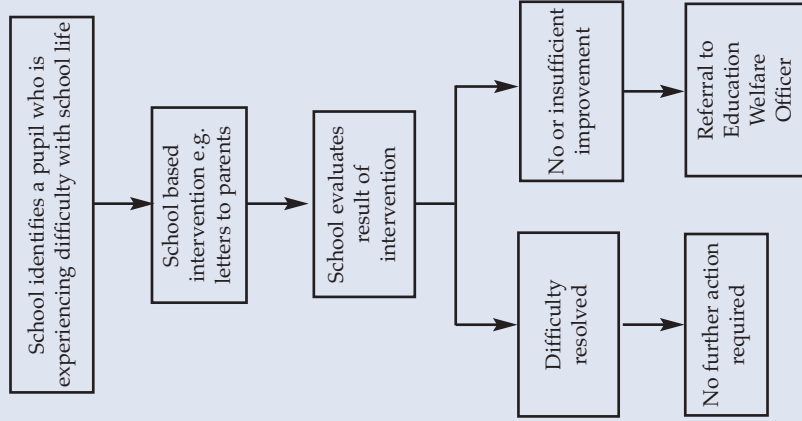
CHECKLIST A3 - DEVELOPING SCHOOLS' CAPACITIES TO MANAGE ATTENDANCE		
1	Does the LEA's strategy for improving school attendance include building schools' capacities to manage attendance effectively? Has the LEA set out how it will do this?	
2	Has the LEA specified the minimum standards that schools should aim to meet in managing attendance? Has the LEA provided schools with guidance on how they can meet these standards?	
3	Does the LEA encourage schools to analyse their attendance data? Does it help to provide opportunities to benchmark school performance?	
4	Does the LEA help schools analyse their approach to school attendance in order to identify the scope for improvement?	
5	Does the LEA ensure that schools have access to advice, support and training to improve their management of school attendance?	

CHECKLIST A4 - SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS' MANAGEMENT OF ATTENDANCE		
1	Has the LEA established systems to collect a range of information to monitor how schools manage attendance?	
2	Has the LEA included the promotion of attendance within the remit of its inspection and advisory staff? Is attendance included as a routine item for discussion with schools?	
3	Do LEA services - in particular inspection and advisory staff and the education welfare service - share information about schools?	
4	Has the LEA identified how inspection and advisory staff can help schools promote attendance through improvements to curriculum and teaching?	
5	Has the LEA agreed with schools to increase the amount of time education welfare staff will spend helping schools to improve policies and procedures?	
6	Do education welfare staff have the skills and training to support schools in making improvements to policies and procedures?	
7	How well does the LEA identify and disseminate good practice in schools' management of attendance?	

# Appendix 4 (paragraph 2.35)



**SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITY**





# List of NIAO Reports

<b>Title</b>	<b>NIA/HC No.</b>	<b>Date Published</b>
<b>2003</b>		
The Sheep Annual Premium Scheme	NIA 75/02	6 February 2003
The PFI Contract for the Education and Library Board's New Computerised Accounting System	NIA99/02	20 March 2003
Areas of Special Scientific Interest	NIA103/02	27 March 2003
Financial Auditing and Reporting: 2001/02	NIA 107/02	2 April 2003
The Use of Operating Theatres in the Northern Health and Personal Social Services	NIA111/02	10 April 2003
Investigation of Suspected Fraud in the Water Service	HC 735	26 June 2003
Management of Industrial Sickness Absence	HC 736	1 July 2003
Encouraging Take-Up of Benefits by Pensioners	HC 737	3 July 2003
<b>2004</b>		
Navan Centre	HC 204	29 January 2004
The Private Finance Initiative: A Review of the Funding and Management of Three Projects in the Health Sector	HC 205	5 February 2004
De Lorean: The Recovery of Public Funds	HC 287	12 February 2004
Local Management of Schools	HC 297	19 February 2004
The Management of Surplus Land and Property in the Health Estate	HC 298	26 February 2004
Recoupment of Drainage Infrastructure Costs	HC 614	8 June 2004
Use of Consultants	HC641	10 June 2004
Financial Auditing and Reporting: 2002 -2003 General Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland	HC673	24 June 2004
Introducing Gas Central Heating in Housing Executive Homes	HC725	1 July 2004
Department of Employment and Learning: Jobskills	HC 762	6 July 2004
Imagine Belfast 2008	HC826	14 July 2004
Building For The Future: A Review of the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects	NIA112/03	14 October 2004







Published by TSO (The Stationery Office) and available from:

**Online**

[www.tso.co.uk/bookshop](http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop)

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

TSO

PO Box 29, Norwich, NR3 1GN

Telephone orders/General enquiries: 0870 6005522

Fax orders: 0870 6005533

Order through the Parliamentary Hotline

Lo-call 0845 702 3474

E-mail [book.orders@tso.co.uk](mailto:book.orders@tso.co.uk)

Telephone: 0870 240 3701

**TSO Bookshops**

123 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6PQ

020 7242 6393 Fax 020 7242 6394

68-69 Bull Street, Birmingham B4 6AD

0121 236 9696 Fax 0121 236 9699

9-21 Princess Street, Manchester M60 8AS

0161 834 7201 Fax 0161 833 0634

16 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GD

028 9023 8451 Fax 028 9023 5401

18-19 High Street, Cardiff CF10 1PT

029 2039 5548 Fax 029 2038 4347

71 Lothian Road, Edinburgh EH3 9AZ

0870 606 5566 Fax 0870 6065588

**The Parliamentary Bookshop**

12 Bridge Square, Parliament Square,

London SW1A 2JX

Telephone orders/General enquiries 020 7219 3890

Fax orders 020 7219 3866

TSO Accredited Agents

(see Yellow Pages)

*and through good booksellers*



[www.tso.co.uk](http://www.tso.co.uk)

