



Northern Ireland Audit Office

# Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
25 February 2014





Northern Ireland Audit Office

# Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-Up Report

Published 25 February 2014



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.

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Northern Ireland Audit Office

Comptroller and Auditor General

25 February 2014

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# Abbreviations

ELB	Education and Library Board
ESA	Education and Skills Authority
ESaGS	Every School a Good School
ESO	Education Supervision Order
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
EWS	Education Welfare Service
FSM	Free School Meal
LAC	Looked After Children
'NEET'	Not in education, employment or training
NISCC	Northern Ireland Social Care Council
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
NRA	Neighbourhood Renewal Area
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PAM	Primary Attendance Matters
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
TESS	Traveller Education Support Service

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## Executive Summary





# Executive Summary

## Introduction

1. There are currently over 158,000 pupils enrolled in 847 primary schools in Northern Ireland and nearly 146,000 pupils enrolled in 215 post primary schools<sup>1</sup>. Parents and guardians have a legal duty to ensure that children of compulsory school age, that is, 4 to 16 years, attend regularly. Regular school attendance and educational attainment are inextricably linked and regular attendance ensures that pupils get the best possible outcomes from their period in compulsory education. Conversely, poor attendance at school can have an irreversible and long-term impact on the absent pupil. Young people who regularly miss school without good reason are more likely to become isolated from their friends, to underachieve in their examinations and may become involved in anti-social behaviour<sup>2</sup>. Absenteeism also impacts on the learning of other pupils as it can disrupt the teacher's ability to deliver lessons in a sequential and organised way.
2. In addition to the personal costs associated with non-attendance at school, there are wide reaching implications for society and the economy. Over a fifth of Northern Ireland's working population aged 16 to 24 are not in education, employment or training – officially described as 'NEET' – and Northern Ireland's expanding NEET group costs the local economy nearly £5 million a week. Persistent absentees are seven times more likely to be a NEET at age 16.<sup>3</sup>
3. Parents who fail in their duty to ensure that children attend school regularly are effectively forfeiting the opportunity that has been provided for their child to receive an education. Based on 2011-12 figures, the opportunity cost of non-attendance is around £22 million a year.
4. Although it is a parent's legal responsibility to ensure that a child attends school regularly, schools, the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the Department of Education (the Department) also have a role to play. At present, the five ELBs fulfil their statutory duties<sup>4</sup> in relation to school attendance through the Education Welfare Service (EWS). The EWS is a specialist education support service which seeks to help young people of compulsory school age and their families get the best out of the education system. Its aim is to promote a culture of regular attendance at school. The ELBs fund the EWS through their core funding and this is supplemented by the Department through a collective allocation of a further £1.7 million per annum. A school can make a referral to EWS when a pupil's attendance is a cause for concern or when attendance drops below 85 per cent.
5. Attendance is measured for every pupil in half day sessions (am and pm) and all schools are now required to maintain

1 In 2012-13 per the Department of Education

2 School Attendance Matters: A Parent's Guide, Department of Education

3 Helping a Lost and Forgotten Generation, PricewaterhouseCoopers, 27 March 2012

4 As laid out in The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

## Executive Summary

electronic records of pupil attendance. The Department provides schools with guidance which classifies different types of pupil absence. The two main categories are authorised (absence with permission from an authorised school representative on provision of a satisfactory explanation) and unauthorised (absence without permission from an authorised school representative due to unexplained or unjustified absence).

6. In 2004, we published a report on improving pupil attendance at school which considered the effectiveness of attendance management practices in schools<sup>5</sup>. The report raised concerns about a lack of strategic perspective in relation to improving school attendance, a need for better dissemination of good practice and a more effective use of attendance data. We concluded that the ELBs and the Department needed to:
- develop a more strategic perspective by outlining their aims, objectives and targets in relation to improving school attendance;
  - bring about change in school policy and procedures and to disseminate good practice ideas on managing attendance; and
  - use data to plan effective initiatives to deal with the problem of low attendance.

7. This report outlines an update of the progress achieved since our last report and an analysis of recent trends in pupil attendance, including statistics from other regions of the UK. It also highlights examples of good practice identified during visits to local schools which have good or improving attendance records or face particular challenges in addressing persistent absenteeism.

### Main findings

8. The Department has implemented a number of changes in response to the recommendations made in the 2004 report. Since 2007-08, attendance data is collected each academic year from all primary, post primary and special schools via the annual school census in October. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency publishes an annual Detailed Statistical Release which includes analysis of attendance data by school type and characteristics such as management type as well as pupil characteristics (for example, gender and ethnicity).
9. In April 2009, the Department issued the 'Every School a Good School' school improvement policy document. This recognises that regular attendance at school is an important precursor to achieving effective and successful learning outcomes for all pupils.

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5 Improving pupil attendance at school, Northern Ireland Audit Office, NIA 122/03, 4 November 2004

10. The Department's Additional Educational Needs Team has responsibility for policy on attendance and provides guidance to schools. In June 2013, the Department issued its most recent circular 'Attendance Guidance and Absence Recording by Schools' which provides schools with good practice, guidance and strategies to manage pupil attendance and advises schools of the C2K<sup>6</sup> attendance module pupils' absence codes.
11. The Department commissioned consultants to undertake research into improving attendance in schools serving deprived areas. The aim was to provide the Department with information that would inform policy and practice in those schools with low attendance rates to help them in improving attendance. The report, which was published in May 2012, found that more than 40 per cent of schools surveyed did not have an attendance policy in place and only 64 per cent of schools had a target for school attendance in their school development plan<sup>7</sup>. The report made four recommendations for the Department to consider and action was taken as a result.
12. In November 2012, the Department set up an Attendance Working Group consisting of Principals, representatives from the Department, the ELBs and the EWS to develop practical guidance. This Group developed 'School Attendance Matters: A Parent's Guide' which was distributed to all schools for all Year 1 and Year 8 pupils and future work includes the development of an attendance information pack for all schools.
13. Although the Department has made some progress in implementing the recommendations contained in our 2004 report it is concerning that a number are still outstanding, in particular:
- the Department has not yet developed a strategy to improve attendance;
  - the EWS has been unable to provide us with detailed information on waiting lists; and
  - there is little evidence of a joined up approach in the delivery of the EWS across the ELBs.
- Overall attendance rates have marginally increased but challenges remain**
14. Overall attendance levels in Northern Ireland schools have improved from 93.6 per cent in 2007-08, when statistics were first published, to 94.2 per cent in 2011-12. However, despite the marginal improvements in attendance, it is clear that challenges remain. Firstly, in real terms, the 2011-12 absence rates in Northern Ireland primary and post primary schools, on average, equate to:
- around 9 days missed per pupil at primary school; and

6 The C2K project provides the infrastructure and services to support the enhanced use of ICT in schools in Northern Ireland

7 Page 12, RSM McClure Watters 'Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas', March 2012

## Executive Summary

- 13 days missed per pupil at post primary school.
15. Secondly, further analysis of absence data indicates that there are specific trends amongst a number of subgroups most notably those pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM), non grammar school pupils, Irish Traveller children and Looked After Children<sup>8</sup>. There is also a trend by year group in post primary schools which indicates that the level of non-attendance increases as pupils progress through school, with Year 11 pupils having the highest level of non-attendance.
- Pupils entitled to FSMs have higher absence records and achieve considerably lower attainment levels than pupils not entitled to FSMs. Unauthorised absence is also higher in schools with high levels of FSM entitlement. The Department is aware that pupil attendance in socially deprived areas is particularly low and, in response, it commissioned consultants to undertake research into improving attendance in schools in these areas<sup>9</sup>;
  - Average levels of absence in non grammar schools were much higher than grammar schools; however, it is encouraging that the gap is narrowing. Almost nine out of ten pupils with more than a 15 per cent overall absence rate attended non grammar schools. There is a marked difference in the levels of unauthorised absence in non grammar and grammar schools;
  - The absence level of Irish Traveller primary school children was six times greater than the general school population in 2011-12. Irish Traveller children are absent from post primary schools more than any other ethnic group, missing up to 40 per cent of the school year. In November 2013, the Department launched 'The Traveller Child in Education Action Framework' which will address attendance amongst other issues;
  - Rates of overall and unauthorised absence are notably higher for Looked After Children in post primary schools. The Department told us that it plans further work to develop a Looked After Children resource pack for schools;
  - Levels of average absence and unauthorised absence of post primary pupils increase steadily between Year 8 and Year 11. This pattern in attendance is reflected in pupils' achievement - by Key Stage 3<sup>10</sup>, more than one in five does not achieve the expected standard in literacy and numeracy. By GCSE, two in five do not achieve the standards deemed necessary to progress to sixth form studies at school; further education; training; or step onto the employment ladder<sup>11</sup>; and

8 Children in care

9 RSM McClure Watters 'Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas', March 2012

10 Key Stage Three is Year 8-10 (first to third year) at post primary level education

11 Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools, Northern Ireland Audit Office, 19 February 2013



- While overall attendance levels have improved since data was first collected, the level of unauthorised absence has increased. Northern Ireland has consistently had a higher level of unauthorised absence than England and Wales. Northern Ireland rates of unauthorised absence are now double England's rates in both the primary and post primary sectors.

### **Referrals to Education Welfare Service and sanctions imposed**

16. Schools can make a referral to EWS when a pupil's attendance is a cause for concern or when attendance drops below 85 per cent. In real terms, the threshold of 15 per cent absence means children are missing nearly six weeks (28 days) of school and learning.
17. In 2011-12 more than 7,000 primary school pupils and almost 13,000 post primary school pupils in compulsory education exceeded the 15 per cent absence threshold and 3,881 of these pupils were referred to the EWS. This means that around 16,000 children missed 15 per cent (six weeks) of school but were not referred to the EWS. There is a risk that, if schools are not proactive in managing these cases, these pupils could slip through the net. Of those cases referred to the EWS 108 cases resulted in a parental fine<sup>12</sup> and 24 cases resulted in an Education Supervision Order.

### **Building on the experience of good practice in local schools**

18. During our visits to 10 primary, 10 post primary and 2 special schools, we were encouraged to note a number of emerging themes which have contributed to successfully improving pupil attendance:
  - Early intervention can prevent patterns of non-attendance from emerging;
  - A strong pastoral ethos helps to instil a sense of pride and belonging in pupils;
  - Tackling persistent non-attendance will require schools to adopt a flexible approach;
  - A school attendance policy promotes the importance of attendance at school;
  - Effective use of attendance data helps to prevent persistent non-attendance at school;
  - School principals determine the level of priority given to school attendance;
  - Engagement with parents and the wider community encourages better attendance at school;
  - Schools facing particular challenges may need to consider the merit of adopting more innovative

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<sup>12</sup> Fines are issued at the discretion of the court system and EWS has no influence over the outcome of this process

## Executive Summary

approaches to improving attendance; and

- Good practice should be identified and disseminated across the education system.

19. Research has however concluded that, *“there is no ‘magic bullet’ to school attendance...”*<sup>13</sup>. We recognise that ‘one size does not fit all’ and it is likely that the more challenging the circumstances a school finds itself in, the more ambitious and flexible its approach will need to be.

### Summary of Recommendations

#### Recommendation 1

It is imperative that the Department implements the recommendations made by the NIAO in a timely way. The Department should view, as a priority, the development of an overarching Strategy to address the issues associated with school attendance.

#### Recommendation 2

When it is developed, the Department’s Strategy on Attendance should target the specific groups which are most at risk of failure due to non-attendance at school.

#### Recommendation 3

We welcome the progress made by the Department in addressing pupil attendance in socially deprived areas and recommend that the Department, through the Education Welfare Service, continues to offer support to

help schools in these areas to drive down non-attendance. The Department must also address outstanding recommendations from the 2004 report and, in particular it should establish an attendance network for schools in deprived areas to share information and good practice.

Overall responsibility for ensuring that children attend school lies with the parents and therefore, in our view, promoting the importance of attendance to parents is a worthwhile investment. We recommend, therefore, that the Department considers issuing the Parent’s Guide to the parents/guardians of all primary and post primary pupils.

#### Recommendation 4

There is a link between attendance and educational performance. We recommend, therefore, that schools ensure that attendance statistics are part of the tracking and monitoring of pupils’ overall performance throughout their time in compulsory education and an item for discussion at parent/teacher meetings. As part of this process primary schools should maintain attendance statistics for individual pupils and this information should be made available to the pupil’s post primary school.

#### Recommendation 5

We recommend that study leave should be omitted from the attendance figures reported for Year 12 pupils. This will help authorities to gain a more accurate picture of attendance at this level.

#### Recommendation 6

We recommend that schools place a greater emphasis on following up absence to enable

a more meaningful reporting of absence information which, in turn, will afford more effective monitoring and analysis.

ETI reviews school attendance as part of its school inspections and is, therefore, in an ideal position to identify good practice in schools with good or improving attendance. It is important that this information is disseminated throughout the education system. We recommend that the Education and Training Inspectorate shares this information with the Department and that the Department considers how best to promulgate good practice in attendance management identified during school visits. As highlighted in paragraph 2.15 the purpose of inspection is to promote the highest possible standards of learning, teaching and achievement and this recommendation would be consistent with this statement.

### **Recommendation 7**

We understand and acknowledge that there may be exceptional circumstances which may result in pupils being absent from school for extended periods of time. It is, however, unacceptable that the Education Welfare Service is discouraging schools from referring pupils who miss more than 15 per cent of school. It is vitally important that schools have the freedom to refer all pupils who meet the 15 per cent threshold and, in their view, require intervention. Without this freedom there is a risk that the education system could be failing the most vulnerable pupils. We recommend that schools refer all cases where intervention is considered to be necessary. Although this is likely to result in an increase in demand for the EWS and potentially contribute to an increase in waiting lists it is essential that the Department

has an opportunity to analyse the real level of demand for the service and consider how best to resource it.

### **Recommendation 8**

Tackling the problem of persistent absenteeism is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges that our education system faces. We recommend that the EWS places a greater emphasis on preventative measures through the provision of training and consultation for staff in schools with attendance responsibilities.

### **Recommendation 9**

We understand that once the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) has been implemented there will be one regional Education Welfare Service for all schools. The Department should consider whether any improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery can be identified in the Education Welfare Service. There should be a particular focus on ensuring that the approach adopted by the Education Welfare Officers is consistent and that all disengaged pupils have access to the same services.

If the implementation of ESA is delayed for any reason we recommend that the Department gives consideration to a more joined up and consistent approach in the provision of an Education Welfare Service under the current five Board structure. This should help to streamline the working relationships between schools and the Education Welfare Service and should ensure that all disengaged pupils receive the same opportunities.

## Executive Summary

### Recommendation 10

It is vital that the Education Welfare Service has access to the basic management information that it requires in order to complete its role effectively. We recommend that the Department provides the Education Welfare Service with access to the C2K system and that EWS's current management information systems are reviewed. Basic management information such as caseloads and waiting lists should be available at the touch of a button.

### Recommendation 11

There is a wide range of factors that can impact on a pupil's attendance at school and for this reason it is not appropriate to apply a single approach in tackling the problem of non-attendance. In our view, the best results can be achieved through the implementation of innovative practices tailored to meet the local circumstances of individual schools. We recommend that the Department and the ELBs should work together to identify and offer support to those schools with high levels of unauthorised absence and/or a high concentration of vulnerable pupils. This should involve providing schools with examples of good practice and working with them in developing and applying a tailored approach to tackling non-attendance.

### Recommendation 12

Early identification of patterns in pupil absence can assist schools in putting measures in place to prevent persistent non-attendance at school. Since our last report in 2004, there is now more data available to school Governors and principals and it is essential that this data is used

in a meaningful way. We recommend that all schools are required to set their own realistic but challenging targets for pupil attendance and that progress against the targets is monitored regularly with early intervention where an individual pupil's attendance record gives cause for concern. Pupil attendance should be a standing item on the agenda of Board of Governors meetings.

### Recommendation 13

It is clear that tackling the problem of non-attendance, and in particular persistent non-attendance, is highly complex and in certain cases it may be necessary to involve a wide range of stakeholders. We strongly recommend that the Department considers ways of ensuring that there is a more cohesive and joined up approach in addressing the issues associated with non-attendance. In developing an overarching strategy to address issues associated with school attendance (see Recommendation 1) the Department should consider how it will work with other relevant agencies.

### Recommendation 14

Sharing good practice is a cost effective means of improving pupil attendance which, in turn, can raise standards in schools. We recommend that the Department develops an approach for identifying and sharing innovative and successful ideas in improving attendance within schools.

## Key Facts

- If children miss school, they are missing the opportunity to learn. At the end of primary school 1 in 6 children does not achieve the expected standard in literacy and numeracy and by Key Stage 3 this is more than 1 in 5. By GCSE, 2 in 5 do not achieve the standards deemed necessary to progress to sixth form studies at school.
  - 21.4% of NI working population aged 16-24 are not in education, employment or training –‘NEET’. This expanding NEET group costs the local economy nearly £5million a week. Persistent absentees are 7 times more likely to be a NEET at age 16.
  - Over 158,000 pupils are currently enrolled in 847 primary schools and nearly 146,000 pupils enrolled in 215 post primary schools in NI.
  - The average funding per pupil in 2011-12 for primary school was £3,007 and £4,191 for a post primary pupil.
  - Parents and guardians have a legal duty to ensure that children of compulsory school age attend school regularly, otherwise they risk receiving a fine not exceeding £1,000 in court.
  - There is a wide range of factors including social deprivation, family problems and bullying which may result in persistent absenteeism.
  - If an average sized post primary school managed to improve its attendance by one percentage point, that would represent an additional 1,300 pupil days spent at school.
  - Overall attendance figures have improved since 2007-08 by 0.6% to 94.2% in 2011-12 although the level of unauthorised absence has increased from 27% to 33%.
  - The average rate of attendance in primary schools was 95.2% and 93.0% in post primary schools in 2011-12.
  - In 2011-12 there were around 9 days missed per primary school pupil, with 2.5 being unauthorised. There were 13 days missed per post primary school pupil with nearly 5 days unauthorised. Based on 2011-12 figures the opportunity cost of unauthorised absence is around £22million per year.
  - In 2011-12 almost 20,000 pupils missed more than 15%, i.e. 28 days of school. 3,881 cases were referred to the EWS meaning that there was no formal intervention in around 16,000 cases.
  - Children with the worst attendance in the early years tend to come from the lowest socio-economic groups where attainment on entry to primary school is often notably lower than that of their peers. These pupils are likely to come from families where the parents often missed school themselves.
-

## Key Facts

- In post primary schools absence levels steadily increase as children progress from Year 8 to 11.
  - Pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSMs) have higher absence records and achieve considerably lower attainment levels than pupils not entitled to FSMs.
  - There are higher levels of unauthorised absence in non grammar (3.8%) than in grammar schools (0.8%) in 2011-12.
  - Over 90% of Traveller children have attendance rates below the overall attendance rate for non-Traveller children.
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## Part One: Introduction





## Part One: Introduction

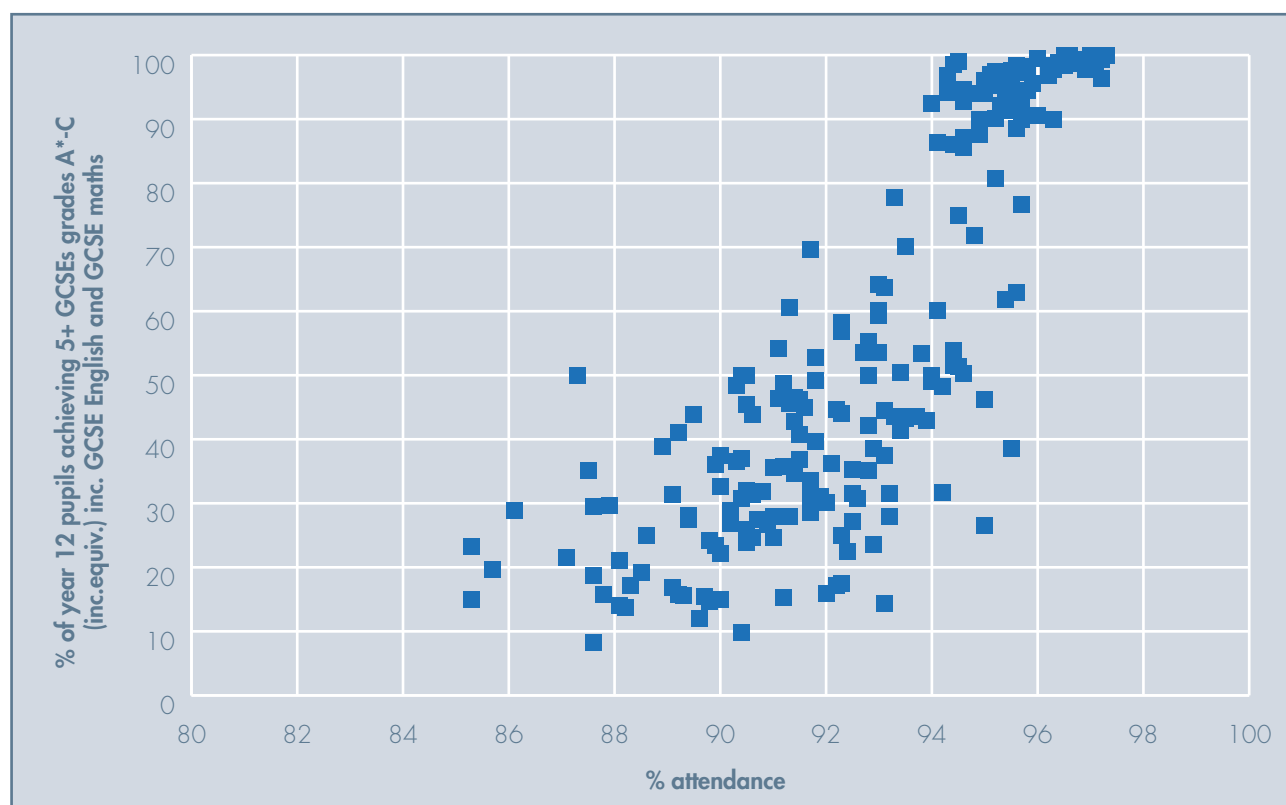
### The importance of attending school for children and for society

1.1 There are currently over 158,000 pupils enrolled in 847 primary schools in Northern Ireland and nearly 146,000 pupils enrolled in 215 post primary schools<sup>14</sup>. Parents and guardians have a legal duty to ensure that children of compulsory school age, that is, a 4 to 16 years, attend regularly. Regular school attendance and educational attainment are inextricably linked and regular attendance ensures that pupils get the best possible outcomes from their period in compulsory education. Conversely, poor attendance at school can have an

irreversible and long-term impact on the absent pupil. Young people who regularly miss school without good reason are more likely to become isolated from their friends, to underachieve in their examinations and may become involved in anti-social behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Absenteeism also impacts on the learning of other pupils as it can disrupt the teacher's ability to deliver lessons in a sequential and organised way.

1.2 For those children whose attendance is continually disrupted there can be a substantial impact on subsequent life chances. Not only does non-

**Figure 1: Pupil Attendance at Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools in 2011-12 plotted against the percentage of Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs (including equivalents) including GCSE English and GCSE maths**



Source: Department

14 In 2012-13 per the Department

15 School Attendance Matters: A Parent's Guide



attendance result in pupils effectively forfeiting the value of their education but it is a contributory factor in low levels of pupil attainment. Figure 1 shows the link between attendance and educational attainment at GCSE level for pupils aged 16.

1.3 In addition to the personal costs associated with non-attendance and poor educational achievement at school, there are wide reaching implications for society and the economy. Over a fifth (21.4 per cent) of Northern Ireland's working population aged 16 to 24 are not in education, employment or training – officially described as 'NEET'. If this remains static until the end of the current Programme for Government<sup>16</sup>, lost productivity alone will have cost the Northern Ireland taxpayer £1 billion. Northern Ireland's expanding NEET group costs the local economy nearly £5 million a week. Persistent absentees are seven times more likely to be a NEET at age 16<sup>17</sup>. One of the priorities in addressing the social costs of NEETs is to eliminate literacy and numeracy underachievement at primary school level but clearly it is challenging for schools to initiate improvement if children are not in school.

1.4 There is also a strong relationship between educational underachievement and anti-social behaviour, and it is likely that a child's poor attendance at school and criminal behaviour are linked. A national survey of 11-15 year olds in England found that pupils who truanted

from school were three times more likely to smoke regularly, over twice as likely to have drunk alcohol in the past week and were 1.85 times as likely to have taken drugs in the past year.<sup>18</sup>

1.5

Attendance is measured for every pupil in half day sessions (am and pm) and all schools are now required to maintain electronic records of pupil attendance. The Department of Education (the Department) provides schools with guidance, strategies and examples of good practice to manage pupil attendance<sup>19</sup>. The guidance classifies different types of pupil absence (see Appendix 1) and the two main categories are:

- **Authorised** - absence with permission from an authorised school representative on provision of a satisfactory explanation. This includes illness, artistic endeavour, bereavement, suspension, agreed family holiday (in very exceptional circumstances), medical/dental appointments, other exceptional circumstances (includes an exceptional event outside control of the school, for example, travelling children, court appearance) and religious observance.
- **Unauthorised** - absence without permission from an authorised school representative due to unexplained or unjustified absence. This includes a family holiday which has not been agreed, other absence (includes

16 The Programme for Government 2011-15 sets the strategic context for both the Budget and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

17 Helping a Lost and Forgotten Generation, PricewaterhouseCoopers, 27 March 2012

18 Fuller, E (2012) Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England 2011

19 Circular 2013/13 'Attendance Guidance and Absence Recording by Schools'

## Part One: Introduction

- absence not covered by any other code or a reason which is not acceptable to the school, for example, pupil's/parent's or sibling's birthday), where no reason has been provided for absence and late arrival (after registration closed)<sup>20</sup>.

### Scope of the report

1.6 This report incorporates:

- a review of the role of the Department and the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) (Part 2);
- an analysis of recent trends in pupil attendance including statistics from other regions of the UK (Part 3); and
- good practice Case Examples from local schools which have good or improving attendance records or face particular challenges in addressing persistent absenteeism (Part 4).

- visits to 22 primary, post primary and special schools from different sectors<sup>21</sup> and ELBs (Appendix 3 provides a complete list of school visits and the rationale behind our selection);
- analytical review of the Department's statistics on pupil attendance; and
- desk based review of research on pupil attendance including RSM McClure Watters Survey of school staff and parents on attendance.

### Methodology

1.7 The study has used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods including:

- interviews with relevant staff in the Department, the ELBs and other relevant third parties such as the Youth Justice Agency;

20 Notes to Readers – no.4 Definitions - Statistical First Release 2011-12

21 The education system in Northern Ireland consists of different types of schools – controlled, Catholic maintained, other maintained, voluntary and integrated

## Part Two: Roles and Responsibilities



## Part Two: Roles and Responsibilities

### Who is responsible for ensuring that children attend school?

#### Parents

- 2.1 Parents and guardians have a legal duty to ensure that children of compulsory school age attend school regularly. By law<sup>22</sup>, all children of compulsory school age must receive a suitable full-time education. Parents must therefore either register their child at school or make other suitable arrangements such as elective home education. Once a child has been registered at a school, parents are legally obliged to ensure that they attend school regularly. If a child or young person who is registered at a school does not attend regularly, a parent can receive a fine not exceeding £1,000 in court (for each child). An Education Supervision Order (ESO) could also be made by a court under Article 55 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995<sup>23</sup>.

#### Schools

- 2.2 Although it is a parent's responsibility to ensure that a child attends school regularly schools also have a role to play. The most recent attendance guidance issued by the Department in June 2013<sup>24</sup> advises that schools:

- have a responsibility to provide a caring and stimulating ethos which promotes a positive culture and encourages good attendance;

- should have an attendance policy in place which is approved and endorsed by the Board of Governors;
- have a responsibility to have in place a clear strategy and procedures for promoting attendance along with clearly defined attendance targets;
- must include a summary and evaluation of the attendance strategy in the School Development Plan;
- should ensure that school attendance and targets are placed as agenda items at each Board of Governors meeting;
- should have a designated member of senior staff responsible for attendance;
- should have defined roles and responsibilities for staff, pupils and parents in relation to attendance which are clearly communicated; and
- should have early interventions in place for those at risk.

#### The Department

2.3 In 2004, we published a report on improving pupil attendance at school which considered the effectiveness of attendance management practices in schools<sup>25</sup>. The report raised concerns about a lack of strategic perspective in

22 Article 45 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986

23 An Education Supervision Order is heard in the Family Proceedings Court and will involve the cooperation of the Education and Library Board and a child's parents in developing a work plan which will tell the Court of the intended educational provision, any other agencies to be involved and any direction to be included. The Education Supervision Order is intended to support parents in fulfilling their legal responsibilities

24 Circular 2013/13 'Attendance Guidance and Absence Recording By Schools'

25 Improving pupil attendance at school, Northern Ireland Audit Office, NIA 122/03, 4 November 2004

relation to improving school attendance, a need for better dissemination of good practice and a more effective use of attendance data. We concluded that the ELBs and the Department needed to:

- develop a more strategic perspective by outlining their aims, objectives and targets in relation to improving school attendance;
- bring about change in school policy and procedures and to disseminate good practice ideas on managing attendance; and
- use data to plan effective initiatives to deal with the problem of low attendance.

The Department has implemented a number of changes in response to the recommendations made in the 2004 report.

2.4 Since 2007-08, attendance data is collected each academic year from all primary, post primary and special schools via the annual school census in October. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) publishes an annual Detailed Statistical Release which includes analysis of attendance data by school type and characteristics such as management type as well as pupil characteristics (for example, gender and ethnicity).

2.5 The Department's Additional Educational Needs Team has responsibility for policy on attendance and provides guidance to

schools. In April 2009, the Department issued the 'Every School a Good School' school improvement policy document. This recognises that regular attendance at school is an important precursor to achieving effective and successful learning outcomes for all pupils.

2.6 The Department commissioned RSM McClure Watters to undertake research into improving attendance in schools serving deprived areas. The aim was to provide the Department with information that would inform policy and practice in those schools with low attendance rates to help them in improving attendance. The report, which was published in May 2012, found that more than 40 per cent of schools surveyed did not have an attendance policy in place and only 64 per cent of schools had a target for school attendance in their School Development Plan<sup>26</sup>. The report made four recommendations:

- the Department should provide guidance to schools on the need to introduce attendance management policies and key elements to be included within these;
- schools should be provided with an information pack setting out the main types of interventions that could be introduced – supported by case studies – to address poor attendance;
- the information pack should be supported by guidance on monitoring and evaluation – to help

## Part Two: Roles and Responsibilities

- schools to identify the most successful interventions; and
- an attendance network/forum should be set up for schools in deprived areas to share information and good practice on attendance management strategies.

2.7 In November 2012, the Department set up an Attendance Working Group of Principals, representatives from the Department, the ELBs and the EWS to develop practical guidance. The most recent circular, 'Attendance Guidance and Absence Recording by Schools' provides schools with good practice, guidance and strategies to manage pupil attendance. It also advises schools of the C2K attendance module pupils' absence codes from the 2013-14 school year. The circular was issued in June 2013 to facilitate the School Development Planning process for the 2013-14 school year.

2.8 The Department established a working group which developed 'School Attendance Matters: A Parent's Guide' which was distributed to all schools for distribution to all Year 1 and Year 8 pupils and is available on the Department's website. Further work includes the development of an attendance information pack for all schools which will be issued in advance of the 2014-15 school year.

2.9 In December 2011, the Department launched a report by the Taskforce on Traveller Education which contained a

number of high level recommendations aimed at addressing the barriers to education faced by Traveller children. 'The Traveller Child in Education Action Framework', published in November 2013, is the Department's response to these recommendations. The Framework is underpinned by the delivery plan of the Regional Traveller Education Support Service (TESS) and will ensure that Traveller children can benefit from the equal opportunities available. This Action Framework will be monitored and reviewed biannually by a small Monitoring and Review Group which will report directly to the Minister for Education. The TESS delivery plan will be monitored by the Department on a quarterly basis.

2.10 As illustrated in paragraphs 2.4 to 2.9, although the Department has made some progress in implementing the recommendations contained in our 2004 report it is concerning that a number are still outstanding, in particular:

- the Department has not yet developed a strategy to improve attendance;
- the EWS has been unable to provide us with detailed information on waiting lists; and
- there is little evidence of a joined up approach in the delivery of the EWS across the ELBs.

### Recommendation 1

It is imperative that the Department implements the recommendations made by the NIAO in a timely way. The Department should view, as a priority, the development of an overarching Strategy to address the issues associated with school attendance.

### Education and Library Boards

2.11 At present, the five ELBs in Northern Ireland fulfil their statutory duties<sup>27</sup> in relation to school attendance through the Education Welfare Service (EWS). The EWS is a specialist education support service which seeks to help young people of compulsory school age and their families get the best out of the education system. Its aim is to promote a culture of regular attendance at school. The ELBs fund the EWS through their core funding and this is supplemented by the Department through a collective allocation of a further £1.7 million a year. In total there are 134 Education Welfare Officers employed across the five ELBs.

2.12 The EWS has six strategic objectives:

- to assist schools to develop a whole school approach to the promotion of regular attendance;
- to operate within agreed criteria for referrals from schools and to respond appropriately;

- to empower parents to meet their legal responsibilities regarding school attendance through a partnership approach;
- to engage with children and families in a structured and purposeful way with a view to improving attendance at school;
- to engage in efficient and effective intra-board partnerships in the best interest of the child or young person; and
- to establish effective working relationships with appropriate external bodies - statutory, voluntary and community in the best interests of children and young people.

2.13 A school will make a referral to EWS when a pupil's attendance is a cause for concern or when attendance drops below 85 per cent. Once a referral has been made, an Education Welfare Officer will conduct a home visit as part of an assessment process and agree an action plan to address attendance with the pupils, parent or guardians, school, and other agencies if required. In 2011-12, almost 20,000 missed more than 15 per cent of school, of these, 3,881 cases were referred to the EWS (see paragraph 3.25).

27 As laid out in The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

## Part Two: Roles and Responsibilities

### The Education and Training Inspectorate

- 2.14 The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) provides inspection services and information about the quality of education being offered to the Department, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Employment and Learning.
- 2.15 The purpose of inspection is to promote the highest possible standards of learning, teaching and achievement through the education, training and youth sectors. In achieving this purpose ETI:
- provides unbiased, independent, professional assessments of the quality of learning and teaching, including the standards achieved by learners;
  - identifies and reports on educational developments;
  - comments on the influence and outcomes of the policies of the three Departments within the education, training and youth sectors; and
  - publishes reports on individual organisations and summary reports on aspects of educational, training and youth sectors in Northern Ireland.
- 2.16 ETI provides factual information on attendance in all inspection reports. Additional comments are made on attendance in inspection reports where

there are good, poor or improving patterns of attendance. Although ETI will look at pupil attendance as part of a school inspection, it has not produced any specific reports or guidance in this area recently.

### Attendance and Value for Money

- 2.17 As well as the huge personal, economic and social costs of poor attendance at primary and post primary school, there is also an opportunity cost of 'missed education'. Attendance at school is a core element of the education system and integral to all aspects of school life. It is important to improve pupil attendance at school so that all children benefit from good teaching.
- 2.18 The Department of Education provides funding for children in Northern Ireland of compulsory school age. The average funding that it provided per pupil in 2011-12 was £3,007 for a primary school pupil and £4,191 for a post primary school pupil. Parents who fail in their duty to ensure that children attend school regularly are effectively forfeiting the opportunity that has been provided for their child to receive an education. In our report in 2004 we estimated that, annually, pupils absent from school with no valid reason missed around £12 million worth of education annually. Based on 2011-12 figures, the opportunity cost of unauthorised absence is around £22 million a year (calculations are provided in Appendix 2).



- 2.19 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.
-



## Part Three: Progress in Improving Pupil Attendance at School



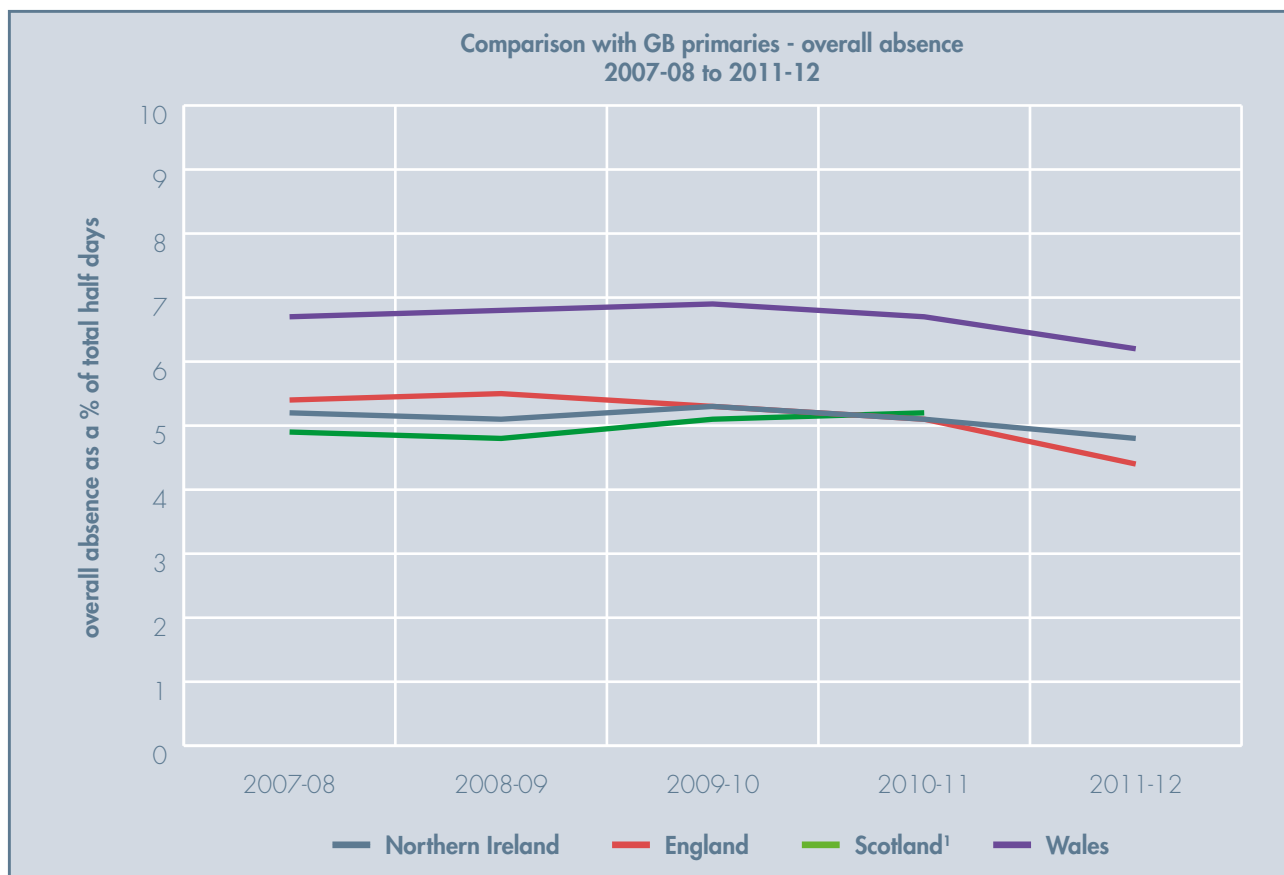
## Part Three: Progress in Improving Pupil Attendance at School

### Overall Attendance Rates for all Northern Ireland schools

3.1 When considering pupil attendance it is worth noting that relatively marginal increases in the level of pupil attendance can have a significant impact. For example, if an average sized post primary school managed to improve its attendance by one percentage point, that would represent an additional 1,300 pupil days spent in school. It is

encouraging, therefore, that overall attendance levels in Northern Ireland schools have improved from 93.6 per cent in 2007-08, when statistics were first published, to 94.2 per cent in 2011-12<sup>28</sup>. However, attendance rates differ at individual school level. For example, the average rate of attendance in primary schools in 2011-12 was 95.2 per cent, but this ranged from 87.7 per cent to 98.8 per cent<sup>29</sup>. In post primary schools, the average was 93.0

**Figure 2a: Comparison with England, Scotland and Wales primary schools – overall absence, 2007-08 to 2011-12<sup>30</sup>**



[1] Data for Scotland for 2011-12 is not available since it is now produced on a biennial basis

Source: Department

28 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: Statistical Press Releases on Attendance at grant-aided primary, post primary and special schools 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12: Detailed Statistics. This primary and post primary school data refers to pupils in Years 1 to 12 only which aligns with the compulsory school age in Northern Ireland

29 This range does not include one school which had an attendance rate of 57.8 per cent

30 Table 3 of Statistical First Release 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12

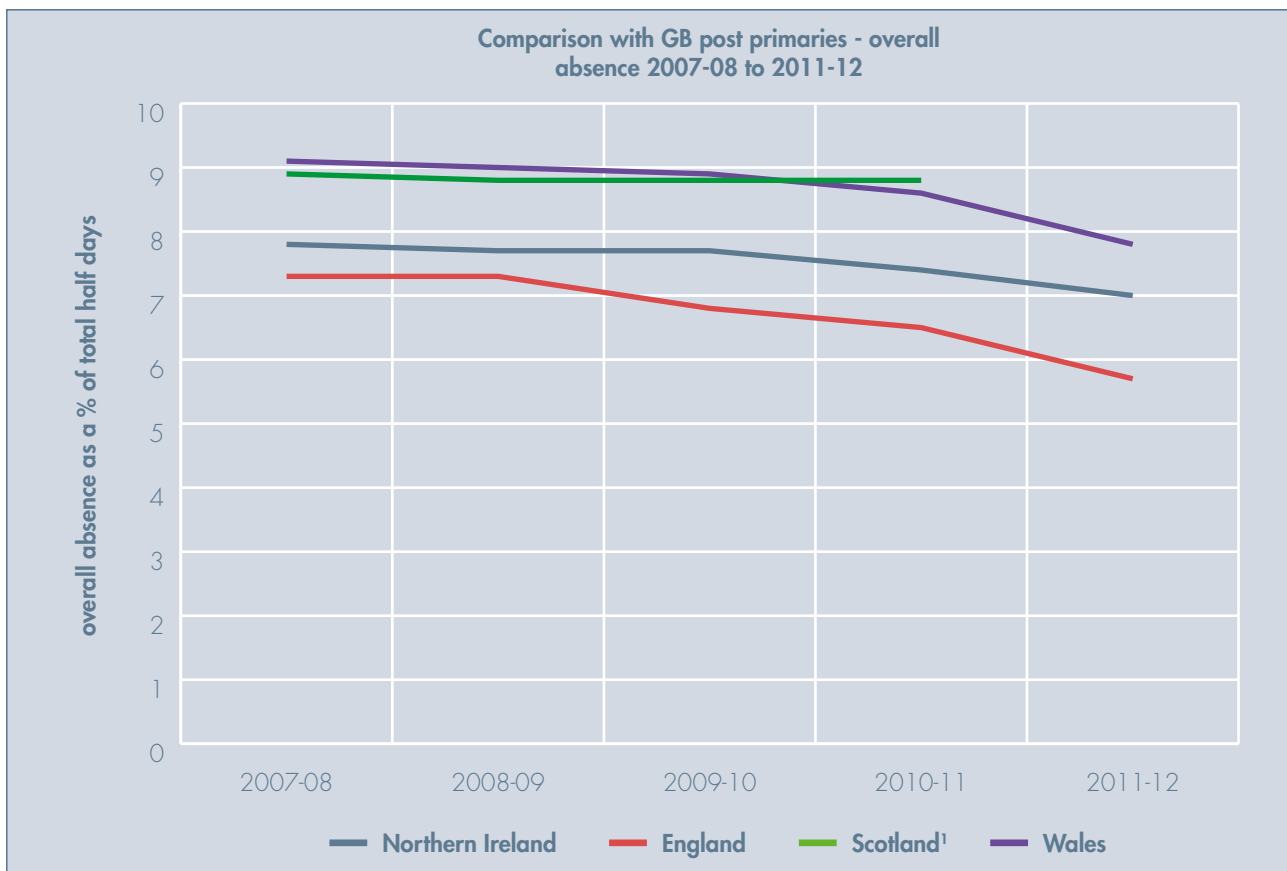
per cent but individual schools had attendance rates of between 82.6 per cent and 97.3 per cent. In special schools, where the average attendance was 90.2 per cent in 2011-12, individual rates ranged from 85.1 per cent to 93.4 per cent. As illustrated in figures 2a and 2b, attendance levels in Northern Ireland's schools are on a par with England and Scotland and are better than the attendance levels recorded in Wales.

3.2

However, despite the marginal improvements in attendance, it is clear that challenges remain. Firstly, in real terms, the 2011-12 absence rates in Northern Ireland primary and post primary schools, on average, equate to:

- around 9 days missed per pupil at primary school;
- 13 days missed per pupil at post primary school;

**Figure 2b: Comparison with England, Scotland and Wales post primary schools – overall absence, 2007-08 to 2011-12** <sup>31</sup>



[1] Data for Scotland for 2011-12 is not available since it is now produced on a biennial basis

Source: Department

31 Table 3 of Statistical First Release 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12

## Part Three:

# Progress in Improving Pupil Attendance at School

- 7,500 of the 156,000 primary school pupils failing to attend school each day; and
- 10,300 of the 147,000 post primary school pupils failing to attend school each day.

It is important to note however that individual pupil absence levels vary greatly and that the measures highlighted above merely provide an indication of the extent of the problem. For example, not all primary school pupils miss nine days of school, absence levels recorded at primary school could reflect a small number of pupils with lengthy absences or a high percentage of pupils with brief absences.

- 3.3 Secondly, further analysis of absence data indicates that there are specific trends amongst a number of subgroups most notably those pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM), non grammar school pupils, Irish Traveller children and Looked After Children (LAC)<sup>32</sup>. There is also a trend by year group in post primary schools which indicates that the level of non-attendance increases as pupils progress through school, with Year 11 pupils having the highest level of non-attendance.

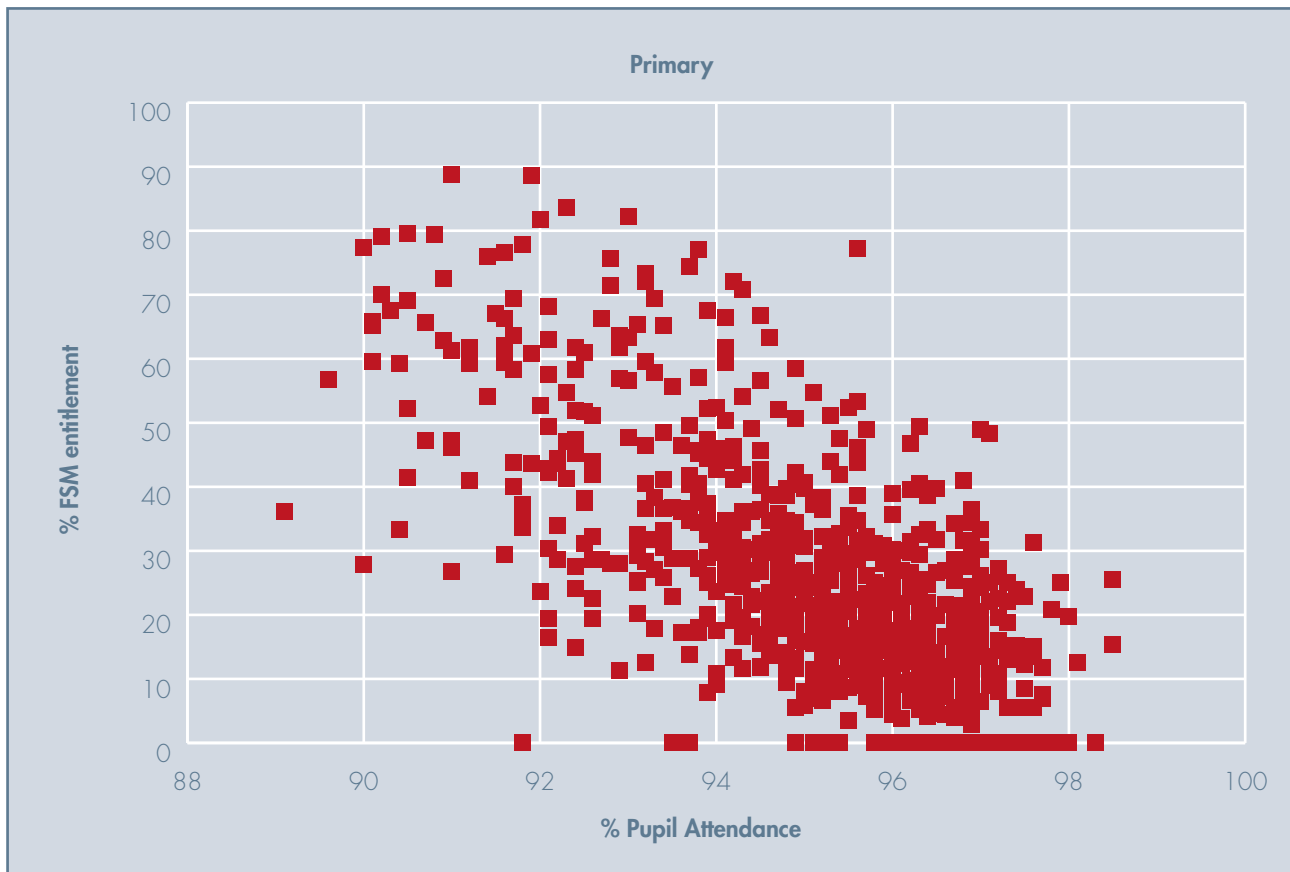
### Family income remains an indicator of poor attendance at school

- 3.4 Pupils entitled to FSMs have higher absence records and achieve considerably lower attainment levels than pupils not entitled to FSMs. Average overall absence levels generally increase in line with the percentage of pupils enrolled in a school with FSM entitlement (Figures 3a and 3b). In primary schools where fewer than 10 per cent of pupils enrolled were eligible for FSM, the average overall absence level was 3.4 per cent in 2011-12. This more than doubles to 7.0 per cent for schools where more than 50 per cent of pupils enrolled are eligible for FSM. A similar pattern, with a starker contrast, can be seen in post primary schools. For example, in post primary schools where fewer than 10 per cent of pupils enrolled were eligible for FSM, the average overall absence level was 4.2 per cent in 2011-12. This compares with 11.6 per cent for post primary schools with more than 50 per cent of pupils enrolled eligible for FSM. Since the level of FSM entitlement is indicative of levels of deprivation, the data suggests that absence tends to be higher in more disadvantaged areas.

### Recommendation 2

When it is developed, the Department's Strategy on Attendance should target the specific groups which are most at risk of failure due to non-attendance at school.

Figure 3a: Free school meal entitlement and pupil attendance in primary schools



Source: Department

3.5 Unauthorised absence is also higher in schools with high levels of FSM entitlement. At primary school, for example, where fewer than 10 per cent of pupils enrolled were entitled to FSMs, the total unauthorised absence was 0.7 per cent in 2011-12. This increases to 2.6 per cent for primary schools with more than 50 per cent of pupils enrolled entitled to FSMs. In post primary schools where less than 10 per cent of pupils enrolled were entitled to FSMs, total unauthorised absence was 0.7 per cent in 2011-12. This significantly increases

to 5.6 per cent for post primary schools with more than 50 per cent of pupils enrolled with FSM entitlement.

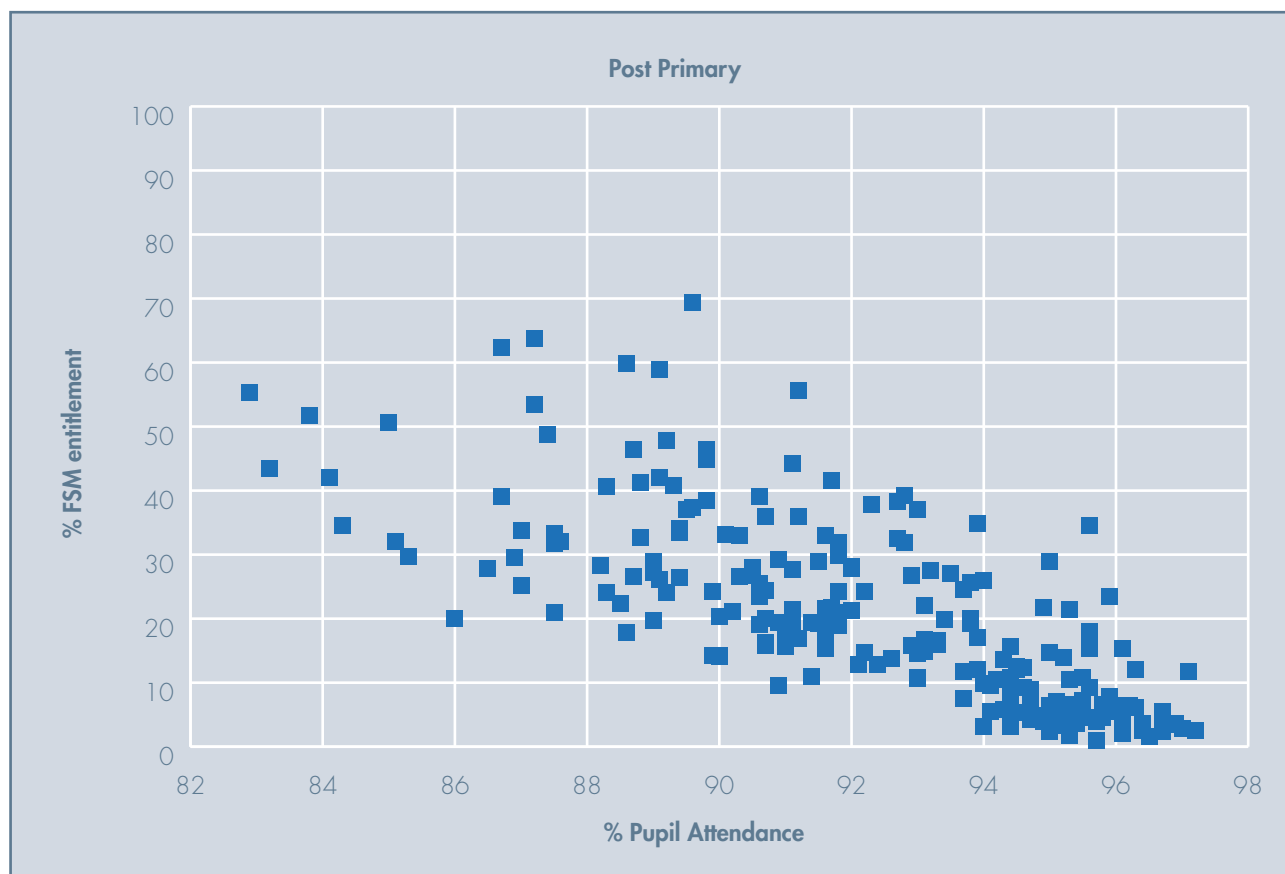
3.6

The link between deprivation and school attendance is confirmed when we examine the absence rate of pupils living in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas<sup>33</sup> (NRAs). At 6.7 per cent in 2011-12, the overall absence rate for primary school pupils living in NRAs was 2.3 percentage points higher than for pupils who did not live in an NRA. In post primary schools, the gap is more

33 Under the Government's People and Place strategy, 36 Neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland have been designated as Neighbourhood Renewal Areas by the Department for Social Development on the basis that these communities are experiencing the highest levels of deprivation

## Part Three: Progress in Improving Pupil Attendance at School

**Figure 3b: Free school meal entitlement and pupil attendance in post primary schools**



Source: Department

pronounced - at 9.8 per cent in 2011-12, the overall absence rate for post primary school pupils living in an NRA was 3.3 percentage points higher than for pupils who did not live in an NRA. There was a similar situation for both primary and post primary schools in the previous three years (data not provided for 2007-08).

- 3.7 The Department is aware that pupil attendance in socially deprived areas is particularly low and in response it commissioned RSM McClure Watters

to undertake research into improving attendance in schools in these areas.<sup>34</sup> The report was published in May 2012 and made four recommendations (see paragraph 2.6). The Department told us that it has made progress in implementing the recommendations, in particular it:

- issued a circular in June 2013 which provides schools with good practice, guidance and strategies to manage pupil attendance;

34 RSM McClure Watters 'Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas', March 2012



- established a working group to develop a leaflet 'School Attendance Matters: A Parent's Guide' which promotes the importance of attendance and provides key facts in relation to non-attendance. The leaflet is issued to all parents of primary one pupils and is available on the Department's website;
- intends to introduce a requirement for schools to record the overall level of pupil attendance in their School Development Plans from September 2013; and
- will monitor the impact of interventions through the annual published attendance statistics and through the results of an annual omnibus survey which will be conducted by NISRA and will seek responses from schools.

### Recommendation 3

We welcome the progress made by the Department in addressing pupil attendance in socially deprived areas and recommend that the Department, through the Education Welfare Service, continues to offer support to help schools in these areas to drive down non-attendance. The Department must also address outstanding recommendations from the 2004 report and, in particular it should establish an attendance network for schools in deprived areas to share information and good practice.

Overall responsibility for ensuring that children attend school lies with the parents and

therefore, in our view, promoting the importance of attendance to parents is a worthwhile investment. We recommend, therefore, that the Department considers issuing the Parent's Guide to the parents/guardians of all primary and post primary pupils.

### Focus needs to be placed on absence in the non grammar school sector, especially unauthorised absence

3.8 The difference in educational outcomes of the grammar and non grammar school sectors is stark. In 2011-12, 94.1 per cent of grammar school leavers achieved at least 5 GCSEs Grades A\*-C (including equivalents) including GCSE English and maths. This compares with 38.5 per cent in the non grammar schools, a difference of over 55 percentage points. There are, of course, a number of factors behind this but attendance is an issue. Analysis of pupils with more than a 15 per cent overall absence rate highlights that almost nine out of ten attended non grammar schools and this is consistent over the previous four years. Average levels of overall absence in non grammar schools, at 8.6 per cent, were much higher than grammar schools (4.3 per cent) in 2011-12. However, it is encouraging that the gap is narrowing (Figure 4).

3.9 There was also a marked difference in the levels of unauthorised absence in non grammar (3.8 per cent) and grammar schools (0.8 per cent) in 2011-12. It is disappointing to note that, over the

## Part Three:

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last five years, although the level of total absence has decreased unauthorised absence has increased in both sectors.

#### Recommendation 4

There is a link between attendance and educational performance. We recommend, therefore, that schools ensure that attendance statistics are part of the tracking and monitoring of pupils' overall performance throughout their time in compulsory education and an item for discussion at parent/teacher meetings. As part of this process primary schools should maintain attendance statistics for individual pupils and this information should be made available to the pupil's post primary school.

**Irish Traveller children are absent from both primary and post primary schools more than any other ethnic group, missing up to 40 per cent of the school year**

3.10 When school attendance is analysed by ethnicity, Irish Traveller children attending primary schools have consistently had a higher average overall absence rate than any other ethnic group. In 2011-12 the absence level of Irish Traveller children was six times greater than the general school population at 28.8 per cent. This trend has been consistent over the past four years.

**Figure 4: Absence at post primary school by school type 2007-08 to 2011-12**

	Non grammar		Grammar	
	Total Absence	Total Unauthorised Absence	Total Absence	Total Unauthorised Absence
	%	%	%	%
2007-08	9.7	3.7	4.7	0.6
2008-09	9.4	3.6	4.8	0.7
2009-10	9.4	3.7	4.9	0.7
2010-11	9.1	4.0	4.6	0.8
2011-12	8.6	3.8	4.3	0.8

Source: Department

- 3.11 Levels of absence amongst travelling children are even more worrying in the post primary sector. In 2011-12 Irish Traveller children missed 40 per cent of school compared with 6.9 per cent for white children and 7.0 per cent for children from a minority ethnic background. This trend has also been consistent over the past four years and equates to pupils missing over 15 of the 38 weeks of schooling each year.
- 3.12 The ETI's 2008 evaluation of Traveller Education in the five ELBs found that almost all Traveller children, as they progress through the school system, attend school less often than their peers and fail to benefit from full-time education. This is still the case. Over 90 per cent of Traveller children have attendance rates below the overall attendance rate for non-Traveller children.
- 3.13 In December 2011, the Department launched a report by the Taskforce on Traveller Education which contained a number of high level recommendations aimed at addressing the barriers to education faced by Traveller children. 'The Traveller Child in Education Action Framework', published in November 2013, is the Department's response to these recommendations. The Framework is underpinned by the delivery plan of the Regional Traveller Education Support Service (TESS) and will ensure that Traveller children can benefit from the equal opportunities available. This Action Framework will be monitored and reviewed biannually by a small Monitoring and Review Group which

will report directly to the Minister for Education. The TESS delivery plan will be monitored by the Department on a quarterly basis.

- 3.14 Article 45 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 places a duty on the parent of every child of compulsory school age to cause the child to receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational need he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. Paragraph 3 (3) of Schedule 13 to the Order states that, "*where, in any proceedings brought against a parent on the ground that a child who is a registered pupil at a school has failed to attend that school regularly, it is proved that the child has no fixed abode..., the parent shall be entitled to be acquitted if he proves that he is engaged in any trade or business of such a nature to require him to travel from place to place and the child has attended... on at least one hundred days during the period of twelve months*". The Department plans to commence a review of this legislation in consultation with Traveller groups by April 2014.

**Rates of overall and unauthorised absence are notably higher for Looked After Children in post primary schools**

- 3.15 Attendance data for Looked After Children shows that the absence rates of this group are notably higher for children in post primary schools (11.0 per cent

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of the total half days compared with 6.9 per cent for other children in 2011-12), particularly unauthorised absence (5.9 per cent and 2.6 per cent respectively). This is similar for the previous three years.

- 3.16 A recent Internal Audit report<sup>35</sup> on the Additional Educational Needs Team highlighted that it had not agreed targets with the ELBs for the use of earmarked funding in respect of Traveller Children, Looked After Children and School Aged Mothers. The Department told us that targets are now agreed for the use of earmarked funding and quarterly returns are requested. Internal Audit further highlighted that research commissioned by the Department, and published in 2011, on attendance at post primary schools of Looked After Children has not yet been formally considered<sup>36</sup>. The Department told us that this work has been subsumed within its policy work on attendance and Looked After Children. It plans further work to develop a Looked After Children resource pack and an attendance pack for all schools.

#### **Average absence levels of post primary pupils increase as they progress through schooling**

- 3.17 In the post primary sector average absence levels increased steadily between Year 8 and Year 11 from 5.2 per cent to 8.3 per cent respectively in 2011-12 before decreasing to 7.2 per cent in Year 12. This sudden decrease

in Year 12 is likely to be attributed to study leave over the GCSE period which qualifies as full attendance for all pupils. The Department has recently issued new guidance to schools on study leave as it found 'considerable disparity in practice when schools are granting study leave'<sup>37</sup>.

- 3.18 This pattern in attendance is reflected in pupils' achievement - as pupils progress from primary to post primary, the percentage of pupils reaching the expected standard in literacy and numeracy declines. At the end of primary school, one in six does not achieve the expected standard in literacy and numeracy. By Key Stage 3<sup>38</sup>, more than one in five does not achieve the expected standard in literacy and numeracy. By GCSE, two in five do not achieve the standards deemed necessary to progress to sixth form studies at school; further education; training; or step onto the employment ladder<sup>39</sup>. It is essential that, particularly during the early years, pupils' attendance is monitored and corrected so that, in turn their learning needs can be met. Early intervention is further discussed in Part Four of this report.

- 3.19 Significantly, levels of unauthorised absence followed the same pattern, increasing from 1.4 per cent in Year 8 to 3.5 per cent in Year 11 before falling slightly to 3.3 per cent in Year 12. This shows a disturbing trend of pupils missing more learning opportunities

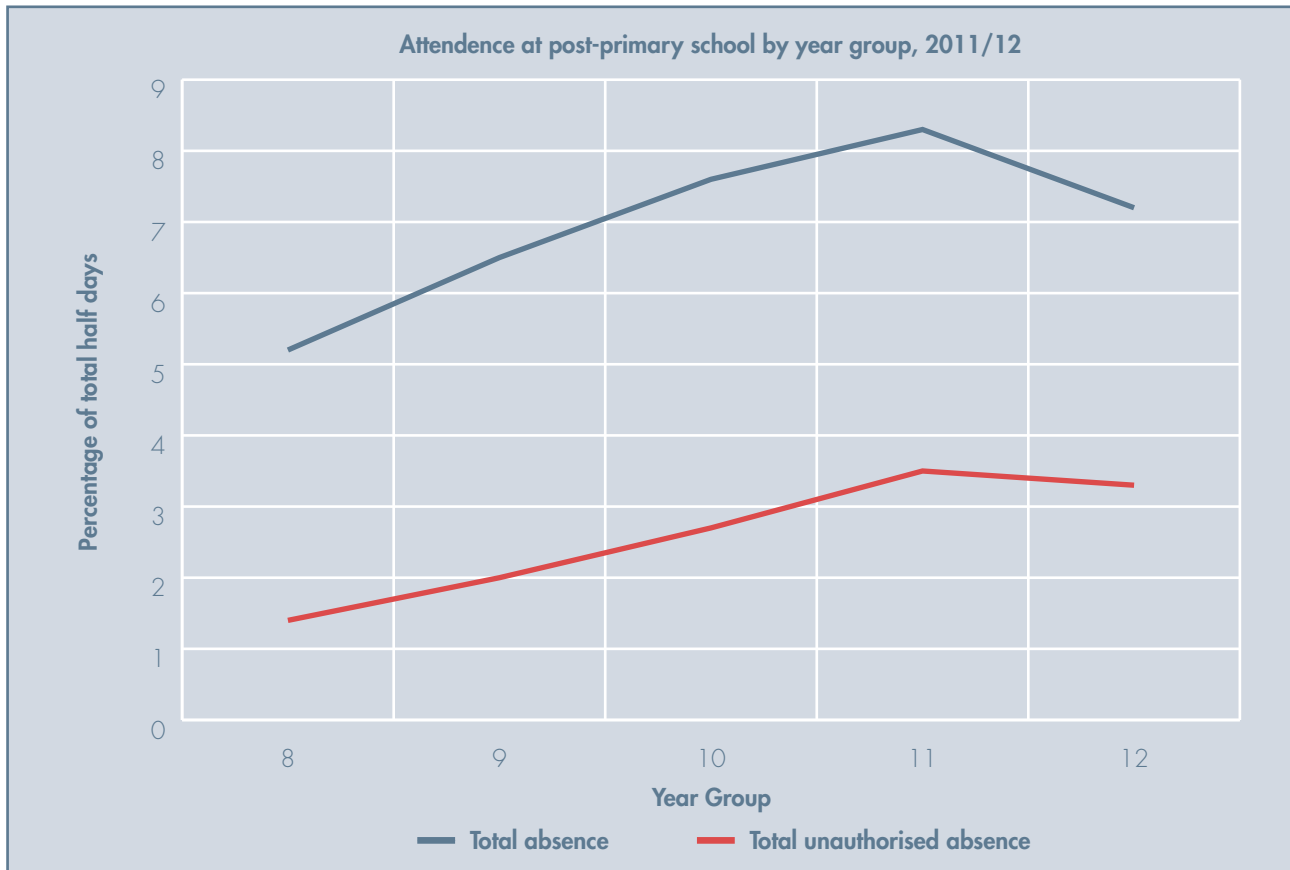
35 Issued 18 April 2013 by the Department of Education Internal Audit

36 PricewaterhouseCoopers 'Study into how the education system can improve the attendance of Looked After Children at post primary school' 2011

37 Department of Education Circular 2012/18, para 9, September 2012

38 Key Stage Three is Year 8-10 (first to third year) at post primary level education

39 Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools, Northern Ireland Audit Office, 19 February 2013

**Figure 5: Absence at post primary school by year group, 2011-12**

Source: Department

as they progress through their school life, culminating in taking GCSE and other examinations in Year 12. Year 11 pupils are also more likely to have absence rates of more than 15 per cent.

### Recommendation 5

We recommend that study leave should be omitted from the attendance figures reported for Year 12 pupils. This will help authorities to gain a more accurate picture of attendance at this level.

### Levels of unauthorised absence remain a challenge

3.20

Although overall attendance levels have improved since data was first collected in 2007-08 the level of unauthorised absence has increased from 27 per cent of total absence in 2007-08 to 33 per cent in 2011-12. Figures for primary and post primary school are provided in Figure 6. Unauthorised absence includes family holidays during term time, the impact of which can soon mount

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up – for example, if children are taken away for a two week holiday each year and have the average number of days off for sickness and appointments, then by the time they leave at age 16 they will have missed an entire year of their schooling<sup>40</sup>. Since 2007-08, Northern

Ireland has consistently had a higher level of unauthorised absence than England and Wales. In fact, one striking feature of the data is that the Northern Ireland rates of unauthorised absence are now double England's rates in both the primary and post primary sectors.

**Figure 6: Absence in schools by reason, 2011-12**

	<b>Primary Schools % of absent half days</b>	<b>Post Primary Schools % of absent half days</b>
<b>Authorised Absence:</b>		
Artistic endeavour	0.2	0.3
Bereavement	1.1	1.6
Suspended	0.1	1.3
Family holiday agreed	2.7	0.7
Illness	61.9	49.9
Medical/dental appointment	2.8	5.2
Other exceptional circumstances	3.3	3.7
Religious Observance	0.0	0.1
<b>Total Authorised Absence</b>	<b>72.2</b>	<b>62.7</b>
<b>Unauthorised Absence:</b>		
Family holiday not agreed	6.4	2.2
Other	4.0	6.2
No reason yet provided	16.7	28.5
Late after registration closed	0.7	0.5
<b>Total Unauthorised Absence</b>	<b>27.8</b>	<b>37.3</b>
<b>Total overall absence</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Department

40 Improving attendance at school, Charlie Taylor, 29 June 2012

- 3.21 In primary schools, the percentage of total unauthorised absence has increased each year from 20.7 per cent in 2007-08 to 27.8 per cent in 2011-12. Likewise, unauthorised absence has increased in post primary schools by nearly 5 per cent. This is a worrying trend as it means that 37.3 per cent of all post primary absences in 2011-12 were unauthorised and no reason was obtained for 28.5 per cent of total absence in post primary schools.

#### **Recommendation 6**

We recommend that schools place a greater emphasis on following up absence to enable a more meaningful reporting of absence information which, in turn, will afford more effective monitoring and analysis.

ETI reviews school attendance as part of its school inspections and is, therefore, in an ideal position to identify good practice in schools with good or improving attendance. It is important that this information is disseminated throughout the education system. We recommend that the Education and Training Inspectorate shares this information with the Department and that the Department considers how best to promulgate good practice in attendance management identified during school visits. As highlighted in paragraph 2.15 the purpose of inspection is to promote the highest possible standards of learning, teaching and achievement and this recommendation would be consistent with this statement.

### **Schools can refer pupils with absence of more than 15 per cent to the Education Welfare Service**

- 3.22 The EWS is a specialist education support service which seeks to help young people of compulsory school age and their families get the best out of the education system. The EWS has six strategic objectives (see paragraph 2.12). One of its objectives is to operate a referral and assessment process. A school can make a referral to EWS when a pupil's attendance is a cause for concern or when attendance drops below 85 per cent. In real terms, the threshold of 15 per cent absence means children are missing nearly six weeks (28 days) of school and learning.
- 3.23 Once the EWS receives a referral a contact letter and an acknowledgement letter are sent out to the parents and the school respectively. The EWS applies a risk assessment/screening process in order to assess the needs of the children and families referred and prioritises allocation to an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) in accordance with the EWS Service Caseload Management System. This will form the basis of an Education Support Plan and will determine the level and type of support put in place for the family. Appendix 5 provides a summary of the referral process.

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### Progress in Improving Pupil Attendance at School

- 3.24 There are currently 134 Education Welfare Officers operating across the five Education and Library Boards. Funding for the service is provided by each of the Education and Library Boards through its core funding and in 2013-14 the Department provided an additional £1.7 million of funding to assist the Education Welfare Service in addressing non-attendance. The total current caseload stands at approximately 4,500 and ranges from 728 cases in the South Eastern Education and Library Board to 1,180 in the Belfast Education and Library Board. The EWS applies the professional standards of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) and the number of cases per Education Welfare Officer is therefore capped at 40-45.
- 3.25 Since 2007-08 the total number of referrals has reduced from 4,275 in 2007-08 to 3,881 in 2011-12 (see figure 7). In 2011-12 more than 7,000 primary school pupils and almost 13,000 post primary school pupils exceeded the 15 per cent absence threshold and 3,881 of these pupils were referred to the EWS. This means that around 16,000 children missed 15 per cent (six weeks) of school but were not referred to the EWS.
- 3.26 It is concerning that such a significant percentage of pupils (80 per cent) reaching the 15 per cent threshold of absenteeism did not receive a referral to EWS. The EWS told us that there are a number of valid reasons which may result in a pupil being absent from school for

**Figure 7: Referrals to the Education Welfare Service 2007-08 to 2011-12**

Education and Library Board	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
<b>Belfast</b>	1,157	1,104	1,020	982	910
<b>Western</b>	775	692	632	574	593
<b>North Eastern</b>	750	704	821	776	705
<b>South Eastern</b>	608	756	676	609	574
<b>Southern</b>	985	940	1,037	997	1,099
<b>Total</b>	4,275	4,196	4,186	3,938	3,881

Source: Department



more than 15 per cent including: long-term illness; frequent short-term illnesses; suspension from school; family holidays; and adverse weather conditions. When a school considers that there are valid reasons for a pupil meeting the threshold they may choose not to refer that pupil to the EWS. EWS told us that it contacts every school at least once a term to discuss individual cases where absence has reached or exceeded the 15 per cent threshold. Schools must provide the EWO with appropriate reasons for individual cases of non-attendance. This places the onus on schools to monitor individual cases of non-attendance.

- 3.27 As outlined in paragraph 3.24 the EWS applies the professional standards of the NISCC and the number of cases per EWO is capped at 40-45. Under current arrangements, demand for the service exceeds the resource available and this has put pressure on the EWS. As a result, the Chief Education Welfare Officers told us that schools are discouraged from referring all cases and are encouraged to refer only high priority cases. The Chief Executives of the ELBs assured the Department that it is not the practice of the EWS to discourage schools from referring pupils who fall below the level of 85 per cent for support. The ELBs pointed out that the EWS works in partnership with schools to develop the capacity for schools to manage their referrals in order that EWS resources are targeted at those most in need.

### Recommendation 7

We understand and acknowledge that there may be exceptional circumstances which may result in pupils being absent from school for extended periods of time. It is, however, unacceptable that the Education Welfare Service is discouraging schools from referring pupils who miss more than 15 per cent of school. It is vitally important that schools have the freedom to refer all pupils who meet the 15 per cent threshold and, in their view, require intervention. Without this freedom there is a risk that the education system could be failing the most vulnerable pupils. We recommend that schools refer all cases where intervention is considered to be necessary. Although this is likely to result in an increase in demand for the EWS and potentially contribute to an increase in waiting lists it is essential that the Department has an opportunity to analyse the real level of demand for the service and consider how best to resource it.

- 3.28 Under the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, the EWS may prosecute parents should they fail in their duty to ensure their child receives an education. The courts have a number of disposals available to them up to a maximum fine of £1,000. Under the Children (NI) Order 1995, the EWS may apply to the Family Proceedings Court to seek an Education Supervision Order. The decision made by EWS about which route to take depends on the circumstances of the case.

## Part Three:

# Progress in Improving Pupil Attendance at School

### Referrals to EWS and sanctions imposed

3.29 There is a wide range of factors, including social deprivation, family problems and bullying which may result in persistent absenteeism. Young people who miss school regularly without good reason are more likely to become isolated from friends, underachieve in examinations and become involved in anti-social behaviour. This can create a vicious circle where children and young people return to school and feel excluded and some cope with these feelings by being disruptive when they return to class.<sup>41</sup> Given that 16,000 cases of persistent absence were not referred in 2011-12 there is a risk that, if schools are not proactive in managing these cases, these pupils could slip

through the net. It is concerning that there is no mechanism for ensuring that vulnerable young people who have become disengaged at school receive the support that they require.

3.30 Of those cases referred to the EWS 108 cases resulted in a parental fine<sup>42</sup> and 24 cases resulted in an Education Supervision Order. Pursuing a case through the courts is a lengthy process and delays are substantial. As a result there is a risk that by the time that court proceedings are complete the pupil has already reached the age where there is no longer a compulsory requirement to attend full-time education. Once again, there is a risk that the system is failing the most vulnerable pupils.

**Almost 20,000 pupils were absent from school for more than 15%. This equates to more than 28 days or 5 weeks and 3 days of missed learning.**

**Around 20% of pupils who reached the 15% threshold were referred to the Education Welfare Service. This means that there was no formal intervention in more than 16,000 cases.**

**108 cases resulted in a parental fine and 24 cases resulted in an Education Supervision Order in 2011-12.**

41 Mentor January 2013, Disengaged from school, engaged with drugs and alcohol? Young people at risk

42 Fines are issued at the discretion of the court system and EWS has no influence over the outcome of this process. Figures supplied by Department of Education for Committee for Education on 14 November 2012

3.31 The EWS also carries out preventative work, for example:

- the EWS provide support for primary school pupils through a transition programme as they move to post primary education;
- the EWS' Primary Attendance Matters (PAM) Project uses a resource pack to assist selected primary schools in Northern Ireland to develop a whole school approach to promoting the benefits of regular attendance at school. Launched in 2003, the schools involved are supported by EWS staff to review their current attendance procedures and practices. The feedback from the PAM project has been positive and improvements in attendance recorded; and
- provides information sessions to schools about attendance and how the EWS and schools can work more effectively together.

#### **Recommendation 8**

Tackling the problem of persistent absenteeism is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges that our education system faces. We recommend that the EWS places a greater emphasis on preventative measures through the provision of training and consultation for staff in schools with attendance responsibilities.

3.32 In our 2004 report we recommended that consideration should be given to the provision of a more joined up service where the Boards should identify those

schools where intake covers more than one Board area and investigate the feasibility of only one Education Welfare Service providing support. However the arrangements for the provision of this service have not changed. As a result schools frequently have to liaise with a number of different Education Welfare Officers from a number of different Education and Library Boards. Some of the schools we visited expressed concerns regarding the lack of consistency in the approach and in the services that are available to disengaged pupils.

#### **Recommendation 9**

We understand that once the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) has been implemented there will be one regional Education Welfare Service for all schools. The Department should consider whether any improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery can be identified in the Education Welfare Service. There should be a particular focus on ensuring that the approach adopted by the Education Welfare Officers is consistent and that all disengaged pupils have access to the same services.

If the implementation of ESA is delayed for any reason we recommend that the Department gives consideration to a more joined up and consistent approach in the provision of an Education Welfare Service under the current five Board structure. This should help to streamline the working relationships between schools and the Education Welfare Service and should ensure that all disengaged pupils receive the same opportunities.

## Part Three:

# Progress in Improving Pupil Attendance at School

### Management Information

- 3.33 All schools are required to maintain pupil attendance records electronically on the C2K system however the Education Welfare Service does not currently have access to this system. As a result, EWS relies on schools to provide it with information about pupil attendance. Access to this system would enable the EWS to deliver its frontline service more effectively.
- 3.34 During our audit fieldwork we asked the Education and Library Boards to provide us with information about caseloads and waiting lists for the previous three years. The Education and Library Boards told us that this information is not readily available and as a result there was a delay in receiving the information. Some of the Boards were unable to provide the information at all.

### Recommendation 10

It is vital that the Education Welfare Service has access to the basic management information that it requires in order to complete its role effectively. We recommend that the Department provides the Education Welfare Service with access to the C2K system and that EWS's current management information systems are reviewed. Basic management information such as caseloads and waiting lists should be available at the touch of a button.

## Part Four:

### Building on the experience of good practice in local schools



## Part Four:

# Building on the experience of good practice in local schools

### Tackling persistent non-attendance will require schools to adopt a flexible approach

4.1 Although pupil attendance has improved since statistics were first collected in 2007-08, based on 2011-12 figures, the total opportunity cost of non-attendance at school stands at around £22 million a year. Given that high levels of non-attendance and poor educational attainment are inextricably linked, the costs to society and the economy of non-attendance are likely to be even more significant. Northern Ireland's expanding not in education, employment or training (NEET) group currently costs the local economy £5 million a week (see paragraph 1.3). In order to maximise the benefit derived from our educational provision and minimise the cost of non-attendance it is essential that the education system does all it can to address the issue of non-attendance and in particular unauthorised absence.

4.2 The reasons for non-attendance at school are often complex and can be deep-seated. Cultural values, parental attitude, personal and family problems and mental health issues can all have an impact on pupil attendance at school. However, these problems are not insurmountable. There has been extensive research into pupil attendance<sup>43</sup> conducted throughout the UK and Ireland and a number of key themes and practical techniques for improving pupil attendance can be identified from this research, including:

- production of an attendance policy with associated guidance and training for staff;
- a robust registration system for capturing attendance data;
- clear expectations amongst pupils, parents and staff;
- personal contact between school and parents on attendance issues;
- an automated system for contacting parents of absentees by phone / text;
- an incentive / reward system to celebrate high achievement in attendance;
- a suite of standard letters to contact parents;
- monitoring of punctuality as an early warning system for attendance problems; and
- anti-truancy measures.

During our audit fieldwork we visited 10 primary, 10 post primary and 2 special schools and were encouraged to find that a selection of the techniques identified above had been implemented by the most proactive schools.<sup>44</sup> A number of these schools had managed to successfully improve pupil attendance despite challenging circumstances.

43 IPSOS MORI and The Amsterdam Project; Improving attendance at school, Charlie Taylor, 29 June 2012; Ofsted et al

44 The findings from our school visits are based upon representations provided to us by the school Principals, we did not observe the practical application of the approaches that the school Principals told us that they adopted

- 4.3 Research has however concluded that, *“there is no ‘magic bullet’ to school attendance and that the approaches that are often the most successful are developed to address particular circumstances and are characterised by flexibility and pragmatism”*<sup>45</sup>. We are aware that there is no one solution to the problem of poor attendance and recognise that ‘one size does not fit all’. Some of the themes identified in paragraph 4.2 may be applicable where a school is seeking to maintain an already high level of pupil attendance; others may be appropriate for schools facing particular challenges. Indeed, it is likely that the more challenging the circumstances a school finds itself in, the more ambitious and flexible its approach will need to be. Appendix 4 provides a toolkit of ideas for improving pupil attendance and is based largely on the various examples of good practice that we found in operation in local schools. It also incorporates examples of good practice in operation in other regions of the UK and Ireland. Not all of the ideas will be relevant to every school; it is a checklist of ideas that schools can tailor to meet their own particular needs.

### Recommendation 11

There is a wide range of factors that can impact on a pupil’s attendance at school and for this reason it is not appropriate to apply a single approach in tackling the problem of non-attendance. In our view, the best results can be

achieved through the implementation of innovative practices tailored to meet the local circumstances of individual schools.

We recommend that the Department and the ELBs should work together to identify and offer support to those schools with high levels of unauthorised absence and/or a high concentration of vulnerable pupils. This should involve providing schools with examples of good practice and working with them in developing and applying a tailored approach to tackling non-attendance.

## During our school visits we identified a number of examples of good practice

### A school attendance policy promotes the importance of attendance at school

- 4.4 A policy which promotes good attendance and punctuality and outlines everyone’s responsibilities, including pupils’, ensures that there is consistency of practice with clear lines of management so that all staff with attendance responsibilities know what they are doing and when. However it is important that the policy is not so prescriptive that it prohibits teachers and school principals from applying their judgement where necessary.
- 4.5 We received mixed feedback from schools with regards to the importance placed upon having an attendance policy in place. However, in general, schools with good or improving attendance have a policy in place. In



## Part Four:

# Building on the experience of good practice in local schools

2012 RSM McClure Watters reported that 58.6 per cent of the schools that they surveyed did not have an attendance policy in place<sup>46</sup>. In response to the RSM McClure Watters report the Department issued guidance in June 2013 which recommends that every school should have an attendance policy in place which has been approved and endorsed by the Board of Governors.

### Effective use of attendance data helps to prevent persistent non-attendance at school

- 4.6 All schools should undertake regular analysis of attendance data with a view to identifying patterns and issues of concern at a pupil level. However, some schools are better than others at collecting and monitoring absence data and there is no assurance that the schools most in need of this information are collecting and using data effectively.

#### Case Example: Sperrin Integrated College

Sperrin Integrated College is an integrated post primary school founded in 2002 and situated in Magherafelt. It has a current enrolment of around 500 pupils. The school has an attendance policy in place which makes clear the responsibilities of pupils and staff and includes a target for overall school attendance.

Teachers record attendance data in each class of the day on a computerised system. Monitoring of this data is undertaken at three levels:

1. Pupils whose attendance has fallen below 85 per cent;
2. Pupils whose attendance has not yet fallen below 85 per cent but is below 90 per cent; and
3. Pupils whose attendance has not yet fallen below 90 per cent but is below the school target.

A strategy is devised for each pupil dependent on the particular circumstances with the aim of raising attendance and addressing any difficulties they might have. This may range from a simple conversation with the pupil, to meetings with parents and, in more serious cases, referral to the EWS.

The school stressed the importance of the role of Year Heads. At bi-weekly meetings attendance is a standing item on the agenda.

#### Recommendation 12

Early identification of patterns in pupil absence can assist schools in putting measures in place to prevent persistent non-attendance at school. Since our last report in 2004, there is now more data available to school Governors and principals and it is essential that this data is used in a meaningful way. We recommend that all schools are required to set their own realistic but challenging targets for pupil attendance and that progress against the targets is monitored regularly with early intervention where an individual pupil's attendance record gives cause for concern. Pupil attendance should be a standing item on the agenda of Board of Governors meetings.

46 Survey was based on 141 primary and 36 post primary schools in deprived areas – pages 5 & 12, RSM McClure Watters Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas, March 2012



## Engagement with parents and the wider community encourages better attendance at school

- 4.7 While schools have a responsibility to promote and encourage attendance, it is the parent or carer of a child who has legal responsibility for ensuring that children of compulsory school age attend school regularly. Changing attitudes, breaking down barriers and reminding parents of the importance of punctuality and attendance through parental and community engagement are vital.

### Case Example: Millburn Primary School

Millburn Primary School is located in a large, established housing estate in Coleraine. It has 388 pupils, 28 per cent of whom were entitled to Free School Meals in 2010-11. Over the past 11 years, the Principal has broken down boundaries between the parents and the school – there is an open door policy and teachers and parents are on first name terms. In response to feedback received from parents that some of the school events were too formal and intimidating for people who may have had negative experiences at schools themselves, the Principal has initiated less formal interaction with parents. For example, the school now offers parents the opportunity to join teachers for an on-site lunch at the end of sports day when the parents are in the school anyway. The school also holds one breakfast morning every term for parents and grandparents after drop off and these have proven very popular, with 275 people attending the last one. The

Principal has also persisted in building up a good relationship with key community leaders.

Over time, these measures have resulted in a change in culture whereby parents and the community can see that the Principal and the teachers are working in the best interests of their children and they reciprocate with their support. The strong sense of community and parental support means that the Principal has gradually achieved a culture where learning is important to the children and their parents and attendance at school is naturally an important part of that.

On a practical level, when a child is absent from school the Principal does not issue a letter but telephones the parents and follows this up, if necessary, with a visit to the child's home. The Principal attributes the school's low levels of unauthorised absence to the improved relationship with parents – the parents and grandparents clearly know the importance of attending school and are well aware that, if their child is absent from school, the Principal will come to their house and talk to them to establish the reason for the absence.

The Principal monitors absence regularly to identify patterns – for example, it was noted that some children were frequently off on a Friday. On investigation, it came to light that these pupils were often worried about their performance in class tests which are held on a Friday. As a result, the children now have two tests each term – they are told the week before that the tests are coming up but not told on which day. The children are also clear that, if they are absent on the day of the test, they will sit it when they come back to school.

By regularly monitoring attendance the Principal is also aware of the 10 children (approximately) who are near the 85 per cent

## Part Four:

# Building on the experience of good practice in local schools

attendance threshold and knows the reason for their high levels of absence. There is little interaction between the school and the EWS as there is generally no more than one referral each year and the Principal meets with the Education Welfare Officer on an 'as needs' basis.

### Early intervention can prevent patterns of non-attendance from emerging

4.8 Children with the worst attendance in the early years tend to come from the lowest socio-economic groups where attainment on entry to primary school is often notably lower than that of their peers. The Sutton Trust's Early Years research has established that low and middle income children start lagging behind their better off peers before they even start school – in fact, children growing up in the poorest fifth of families are already almost a year and a half behind children from high income families when they start school at the age of five. By ensuring that the parents of these children get into good attendance habits, schools will be able to do the work required to narrow this gap<sup>47</sup>.

4.9 As pupils progress through post primary school, the number who are persistently absent<sup>48</sup> increases from 10.7 per cent in Year 8 to 27.4 per cent in Year 12. The Government's Expert Adviser on Behaviour believes that these tend to be children who have become disillusioned with school and have stopped attending. By the time children have reached their

mid teens it becomes more difficult for parents and schools to get these pupils to attend. In England, the majority of children whose parents are taken to court for poor attendance are in Years 10 and 11 but by this time it is often too late for prosecution to solve the attendance problems. Patterns of attendance of this group of children are established much earlier in their school career. These children are more likely to come from families who do not value education and where the parents often missed school themselves.

4.10 Evidence shows that children who miss significant amounts of their education in primary school are more likely to truant later on<sup>49</sup>. Many schools place a strong emphasis on implementing punitive measures for tackling the problem of persistent non-attendance however some experts believe that there should be a greater emphasis placed on addressing the cause of these problems which, in many cases, is non-attendance in the early years approved by parents. This can soon become a pattern and establishes poor attitudes towards school.

### A strong pastoral ethos helps to instil a sense of pride and belonging in pupils

4.11 Many of the schools we visited placed a strong emphasis on the importance of providing pupils with a positive learning environment and a caring atmosphere. Relationships between staff and pupils were viewed as crucial to a pupil's sense of belonging. One key aspect of this

<sup>47</sup> Improving attendance at school, Charlie Taylor, 29 June 2012

<sup>48</sup> Persistently absent refers to those pupils missing 15 per cent or more of half school days

<sup>49</sup> Improving attendance at school, Charlie Taylor, 29 June 2012

was that staff project a belief that all students can achieve.

### Case Example: Ballysally Primary School

Ballysally Primary School is situated in an area of high social deprivation with 58 per cent of the 200 pupils entitled to free school meals in 2010-11. Despite the challenging circumstances that the school faces, it refuses to accept social deprivation as an excuse for not trying.

In the past, pupil attendance was not a priority for the school and in 2009-10 attendance of 93.5 per cent was below the Northern Ireland primary school average of 94.7 per cent. Since then, the Principal has adopted a 'drip-feed' approach to changing the culture in the school. This has involved continuously reinforcing the importance of attendance with parents through the circulation of newsletters and at parent-teacher meetings. The value of attendance is stressed with parents of every new Year 1 class.

Attendance data is now monitored by the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) on a weekly basis and, where necessary, the SENCO will liaise with the class teachers. The SENCO demonstrates a proactive approach in addressing problems with pupil attendance and this has involved making home visits to discuss problems directly with a pupil's parents. The school does make referrals to the EWS however this is seen as a last resort.

The school has developed links with families and now offers its pupils a very high standard of pastoral care through the following initiatives:

- organising a 'lads and dads' group. The group is led by the Principal and encourages boys from the school to undertake a series of one-off activities such as archery, fishing and football with their fathers. The Principal considers that this has been an effective means of getting fathers to engage in their child's education and has provided a valuable opportunity for the school to communicate with fathers. The school operates a similar group for mums and daughters;
- offering a free breakfast and a piece of fruit at break time for each child. This helps to ensure that there is a positive learning environment where pupils and their parents feel valued;
- becoming a member of the 'Ballysally Integrated Nurturing Programme' which also involves Surestart, Ballysally Nursery, Focus on Family and Ballysally Presbyterian Church. The aim of the Programme is to join up several services to offer help and support to members of the local community;
- organising significant after schools provision, an early risers club and a homework club;
- holding a 3 week workshop with parents which resulted in the production of an 'attendance matters' leaflet. The leaflet highlights the importance of attendance, identifies the procedures for contacting the

## Part Four:

# Building on the experience of good practice in local schools

school in the event of an absence and emphasises the importance of a home-school partnership. A copy of the leaflet was sent home with all pupils; and

- celebrating achievement. Certificates are awarded to pupils with 100 per cent attendance at the end of every school year and a reward chart has been used to recognise pupils arriving at school on time. There are also monthly achievement awards.

Overall, the measures appear to have had an impact and in 2011-12 the school attendance rate had increased to 95.2 per cent.

### School principals determine the level of priority given to school attendance

- 4.12 A school principal can determine the level of priority and resource that the school will devote to monitoring and improving pupil attendance. During our school visits we found that the principals in schools with high or improving levels of pupil attendance placed a great deal of emphasis on promoting the importance of attendance at school, monitoring attendance records and, where required, putting measures in place to improve performance.

### Case Example: Holy Cross Boys Primary School

Holy Cross Boys is a primary school situated in the Ardoyne area of North Belfast. The majority of pupils come from the local area which experiences high levels of social deprivation. For example, 60 per cent of the pupils were entitled to free school meals in 2010-11. Despite this background, attendance and achievement levels have consistently been above the Northern Ireland average (see Appendix 3).

The dedication and leadership of the principal and the Senior Management Team have helped the school to maintain a high level of attendance despite challenging circumstances. The principal told us that he places a strong emphasis on distributing leadership within the school, communicating clearly regarding the high standards that are expected and providing clarity on the roles of individual staff members.

The principal considers that time spent analysing data is a worthwhile investment and, although it can be a very stressful part of the job and can often result in confrontation with parents, when issues are uncovered he is committed to facing parents in an open and honest manner. This sends out a very clear statement to the whole community that the school has a set of established standards that will be maintained and that the school values its pupils' education. The principal told us that he was committed to making personal contact with parents and undertaking home visits in order to challenge parents to do better for their children. The principal also told us that teachers at the school 'practice what they preach' and that staff attendance at the school is incredibly high.

## Schools facing particular challenges may need to consider the merit of adopting more innovative approaches to improving attendance

4.13 It is clear that conventional approaches to improving pupil attendance are not effective in all circumstances. During our school visits we identified a number of innovative approaches employed by schools in a bid to improve pupil attendance at school:

- reward schemes aimed at providing recognition for full or high levels of attendance at school;
- not allowing pupils to leave the school premises at lunchtime as this increases the risk of pupils not returning to school in the afternoon;
- working with the PSNI locally to promote the importance of attendance at school and to provide challenge to those pupils found to be outside of school during normal school hours;
- rearranging the school day / term to maximise pupil attendance and engagement;
- providing no notice of school tests;
- providing alternative curricula to improve pupil engagement; and
- targeting groups where the principal feels improvements in attendance can be made.

4.14 As outlined in paragraph 4.2 there can be a range of complex reasons for a pupil being absent from school. This might include personal or family problems. Whilst the school could take action against and offer support for the pupil, without addressing the family issues poor attendance patterns would almost inevitably reoccur. In such cases a more innovative approach will be required and this may involve engaging a number of third parties in order to identify and address the pupil's needs. Joined up service delivery is one means of addressing the range of social and emotional difficulties that pupils and their families may face. Several of the schools we visited told us that local initiatives were an effective means of providing support to the most vulnerable pupils.

### Recommendation 13

It is clear that tackling the problem of non-attendance, and in particular persistent non-attendance, is highly complex and in certain cases it may be necessary to involve a wide range of stakeholders. We strongly recommend that the Department considers ways of ensuring that there is a more cohesive and joined up approach in addressing the issues associated with non-attendance. In developing an overarching strategy to address issues associated with school attendance (see Recommendation 1) the Department should consider how it will work with other relevant agencies.

## Part Four:

# Building on the experience of good practice in local schools

### Good practice should be identified and disseminated across the education system

- 4.15 It is encouraging that there is so much good practice in operation in our schools however, it is sporadic and often schools in similar areas facing similar challenges have very different levels of attendance and educational outcomes. We are concerned that there are insufficient structures in place to ensure that good practice is adequately disseminated throughout the educational system. Schools should be encouraged to collaborate and share expertise as a cost effective way of improving attendance.
- 4.16 In May 2012 RSM McClure Watters recommended that the Department should set up an attendance network or forum for schools in deprived areas to share information and good practice on effective attendance management strategies. We welcome this recommendation which should be implemented as a matter of urgency.
- 4.17 On 1 March 2011, the Department launched ESaGS.tv (Every School a Good School), an online resource to share good practice. To appear on this, a school must have achieved 'outstanding' or 'very good' in its inspection. This is an effective way of promulgating good practice and consideration should be given to extending this to include examples of effective and innovative ways of managing attendance.

#### Recommendation 14

Sharing good practice is a cost effective means of improving pupil attendance which, in turn, can raise standards in schools. We recommend that the Department develops an approach for identifying and sharing innovative and successful ideas in improving attendance within schools.



# Appendix 1:

## The Department of Education's categories of attendance and non-attendance

Attendance or absence is measured for every pupil in half day sessions (am and pm).

### Attendance

In addition to actual attendance within the school premises, attendance also includes:

- Late (before registration closed)
- Approved sporting activities
- Study leave
- Educational visits
- Work experience
- Alternative education provision (organised by the ELB)
- Home/hospital tuition (organised by the ELB)
- Pupil referral unit
- Another mainstream school (under Entitlement Framework)
- Training organisation (under Entitlement Framework)
- Further Education College (under Entitlement Framework)
- Intensive Support Learning Unit
- Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

### Authorised Absence

An authorised absence is absence with permission from an authorised school representative on provision of a satisfactory explanation. This includes:

- Artistic endeavour
- Bereavement
- Suspension
- Agreed family holiday (in very exceptional circumstances)
- Illness
- Medical/dental appointments
- Other exceptional circumstances (includes an exceptional event outside control of the school, for example, travelling children, court appearance)
- Religious observance



## Unauthorised Absence

An unauthorised absence is absence without permission from an authorised school representative due to unexplained or unjustified absence. This includes:

- Family holiday not agreed
  - Other absence (includes absence not covered by any other code or a reason which is not acceptable to the school, for example, pupil's/parent's or sibling's birthday)
  - No reason provided for absence
  - Late (after registration closed).
-

## Appendix 2:

### Calculating the opportunity cost of non-attendance

	Total no of school days (A)	Average no of unauthorised days missed per pupil 2011-12 (B)	Average funding per pupil 2011-12 (C)	No of Pupils 2011-12 (D)	Opportunity Cost B/A(CxD)
Primary School	190	2.5	£3,007	155,694	£6,160,111
Post Primary School	190	4.9	£4,191	146,747	£15,860,910
<b>TOTAL</b>				302,441	<b>£22,021,021</b>

Source: Department

## Appendix 3: Methodology and School Visits

### Methodology

Qualitative and Quantitative Methods	Purpose
Interviews with Principals and staff with responsibilities for attendance at schools which have good or improving attendance records or face particular challenges in addressing persistent absenteeism	To establish good practice from local schools which is highlighted and disseminated through Case Examples in the report
Interviews with relevant staff in the Department of Education, the Education and Library Boards and other relevant third parties such as the Youth Justice Agency	To establish the roles of the Department of Education and the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) in managing pupil attendance as well as the contribution made by other agencies
Desk based review of research on pupil attendance, including RSM McClure Watters Survey of school staff and parents on attendance	To establish recent developments in research in pupil attendance and associated issues, both in Northern Ireland and further afield
Analytical review of the Department's statistics on pupil attendance	To establish trends in attendance, both over time and by different groups

## Appendix 3: Methodology and School Visits

### School Visits

**Primary Schools Visited (Northern Ireland average attendance in 2010-11 was 94.9%)**

	Reference Number	School Management Type	Board	Attendance 2010-11	FSM Entitlement 2010-11
<b>Ballysally Primary School</b>	3016252	Controlled	NEELB	94.2%	57.8%
<b>Botanic Primary School</b>	1016499	Controlled	BELB	84.5%	26.2%
<b>Broadbridge Primary School</b>	2032278	Maintained	WELB	96.8%	14.5%
<b>Fane Street Primary School</b>	1016205	Controlled	BELB	90.7%	38.8%
<b>Fourtowns Primary School, Ahoghill</b>	3010891	Controlled	NEELB	96.8%	14.2%
<b>Gaelscoil na bhFál</b>	1046571	Other Maintained	BELB	96.3%	42.8%
<b>Holy Cross Boys Primary School</b>	1030194	Maintained	BELB	95.6%	60.5%
<b>Millburn Primary School</b>	3012264	Controlled	NEELB	96.0%	28.1%
<b>Millennium Integrated Primary School</b>	4066644	Grant Maintained	SEELB	96.8%	4.0%
<b>St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon</b>	5036504	Maintained	SELB	92.0%	19.7%

## Appendix 3: Methodology and School Visits

**Post Primary Schools Visited (Northern Ireland average attendance in 2010-11 was 92.6%):**

	Reference Number	School Management Type	Board	Attendance 2010-11	FSM Entitlement 2010-11
<b>Coláiste Feirste</b>	1240291	Other Maintained	BELB	93.0%	33.1%
<b>Cullybackey High School</b>	3210172	Controlled	NEELB	91.0%	16.5%
<b>Friends' School</b>	4420050	Voluntary Grammar	SEELB	97.2%	1.5%
<b>Markethill High School</b>	5210083	Controlled	SELB	94.6%	7.9%
<b>Movilla High School</b>	4210012	Controlled	SEELB	84.3%	31.5%
<b>Newtownbreda High School</b>	4210183	Controlled	SEELB	87.0%	22.6%
<b>St Colm's High School</b>	3230132	Maintained	NEELB	95.2%	11.8%
<b>St Comhghall's College</b>	2230190	Maintained	WELB	95.6%	36.7%
<b>St Patrick's High School</b>	5230187	Maintained	SELB	95.6%	18.3%
<b>Sperrin Integrated College</b>	3260303	Grant Maintained	NEELB	95.3%	18.5%

## Appendix 3: Methodology and School Visits

**Special Schools Visited (Northern Ireland average attendance in 2010-11 was 89.8%):**

	Reference Number	Type of School	Board	Attendance 2010-11	FSM Entitlement 2010-11
<b>Harberton</b>	1310014	Special	BELB	94.3%	53.8%
<b>Tor Bank</b>	4316517	Special	SEELB	92.0%	25.7%

Source: Department of Education

### **Methodology for sample selection of schools**

Data for pupil attendance over the last four academic years was analysed in order to select a sample of schools to provide good practice case examples. The selected schools had exhibited:

- significant improvement in levels of pupil attendance over the period; or
- high levels of pupil attendance despite difficult circumstances (measured as a high proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals); or
- high average pupil attendance over the period; or
- specific issues or challenges; or
- a combination of the above.

The sample selected is also representative of the variety of schools in Northern Ireland:

- the chosen schools are located throughout Northern Ireland;
- all five Education and Library Boards are represented;
- a mixture of management types have been included; and
- the schools selected vary considerably in size.

However, schools with small enrolments were excluded on the basis that the attendance or non-attendance of a small number of pupils could disproportionately affect the overall percentage attendance.

Within the post primary sample, only one grammar school has been included as it was felt academic selection would select pupils (and parents) who were more likely to value high attendance at school and therefore high rates of pupil attendance may not necessarily be representative of good practice.

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## Appendix 4: Attendance Toolkit

### For all schools

The school has produced an attendance policy and it is accessible to staff, pupils and parents via the school website.

The school establishes challenging but realistic targets for pupil attendance.

The school Principal prioritises attendance management and has devoted adequate resources to monitoring, managing and improving pupil attendance (including regular analysis of attendance data for early identification of non-attendance).

School Governors regularly receive and monitor attendance data (including benchmarking statistics) and this is a standing agenda item.

Staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to pupil attendance.

The school makes contact with the parents of absent pupils promptly.

The teachers develop effective pupil/teacher relationships and set high expectations for all pupils.

Registration is completed in line with guidance from the Department of Education.

Punctuality is monitored as an early warning for attendance problems.

Parents notify the school about any planned or extended absence.

There is support for pupils returning to school after a period of absence.

### For schools with low levels of attendance and/or high levels of persistent absenteeism

The school offers an incentive scheme to pupils for regular/full attendance at school.

The school considers alternative curricula and/or methods of teaching to help to engage pupils struggling with their studies.

The school conducts home visits to discuss problems with attendance.

The school refers all pupils meeting the 15 per cent threshold to the Education Welfare Service.

The school seeks additional support from the Education and Library Boards through the Education Welfare Service for cases that cause concern.

Inclusive practices are utilised, including the use of interpreters and provision of relevant documents translated into different languages.

The school engages with other agencies to manage and improve pupil attendance.

The school provides activities for pupils outside of the normal school day.

### For schools with high levels of attendance

The school collaborates with other schools to share knowledge and good practice.



## Appendix 5:

# Summary of the process for referring a child to the Education Welfare Service<sup>50</sup>

### Referring a child

A referral can come from another service, a parent or a school. Referrals can be made to EWS for reasons of poor attendance – below 85% and / or welfare concerns (the EWS recognises that poor school attendance is often symptomatic of underlying issues).

### Referral Received

Once the EWS receives a referral, a contact letter and acknowledgement letter are sent out to the parents/guardian and school respectively. The referral is allocated within the appropriate team and to the appropriate Education Welfare Officer (EWO).

### Assessment and Development of an Education Support Plan

The EWS uses an Assessment Framework<sup>51</sup> to assess the needs of children and families referred to the service. This assessment tool is used within a participative process designed to give parents, children and young people and other agencies involved with the family an opportunity to contribute to the assessment. Once completed it forms the basis of an Education Support Plan. This in turn directs the EWO in terms of the level and nature of the support that must be delivered.

### Review of Education Support Plan

At this stage, a number of interventions take place including Family Consultation Meetings and Education Planning Meetings. These are points at which there is discussion with the family to determine the effectiveness of the Education Support Plan. In addition the 'case' is discussed at length through regular professional supervision

of the EWO by the Senior EWO. Decisions made and all work that has been done with the family, young person, the school and other relevant parties are recorded electronically.

It may be that the 'case' can be closed because there is sufficient evidence of change in the attendance of the child and in relation to other relevant issues.

Alternatively, there may be a need to enhance the level of support being delivered to the family and child and maintain EWS involvement.

Where there is evidence of complex issues warranting more formal legal intervention in the form of an Education Supervision Order (which is a support order for the child attained through the Family Proceedings Court) or Parental Prosecution (as a result of the parties with parental responsibility for the child not meeting their responsibilities in terms of ensuring the child receives an education commensurate to his/her age, aptitude and ability), the EWS will take action as appropriate.

### Review Following Court Action

Where an Education Supervision Order has been acquired, this will last the minimum of one year and lends further legal weight to EWS intervention including establishing 'direction' which must be followed otherwise the Order can be breached.

Where the EWS has pursued a Parental Prosecution, the court may impose a fine of up to £1,000.

The EWS reviews the 'case' following the above and determines the effectiveness of these interventions as appropriate.

<sup>50</sup> Based on the regional EWS Flow chart showing the 'Pathway through Casework'

<sup>51</sup> 'Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland' (UNOCINI)

## Appendix 5:

# Summary of the process for referring a child to the Education Welfare Service

### Closure

A 'case' remains open until such times as sufficient change brought about as a result of EWS interventions warrants closure. A 'case' may be re-opened in the event that there is any future deterioration in attendance and/or there are welfare concerns that would give rise to a further referral to EWS.

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Published and printed by CDS

CDS 109156

ISBN 978-1-910219-00-3



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