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RESEARCH INTO IMPROVING ATTENDANCE IN SCHOOLS SERVING DEPRIVED AREAS

by RSM McClure Watters (formerly FGS McClure Watters)

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Education & Training

RESEARCH REPORT

Client

Department of Education

Project

**Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving
Deprived Areas**

FINAL REPORT

Division

Consultancy

March 2012

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The Department of Education commissioned RSM McClure Watters (in association with C4EO) to undertake research into improving attendance amongst schools serving deprived areas. This report presents a summary of key findings against the Terms of Reference drawing on an extensive programme of primary and secondary research.

1.2 Terms of Reference

1.2.1 Background

Regular school attendance and educational attainment are inextricably linked. Regular attendance ensures that pupils get the best possible outcomes from their period in compulsory education. This also contributes to minimising the likelihood of a young person not being in education, training or employment post 16 years, reducing social exclusion and improving their chances of employment in the longer term, thereby improving their socioeconomic status and reducing intergenerational poverty.

Extensive research has been undertaken into the causes of poor attendance and the contributory factors are well known. In response to the needs of specific groups in this regard, the Department of Education has developed a series of programmes targeted at for example: Looked After Children, Travellers and School Age Mothers. Outside these well-defined groups, there are other pupils whose pattern of poor attendance or nonattendance remains a concern; the Department of Education wishes to identify strategies which are successful in promoting attendance and addressing non-attendance.

Analysis of attendance data¹ shows that, as the level of Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) in a school increases, so too do absence levels. For example: in primary schools where less than 10% of pupils enrolled had FSME, the overall absence level was 4% of total half days in 2009/10, whereas in schools where more than 50% of pupils enrolled have FSME, absence levels were 8.4% of total half days in 2009/10. The implication is that absence tends to be higher in more disadvantaged areas (since FSME is indicative of levels of deprivation). Analysis of attendance data by Neighbourhood Renewal Area (NRA) supports this; it shows that absence levels for primary pupils living in NRAs were higher than those in non-NRAs (overall absence rate of 7.4% of total half days compared with 4.9% in non-NRAs in 2009/10). However the issue is not clear-cut: with analysis showing wide variation between the attendance rates of schools with comparable levels of deprivation.

¹ Attendance data for all grant-aided primary, post-primary and special schools is collected at pupil level in the school census in October each year.

1.2.1 Research Aim and Research Objectives

The **aim of the research** is:

- To provide DE with information that will inform policy and practice in those schools with low attendance rates to help them in improving attendance.

It is expected that the subsequent attainment of children in deprived areas will thereby be improved in line with the Minister's education priority "closing the Performance Gap, Increasing Access and Equity".

The **research objectives** are to examine:

- the role of the school in promoting regular attendance of all registered pupils of compulsory school age and the identification of local and international good practice;
- the interface between schools in deprived areas, the home and the community around promoting regular attendance and the identification of local and international good practice;
- the interface between schools and external support services and its effectiveness in promoting regular attendance at school.

The findings from the research will be used to inform appropriate actions to promote regular and sustained attendance at schools in deprived areas.

1.3 Methodology

The key strands of research included both primary and secondary research in order to identify effective approaches and best practice for promoting good attendance and addressing non-attendance.

- **Literature Review**

This is presented in detail in Appendix I-2 which includes information from a review of literature related to the three research objectives. The first section relates to the north of Ireland – in order to provide context and an overview of current approaches to managing attendance. In the remaining sections, we set out information relevant to the three research objectives and drawing on literature from the following countries:

- England;
- Scotland and Wales;
- Ireland;
- USA;
- Australia;
- New Zealand.

These have been selected owing to having a similar cultural background and therefore approaches which are more likely to transfer to a NI context. The documents reviewed include broad / high level strategies as well as specific interventions and reviews / evaluations of both of these. There are also descriptions of specific examples of programmes and initiatives which have been introduced to address improving

attendance in deprived areas– some of these are focused on schools and children; others target parents.

- **Consultation** - This includes the following main strands:
 - **School staff survey**
 - Surveys were issued to 141 Primary and 36 Post-Primary schools
 - These were selected on the basis of location (in a Neighbourhood Renewal Area) or having a high Free School Meal entitlement – indicating a high proportion of the school population coming from areas of disadvantage / deprivation.
 - 85 surveys were completed by staff from 85 Primary Schools and 26 by staff from 25 Post-Primary schools (2 responses received from 1 school) giving an overall response rate of 62%.
 - Surveys were issued by email and post; an on-line version was also available.
 - A range of topics were included in the survey: attitude / ethos with regards to attendance, current approaches to promote attendance, effective policies and strategies for school attendance; and engagement with families, communities and external support services.
 - **Board of Governors' survey**
 - Surveys were issued to the Board of Governors (BoG) in the same 141 Primary and 36 Post-Primary schools
 - 19 surveys were completed by representatives of the BoG in Primary Schools and 3 by representatives of the BoG in Post-Primary schools.
 - There were some challenges in issuing the BoG' survey and this goes some way to accounting for the poor response rate:
 - There is no centrally held database of BoG contact details;
 - In most cases when schools were contacted to access BoG contact details, these were not forthcoming – so we could not have a direct conversation / connection with the Governors;
 - Instead we were advised to send the survey to the school marked for the attention of the Chair of the BoG – these were sent by email, post and an on-line version was also available.
 - However without access to – in some cases a named contact and in most cases, a direct phone number or email, it was difficult to follow up these survey invitations by phone.
 - Owing to the small number of responses and hence concerns about robustness / representativeness of the data from the BoG survey, analysis of this is not included in this report.
 - **Focus Groups with parents (4 schools)**
 - Focus groups were completed with parents in 4 schools: 3 Primary and 1 Post-Primary. These schools were put forward by Chief Education Welfare Officers (CEWOs) – based on the schools' experience of attendance issues and on the willingness / availability of parents / carers to take part and talk about their own experiences. Not all of those who were invited by the school to take part turned up on the day – typically 2 parents turned up at each focus group.

- **Focus Groups with children (4 schools)**
 - Focus groups were completed with children in 4 schools: 3 Primary and 1 Post-Primary. These took place in the same schools as the parents' focus groups. Not all of those who were invited by the school to take part turned up on the day or had a completed consent form. Attendance at these was better than at the parents' focus groups – with the number of participants varying from 2 to 5.
- **School Staff 1-to-1s (5 schools)**
 - Interviews were completed with senior staff with responsibility for attendance in 5 schools (2 Primary and 3 Post-Primary) to get further insights into issues contributing to improving attendance. These schools were selected on the basis of having relatively high levels of Free School Meal Entitlement and Attendance. One school was selected from each ELB.
- **Other Stakeholders**
 - Telephone consultations were undertaken with 4 of the 5 Extended Schools Co-ordinators; representatives of 2 Full Service Pilot Projects; Youth Service and Neighbourhood Renewal.
 - Interviews / meetings were also held with: DE – Additional Educational Needs Team and Pupil Support Unit; DSD – Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and the CEWOs.
- **Review of Attendance Management Policies (where they exist / are available)**
 - In the survey of primary and post-primary schools, schools were asked whether or not they had an attendance policy - and if so, to provide a copy. This provided 23 attendance policies, 13 from Primary and 10 from Post-Primary schools. A review of these policies highlights a number of key characteristics common to both primary and post-primary school's attendance policies.
- **Identification of common features of schools with improving attendance**
 - Statistics on attendance and suspensions for the last 3 years for the Primary Schools and Post-Primary Schools from which survey responses were received have been combined with the survey data in order to establish whether there is any evidence of "what works" with regards to improving attendance.
 - From attendance statistics, 10 of the schools in the sample (and which completed surveys) have been identified as having improving attendance:
 - the top six Primary schools are those which have improved attendance by at least 1% over 2 years.
 - the top four Post-Primary schools are those which have improved attendance by at least 2% over 2 years.
 - Survey findings for these 10 schools have been considered in order to identify if there are key themes / features that contribute to improving attendance.
 - However, it is important to note that the enrolment in these 10 schools varies and care must be taken in interpreting data for the smaller schools, where poor or improved attendance by only 1 pupil can make a significant difference to the overall attendance figures and percentages.

- It is also important to note that owing to the small sample size, the survey data is not conclusive.

1.4 Format of Report

The structure of the report and Appendices is set out in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Report Structure

| Section | Section Heading |
|---------|---|
| 2 | Role of the school in promoting regular attendance |
| 3 | Interface between schools in deprived areas, the home and the community around promoting regular attendance |
| 4 | Interface between schools and external support services and its effectiveness in promoting regular attendance |
| 5 | Conclusions and Recommendations |

Source: RSM McClure Watters, March 2012

Table 2: Appendices

| Section | Section Heading |
|---------|-----------------------|
| I-1 | Attendance Statistics |
| I-2 | Literature Review |

Source: RSM McClure Watters, March 2012

1.5 Acknowledgements

The Research Team would like to thank the Project Steering Group members for being available for meetings and providing access to the information that was required for the completion of this report.

In addition, we would like to express our gratitude to the staff, parents and pupils who made themselves available to take part in this important research. We would also wish to acknowledge the time and input from the wide range of stakeholders with whom we consulted including DE, CEWOs, DSD, Extended Schools Coordinators, Full Service Schools, Youth Service and Neighbourhood Renewal projects.

2 ROLE OF THE SCHOOL

2.1 Introduction

Drawing on evidence from primary and secondary research, a number of key themes have been identified with regards to:

- the role of the school in promoting regular attendance of all registered pupils of compulsory school age and the identification of local and international good practice;

Each theme is briefly described below – together with evidence of its effectiveness and any relevant examples to illustrate the approach.

2.2 School Ethos and Culture

2.2.1 Theme

Key to the issue of addressing the prevention of absence and promotion of attendance is the ethos and culture within schools. This includes the following:

- A “whole school” approach which reinforces good attendance, highlights the links between attendance and attainment and permeates all aspects of school life;
- Leadership on attendance with a designated member of senior staff responsible for attendance;
- Attendance being treated as a priority and valued highly;
- Attendance being regularly discussed by the Senior Management Team and Board of Governors;
- Consistent approach to attendance by all members of staff;
- Attendance policy which is easily understood, regularly updated and disseminated widely (see Section 2.3);
- Conveying information clearly to parents and pupils on expectations in terms of attendance (what is expected, acceptable) and implications arising from non-attendance

2.2.2 Supporting Evidence

A **review of literature** from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand highlights the following common strands in terms of addressing poor attendance:

- Whole School Approach;
- School ethos and culture that supports good attendance;
- School leadership / A school attendance leader – a member of the senior leadership team to ensure there is a strategic lead for attendance in school;
- Awareness and involvement of Board of Governors regarding attendance issue including endorsement of attendance policies;
- Attendance policies which are regularly reviewed and modified;
- Targets for attendance;

- Clear understanding of roles and responsibilities of schools;
- Consistent application of attendance codes, practice and procedures;
- Designated staff with responsibility for attendance e.g.: Attendance Manager.

From the **survey of schools**, there was evidence of many of these features in practice – although the evidence tends to be stronger in Primary than in Post-Primary Schools.

- Over 96% of Primary and Post-Primary respondents agreed with the statements:
 - My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school placing a high priority on and valuing attendance and punctuality.
 - My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school adopting a “whole school” approach which reinforces good attendance, teaching and learning
 - My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school addressing school-based causes of poor attendance.
- About two thirds of Primary and Post-Primary respondents agreed that: “Governors are involved in monitoring school attendance” but only about one quarter of respondents agreed that: “Governors are involved in managing school attendance”.
- 95.3% Primary and 76.9% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: “A senior member of staff has lead / overall responsibility for school attendance”.
- 91.8% of Primary and 88.5% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: “All members of staff share responsibility for school attendance”.
- 94.1% of Primary and 69.2% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: “Attendance management strategies are applied consistently by all staff”
- Communication of attendance policies to parents takes place through a variety of media (School prospectus, promotional material, newsletter website, parents’ evening, pupil reviews) and various frequencies (the most common being once per year).

Focusing only on the survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**², there was evidence of many of these features in practice – although the evidence tends to be greater in Primary than in Post-Primary Schools.

- All Primary and Post-Primary respondents agreed with the statements:
 - My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school placing a high priority on and valuing attendance and punctuality.
 - My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school adopting a “whole school” approach which reinforces good attendance, teaching and learning

² These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

- My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school addressing school-based causes of poor attendance.
- 7 respondents agreed that: “Governors are involved in monitoring school attendance” but only 4 respondents agreed that: “Governors are involved in managing school attendance”.
- 9 respondents agreed that: “A senior member of staff has lead / overall responsibility for school attendance”.
- 9 respondents agreed that: “All members of staff share responsibility for school attendance”.
- 9 respondents agreed that: “Attendance management strategies are applied consistently by all staff”.
- Communication of attendance policies to parents takes place through a variety of media (School prospectus, promotional material, newsletter website, parents’ evening, pupil reviews) and various frequencies (the most common being once per year).

Some schools catering for relatively high levels of FSM entitlement have maintained consistently high attendance levels (i.e. in top quartile in 3 years (2007/08, 2008/09, 2009/10)). There are 5 Primary Schools³ and 4 Post-Primary Schools⁴ in this category, with relatively high enrolment⁵ (>200 i.e. in top 35% of all Primary schools or >500 i.e. in top 35% of all Post-Primary Schools) and which have completed surveys. Focusing only on survey results from these **9 schools**, there was evidence of many of these features in practice:

- All Primary and Post-Primary respondents agreed with the statements:
 - My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school placing a high priority on and valuing attendance and punctuality.
 - My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school adopting a “whole school” approach which reinforces good attendance, teaching and learning
 - My school has an ethos and culture which encourages good attendance. This is demonstrated in my school addressing school-based causes of poor attendance.
- 4 respondents agreed that: “Governors are involved in monitoring school attendance” but only 2 respondents agreed that: “Governors are involved in managing school attendance”.
- 7 respondents agreed that: “A senior member of staff has lead / overall responsibility for school attendance”.

³ 2010382 - Ebrington Controlled Primary School; 2036094 - St Patrick's Primary School; 3013315 - Ballykeel Primary School; 3016052 - Harpurs Hill Primary School; 5031148 - St Patrick's Primary School

⁴ 2260276 - Oakgrove Integrated College; 3230203 - Edmund Rice College; 5230108 - St Mary's High School; 5230167 - St Joseph's High School

⁵ With relatively high enrolment levels, statistics are more robust; where enrolment levels are lower, the attendance or not of just 1 pupil can make a significant difference to the overall school attendance levels.

- 9 respondents agreed that: “All members of staff share responsibility for school attendance”.
- 9 respondents agreed that: “Attendance management strategies are applied consistently by all staff”.
- Communication of attendance policies to parents takes place through a variety of media (School prospectus, promotional material, newsletter website, parents’ evening, pupil reviews) and various frequencies (the most common being once per year).

2.3 Attendance Policy and Attendance Targets

2.3.1 Theme

Having a written attendance policy provides clarity about a school’s approach to attendance in terms of:

- Clear and fair rules around attendance - what is an acceptable level of attendance (targets)
- How the school will record and monitor attendance including guidance for staff on registration and categorisation of absence
- Clear procedures to identify and follow up all absence and lateness (allocating individual staff roles and responsibilities)
- How the school will promote attendance (e.g. awareness-raising through displays, website, prospectus, parents’ meetings, attendance projects, campaigns, etc.)
- Rewards for attendance
- Strategies for addressing poor attendance
- Sanctions for poor attendance
- Consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence
- Steps to be taken in the event of non-attendance including clear trigger points for each intervention (from first day contact, to escalating circumstances e.g. referral to EWO etc.)
- Clear procedures for reintegrating long-term absentees and pupils who may, for specific reasons, have been on a reduced timetable
- Process for parents with regard to explaining absence
- Roles of school staff

The existence of such a policy demonstrates the priority and value placed on attendance by a school. It also provides a framework for a consistent approach to attendance.

An attendance policy should be regularly reviewed and consulted on (e.g. amongst staff, pupils and parents).

2.3.2 Supporting Evidence

The value of an attendance policy is supported by evidence from the **literature review** – see 2.2.2 and Appendix I-2.

It is also worth noting that a survey of schools conducted as part of the PEHAW review highlighted that **only 5% of schools have a specific attendance policy in place**. (Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing (PEHAW): A Review of Audit Tools and a Survey of Practice in NI Post-Primary Schools (DE, 2011))

From the **survey of schools**, there is evidence of attendance policies in practice:

- Overall 58.6% (52.9% of Primary and 76.9% of Post-Primary) of respondents stated that their school had an attendance policy in place
- Overall almost two thirds (64.0% consisting of 60.0% of Primary and 76.9% of Post-Primary) of respondents indicated that their school had a target for pupil attendance in the school development plan
- Overall 46.2% (42.2% of Primary and 55.0% of Post-Primary) of respondents stated that pupils in their school had an opportunity to influence / provide input to the school attendance policy
- Overall 41.5% (40.0% of Primary and 45.0% of Post-Primary) of respondents stated that parents / families in their school had an opportunity to influence / provide input to the school attendance policy
- 95.3% Primary and 76.9% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: "A senior member of staff has lead / overall responsibility for school attendance".
- 91.8% of Primary and 88.5% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: "All members of staff share responsibility for school attendance".
- 94.1% of Primary and 69.2% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: "Attendance management strategies are applied consistently by all staff". However a minority (7.1% of Primary respondents, 19.2% of Post-Primary respondents) agreed with the statement: "Attendance management strategies are applied consistently by only a few staff".)

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**⁶ show:

- 7 of the schools with improving attendance currently have an attendance policy in place.
- 9 of the schools with improving attendance have a target for pupil attendance in the school development plan
- In 5 of the schools with improving attendance, pupils have an opportunity to influence / provide input to the school attendance policy
- In 4 of the schools with improving attendance, parents/families have an opportunity to influence / provide input to the school attendance policy
- 9 respondents agreed that: "A senior member of staff has lead / overall responsibility for school attendance".
- 9 respondents agreed that: "All members of staff share responsibility for school attendance".

⁶ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

- 9 respondents agreed that: “Attendance management strategies are applied consistently by all staff”.

These aspects are supported by evidence from the **review of attendance policies**:

- The Department of Education recommends that schools should consider a referral to the Education Welfare Service when a pupil’s attendance is a cause for concern and/or drops below 85%. DE expects attendance to be much higher than this and expects that schools take action before attendance falls to this level. The 85% threshold signifies the point at which schools must refer to the EWS (if not already been done) to take the intervention with the family / pupil to the next more formal stage.
- While the ideal target would be a 100% attendance rate from every pupil, most schools have indicated, in their policies, an attendance rate of at least 90% to be the set minimum target.

2.4 Designated Staff / Defined Roles and Responsibilities

2.4.1 Theme

Dealing with attendance requires a focus on a number of different activities including:

- Leadership on attendance with a designated member of senior staff responsible for attendance;
- Keeping attendance information under review – a responsibility for the Senior Management Team and Board of Governors;
- Recording attendance / absence – responsibility shared by many staff members including office staff where Manual Registration or Optical Mark Reader (OMR) is used.
(Note:
 - Manual Registration sheets – these are completed by teachers and sent to school office for administrator to update the electronic register
 - Optical Mark Reader – OMR sheets are completed by teachers and sent to the school office for processing using an optical mark reader.)
- Monitoring and analysing attendance information to identify patterns of non-attendance, pupils with poor attendance, pupils at risk of falling below the 85% threshold, etc.
- Liaison with other staff in school, parents, EWS and other external support agencies;
- Promoting attendance e.g. through projects, campaigns, reward schemes, promotional material (prospectus, website, newsletter, etc.) and meetings with parents.

These functions will be carried out by a variety of people including: teachers, Heads of Year, Vice Principals, Principals, Governors, etc. Clarity with regards to roles and responsibilities ensures that all aspects of attendance are addressed and staff members know what is required of them with regards to attendance

2.4.2 Supporting Evidence

These aspects are supported by evidence from the **literature review** – see information from the literature review discusses at Section 2.2.2 above and Appendix I-2.

From the **survey of schools**, there was evidence of some of these features in practice:

- 95.3% Primary and 76.9% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: “A senior member of staff has lead / overall responsibility for school attendance”.
- 91.8% of Primary and 88.5% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: “All members of staff share responsibility for school attendance”.
- 94.1% of Primary and 69.2% of Post-Primary respondents agreed that: “Attendance management strategies are applied consistently by all staff”
- Most respondents felt that staff were confident in using and applying strategies to::
 - prevent poor attendance (average score of 2.0 in Primary Schools and 2.3 in Post-Primary schools, where 1 is Very Confident and 5 is Not Very Confident)
 - manage poor attendance (average score of 2.1 in Primary Schools and 2.2 in Post-Primary schools, where 1 is Very Confident and 5 is Not Very Confident)
- Respondents to the survey carried out a variety of roles with regards to attendance as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Q3. Please explain your role with regard to promoting school attendance

| Aspect of Role (Grouped) | Primary | | Post-Primary | |
|---|---------|-------|--------------|-------|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Overall responsibility | 25 | 29.4% | 7 | 26.9% |
| Monitoring | 32 | 37.6% | 14 | 53.8% |
| Encourage / promote good attendance (incl. rewards) | 27 | 31.8% | 4 | 15.4% |
| Liaise with / refer to EWO | 47 | 55.3% | 15 | 57.7% |
| Liaise with parents | 38 | 44.7% | 11 | 42.3% |
| Report to BoG any Concerns | 4 | 4.7% | 1 | 3.8% |
| Liaise with teachers | 14 | 16.5% | 6 | 23.1% |

Base: Primary (85) Post Primary (26) Total (111)
 Note: Respondents' roles could cover more than 1 aspect therefore the sum of % may be >100%
 Source: RSM McClure Watters, March 2012

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**⁷ reinforced the importance of clarity around roles and responsibilities:

- 9 respondents agreed that: “A senior member of staff has lead / overall responsibility for school attendance”.
- 9 respondents agreed that: “All members of staff share responsibility for school attendance”.
- 9 respondents agreed that: “Attendance management strategies are applied consistently by all staff”.
- Most respondents felt that staff were confident in using and applying strategies to::

⁷ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

- prevent poor attendance (average score of 1.9, where 1 is Very Confident and 5 is Not Very Confident)
- manage poor attendance (average score of 2.0, where 1 is Very Confident and 5 is Not Very Confident)

These aspects are supported by evidence from the **review of attendance policies** which set out details of roles for Governors, Principals/ Heads of Year, teachers/tutors and support staff such as: Education Welfare Officer (EWO) / Student Support Officer (SSO) / Attendance Co-ordinator (AC).

- Role of Governors
 - In the Primary attendance policies provided, there is little mention of the role of Governors with regards to attendance. Some schools' attendance policies note that it was the responsibility of the school Governors to oversee the school's attendance policy and review annually.
 - Most post-primary attendance policies did not detail the role of governors with regards to attendance. Some of the policies reviewed stated that each policy was monitored and, if necessary reviewed, by governors and the Principal before the start of each academic year.
- Role of Principals/Heads of Year
 - In cases of consistently poor attendance or truancy, where attempts by the teacher to resolve the situation were unsuccessful, the consensus among most the primary policies was that the Principal would assume responsibility of resolving the issue. In such situations, the Principal may invite parents/guardians into the school to discuss the matter or in some cases, would refer the case to the Education Welfare Service (EWS).
 - Where attendance policies exist in primary schools, these often specify that the Principal would be expected to liaise with the Board of Governors on policy development and implementation, as well as providing a termly or annual overall assessment of attendance.
 - All of the Post-Primary policies reviewed identified Principals and Heads of Year to monitor pupils whose attendance was cause for concern. Aside from liaising with parents/guardians, Principals and Heads of Year determined whether pupils should be put on to an attendance reporting scheme. The seniority of the person who authorises the referral to an attendance report scheme or whoever liaises with parents/guardians usually reflects how poor a pupil's attendance has become.
- Role of teachers/tutors
 - In most of the attendance policies provided by primary schools, it was noted that the responsibility of the class teacher was to develop a rapport with parents/guardians and monitor individual pupil's attendance. Many of the attendance policies expected class teachers to demonstrate the importance of punctuality, by setting a good example or by explaining the value of good attendance during a morning assembly or registration.
 - All of the post-primary attendance policies provided stated teachers and form tutors were responsible for monitoring the day-to-day attendance of pupils and liaising with parents/guardians where necessary. The majority of post-primary

school attendance policies stated that in the event of persistently poor attendance or truancy from individual subject classes, teachers and form tutors refer the case to heads of year or heads of department.

- Role of Education Welfare Officer (EWO) / Student Support Officer (SSO) / Attendance Co-ordinator (AC)
 - Most primary school attendance policies indicate that with regards to attendance, a school's EWO would only be called upon in cases of extremely poor attendance. One or two of the primary schools surveyed, remitted all cases of absence to their EWO, but generally the EWO would liaise with parents after the teacher and Principal. The EWO was responsible for initiating legal proceedings and referring the parents/guardians to the Magistrates court in cases of persistent non-attendance.
 - In post-primary schools attendance policies, where cases of persisted truancy is suspected, or if a pupils attendance has become a major cause of concern (for whatever reason) most of the attendance policies provided showed that such cases would be referred to the EWO. 3 schools had employed someone directly responsible for attendance (Student support office (SSO) or Attendance coordinator). In these cases, individual and multiple cases of non-attendance were dealt with by them.

2.5 Recording and Monitoring Attendance

2.5.1 Theme

In order to identify and manage attendance issues, information is vital. By collecting attendance data regularly, accurately and consistently, schools will quickly be able to access information on absence to monitor progress/ trends and set targets for improvement. Schools will also be able to access information which is straightforward identification of attendance / absence on a given day to follow up immediately as well as accessing detailed information which can be investigated to identify patterns of non-attendance where a referral may be required to the EWS. (As noted in Section 2.3.2, the DE recommends that schools should consider a referral to the EWS when a pupil's attendance is a cause for concern and/or drops below 85%).

To ensure that relevant information is available and accessible requires:

- A system for recording attendance – ideally electronic;
- Clear and unambiguous procedures for recording attendance; and
- Clear guidance for staff on registration and appropriate categorisation of absence
- Clear procedures to identify and follow up all absence and lateness (allocating individual staff roles and responsibilities)
- Consistent application of procedures by all staff.
- Monitoring of post-registration truancy through taking class registers and spot checks
- Encouraging students and teachers to ensure attendance information is accurate; to achieve this, attendance information should be made available to parents and students.

This will enable:

- Production of regular reports to assist in the monitoring and management of attendance issues; and
- regular in-depth analysis of attendance data to identify patterns and to highlight individuals / groups where intervention is required.

2.5.2 Supporting Evidence

A review of literature from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand highlights the following common strands regarding recording and monitoring attendance:

- Systems for monitoring attendance;
- Use of Attendance register;
- Electronic registration;
- Regular analysis of attendance data;
- Monitoring of post- registration truancy – class registers and spot checks;
- Use of data to improve attendance.

From the **survey of schools**, there was evidence of some of these features in practice:

- Schools used a variety of methods to record attendance with manual registration more common in Primary Schools and electronic registration more common in Post-Primary Schools:
 - 64.7% of primary & 3.8% of post-primary use Manual Registration sheets (which are completed by teachers and sent to the school office in order to update the electronic register)
 - 10.6% of primary & 19.2% of post-primary use Optical Mark Readers (OMR sheets are completed by teachers and sent to the school office for processing)
 - 23.5% of primary & 57.7% of post-primary use SIMS daily (electronic register updated by the class teacher)
 - Most Primary Schools update SIMS weekly (61.2%) with a significant minority updating SIMS daily (23.5%) or twice daily (11.8%). In Post-Primary Schools, most updated SIMS more frequently: twice daily (69.2%); a small proportion updates it daily (15.4%) or weekly (11.5%).
 - 92.3% of post-primary record Lesson Attendance (not relevant for Primary Schools).
- Over 80% of primary and post-primary use reports (The Official Register, Group Analysis by Attendance Category Report, Percentage Attendance Report (less than 85% attendance) from SIMS.NET to monitor attendance. The Percentage Attendance Report is used by close to 95% of schools.
- 69.2% of post-primary regularly review Lesson Attendance reports (not relevant for Primary Schools).
- The majority of staff have time allocated to access and investigate data and liaise with staff, parents and EWOs:
 - 63.5% of Primary respondents and 73.1% of Post-Primary respondents have time allocated to access attendance data

- 52.9% of Primary respondents and 73.1% of Post-Primary respondents have time allocated to investigate trends in attendance data
- 68.2% of Primary respondents and 69.2% of Post-Primary respondents have time allocated to liaise with other staff regarding attendance
- 63.5% of Primary respondents and 76.9% of Post-Primary respondents have time allocated to liaise with parents regarding attendance
- 77.6% of Primary respondents and 92.3% of Post-Primary respondents have time allocated to liaise with EWO regarding attendance
- 74.1% of Primary and 84.6% of Post-Primary respondents indicated that the senior management team receives and/or discusses regular reports on attendance and attendance management strategies
- 56.5% of Primary and 57.6% of Post-Primary respondents indicated that the Board of Governors receives and/or discusses regular reports on attendance and attendance management strategies

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**⁸ provided some evidence of these features in practice – this is broadly in line with survey results for all schools:

- Schools used a variety of methods to record attendance with manual registration the most common:
 - 4 use Manual Registration sheets (which are completed by teachers and sent to the school office in order to update the electronic register)
 - 2 use Optical Mark Readers (OMR sheets are completed by teachers and sent to the school office for processing)
 - 3 use SIMS daily (electronic register updated by the class teacher)
 - Most schools update SIMS at least weekly (3 twice daily, 4 daily and 3 weekly)
 - All of the post-primary record Lesson Attendance (not relevant for Primary Schools).
- Most schools use reports (7 x The Official Register, 7 x Group Analysis by Attendance Category Report, 9 x Percentage Attendance Report (less than 85% attendance) from SIMS.NET to monitor attendance
- All 4 of the post-primary schools regularly review Lesson Attendance reports (not relevant for Primary Schools).
- The majority of staff have time allocated to access and investigate data and liaise with staff, parents and EWOs:
 - 6 have time allocated to access attendance data
 - 6 have time allocated to investigate trends in attendance data
 - 6 have time allocated to liaise with other staff regarding attendance
 - 6 have time allocated to liaise with parents regarding attendance
 - 7 have time allocated to liaise with EWO regarding attendance
- All 10 schools indicated that the senior management team receives and/or discusses regular reports on attendance and attendance management strategies

⁸ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

- In 6 of the 10 schools, the Board of Governors receives and/or discusses regular reports on attendance and attendance management strategies

Evidence from the **review of attendance policies** on recording attendance⁹ shows:

- Attendance policies in primary schools tend to refer to procedures for recording attendance:
 - most of the primary schools referred to a morning and afternoon register to be taken by the class teacher. This register would then be taken to an administrator to enter the attendance data into the Attendance Manager software provided by the Schools Information Management System (SIMS). SIMS software then allows data on absence to be reviewed and analysed quickly and effectively.
 - Some of the attendance policies provided by primary schools did not specifically mention the SIMS Attendance software.
- Most of the post-primary schools' attendance policies referred to the SIMS registration and admissions software. Policies noted that class/form registers were input into the SIMS system before 9.30am to detect non-attendance or truancy as early as possible.

2.6 Rewards and Sanctions for Attendance

2.6.1 Theme

Reflecting the importance placed on attendance by many schools, a range of reward schemes have been put in place in order to promote good attendance. These can recognise:

- Individual attendance
- Class attendance;
- Improving attendance
- Good attendance

The rewards might be weekly, termly or annually and vary from a certificate to a more tangible monetary reward (e.g. voucher). By their nature, these are generally more appropriate/effective in Primary Schools and for Junior Years in Post-Primary schools.

Reward schemes promoting good attendance are complemented by sanctions on pupils with poor attendance – although these tend to be less commonplace.

2.6.2 Supporting Evidence

A **review of literature** from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand highlights numerous examples of reward schemes which reward good and improving attendance for individuals and classes. (See Appendix I-2 including 2.3.19 and 2.3.20 in particular).

⁹ All schools within DE's control have access to a central MIS, which includes attendance recording functionality. This MIS is currently provided by Capita (SIMS). However, some other schools such as NI Independent schools and Nursery schools will not have SIMS installations.

From the **survey of schools**, there was evidence of some of these features in practice:

- Most respondents (65.9% of Primary respondents, 100% of Post-Primary respondents) indicated that they had attendance incentive schemes in place which recognise and reward good attendance.
- Most Primary schools (67.1% of respondents) and a minority of Post-Primary schools (15.4% of respondents) did not apply sanctions for poor attendance. In Post-Primary schools, the most common sanctions were:
 - Pupil placed on report (69.2%)
 - Detention (57.7%)
 - Removal of privileges (38.5%)
 - Kept in at lunch / breaktime (38.5%)
 - Suspension in school (30.8%)
 - Suspension (7.7%).

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**¹⁰:

- 7 schools indicated that they had attendance incentive schemes in place which recognise and reward good attendance.
- 3 schools did not apply sanctions for poor attendance. In the other 7 schools, the most common sanctions were:
 - Pupil placed on report (6)
 - Kept in at lunch / breaktime (3)
 - Detention (2) / Removal of privileges (2) / Suspension in school (2)
 - None of the schools used suspension as a sanction

Evidence from the **review of attendance policies** on rewards and sanctions shows:

- Rewards for good attendance
 - Most primary schools which provided attendance policies offered some reward scheme for pupils with excellent attendance. Rewards varied depending on the size of the school, but included small prizes for pupils with excellent attendance throughout the term/year (e.g. a pencil case) or day trips for year groups who had a higher rate of attendance than other year groups.
 - Most post-primary schools have adopted a reward scheme for pupils who demonstrated excellent punctuality and attendance. At the individual level this included: Certificates; Small prizes; Class trips; and References for employers
- Sanctions for poor attendance
 - In cases of extremely poor attendance for children of primary school age, sanctions are imposed on the parents/guardians of children whose attendance consistently falls below 85%. Sanctions could be in the form of a referral to EWS in the relevant ELB which could lead to prosecution resulting in a fine or in more extreme circumstances an Education Supervision Order or Care Order.

¹⁰ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

- None of the attendance policies provided by primary schools noted any sanctions on pupils with poor attendance. Most of the policies provided, indicated that in the event of multiple absences, contact with parents would usually be expected to resolve the issue
- With pupils assuming a greater responsibility of their punctuality and attendance at the post-primary age, all of the reviewed policies demonstrated some form of sanction for poor attendance. Generally, this involved break/lunchtime detention or, for repeat offenders, after school detention. Some of the attendance policies provided asked parents to support the sanctioning of poor attendance where appropriate. For example, agreeing to an afterschool detention.

2.7 Strategies and Supports to Address Poor Attendance

2.7.1 Theme

Reflecting the need to address poor attendance through both supporting those who are poor attenders as well as re-integrating those who have been absent, schools draw on a wide range of strategies and supports. Each of these addresses different underlying issues – many of which are specific to schools serving deprived areas and reflecting the multiple disadvantage faced by pupils. Examples of interventions include:

- **Rules / Procedures – addressed in Sections 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5**
 - Clear, fair rules around attendance - quickly and consistently applied by all staff
 - Communicate attendance rules to students including consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence
 - Clear guidance for staff on registration/ appropriate categorisation of absence
 - Clear procedures to identify and follow up all absence and lateness (allocating individual staff roles and responsibilities)
 - Monitor post-registration truancy through taking class registers, spot checks
 - Clear procedures for reintegrating long-term absentees and pupils who may, for specific reasons, have been on a reduced timetable
- **Use of attendance information – addressed in Section 2.5**
 - Encourage students and teachers to ensure attendance information is accurate
 - Make attendance information available to parents and students
 - Collect and use attendance data to monitor progress/trends and set targets for improvement
 - Use of technology to monitor and address attendance
- **Communication between school and parents**
 - Provide Free phone number to call to report a student's absence
 - Provide Free phone number to text to report a student's absence
 - Provide an email address to report a student's absence
 - Accept paper note as a method of reporting a student's absence
 - First Day Response (first-day absence contact)
 - Communicate attendance rules to parents including consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence

- School absence letters – when levels of attendance becoming a ‘cause for concern’
- Informal meetings and/or telephone calls with parents to discuss the reasons for a pupil’s poor attendance
- **Interventions in school**
 - Identify pupils who are vulnerable to becoming persistent absentees and have individual action plans in place for each pupil
 - Individual Curriculum (alternative / flexible provision for disaffected pupils)
 - Vocational options included in the curriculum recognising likely career pathways of students
 - Pastoral support plans for pupils with long term attendance difficulties - recognising that such pupils face multiple disadvantage
 - Effective counselling systems
 - Pupil Mentoring / Buddy System
 - Additional study support
 - Support for reintegration following absence
 - Attendance incentive schemes which recognise and reward good attendance
 - Activities before and after school as an incentive for pupils to come to school
 - Pre-School activities (e.g. Breakfast Club, etc.)
 - After-school Programmes
 - Activities which are conditional on full attendance
 - Attendance and punctuality projects
 - Attendance theme days/week
 - Dedicated member of staff supporting pupils with poor attendance
 - Allocated resource for an attendance officer
 - Create Student-Generated Classroom Rules
 - Build Positive Student-Teacher Connections
 - Using school assemblies and visual displays to engage pupils
 - Sign Posting and access to external support for parents and pupils
 - Transition support (Primary to Post-Primary)
 - Programmes for parents (see Section 3)
 - Home-school liaison project (see Section 3)
- **Support for staff**
 - Training for staff on specific needs of pupils e.g. young carers
 - Access to training in relevant social and emotional behaviour skills for staff to equip them to support these pupils

2.7.2 Supporting Evidence

A **review of literature** from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand highlights the following common strands in terms of strategies and supports:

- Strong pastoral support systems including:
 - Early intervention
 - Support systems for vulnerable pupils
 - Addressing causes of non-attendance e.g. bullying

- Support for parents and pupils with greatest needs including work with EWS and multi-agency supports
- Support for transition from primary to post-primary school including sharing of attendance information
- Early / first day contact with parents when a child is found to be absent
- Mentoring
- Provision of vocational courses at school
- Alternative / flexible curriculum provision
 - use of alternative academic subjects to stimulate interest / motivation
 - Varied, alternative and relevant curriculum to raise interest and provide skills which pupils will need at work
 - Community service / involvement in community projects
- Smaller and personalised learning environments
- Structured programme for reintegrating pupils who are disengaged/ have been absent including:
 - modifying curriculum and drawing on educational providers outside the school
 - reduced/ alternative timetable
 - peer support to help students re-integrate / catch up after a period of absence
- Appropriate training/ support for staff to address issues related to attendance
- Employ dedicated Attendance Coordinators to support pupils with attendance problems
- Positive Impact of Full Service / Extended Schools activities on attendance (including Homework clubs, Breakfast Clubs, After-School Clubs, etc.
- Expand school time e.g.: e.g. KIPP academies with provision from 8 AM to 5 PM and TASC / Expanded schools with additional 3 hours per day – providing a better match for parents' working hours and including a mix of formal and informal education
- Collaboration with other schools (re: good practice)

From the **survey of schools**, there was evidence of some of these strategies in practice:

- A wide range of attendance management strategies are adopted by schools – the most common are highlighted in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Q26. What types of attendance management strategies are in place at your school? Tick Yes or No on each row.

| Theme | Attendance Management Strategy | Primary | | | | Post-Primary | | | |
|--|---|---------|-------|----|-------|--------------|-------|----|-------|
| | | Yes | | No | | Yes | | No | |
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Rules / Procedures | Clear, fair rules around attendance - quickly and consistently applied by all staff | 63 | 74.1% | 4 | 4.7% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Communicate attendance rules to students including consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence | 47 | 55.3% | 18 | 21.2% | 24 | 92.3% | 2 | 7.7% |
| | Clear guidance for staff on registration and appropriate categorisation of absence | 69 | 81.2% | 1 | 1.2% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Clear procedures to identify and follow up all absence and lateness (allocating individual staff roles and responsibilities) | 60 | 70.6% | 9 | 10.6% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Monitor Post-registration truancy through taking class registers and spot checks | 17 | 20.0% | 46 | 54.1% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Clear procedures for reintegrating long-term absentees and pupils who may, for specific reasons, have been on a reduced timetable | 27 | 31.8% | 35 | 41.2% | 22 | 84.6% | 4 | 15.4% |
| Use of attendance information | Encourage students and teachers to ensure attendance information is accurate | 70 | 82.4% | 1 | 1.2% | 25 | 96.2% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Make attendance information available to parents and students | 65 | 76.5% | 6 | 7.1% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Collect and use attendance data to monitor progress/trends and set targets for improvement | 61 | 71.8% | 10 | 11.8% | 24 | 92.3% | 2 | 7.7% |
| Communication between school and parents | Provide Free phone number to call to report a student's absence | 2 | 2.4% | 66 | 77.6% | 3 | 11.5% | 23 | 88.5% |
| | Provide Free phone number to text to report a student's absence | 1 | 1.2% | 70 | 82.4% | 2 | 7.7% | 24 | 92.3% |
| | Provide an email address to report a student's absence | 15 | 17.6% | 54 | 63.5% | 11 | 42.3% | 15 | 57.7% |
| | Accept paper note as a method of reporting a student's absence | 69 | 81.2% | 2 | 2.4% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | First Day Response (first-day absence contact) | 27 | 31.8% | 44 | 51.8% | 18 | 69.2% | 7 | 26.9% |
| | Communicate attendance rules to parents including consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence | 63 | 74.1% | 8 | 9.4% | 24 | 92.3% | 2 | 7.7% |
| | School absence letters- used when levels of attendance becoming a 'cause for concern' | 64 | 75.3% | 5 | 5.9% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Informal meetings and/or telephone calls with parents to discuss the reasons for a pupil's poor attendance | 70 | 82.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Interventions in school | Identify pupils who are vulnerable to becoming persistent absentees and have individual action plans in place for each pupil | 32 | 37.6% | 38 | 44.7% | 19 | 73.1% | 7 | 26.9% |
| | Individual Curriculum (alternative / flexible provision for disaffected pupils) | 13 | 15.3% | 57 | 67.1% | 22 | 84.6% | 4 | 15.4% |
| | Pastoral support plans for pupils with long term attendance difficulties | 9 | 10.6% | 4 | 4.7% | 10 | 38.5% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Effective counselling systems | 42 | 49.4% | 30 | 35.3% | 24 | 92.3% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Additional study support | 22 | 25.9% | 48 | 56.5% | 21 | 80.8% | 5 | 19.2% |
| | Pupil Mentoring / Buddy System | 29 | 34.1% | 42 | 49.4% | 12 | 46.2% | 14 | 53.8% |

| Theme | Attendance Management Strategy | Primary | | | | Post-Primary | | | |
|-------------------|--|---------|-------|----|-------|--------------|--------|----|-------|
| | | Yes | | No | | Yes | | No | |
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| | Attendance incentive schemes which recognise and reward good attendance | 56 | 65.9% | 15 | 17.6% | 26 | 100.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Pre-School activities (e.g. Breakfast Club, etc.) | 56 | 65.9% | 16 | 18.8% | 17 | 65.4% | 9 | 34.6% |
| | After-school Programmes | 62 | 72.9% | 5 | 5.9% | 20 | 76.9% | 6 | 23.1% |
| | Attendance and punctuality projects | 30 | 35.3% | 41 | 48.2% | 10 | 38.5% | 15 | 57.7% |
| | Attendance theme days/week | 17 | 20.0% | 52 | 61.2% | 6 | 23.1% | 19 | 73.1% |
| | Allocated resource for an attendance officer | 15 | 17.6% | 55 | 64.7% | 14 | 53.8% | 11 | 42.3% |
| | Create Student-Generated Classroom Rules | 57 | 67.1% | 14 | 16.5% | 19 | 73.1% | 7 | 26.9% |
| | Build Positive Student-Teacher Connections | 65 | 76.5% | 3 | 3.5% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Using school assemblies and visual displays to engage pupils | 70 | 82.4% | 2 | 2.4% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Sign Posting and access to external support for parents and pupils | 50 | 58.8% | 21 | 24.7% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| Support for staff | Training for staff on specific needs of pupils e.g. young carers | 35 | 41.2% | 35 | 41.2% | 17 | 65.4% | 9 | 34.6% |
| | Access to training in relevant social and emotional behaviour skills for staff to equip them to support these pupils | 49 | 57.6% | 19 | 22.4% | 22 | 84.6% | 4 | 15.4% |
| Other | | 3 | 3.5% | 6 | 7.1% | 4 | 15.4% | 3 | 11.5% |

Base: Primary (85), Post Primary (26), Total (111)
Note: Respondents could provide more than 1 response so total number of responses may be greater than the total number of respondents and the sum of the percentages may be greater than 100%
Source: RSM McClure Watters, March 2012

- 81.2% of Primary and 92.3% of Post-Primary respondents confirmed that the school sent work home if a pupil was off for any length of time
- For pupils returning from a period of absence to help them settle in and catch up, the most common supports include:
 - Additional support (44.7% of Primary and 42.3% of Post-Primary respondent)
 - Reintegration programme (4.7% of Primary and 11.6% of Post-Primary respondent)
 - On-going monitoring (11.6% of Post-Primary respondents)
- The most effective attendance management strategies identified by schools include:
 - Communication and positive relationships with parents (36.5% of Primary respondents, 46.2% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Awards / rewards systems (15.3% of Primary respondents, 11.5% of Post-Primary respondents);
 - Other strategies mentioned by a small proportion (less than 5%) of Primary respondents included: EWO involvement, breakfast club / afterschool club, face-to-face meetings with parents
 - Other strategies mentioned by a small proportion (less than 10%) of Post-Primary respondents included: EWO involvement, EWO on site, text to parents).
- Relatively few respondents identified least effective attendance management strategies; the most common were:
 - Letters (10.6% of Primary respondents, 11.5% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Sanctions (5.8% of Primary respondents, 3.8% of Post-Primary respondents);

- A majority of Post-Primary respondents felt that the link / transition arrangements between Primary and Post-Primary schools made a significant difference to attendance in Year 8; the Primary respondents were less convinced:
 - Difference made by link / transition arrangements – Post-Primary respondents (rated 1 by 34.6%; rated 2 by 19.8% (where 1 is Significant Difference and 5 is No Difference)
 - Difference made by link / transition arrangements – Primary respondents (rated 1 by 8.2%; rated 2 by 20% (where 1 is Significant Difference and 5 is No Difference)
- The most effective link / transition arrangements were considered to be:
 - Visits by Post-Primary teachers & visits to Post-Primary schools (18.8% of Primary respondents, 23.1% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Exchange of information and records (14.1% of Primary respondents, 11.5% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Visit / talk to priority students / parents (11.5% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Induction Programme (11.5% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Teambuilding activities (7.7% of Post-Primary respondents)
- Most schools surveyed were in receipt of Extended Schools funding (76.5% of Primary respondents, 92.3% of Post-Primary respondents) – enabling the provision of additional activities before, and after school.

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**¹¹ show:

- A wide range of attendance management strategies are adopted by schools – the most common are highlighted in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Q26. What types of attendance management strategies are in place at your school? Tick Yes or No on each row.

| Theme | Attendance Management Strategy | Yes | No |
|--|---|-----|----|
| Rules / Procedures | Clear, fair rules around attendance - quickly and consistently applied by all staff | 8 | 2 |
| | Communicate attendance rules to students including consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence | 7 | 3 |
| | Clear guidance for staff on registration and appropriate categorisation of absence | 10 | 0 |
| | Clear procedures to identify and follow up all absence and lateness (allocating individual staff roles and responsibilities) | 10 | 0 |
| | Monitor Post-registration truancy through taking class registers and spot checks | 6 | 4 |
| | Clear procedures for reintegrating long-term absentees and pupils who may, for specific reasons, have been on a reduced timetable | 7 | 3 |
| Use of attendance information | Encourage students and teachers to ensure attendance information is accurate | 10 | 0 |
| | Make attendance information available to parents and students | 9 | 1 |
| | Collect and use attendance data to monitor progress/trends and set targets for improvement | 9 | 1 |
| Communication between school and parents | Provide Free phone number to call to report a student's absence | 0 | 10 |
| | Provide Free phone number to text to report a student's absence | 0 | 10 |
| | Provide an email address to report a student's absence | 6 | 4 |

¹¹ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

| Theme | Attendance Management Strategy | Yes | No |
|---|--|-----|----|
| | Accept paper note as a method of reporting a student's absence | 10 | 0 |
| | First Day Response (first-day absence contact) | 6 | 4 |
| | Communicate attendance rules to parents including consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence | 8 | 2 |
| | School absence letters – used when levels of attendance becoming a 'cause for concern' | 9 | 1 |
| | Informal meetings and/or telephone calls with parents to discuss the reasons for a pupil's poor attendance | 10 | 0 |
| Interventions in school | Identify pupils who are vulnerable to becoming persistent absentees and have individual action plans in place for each pupil | 8 | 2 |
| | Individual Curriculum (alternative / flexible provision for disaffected pupils) | 3 | 7 |
| | Pastoral support plans for pupils with long term attendance difficulties | 4 | 0 |
| | Effective counselling systems | 9 | 1 |
| | Additional study support | 6 | 4 |
| | Pupil Mentoring / Buddy System | 6 | 4 |
| | Attendance incentive schemes which recognise and reward good attendance | 7 | 3 |
| | Pre-School activities (e.g. Breakfast Club, etc.) | 9 | 1 |
| | After-school Programmes | 9 | 1 |
| | Attendance and punctuality projects | 2 | 8 |
| | Attendance theme days/week | 2 | 8 |
| | Allocated resource for an attendance officer | 6 | 4 |
| | Create Student-Generated Classroom Rules | 9 | 1 |
| | Build Positive Student-Teacher Connections | 10 | 0 |
| | Using school assemblies and visual displays to engage pupils | 10 | 0 |
| Sign Posting and access to external support for parents and pupils | 9 | 1 | |
| Support for staff | Training for staff on specific needs of pupils e.g. young carers | 5 | 5 |
| | Access to training in relevant social and emotional behaviour skills for staff to equip them to support these pupils | 8 | 2 |
| Other* | | 1 | 0 |
| <p>Base: Primary (6), Post Primary (4), Total (10) – improving schools Note: Respondents could provide more than 1 response so total number of responses may be greater than the total number of respondents Source: RSM McClure Watters, March 2012</p> | | | |

- All 10 schools send work home if a pupil is off for any length of time
- When a pupil returns, most schools have a strategy to help them settle in and catch up; these include:
 - E.g. if a child has a long term illness we would offer to send work home. On return, class teacher gradually enables pupil to reintegrate into class work and topics.
 - Depends on teacher. Work can be sent home. Group work provides for differentiation of a pupil's needs to help with catching up.
 - An individual plan is worked out so that the child can return as easily as possible.
 - Form tutor liaises with subject teachers, monitors progress and identifies/addresses additional needs as required.
 - Staged return. Time out cards. Lunch time groups.
 - A personalised timetable and the use of Learning Support Unit if necessary. Reintegration with class later.
 - Individual to class and child's needs
 - 1:1 help if required to 'catch up'... provided by special needs assistant.

- The most effective attendance management strategies identified by 10 schools with improving attendance include:
 - Relationship / Contact / communication with parents (mentioned by x8)
 - Good contact and communication between school and parent.
 - Contacting parents directly either by letter or by telephone.
 - Parents are contacted and our home school liaison teacher discusses their child's attendance. This personal approach helps to clarify why and how attendance can be improved. We find that it helps to solve the problem.
 - Communication between school and parents/carers as this facilitates appropriate interventions to address any issues/concerns promptly.
 - Close contact with parents. Best done by phone to ensure contact, then meetings can happen and if needed home visits.
 - We believe in good relationships with our parents a phone call can make all the difference.
 - Positive relationships built between home and school... high expectations for pupil achievement... pupil's feeling that they are valued and listened to.
 - Personal one-one discussion/regular meeting with pupil to discuss progress on a daily basis. Meeting pupil each morning prior to going to class. Befriending parent. Daily phone call home.
 - Other strategies included related to monitoring / management of attendance:
 - Identifying the target group. Keeping a visual record of the child's monthly attendance - i.e. a monthly sheet where the child gets a star/stamp for each day's attendance which is recognised daily. Rewards on a monthly basis for full attendance. Phoning home when the child does not come in.
 - Attendance management is very complete as we are working with a wide range of pupils with differing needs/issues; therefore a wide range of strategies is drawn upon. The key to effective management is close monitoring and prompt follow up of absence.
- Relatively few respondents identified least effective attendance management strategies; those deemed less effective included:
 - Use of school prospectus (x2) – as information can be ignored / overlooked
 - Sometimes material in a school prospectus can be overlooked or forgotten.
 - Prospectus, some parents will only respond when contacted directly.
 - Letters (x2) – as these can be ignored
 - Letters used to be sent, but they were an administrative burden and got little feedback. So phone calls better as more direct, and sanctions discourage students.
 - Letters at times are ignored
 - Sanctions (x1) – preference is for encouraging attendance rather than reprimands

- Sanctions do not work. Encouraging good attendance has more success than reprimand for poor attendance.
 - Phone calls to parents (x1)
 - Trying to phone home doesn't always work. Parents don't answer when they see the school number. They may have no credit on phone.
- Most schools describe the difference made by link / transition arrangements between Primary and Post-Primary schools to attendance in Year 8 in broadly positive terms:
 - Difference made by link / transition arrangements – 10 improving schools (rated 1 by 2; rated 2 by 4, rated 5 by 2 respondents (where 1 is Significant Difference and 5 is No Difference))
- Schools describe the following link/transition arrangements for primary pupils moving to post-primary school as being most effective
 - Information sessions. School visits. Meetings with key staff.
 - Making the secondary school aware if there is an attendance problem. EWO liaises with the post primary school.
 - Meeting with P7 teachers in June.
 - Where attendance issues have been identified in p7, school (the attendance officer and the Barnardo's parent co-ordinator) contact the home and arrange to visit the home during the summer.
 - Teachers visit school to give presentation and Q and A. Also open night as it gives students and parents more information about the school.
 - Pastoral visit to P7 primary school. Meeting pupil and getting to know their interests prior to pupil arriving in Year 8.
- Schools describe the following as induction support arrangements for new pupils
 - Welcome pack - holidays, times, rules, etc.; Tour of school; appointment of buddy especially during settling period.
 - Find a buddy/group of pupils to look after the new pupil.
 - New pupils meet with our home school liaison teacher and she works with the child to help them integrate into the school. We have buddies in place to help new children. In the playground there are 'playground friends' and they help new children mix.
 - Meeting with each pupil and his/her appropriate parent/carer in June, day for yr 8 pupils only, suspended timetable form tutor for a morning prior to the commencement of normal timetable in September and induction review evening at the end of September. 'Open door' policy.
 - A number of visits to take part in activities in school diary p7. Activities led by senior pupils and school staff in feeder primary schools. A half day in school at the end of August with no other pupils. A full day at the end of August with a limited number of other pupils in school.
 - Parents encouraged to attend on first morning, then leave and an induction programme occurs including a tour and meeting teachers in their classes. Many lessons are taught by form teacher as they are used to only having one teacher. Then a parents meeting is held informing them of all attendance issues, etc.

- Pastoral visit to PS in June. Induction evening in June. For years 9 onwards: Phone call to previous school to get background information. Introducing new pupil to a friend. Completion of induction sheet on arrival and 4 weeks after pupil has started.
- Meeting with parents, principal, class teacher and pupil. Policies, procedures and expectations are shared in this meeting.

These aspects are supported by evidence from the **review of attendance policies** which describe strategies for addressing poor attendance as follows:

- In primary school attendance policies, the need for constant liaising with parents/guardians over all matters concerning a child's primary education, including attendance is highlighted. Daily contact with parents/guardians for absent children to monitor attendance usually addressed individual cases of school absence. Some of the primary school policies provided noted where there were consecutive days of unauthorised absences; schools liaised with their Education Welfare Officer (EWO), who would offer support/advice where necessary.
- For many of the post-primary schools, pupils who demonstrated persistently poor attendance were put on an attendance report scheme. Pupils, who were put on such a scheme, would usually require a confirmation signature from class/form teachers, parents/guardians and heads of year for each class/day for a pre designated length of time. Post-primary schools endeavour to liaise with parents at the earliest sign of poor punctuality and attendance to address any bad habits.
- All 10 of the improving schools were in receipt of Extended Schools funding – enabling the provision of additional activities before, and after school.

Evidence from the **consultations with stakeholders** highlight a variety of supports – many of which seek to address the underlying causes of poor attendance – and many of which are funded through the Extended Schools Programme. This enables the school day to extend earlier and later; examples of the types of initiatives (for pupils) funded under Extended Schools include:

- Breakfast club;
- Afterschool Club;
- Homework Club;
- Sports Clubs;
- Specialist Clubs/Skills.

Feedback from stakeholders highlighted the following examples of specific projects aimed at pupils:

- **Attendance Co-ordinator (Full Service Pilot Projects – Belfast Model School for Girls):** An Attendance Co-ordinator is employed to work one-to-one with pupils with attendance issues, also to carry out group work and home visits if necessary. A review for 2011 has found that this intervention has been very successful. The intervention targeted a total of 30 girls from Years 8, 9, and 10. There was an average increase in attendance of 8% which brings the pupils' overall attendance rate above the 90% mark, thus taking pressure of the EWS. Funding has recently been secured from DE which

will fund the Full Service Programme (including the Attendance Co-ordinator) up to March 2015.

- **Numeracy and Literacy support:** Participants in two of the children's' focus groups and school staff 1-to-1 interviews referred to specific clubs / projects targeted at improving maths and English (Number Crunchers, Rapid Reading Club, WoW (Working on Words) Club, Ballysally PS and Chantel Library Greenhaw PS). Although not directly focused on attendance, such initiatives help to overcome some of the barriers to learning and hence will have an indirect impact on attendance.
- **Breakfast Club:**
 - Kilcooley PS – The Principal referred to the Breakfast Club. This involves offering all pupils the opportunity to have breakfast in school. This takes place at break time as opposed to morning time, thus encouraging parents to get their children into school whether late or not. (In the past the Breakfast Club was run before school started and there was a fairly low uptake).
 - St Joseph's Boys Club (Derry) Head of Junior School noted that this involves offering all pupils the opportunity to have breakfast in school.
 - Breakfast Clubs funded through ES. ES co-ordinators provided examples of positive impacts of Breakfast Clubs on attendance:
 - West Winds Primary School in Newtownards has used the breakfast club as a means of addressing the poor attendance of two children within the same family. One child's attendance increased from 73% to 88% and the others from 71% to 89%. The school stated to the Extended Schools co-ordinator that the breakfast club played a major part in increasing attendance.
 - Another school in the BELB area used the Breakfast club as an intervention to address the attendance of one of his/her pupils. It was identified that the child's grandmother could drop the child off in the morning before she went on to work. By having the breakfast club in place the grandmother could drop the child off. As a result the child's attendance increased from 75.3% to 82.6%.
- **After-School Clubs** – funded through ES, these are intended to target pupils with attendance issues or other priority needs. These allow school to interact with the children by playing games and having fun. It provides support to parents and children for attendance issues. If the child does not attend school he/she are not allowed to attend the After School Club. This provides an incentive to attend school as the children enjoy the fun he/she can have with his/her other friends. St Kieran's Primary School in Belfast, which has acute level of needs has increased its overall attendance rate from 90.9% to 92.1% and put this down to Extended School funding for both the afterschool clubs and breakfast clubs.
- **Lunch Time Club:**
 - St Joseph's Boys Club (Derry) Head of Junior School noted that this helps the "quieter" children in the school. It is a mentoring programme aimed at helping individuals build their confidence and self-esteem.
- **Homework Clubs**
 - highlighted in 2 of the parents' focus groups; these were felt to be beneficial in providing time and space that might not otherwise be available for children to

complete their homework and access additional help; although not all children enjoyed the club. Interest was expressed in this type of initiative in another focus group.

- Participants in 2 of the children's focus groups mentioned Homework Clubs but there were mixed views on these.
- St Joseph's Boys Club (Derry) Head of Junior School noted that the Homework Club provides support to children to help them complete their homework.
- **Additional Tuition:** In one of the parents' focus groups, an extra tuition class on afternoon per week was proposed as a means of addressing the issue of children falling behind / not catching up on work from when they were absent. In one of the children's focus groups, reference was made to Subject Support – held after school and targeted at those who might be falling behind (for attendance or other reasons);
- **Individual Curriculum:** a participant in one of the children's focus groups referred to a class in which he/she was experiencing difficulties – the child was able to drop this class and spend the time in the library instead with a teacher available to provide support if needed.
- **Flexible timetable** - The Vice-Principal of St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen described the use of Flexible timetable – for those who are being re-integrated back into school, the school will work with them, parents and EWO (where relevant) e.g. to build up attendance and allowing for some variation in timetabled classes.
- **Vocationally-focused subjects / experience:** The Head of Junior School, St Joseph's Boy's School (Derry) described how "disconnected" boys could attend **Local Fire Service**. In this time, they learn the importance of education and team working.
- **Employment Support** (St Gemma's Girls School): Recognising that some students do not attend school because they are put off by the high unemployment rate, which reduces their motivation to get an education, the school has put together support for these employment issues. This is in the form of mock interviews, careers service. The Principal also makes all girls in Year 12 apply for the prefect position. This involves doing a video interview with someone from an external agency. This allows individuals to gain feedback on their interview which will help them in the future.
- **School Start / Finish Times:** In one of the children's focus groups, a suggestion was made that a later start time every day would encourage attendance whilst an earlier finish on one day per week was also suggested as a means of encouraging attendance.
- **Nurture Rooms** were highlighted in 2 of the parents' focus groups; these provide an alternative to a child's normal class catering for small groups of children and providing support in areas in which they may be struggling, and a listening ear. Also mentioned in the staff 1-to-1s in Kilcooley PS and Ballysally PS.
- **Family-based clubs** were highlighted in 2 of the parents' focus groups
 - Kilcooley PS – Family Fun Club
 - Ballysally PS – Stay and Play Days - "Lads and Dads" and "Mums and Girlies"These provide an environment in which parents can come into school and take part in fun activities with their children e.g. cookery, zumba, judo, etc. This is a means of encouraging parents to come in to the school, to spend time with their children, to have a positive experience and to build school-parent relationships. It provides an informal setting for parents and staff to talk; also by engaging with parents in

this way, there is an incentive to ensure that children get to school so that parents can attend the club after school. In one focus group, it was felt that more funding for after-schools activities would help school to be more “fun”.

- St Joseph’s Boys Club (Derry) Head of Junior School noted that Lads and Dads allows for parents and sons to bond but also provides a link to the parents.
- **Intergenerational Group Working (Full Service Pilot Projects – Belfast Model School for Girls):** This is a 10 week programme which involves 10 girls from Year 9 and 10 older members of the community. Members of the group talk and discuss the past and learn new skills. Activities include jewellery making, learning to dance and to sew, creative writing; participants improve their social skills and learn about both life in the past and life now. The programme is open to all girls from the school who may apply for a position; however the Full Service Co-ordinator makes preference to those girls with attendance issues so that the programme can be used as an indirect intervention for encouraging attendance. It is a requirement that the girls must have full attendance each week to attend the programme. It is noted that if the girls do not attend then their place will be given to another student. The programme is provided in partnership with the Crescent Arts Centre, Intergenerational NI, and Camberwell Court and is part funded by the Full Service Project and Crescent Arts Centre. Of the ten girls who attend the programme, four have attendance issues. As a result of the requirement to have full attendance in order to take part, all four girls’ attendance has improved. The overall percentage has not yet been calculated as the programme has not yet been completed. However the Full Service Co-ordinator reviews the attendance each week and can already see the difference in the rate of attendance.
- **Reward / Incentive Schemes:**
 - In one of the parents’ focus groups, the concept of a reward scheme was felt to be useful in motivating children to come to school. A previous “Be on Time” week (Ballysally PS) had had a noticeable impact on participants’ children.
 - All of the children’s focus groups mentioned awards schemes for attendance; generally certificates presented at assembly – once per month in Kilcooley PS, once per year in Ballysally PS and Greenhaw PS (awards assembly). An alternative system of “Honour Marks” operates in Forthill Integrated High School.
 - The Principal in Kilcooley PS described the incentive scheme – certificates for full attendance each month; certificates for best class attendance each term and a cinema ticket for full attendance all year. A previous scheme “on time all week” was discontinued as parents had kept their children off school rather than being in to school late.
 - The School SENCO in Ballysally PS referred to monthly rewards for full attendance (e.g. pencil or bookmark); and full attendance for the year meaning that the pupil could go on a trip at the end of the year.
 - The Principal of St Gemma’s described the school’s reward scheme – including a certificate for full attendance (monthly) and a day trip each term for those with full attendance.
 - The Vice Principal of St Joseph’s (Crossmaglen) described a reward scheme which includes attendance (along with behaviour and attitude); attendance of at

- least 90% was required to qualify for the award each term and there are 3 levels: Gold, Silver and Bronze.
- The Head of Junior School of St Joseph's Boys' School (Derry) described the schools reward system for attendance on a weekly, monthly and termly basis:
 - The school has in place a Champions League Table. Each form class has its own football jersey design. A display is put up in the front of the school identifying those who are at the "top of the league" in terms of attendance. The class which is at the top of the league each month are rewarded with a trip to the Nerve Centre (local film centre).
 - The school also have a sticker reward system. Those who attend for 1 week get a bronze sticker, 2 weeks, silver sticker, 3 weeks a gold sticker and 4 weeks a platinum sticker.
 - Those with 100% attendance are rewarded with a certificate at the end of term assembly.
 - Other rewards used in this school include:
 - Creggan Country Park – This is an outdoor pursuit centre. The school brings the pupils to this centre for team building and motivation. This is used as a reward for good behaviour and attendance.
 - St Mary's Youth Centre – The centre will open during the day so that pupils from the school can attend to play pool, computer games and "have fun". Those who are nominated as class of the month are rewarded with the trip to the youth centre.
 - The Nerve Centre – This is a local film centre. The school works with the centre to put on films to reward those with full attendance. The films will target specific areas such as team work, achievement and success as opposed to watching films released in the cinema.
 - The school also ties in attendance with after school activities such as Basketball, Running and Film Club. The students receive an achievement point for each activity they take part in. They receive a negative point for non-attendance and bad behaviour. These are then evaluated at the end of each term and those who have a good level of achievement awards will receive a certificate. This is similar to the Magic Bus Framework, an Indian initiative which uses sport participation to improve attendance.
 - Corpus Christi College (Full Service Community Network): Recognising the need to ensure that once attendance has increased, there is an incentive to continue to attend. Working collaboratively with the community to put in place reward systems has proven to be effective in the past. One example of this was working with Bombardier to reward those with 100% attendance each term with a flight around the north of Ireland. This was an incentive scheme put in place within Corpus Christi College. Over the course of the year approximately 300 boys were rewarded with the flight.

- **Counselling:** In Kilcooley PS – the school Principal described the Family Works Counselling service which is available to pupils from Kilcooley PS. A counsellor attends the school every week and targets children who “feel down” or are fearful of school. It helps them address their fear and encourage more positive life experiences in school which will improve attendance.
- **Secondary Pupils Support Service (Corpus Christi College, Full Service Community Network):** This was initially provided by an external agency, however the need within the College was high therefore the Full Service Community Network Programme provided funding and trained staff in the delivery of the programme. The programme does not directly target attendance however it is open to boys from the school that have behaviour issues which as a result affects their attendance. At present there are approximately 20 boys from Corpus Christi College on the programme. The Programme is currently on-going therefore no evaluation has taken place. However it has been observed that both attendance and behaviour of the 20 boys has improved.

3 INTERFACE BETWEEN SCHOOLS IN DEPRIVED AREAS, THE HOME AND THE COMMUNITY

3.1 Introduction

Drawing on evidence from primary and secondary research, a number of key themes have been identified with regards to:

- the interface between schools in deprived areas, the home and the community around promoting regular attendance and the identification of local and international good practice;

Each theme is briefly described below – together with evidence of its effectiveness and any relevant examples to illustrate the approach.

3.2 Links with Home / Parents

3.2.1 Theme

Parents have a legal responsibility to ensure that their children attend school. Reflecting this responsibility, the relationship between schools and parents/ carers is extremely important. Schools can assist parents to discharge their responsibility by:

- **Parent/Carer responsibilities**
 - Remind parents/carers of their legal responsibilities for ensuring their children's regular and punctual attendance
 - Communicate clearly with parents/carers about the consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence
 - Remind parents/carers of the potential sanctions for failure to meet their responsibilities (e.g. legal sanctions, such as parent only prosecutions resulting in fines of up to £1000 or in more serious circumstances, the EWS may apply for an Education Supervision Order (under Article 55 of the Children (NI) Order 1995) to place the child under the supervision of the Board or, where concerns are not solely related to attendance matters, a Supervision or Care Order (under Article 56) may be granted)
 - Remind parents/carers to ensure that their child only misses school for reasons which are unavoidable or justified, such as illness or days of religious observance
 - Stress to parents/carers the importance of continuity of learning, particularly in relation to family holidays during term-time
 - Encourage parents/carers to avoid booking family holidays during term-time
 - Clear attendance information is regularly communicated to parents/carers
 - Remind parents/carers to always notify the school as soon as possible - preferably on the first morning - of any absence
- **Home/ School engagement and communication**
 - Explain link between poor attendance and reduced attainment to parents/carers

- Meet with parents/carers to discuss learning expectations of their child
- Encourage parents/carers to be aware of letters from school which their child brings home
- Encourage parents/carers to take an active interest in their child's school life and work
- Invite parents to presentations – e.g. rewards for good attendance
- Remind parents/carers to ensure that their child completes his/her homework and goes to bed at an appropriate time
- Encourage parents to attend parents' evenings and other school events
- Discuss child's attendance at parent teacher evenings or when meeting parents
- Encourage parents to talk to the school if they are concerned that their child may be reluctant to attend
- **Support for parents/carers on attendance**
 - Parents/carers of Post-registration truants are promptly informed and where necessary actively involved
 - Provide information about the range of support services that parents/carers can access
 - Programmes / activities to build relationships with parents / families
 - Use of parenting contracts where required.

These links between schools and homes / parents are underpinned by the need to:

- Build and maintain strong relationships with parents and families;
- Communicate with parents in ways that are: accessible and easily understood;
- Understanding the issues / challenges that parents/ carers face and the implications this may have on school attendance.

3.2.2 Supporting Evidence

A **review of literature** from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand highlights the following common strands in terms of working with parents to address poor attendance:

- Ensuring that parents understand their legal responsibilities with regard to attendance
- Threat of legal sanctions (parents)
- Clear communication with pupils and parents
- Explaining the link between poor attendance and reduced attainment
- Access to information about their child's attendance for parents
- Building good relationships with parents:
 - although there is a need to recognise the complexity of the relationship between parental attitudes and children's attendance at school
 - Family engagement / activities to help build relationships with parents/ carers
 - Home-school liaison: a dedicated member of staff with responsibility for liaising with parents;
- Recruiting support staff from local community to build relationships/break down barriers
- Parenting classes

- Support for parents and pupils with greatest needs including work with EWS and multi-agency supports
- Signposting / access to external support for parents / carers
- Parenting contracts for non-attendance where parenting is thought to be a contributing factor
- Link between non-attendance and social security benefits (potential to suspend payments for non-attendance)

From the **survey of schools**, there was evidence of some of these features in practice:

- Most respondents felt that the relationship between their school and the families of pupils who were poor attenders were not as strong as relationships with families in general:
 - Relationship between schools and families – generally (average score of 1.4 in Primary Schools and 1.6 in Post-Primary schools, where 1 is Very Strong and 5 is Very Weak)
 - Relationship between schools and families of pupils who are poor attenders (average score of 2.2 in Primary Schools and 2.6 in Post-Primary schools, where 1 is Very Strong and 5 is Very Weak)
- 22.4% of Primary and 57.7% of Post-Primary respondents stated that their school had a home-school liaison person
- Communication of attendance policies to parents takes place through a variety of media (School prospectus, promotional material, newsletter website, parents' evening, pupil reviews) and various frequencies (the most common being once per year).
- With regards to communicating with parents on an incident of non-attendance:
 - 41.2% of Primary and 65.4% of Post-Primary respondents indicated that their school uses text-to-parents communication software.
 - 68.2% of Primary and 88.5% of Post-Primary respondents are aware that SIMS has the capacity to generate standard letters for parents if a child is absent and no reason given. However only 31.0% of Primary and 34.8% of Post-Primary respondents use this.
 - In terms of the first action taken by a school if a child is absent, 30.6% of Primary and 77.5% of Post-Primary school respondents referred to contacting parents (by phone, letter, text or TruancyCall).
- Schools adopt a variety of strategies in engaging with parents – the most common are highlighted in Table 6 below. Most schools adopt most of the strategies.

Table 6: Q32. Which of the following strategies does your school adopt in engaging with parents / carers on attendance issues? Tick yes or no on each row

| Theme | Strategy for engaging parent/carers on attendance issues | Primary | | | | Post-Primary | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---------|-------|----|-------|--------------|--------|----|-------|
| | | Yes | | No | | Yes | | No | |
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Parent/Carer responsibilities | Remind parents/carers of their legal responsibilities for ensuring their children's regular and punctual attendance | 60 | 70.6% | 9 | 10.6% | 26 | 100.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Communicate clearly with parents/carers about the consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence | 55 | 64.7% | 16 | 18.8% | 24 | 92.3% | 2 | 7.7% |
| | Remind parents/carers of the potential | 40 | 47.1% | 29 | 34.1% | 23 | 88.5% | 3 | 11.5% |

| Theme | Strategy for engaging parent/carers on attendance issues | Primary | | | | Post-Primary | | | |
|---|---|---------|-------|----|-------|--------------|-------|----|-------|
| | | Yes | | No | | Yes | | No | |
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| | sanctions for failure to meet their responsibilities (e.g. legal sanctions i.e. prosecution in magistrates court / and for pupils Children Order ART 55 'education supervision orders') ¹² | | | | | | | | |
| | Remind parents/carers to ensure that their child only misses school for reasons which are unavoidable or justified, such as illness or days of religious observance | 67 | 78.8% | 4 | 4.7% | 25 | 96.2% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Stress to parents/carers the importance of continuity of learning, particularly in relation to family holidays during term-time | 69 | 81.2% | 1 | 1.2% | 25 | 96.2% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Encourage parents/carers to avoid booking family holidays during term-time | 66 | 77.6% | 5 | 5.9% | 25 | 96.2% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Clear attendance information is regularly communicated to parents/carers | 49 | 57.6% | 22 | 25.9% | 21 | 80.8% | 4 | 15.4% |
| | Remind parents/carers to always notify the school as soon as possible - preferably on the first morning - of any absence | 70 | 82.4% | 1 | 1.2% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Home/ School engagement and communication | Explain link between poor attendance and reduced attainment to parents/carers | 67 | 78.8% | 4 | 4.7% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Meet with parents/carers to discuss learning expectations of their child | 69 | 81.2% | 2 | 2.4% | 25 | 96.2% | 1 | 3.8% |
| | Encourage parents/carers to be aware of letters from school which their child brings home | 71 | 83.5% | 0 | 0.0% | 23 | 88.5% | 3 | 11.5% |
| | Encourage parents/carers to take an active interest in their child's school life and work | 71 | 83.5% | 0 | 0.0% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Remind parents/carers to ensure that their child completes his/her homework and goes to bed at an appropriate time | 70 | 82.4% | 1 | 1.2% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Encourage parents to attend parents' evenings and other school events | 72 | 84.7% | 0 | 0.0% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Discuss child's attendance at parent teacher evenings or when meeting parents | 69 | 81.2% | 2 | 2.4% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| | Encourage parents to talk to the school if they are concerned that their child may be reluctant to attend | 68 | 80.0% | 2 | 2.4% | 26 | 100% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Support for parents/carers on attendance | Parents/carers of Post-registration truants are promptly informed and where necessary actively involved | 38 | 44.7% | 23 | 27.1% | 24 | 92.3% | 2 | 7.7% |
| | Provide information about the range of support services that parents/carers can access | 48 | 56.5% | 19 | 22.4% | 23 | 88.5% | 3 | 11.5% |
| Other* | | 2 | 2.4% | 3 | 3.5% | 2 | 7.7% | 3 | 11.5% |
| <p>Base: Primary (85), Post Primary (26), Total (111) Note: Respondents could provide more than 1 response so total number of responses may be greater than the total number of respondents and the sum of the percentages may be greater than 100% Source: RSM McClure Watters, March 2012</p> | | | | | | | | | |

¹² Remind parents/carers of the potential sanctions for failure to meet their responsibilities (e.g. legal sanctions, such as parent only prosecutions resulting in fines of up to £1000 or in more serious circumstances, the EWS may apply for an Education Supervision Order (under Article 55 of the Children (NI) Order 1995) to place the child under the supervision of the Board or, where concerns are not solely related to attendance matters, a Supervision or Care Order (under Article 56) may be granted)

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**¹³ provided evidence of the following interaction with parents:

- 7 of the 10 of the schools indicated that they had a home/school liaison person
- Most respondents felt that the relationship between their school and the families of pupils who were poor attenders were not as strong as relationships with families in general which was generally positive:
 - Relationship between schools and families – generally (average score of 1.2, where 1 is Very Strong and 5 is Very Weak)
 - Relationship between schools and families of pupils who are poor attenders (average score of 2.4, where 1 is Very Strong and 5 is Very Weak)
- Communication of attendance policies to parents takes place through a variety of media (School prospectus, promotional material, newsletter website, parents’ evening, pupil reviews) and various frequencies (the most common being once per year).
- With regards to communicating with parents on an incident of non-attendance:
 - In 3 of the 10 schools, respondents indicated that their school uses text-to-parents communication software.
 - In 8 of the 10 schools respondents are aware that SIMS has the capacity to generate standard letters for parents if a child is absent and no reason given. However only 2 use this.
- Schools adopt a variety of strategies in engaging with parents – the most common are highlighted in Table 7 below. Most schools adopt most of the strategies.

Table 7: Q32. Which of the following strategies does your school adopt in engaging with parents / carers on attendance issues? Tick yes or no on each row

| Theme | Strategies for engaging parents/carers on attendance issues | Yes | No |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|----|
| Parent/Carer responsibilities | Remind parents/carers of their legal responsibilities for ensuring their children’s regular and punctual attendance | 10 | 0 |
| | Communicate clearly with parents/carers about the consequences of truancy and parentally condoned absence | 10 | 0 |
| | Remind parents/carers of the potential sanctions for failure to meet their responsibilities (e.g. legal sanctions i.e. prosecution in magistrates court / and for pupils Children Order ART 55 ‘education supervision orders’) ¹⁴ | 9 | 1 |
| | Remind parents/carers to ensure that their child only misses school for reasons which are unavoidable or justified, such as illness or days of religious observance | 9 | 0 |
| | Stress to parents/carers the importance of continuity of learning, particularly in relation to family holidays during term-time | 9 | 0 |

¹³ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

¹⁴ Remind parents/carers of the potential sanctions for failure to meet their responsibilities (e.g. legal sanctions, such as parent only prosecutions resulting in fines of up to £1000 or in more serious circumstances, the EWS may apply for an Education Supervision Order (under Article 55 of the Children (NI) Order 1995) to place the child under the supervision of the Board or, where concerns are not solely related to attendance matters, a Supervision or Care Order (under Article 56) may be granted)

| Theme | Strategies for engaging parents/carers on attendance issues | Yes | No |
|--|--|-----|----|
| | Encourage parents/carers to avoid booking family holidays during term-time | 8 | 1 |
| | Clear attendance information is regularly communicated to parents/carers | 8 | 1 |
| | Remind parents/carers to always notify the school as soon as possible - preferably on the first morning - of any absence | 10 | 0 |
| Home/ School engagement and communication | Explain link between poor attendance and reduced attainment to parents/carers | 10 | 0 |
| | Meet with parents/carers to discuss learning expectations of their child | 9 | 1 |
| | Encourage parents/carers to be aware of letters from school which their child brings home | 10 | 0 |
| | Encourage parents/carers to take an active interest in their child's school life and work | 10 | 0 |
| | Remind parents/carers to ensure that their child completes his/her homework and goes to bed at an appropriate time | 10 | 0 |
| | Encourage parents to attend parents' evenings and other school events | 10 | 0 |
| | Discuss child's attendance at parent teacher evenings or when meeting parents | 10 | 0 |
| | Encourage parents to talk to the school if they are concerned that their child may be reluctant to attend | 10 | 0 |
| Support for parents/carers on attendance | Parents/carers of Post-registration truants are promptly informed and where necessary actively involved | 7 | 2 |
| | Provide information about the range of support services that parents/carers can access | 7 | 2 |
| Other* | | 1 | - |
| Base: Primary (6), Post Primary (4), Total (10) – improving schools Note: Respondents could provide more than 1 response so total number of responses may be greater than the total number of respondents Source: RSM McClure Watters, March 2012 | | | |

Evidence from the **review of attendance policies** which set out details of role of parents with regard to attendance:

- By law, parents/guardians are required to ensure their children punctually attend school each day.
- In all of the primary school policies reviewed, schools highlighted the need for parents/guardians to ensure their children were on time and to support the school's policy on authorising absences. Parents/guardians are expected to inform the school on the day of absence for each day a child is away from school. This is expected to be followed with an explanation. Planned non-attendance can only be authorised by the school.
- In the event of an absence (no matter how long), the parents/guardians of children are required to inform the school on the day of initial non-attendance and provide a valid reason. This procedure was noted in all the post-primary school attendance policies.
- Post-primary attendance policies note the need for parents/guardians to support the school in addressing attendance or punctuality issues.

Evidence from the **consultations with stakeholders** highlight a variety of supports – many of which seek to address the underlying causes of poor attendance – and many of which are

funded through the Extended Schools Programme. This enables the school day to extend earlier and later; examples of the types of initiatives (for parents) funded under Extended Schools include:

- Home – School Liaison
- Parental Link Programme; and
- Family Learning and Support Programmes.

Feedback from a range of stakeholders (including school staff, Extended Schools co-ordinators, Full Service project staff and parents) highlighted the following examples of specific projects aimed at parents:

- **Key Worker – focused on attendance:** St Joseph's Boy's School, Head of Junior School commented that they have a FACT key worker in place within the school. This Key Worker is funded through extended schools and works with 5 schools in the area. The Key Worker will visit parents of those children with attendance issues to identify why attendance is low and will in turn provide the support network needed to solve the issue of low attendance. This can be in the form of social workers, counsellors or the EWS.
- **Home – School Teacher (St Gemma's Girls School):** The Principal described how these teachers make home visits for both positive and negative reasons. If the parents or pupils have done well in addressing their attendance issues the teacher will go out to tell the parents how well they have done. There is a need to praise the parents and students when they have achieved a target or goal regardless of whether this is still below the acceptable level. This also provides parents with another means of communicating with the school. Some parents are single parents who have no child-minding facilities therefore cannot come into the school, some have illnesses which prevent them coming to school. In these cases the Home – School teacher will go out and visit the parents. This has also been a valuable resource due to the high level of deaths and suicides in the area. The Home-School teacher or another member of staff will call out to the home to show support to the student and his/her family at these difficult times. This helps improve the schools link with the parents.
- **Home – School Liaison Project (funded by ES):** This targets a small target group of people who have needs such as behaviour issues, anger management issues but also attendance issues. The Home – School Liaison officer is brought in to talk with families and put in place action plans to target their issues. At Lisnagarvey High School the Home – School Liaison officer worked with a target group of 15 pupils in 2010/2011. On average the pupils attendance increased by between 15% and 20%.
- **A parent co-ordinator within the staff (Kilcooley PS):** This is not currently in place within Kilcooley PS, however the Principal is aware that a similar role exists in other schools and is keen to introduce something similar in this school. This would involve a designated member of teaching staff having time allocated to follow up informally with parents in cases where attendance is becoming an issue. This will allow for a familiar face to call out to parents at home and have an informal chat with parents to discuss why the child is not attending.
- **Support for Parents / Working with Barnardo's:** The Full Service Co-ordinator and the Attendance Co-ordinator at the Belfast Model School for Girls work collaboratively

with Barnardo's to provide support to the parent to develop strategies to deal with morning routines and to help the parent learn how to address the issue of attendance and put mechanisms in place such as removal of mobile phone to encourage attendance.

- **Regular sharing of attendance information with parents:** in St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen, the school provides attendance information in pupil's homework diaries every month and in school reports twice per year.
- **Parents' Group** (St Gemma's Girls School): The Principal noted that a Parents' Group has been put in place to address attendance issues as well as other issues which affect the students such as the high suicide rate and drug misuse. The meetings are held 5 or 6 times per year on average around 15 parents attend. The principal encourages those parents whose children have attendance issues to attend the parents group.
- **Parenting Programme** (Kilcooley PS) - Drug Proof your Child. This is targeted at those parents / children who have attendance issues.
- **Parenting Programmes** (St Joseph's Boys' School) - through Extended schools funding the school has parenting programmes, which puts on a range of activities for parents. This activities change with each parenting group. At any time there are approximately 10-12 parents on the programme.
- **Family Fun Club** (Kilcooley PS), initially part of the Rainbow Room – this has been extended out to the whole school. This is funded by Extended Schools. This involves an afternoon of fun activities such as zumba and baking and is open to parents and pupils. The idea is to get the parents involved and for the school to build up a relationship with the parents so that he/she can be encouraged to bring his/her children into school. This club was mentioned by both the Principal and parents who were consulted.
- **Stay and play days** (Ballysally PS): This is in the form of Lads and Dads days, Mums and Girlies Days. This allows parents to come into the school to participate in activities such as Zumba and Judo. It allows for parents to spend one on one time with their children but also acts as a link to the parents for the school. Teachers can approach and talk to the parents in a more relaxed setting. These activities were mentioned by parents as well as by the school SENCO.
- **Computer Capers** (Ballysally PS): This is an ICT and Art class for parents and children. This is particularly targeted at those parents who have not had a good experience of school and the education system, do not value education and may have low self-esteem / confidence. It aims to break the cycle whereby parents pass on their experience and perceptions of education onto their children. If the parent is enjoying learning it will encourage them to send their children to school to also learn.
- **Ready, Steady Cook** (Ballysally PS)– This is an initiative put in place to build up links with parents and to encourage parents to have fun at the school so that this same message is passed onto the child.
- **Reading Partners** (Ballysally PS) – This is designed for parents with children in P3. It provides support to parents to help them help their children to read.

Feedback from consultation with parents also highlights that some have received support from School Principals and/or SENCOs and/or the EWS including meetings to discuss attendance, advice and support and in some cases home visits. These contacts were often

informal in nature and focused on practical issues for example: transport arrangements, reassurance regarding notifying parents if children were ill at school, bringing work to the child (if off school due to illness), support to address bullying.

In two schools, some parents commented that the PTA was not being particularly active, and that this would be key vehicle to build relationships between parents and the schools.

3.3 Links with Wider Community

3.3.1 Theme

Strengthening links between schools and the local community helps to promote positive relationships and to emphasise the value of education and the importance of attendance. It also provides another strand of support for the school in seeking to promote attendance. Some of the ways in which these links can be developed include:

- Links with local businesses / community e.g.: through membership of Board of Governors;
- Links with local businesses / community through provision of reward schemes for good attendance;
- Recruiting support staff from the local community in order to break down barriers between home and school and help students and their families feel more at ease in the school environment
- Voluntary activity in the local community (where pupils and in some cases parents get involved in voluntary activity and “give something back” to their communities); and
- Projects / interventions which provide support and/or constructive activities for children and young people and /or parents.

3.3.2 Supporting Evidence

A **review of literature** from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand highlights some specific examples in terms of links with the wider community:

- **Reward schemes supported by local businesses** – for example see Appendix I – Section 2.3.19
- A 2008 Ofsted report (Good Practice in Re-engaging Disaffected and Reluctant Students in Secondary Schools) notes that one of the factors that support re-engagement of disaffected and reluctant students in secondary schools is the **involvement of a wide variety of adults within the school and the community to support the students**. The report also notes the importance of support staff in schools in improving the level of enjoyment, satisfaction and consequently attendance at the schools. Some schools took the approach of **recruiting support staff from the local community which was effective in breaking down the barriers between home and school**. As students and their families did not view these staff as part of the local authorities, social services provision or teachers, they felt more at ease and less intimidated when at school.

- In Ireland, the **Home/School/Community/Liaison Scheme** is based on the principle of partnership between homes, schools and communities. Community “ownership” of the scheme is promoted through the development of the Local Committee which deals with issues in the community that impinge on learning in its widest sense. This involves co-operation and partnership with parents, pupils, community agencies, and the schools that participate in the HSCL Scheme. A Local Committee may consist of principals, HSCL coordinators, School Completion Programme coordinators, school staff, parents, pupils, representatives from the local business community and voluntary and statutory agencies. It works to provide an integrated provision of service at the local level and encourages active community participation in the social, personal and educational development of children.
- In the USA, there are numerous examples of programmes / schemes that involve **voluntary / community service for pupils and parents** as a means of engaging with them and encouraging greater commitment, for example:
 - Foundation for Excellent Schools / The Century Program (TCP) - see Appendix I – Section 2.7.1.3;
 - Truancy Reduction Achieved in Our Communities Project, San Antonio, Texas - Family and Community Involvement – see Appendix I – Section 2.7.3.3;
 - Project Shine - Parents as classroom volunteers – see Appendix I – Section 2.7.5.3.

From the **survey of schools**, there was some evidence of some examples of linking with the community:

- More Post-Primary than Primary schools had links with Neighbourhood Renewal or other voluntary / community projects (38.8% of Primary respondents, 65.4% of Post-Primary respondents)
- The majority of Post-Primary and Primary schools reach out to families and communities through joint events; Post-Primary schools tend to be more involved in other joint working:
 - Promote Family-School-Community Events (74.1% of Primary respondents, 73.1% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Meet with local agencies to discuss how they might work together with the school to reduce unjustified absence(17.6% of Primary respondents, 57.7% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Meet with the wider community to discuss how they might work together with the school to reduce unjustified absence(11.8% of Primary respondents, 30.8% of Post-Primary respondents)
 - Work with local shops, businesses to reduce unjustified absence(4.7% of Primary respondents, 34.6% of Post-Primary respondents)

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**¹⁵ with regard to links with the community include:

- 4 of the schools with improving attendance have links Neighbourhood Renewal or other voluntary / community projects
 - Conservation Volunteers - Practical activities
 - Dunclug Partnership (in the process of applying for lottery funding)
 - 1 school mentioned several linkages:
 - Integrated services for children and young people - personal development mentor works with individual boys and families - beneficial effect.
 - Ballysillan and Upper Ardoyne Neighbourhood Partnership. Mentoring support for individual boys and families.
 - Shankill Area Project Steering Committee - signposting and mentoring support for individuals and families.
 - ETHOS Project Greater Shantallow Area Partnership
- Amongst the 10 improving schools, there is evidence of some other joint working:
 - Promote Family-School-Community Events (8)
 - Meet with local agencies to discuss how they might work together with the school to reduce unjustified absence (4)
 - Meet with the wider community to discuss how they might work together with the school to reduce unjustified absence (2)
 - Work with local shops, businesses to reduce unjustified absence (2)

Evidence from the **consultations with stakeholders** highlighted the following examples of broader initiatives targeting underlying issues that affect attendance:

- **The Women's Centre** (Kilcooley PS): Funded by DSD Neighbourhood Renewal. This centre is located in one wing of the school. It offers 450 learning places per week to parents. This is particularly targeted at those parents who have not had a good experience of school and the education system, do not value education and may have low self-esteem / confidence. It offers classes which range from flower arranging to G.C.S.E and A-Level. It aims to break the cycle whereby parents pass on their experience and perceptions of education onto their children. If the parent is enjoying learning it will encourage them to send his/her children to school to also learn.
- **Nurturing Ballysally** (Ballysally PS): This project is funded by DSD. The project involves the school, the Ballysally Presbyterian church and the local community centre working together to focus on family and identify ways to link together to support the community. Funding was awarded to set up a website which can be accessed by the only these three organisations. The website has information on the level and type of support families are receiving. It allows each organisation to see the support already

¹⁵ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

provided but also the gaps. If it is identified that attendance is an issue for a family the other organisations can take it upon themselves to provide support.

- **Poor Claire's Convent** (St Gemma's Girls' School) – This is the only other support network available after 5pm for the local community. St Gemma's have worked alongside this to help support the school. This may not necessarily be for those who have attendance issues but it helps with the underlying issues regarding nonattendance such as family issues and thus indirectly affecting attendance.
- **Intergenerational Group Working** (Full Service Pilot Projects – Belfast Model School for Girls): This is a 10 week programme which involves 10 girls from Year 9 and 10 older members of the community. Members of the group talk and discuss the past and learn new skills. Activities include jewellery making, learning to dance and to sew, creative writing; participants improve their social skills and learn about both life in the past and life now. The programme is open to all girls from the school who may apply for a position; however the Full Service Co-ordinator makes preference to those girls with attendance issues so that the programme can be used as an indirect intervention for encouraging attendance. It is a requirement that the girls must have full attendance each week to attend the programme. It is noted that if the girls do not attend then their place will be given to another student. The programme is provided in partnership with the Crescent Arts Centre, Intergenerational NI, and Camberwell Court and is part funded by the Full Service Project and Crescent Arts Centre. Of the ten girls who attend the programme, four have attendance issues. As a result of the requirement to have full attendance in order to take part, all four girls' attendance has improved. The overall percentage has not yet been calculated as the programme has not yet been completed. However the Full Service Co-ordinator reviews the attendance each week and can already see the difference in the rate of attendance.
- **A range of supports for parents, pupils and the wider community are also funded and offered through Neighbourhood Renewal:** these seek to target underlying causes which may contribute to poor attendance. There is no evaluation data available on the impact of these projects at present. Examples include:
 - **Colin Neighbourhood Partnership** - Fathers Development Worker and a Parents Service Link Worker who are available to link up with the local schools to support families of those children experiencing difficulties in school.
 - **Colin Neighbourhood Partnership - Strength in Communities:** This project targets vulnerable young people from the ages of 12 - 14 and their families. The first session of this project is due to take part in February 2012. There are a total of 14 families registered for the programme targeting approximately 70 people. The project provides support to families to address a number of specific issues which are identified on an individual basis. This can range from attendance issues, family support, housing support, anti-social behaviour issues, drug and alcohol misuse and educational support.
 - **Colin Neighbourhood Partnership - Early Intervention Community:** this is a support network to improve the outcomes for children and families in the community. Rather than being focused on one specific programme or any specific age group, the Early Intervention Community will develop and design specific projects once need is identified. All schools and community centres in the area can apply for support to deliver a project in a specific area.

- **Greater Shantallow Area Partnership (GSAP) – Education, Training, Health Outreach Support (ETHOS).** This project is an early intervention family support project targeting young people of school age from 5 – 18 years. It provides support for non-attendance through addressing educational issues, behaviour issues, family issues such as abuse, marriage breakdown – all of which can affect attendance. A number of initiatives are put in place to support these needs. The project will work with the individual and if attendance is an issue then they will tailor support to meet the need.
- **Greater Shantallow Area Partnership (GSAP) - Shantallow Youth Leadership Programme.** The project aims to take young people off street corners and into constructive programmes. The project aims to reduce anti-social behaviour and targets young people with behaviour, mental health, education issues, which in turn indirectly can target attendance in school. The project includes; personal and social development initiatives, training and development courses, outreach programmes and referral mechanisms to engage marginalised / excluded young people.

4 INTERFACE BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND EXTERNAL SUPPORT SERVICES

4.1 Introduction

Drawing on evidence from primary and secondary research, a number of key themes have been identified with regards to:

- the interface between schools and external support services and its effectiveness in promoting regular attendance at school.

Each theme is briefly described below – together with evidence of its effectiveness and any relevant examples to illustrate the approach.

4.2 Education Welfare Service

4.2.1 Theme

The key support service that schools draw on with regards to attendance is the Education Welfare Service (EWS). This relationship works well when the following are in place:

- Named EWO / Named school staff member
- Regular review meetings
- Clear referral procedures
- Service level agreement with EWS
- EWS involvement in promoting good attendance

4.2.2 Supporting Evidence

A **review of literature** from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, USA, Australia and New Zealand highlights the following common regarding EWS in terms of addressing poor attendance:

- Service level agreements with EWS
- Early involvement of multiple agencies
- In-school multi-agency support meetings
- Multi-Agency Teams where key school staff can meet regularly with EWOs, educational psychologists, social workers and paediatricians to identify ways to keep children and families engaged with school and education

From the **survey of schools**, 72.9% of Primary school respondents and 92.3% of Post Primary respondents used the EWS (see Table 8).

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**¹⁶ show that: all of the 10 improving schools had used the EWS.

The **review of attendance policies** identifies a role for staff / supports for schools as follows (in some cases this is the EWO):

- Role of Education Welfare Officer (EWO) / Student Support Officer (SSO) / Attendance Co-ordinator (AC)
 - Most primary school attendance policies indicate that with regards to attendance, a school's EWO would only be called upon in cases of extremely poor attendance. One or two of the primary schools surveyed, remitted all cases of absence to their EWO, but generally the EWO would liaise with parents after the teacher and Principal. The EWO was responsible for initiating legal proceedings and referring the parents/guardians to the Magistrates court in cases of persistent non-attendance.
 - In post-primary schools attendance policies, where cases of persistent truancy is suspected, or if a pupils attendance has become a major cause of concern (for whatever reason) most of the attendance policies provided showed that such cases would be referred to the EWO. 3 schools had employed someone directly responsible for attendance (Student support office (SSO) or Attendance coordinator). In these cases, individual and multiple cases of non-attendance were dealt with by them.

Evidence from the **consultations with school staff** highlighted the need for timely sharing of information between agencies including EWS.

4.3 Other Supports

4.3.1 Theme

Schools also access support and engage with a range of other external support services. These multi-agency networks and partnerships work well when the following are in place:

- Clear understanding of roles/responsibilities of schools and other agencies re: attendance
- Multi-agency networks and partnerships
- Regular meetings with other key stakeholders
- Sharing of attendance information

4.3.2 Supporting Evidence

See Section 4.2.2 above and Appendix I-2.

¹⁶ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

From the **survey of schools**, there was some evidence of involvement of other supports in practice:

- At least one third, (and for ELB supports over 70%) of Primary school respondents were aware of a range of supports provided by ELBs and other external agencies; over 80% of Post-Primary school respondents were aware of these (see Table 8);
- The level of usage of these supports reported by respondents tends to be higher in Post-Primary than in Primary schools

Table 8: Q46. Which of the following external supports (including Board supports) to address poor attendance (a) Are you aware of? (b) Have you used?

| External Supports | | Primary | | | | Post-Primary | | | |
|-------------------|---|----------|-------|------|-------|--------------|--------|------|-------|
| | | Aware of | | Used | | Aware of | | Used | |
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| ELB Services | Education Welfare Service | 71 | 83.5% | 62 | 72.9% | 26 | 100.0% | 24 | 92.3% |
| | Educational Psychologists | 66 | 77.6% | 44 | 51.8% | 25 | 96.2% | 22 | 84.6% |
| | Special Needs Advisers | 59 | 69.4% | 36 | 42.4% | 23 | 88.5% | 18 | 69.2% |
| | Behavioural Support Staff | 67 | 78.8% | 44 | 51.8% | 25 | 96.2% | 16 | 61.5% |
| Other Services | Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) | 50 | 58.8% | 23 | 27.1% | 25 | 96.2% | 19 | 73.1% |
| | Youth Service | 37 | 43.5% | 8 | 9.4% | 21 | 80.8% | 10 | 38.5% |
| | Youth Justice Agency | 31 | 36.5% | 8 | 9.4% | 22 | 84.6% | 10 | 38.5% |
| | Other* | 10 | 11.8% | 6 | 7.1% | 7 | 26.9% | 4 | 15.4% |

Base: Primary (85), Post Primary (26), Total (111)

Note: Respondents could provide more than 1 response so total number of responses may be greater than the total number of respondents and the sum of the percentages may be greater than 100%

Source: RSM McClure Watters, March 2012

Note: Other services specified by Primary Schools include:

- Child Protection Services;
- Child and Family Team;
- School Liaison Project (PEIPS);
- Barnardo's; and
- Social services

Survey results from the 10 **schools with improving attendance**¹⁷ shows:

- Most of the 10 improving schools respondents were aware of a range of supports provided by ELBs and other external agencies; the level of usage of these supports reported by respondents tends to be higher for ELB than other supports.

¹⁷ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

Table 9: Q46. Which of the following external supports (including Board supports) to address poor attendance (a) Are you aware of? (b) Have you used?

| External Supports | | Aware of | | Used | |
|-------------------|---|----------|----|------|----|
| | | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| ELB Services | Education Welfare Service | 10 | 0 | 10 | 0 |
| | Educational Psychologists | 9 | 1 | 7 | 3 |
| | Special Needs Advisers | 9 | 1 | 6 | 4 |
| | Behavioural Support Staff | 9 | 1 | 6 | 4 |
| Other Services | Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) | 7 | 3 | 3 | 7 |
| | Youth Service | 7 | 3 | 3 | 7 |
| | Youth Justice Agency | 7 | 3 | 2 | 8 |
| | Other* | 2 | 8 | 1 | 9 |

Base: Primary (6), Post Primary (4), Total (10) – improving schools
Note: Respondents could provide more than 1 response so total number of responses may be greater than the total number of respondents
Source: RSM McClure Watters, February 2012

Evidence from the **consultations with stakeholders** highlighted that:

- Collaborative working with Community and Statutory Agencies to support parents and children:** The Extended Schools Co-ordinators commented that a number of schools work collaboratively with a number of organisations such as Barnardo's, the Education Welfare Service, Belfast Metropolitan College, NICVA, National Gymnastics Centre, and Bryson House to provide support to the parents and children to develop strategies to deal with morning routines and to help the parent learn how to address the issue of attendance and put mechanisms in place such as removal of mobile phone to encourage attendance.
- Consultation with school staff** highlighted the need for timely sharing of information between agencies including EWS.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Conclusions

From the extensive primary and secondary research into improving attendance in deprived areas, it is apparent that there is no single solution to the problem of poor attendance in schools serving deprived areas. What is apparent, however is that there are a number of common/recurring themes which point to a range of strategies / interventions that can be applied to help promote good attendance and to address poor attendance. It is encouraging to note that there is evidence of some elements of these examples of good practice (identified in the literature review) in the schools surveyed (and particularly in the 10 identified as having improving attendance).

The approaches and strategies identified in Sections 2, 3 and 4 (focused on each of the 3 research objectives) and supported by detailed information in Appendix I-2 Literature Review address the aim of the research:

- To provide DE with information that will inform policy and practice in those schools with low attendance rates to help them in improving attendance.

Most schools surveyed were in receipt of Extended Schools funding (76.5% of Primary respondents, 92.3% of Post-Primary respondents) – enabling the provision of additional activities before, and after school. It is also worth highlighting that the 10 improving schools were in receipt of Extended Schools funding. The availability of such funding provides schools with opportunities to strengthen links with families and communities and to engage / communicate with parents and pupils on a range of issues including attendance (see Section 2.7.2 regarding Strategies and Supports to Address Poor Attendance – and in particular feedback from stakeholders presented on pages 31-36; also Section 3.2.2 regarding Links with Home / Parents and in particular feedback from stakeholders presented on pages 43 – 45). Therefore, receipt of Extended Schools funding may be a contributory factor in promoting attendance.

5.2 Recommendations

Arising from the review, there are a number of areas in which we have identified scope for change to assist with improvement in attendance.

Recommendation 1: Attendance Policies in Schools

At present, there is no requirement for schools to have an attendance policy however, some schools do have one. In the survey of schools completed as part of this research, almost 6 in 10 (58.6%) respondents indicated that their school has an attendance policy in place. Of the 10 schools with improving attendance¹⁸ which were examined in more detail, 7 had an

¹⁸ These are schools with consistently high and improving attendance as well as catering for relatively large proportion of pupils entitled to FSM. Survey results from these schools have been considered in order to establish if there are any common features in their practice that contribute to their performance in relation to attendance. See final bullet points in Section 1.3 and Appendix II-3 for more information.

attendance policy. Without a formal written definition of a school's approach and hence a framework for dealing with attendance, it will be difficult to address attendance in a consistent way.

We recommend that DE provide guidance to schools on the need to introduce attendance management policies and key elements to be included within these.

Recommendation 2: Resources for Schools illustrating Interventions

There is a wide range of information on strategies and supports to address poor attendance; many of which are commonly used in many locations. A brief information pack for schools in NI setting out a menu of the main interventions (e.g. Alternative Curriculum, Parent Programmes, etc.) supported by short case studies would assist in helping schools to implement these in order to address poor attendance.

We recommend that DE prepare an information pack setting out the main types of interventions that could be introduced – supported by case studies – to address poor attendance.

Recommendation 3: Evaluating Impact of Interventions on Attendance

Whilst a variety of strategies and supports are in place to address attendance, there is relatively little information available on the impacts of these on attendance. In part this may be due to multiple factors being at play; it may also be the case that there may not be a structured monitoring and evaluation plan in place.

We recommend that the information pack (see Recommendation 2) is supported by guidance on monitoring and evaluation – to help schools to identify the most successful interventions (this can be shared through Recommendation 4).

Recommendation 4: Sharing Good Practice

Many schools face common issues with regards to poor attendance; each school has a range of different approaches in place to address these. Given the common issues faced, a means of sharing information / good practice could assist schools in the practical implementation of attendance management strategies and drawing on the Recommendation 3, highlight approaches that are effective. Rather than introducing additional administration / meetings, etc., this “attendance - good practice” repository could be hosted on a website, for example.

We recommend that an attendance network /forum is set up for schools in deprived areas to share information and good practice on attendance management strategies.

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Research cannot make decisions for policy makers and others concerned with improving the quality of education. Nor can it by itself bring about change. But it can create a better basis for decisions, by providing information and explanation about educational practice and by clarifying and challenging ideas and assumptions.

Any views expressed in the Research Report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.