Improving attendance

The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

- ⅄ nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local education authorities (LEAs);
- ⅄ primary schools;
- ⅄ secondary schools;
- ⅄ special schools;
- ⅄ pupil referral units;
- ⅄ independent schools;
- ⅄ further education;
- ⅄ adult community-based learning;
- ⅄ youth support services;
- ⅄ LEAs;
- ⅄ teacher education and training;
- ⅄ work-based learning;
- ⅄ careers companies; and
- ⅄ the education, guidance and training elements of Jobcentre plus.

Estyn also:

- ⅄ provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others; and
- ⅄ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence.

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Introduction

1   In the remit for 2005-2006 from the Welsh Assembly Government, the Minister asked Estyn to provide advice on the interventions used by schools and local education authorities (LEAs) to tackle attendance issues successfully. This report presents Estyn's advice in the form of the findings from a survey of relevant evidence and in an account of aspects of good practice across Wales.

2   As part of the survey, HMI visited and considered evidence from 18 schools and nine LEAs. The schools and LEAs chosen for visits compose a balanced sample from rural and urban areas across Wales with varying levels of social deprivation.
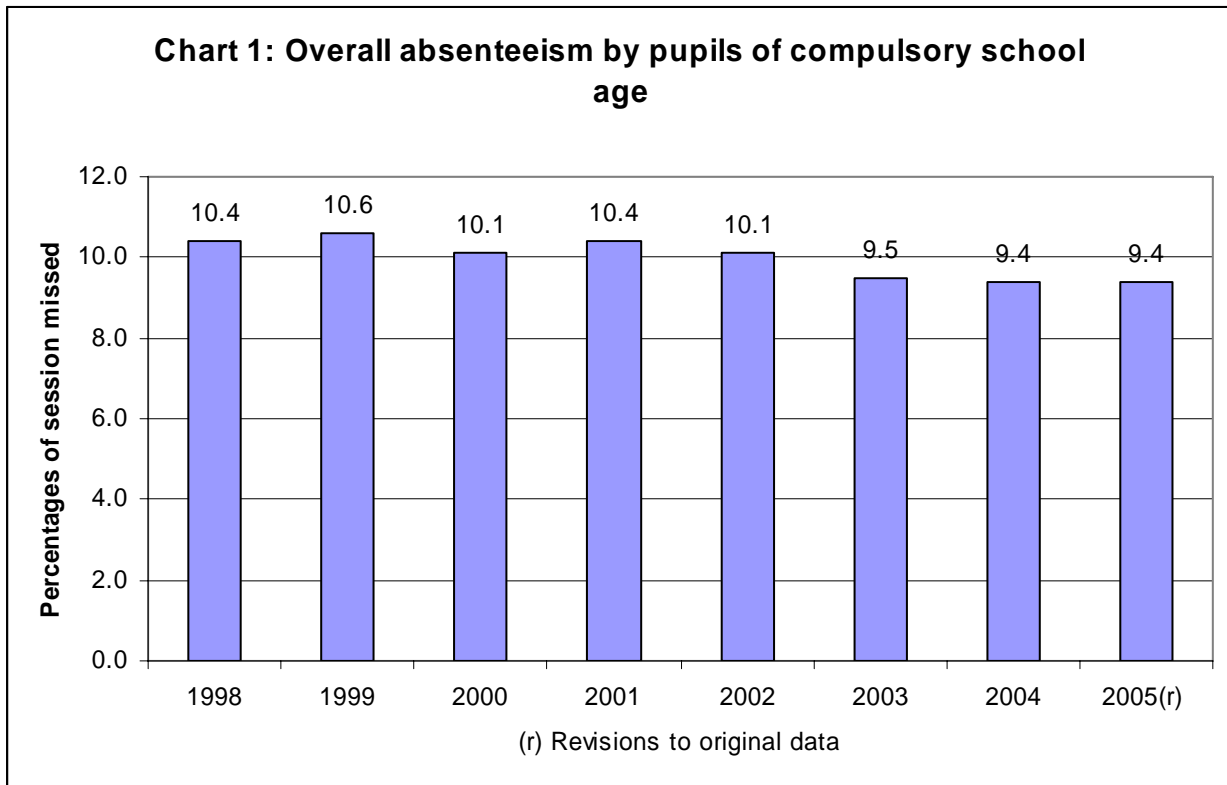
Background

3   The Welsh Assembly Government brought together a task-and-finish group to focus on attendance in 2002 to take forward some of the issues raised at the all-Wales conference on 'Tackling Disaffection Together' in October 2001. The group was co-coordinated by the Welsh Assembly Government's Pupil Support Division and was made up of representatives of the whole range of organisations involved in tackling truancy[1] and its effects.

4   The task and finish group published its final report in February 2003. This report set out the findings of the group and included a series of recommendations and an action plan to take the work forward.

5   Within its report, the group identified a need for the Assembly to promote a vehicle to ensure that schools and LEAs can share information on approaches to truancy, the most effective methods, case studies etc. The report recommended that systems to share good and innovative practice on tackling truancy should be established.

6   It is intended that Estyn's advice in this report should contribute to the sharing of information about good and innovative practice.

Context

7   'The Learning Country' was published in September 2001 and it set out national targets to reduce absence in secondary schools to below 8% by 2004 and to below 7% by 2007. The target for 2004 was not met. The information shown below relates to the period September to May for the academic years 1997/1998 to 2004/2005. It shows that attendance levels in secondary schools have not improved between 2003/2004 and 2004/2005 and have improved only slightly since 2002/2003.

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[1] Truancy is defined as absence that has not been authorised by the school ie unauthorised absence

Chart 1: Overall absenteeism by pupils of compulsory school age

(r) Revisions to original data

Source: Welsh Assembly Government statistical first release SDR 107/2005 secondary schools[2]

8   There is some variation in the rates of absenteeism in secondary schools across Wales, with absence levels ranging between 10.9% and 7.8% in different local authorities for 2004/2005. Generally those authorities with higher levels of deprivation have higher absence rates. High absence rates correlate closely with the percentage of pupils entitled to receive free school meals, which is itself used as an indicator of deprivation. This is illustrated in the table below.

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[2] Following publication of the original statistical release, two schools realized that they had provided incorrect figures and so the National Assembly for Wales made some revisions to the original publication.

Absenteeism by pupils of compulsory school age in all maintained secondary schools, by proportion entitled to free school meals, 2004/2005

Proportion entitled to free school meals	Percentage of school sessions missed		Number of Schools
	All absences	**Unauthorised absences**	
10% or less	(r) 7.8	0.8	56
15% or less, but over 10%	8.5	1.4	54
20% or less, but over 15%	9.6	1.7	(r) 54
30% or less, but over 20%	(r) 10.8	2.4	(r) 38
over 30%	13.6	4.3	25
All maintained schools	(r) 9.5	(r) 1.8	227

Source: Pupils' Attendance Record and School Census, National Assembly

9   The Welsh Assembly Government recently initiated an attendance benchmarking exercise for secondary schools in Wales that used a model based on the entitlement to free school meals. The exercise allowed secondary schools to look at their attendance levels and compare them against what they should be achieving according to the benchmarks in the model.

10   Absenteeism data was first collected for primary schools by the Welsh Assembly Government for the academic year 2002/2003 when 84% of maintained primary schools responded. However, for the last two years the response rates have been 98% and 97% respectively.

11   During 2004/2005, 6.9% of half day sessions were missed due to absenteeism in primary schools, which represents a slight increase over the previous year. As with secondary schools, there is some variation in rates of absenteeism from primary schools across Wales with absence levels ranging from 5.3% to 8.3% in different local authorities.

12   During 2005, the Welsh Assembly Government consulted on proposals to change the basis on which school level attendance targets are set. Instead of calculations based on rates of unauthorised absences they moved to calculations based on the total absences. Regulations[*] which refer to absence targets and omit unauthorised absence targets came into force in February 2006.

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[*] The Education (School Performance and Unauthorised Absence Targets) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2006

Main findings

Local education authorities

13   LEAs have achieved greatest success in raising the level of pupils' attendance when they have given a clear strategic lead to schools. Where this has happened, the LEA has:

- set up a management team and taken a lead role in encouraging schools to make attendance a key issue;

- produced extensive supporting documentation about improving attendance for schools;

- used data on absence rates to identify needs and target resources;

- expanded the Education Welfare Service (EWS) and deployed officers flexibly and according to need; and

- made innovative use of funding.

Schools

14   Very few schools use the benchmarking data provided by the Welsh Assembly Government to set appropriately challenging targets for attendance.

15   Almost all schools have an attendance policy, but a minority of schools do not review these policies regularly and consequently they are not fit for purpose.

16   Many schools have problems in preventing pupils taking holidays during term-time.

17   Where practice is good:

- schools place great importance on creating an environment that welcomes pupils and encourages them to attend;

- headteachers in primary schools and a member of the senior management team in secondary schools take a leading role in tackling absence;

- good links are established and maintained with families; and

- schools have a designated link governor with responsibility for attendance.

Recommendations

Schools should:

R1 ensure that attendance policies are reviewed regularly, have SMART[3] targets, are widely consulted on and include a named governor and senior manager to lead on attendance; and

R2 compare their attendance figures with those of other schools in similar circumstances.

LEAs should:

R3 ensure that they have a strategy to improve attendance that is reviewed regularly, includes SMART targets that are in line with those of 'The Learning Country' and have a named senior manager to lead on attendance;

R4 further develop the processing and use of attendance data, especially from primary schools; and

R5 make more efficient use of the education welfare officers in primary schools in developing early intervention strategies.

LEAs and schools should:

R6 collaborate to explore ways of interacting directly with parents to improve their attitudes to school attendance.

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[3] Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-related.

Local education authoritiy (LEA) initiatives to improve pupils' attendance in schools

Collaborative work

18   In the best examples of collaborative work, officers from different agencies communicate with one another effectively. The agencies involved include the education welfare service and the advisory service. In one case for instance, the LEA has made a new appointment to increase the range of multi-agency support. A Joint Practitioners' Group has established a series of practices and protocols for a team of co-ordinators in schools. These arrangements have improved the support available to parents and pupils.

19   In other instances, the education welfare service and local education authority advisory services work together more closely than previously so that increasing pupils' attendance plays a more significant part in the school improvement agenda.

20   All LEAs, in partnership with local police forces, have taken part in truancy sweeps. The purpose of these truancy sweeps is to pick up and return to school those pupils who are absent without leave. In doing this, the authorities also hope to change the attitudes of parents who condone and even encourage their children's absence. However, the effects of these sweeps have been variable. The publicity has raised the profile of attendance for a short while and, in one LEA, with the strong support of the police, the process has proved valuable over many years. But in other cases, the effects of the exercise have been short-lived and many parents continue to condone the absence of their children. The sweeps may deal with immediate truancy problems but they do not address the causes of truancy. Unless sweeps are combined with other measures that address the underlying reasons for truancy, they will only have a limited and temporary impact.

Support for schools

21   The majority of LEAs have set up management teams consisting of officers with specific roles and responsibilities for improving attendance. As a result, schools are clear about whom they should contact and from whom they can gain information.

22   Nearly all LEAs have produced a detailed policy statement about attendance and many have supported this with specific practical advice and guidance. These packs of guidelines clearly state the measures which should operate in schools. In a few cases, this guidance includes a model attendance policy, which schools can adopt or modify for their own use as appropriate. A minority of LEAs have provided sample letters to send to parents of pupils with varying rates of low attendance. These LEAs have consulted fully with all relevant partners on this documentation so that everyone agrees and understands the procedures that they are proposing.

Planning and evaluation

23   A few LEAs have carried out valuable evaluation exercises of their attendance policies. One has based its monitoring programme on the seven key questions from

Estyn's inspection framework and made useful comparisons with neighbouring authorities. Others have produced action plans that they review annually and maintain as the focus for authority-wide activities.

Use of data

24   Nearly all LEAs collect a variety of data relating to pupil attendance but the use of this information is highly variable. When the LEA uses the data well, it is able to:

- target resources effectively in order to provide good value for money, in particular, by allocating support to schools where absence levels are highest;

- identify and respond quickly to schools and individual pupils who are experiencing problems that may be the underlying reason for poor attendance;

- keep schools fully and accurately informed about attendance data relating to other schools, the LEA and Wales; and

- work with schools to set up realistic yet challenging targets and support schools appropriately.

There are shortcomings in a number of areas. Many LEAs do not consistently:

- collect and process accurate data, especially from primary schools; or

- compare schools' attendance figures with those of other schools in similar circumstances.

Education welfare service

25   Throughout Wales, nearly all LEAs make good use of their education welfare service. Education welfare officers play a major role in improving attendance and reducing the level of unauthorised absence.

26   A minority of LEAs have made a considerable financial commitment to expand their education welfare service. These LEAs provide strong evidence of the positive effects of extra funding to expand services. One LEA has increased its team from three to eight, including appointing an officer for looked-after children. This has resulted in an increase in attendance rates and fewer unauthorised absences. Another LEA has recently appointed officers to support traveller children and pupils from minority ethnic groups. These officers have experience in working with these groups and meet with parents and children in order to emphasise the importance of regular school attendance.

27   A few LEAs have increased the amount of time officers spend in primary schools. This has been effective in giving education welfare support to younger children and preventing them from developing a pattern of low attendance throughout their school careers.

28   Many LEAs have appointed officers with specific responsibility for looked-after children. The officers are effective in:

- linking with other agencies;

- monitoring attendance;

- addressing specific reasons for absence; and

- giving close academic and personal support.

Other initiatives

29   Many LEAs have made innovative use of the Better Schools Fund (BSF) to increase the number of personnel working to support schools in improving pupils' attendance, as the case study below illustrates.

Use of the Better Schools Fund (BSF) to employ additional support staff

Four years ago, one LEA decided on a long-term strategy to support secondary schools in raising their attendance rates. After consulting secondary headteachers, they appointed a team of Attendance Support Officers (ASO), each one to work in two schools. BSF funding was used for this project. The initial function of the ASO was to work with pupils with low-level attendance problems and their families. The role has grown to incorporate a much wider range of attendance-related tasks. These include contacting parents, offering counselling and working with pupils returning to school after extended periods of absence.

Although the basic financial cost is heavy, the process achieves good value for money when set against the cost of any alternative provision and the costs and potential consequences of pupils not attending school regularly. The appointments also release the EWS team to deal with the more significant attendance problems facing schools. The EWS and ASO work closely together to share information about pupils and to agree their respective roles and responsibilities.

The LEA also provides home-school support officers who deal with cases of persistent absence.

Levels of attendance in the LEA have risen in recent years, in secondary schools, from 89.9% in 2001-2002 to 92.3% in 2003-2004. Primary schools have maintained their attendance levels during the same period, increasing it marginally from 92.4% to 92.6%.

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30   Some LEAs have brought together various strands of their work to improve attendance within a single, coherent strategy as the following case study shows.

A coherent multi faceted LEA strategy for improving attendance

One LEA initiated a five-point strategy to address low attendance figures in 2001-2002. It set up a working party, undertook a full review of its schools and incorporated the findings into its behaviour support plan.

Reorganising the education welfare service

It also established an 'Improving Attendance' initiative and carried out an extensive re-organisation of the education welfare service. With only one new appointment made, the LEA re-allocated schools to education welfare officers (EWOs) to meet identified needs. EWO time was shared more appropriately between primary and secondary schools in order to address the problem of low attendance earlier in pupils' school careers. This strategy has proved effective and there is greater clarity about everyone's role.

Attendance workers

The LEA has targeted its resources by appointing eight attendance workers to specific projects based on the criterion of 'under 90% attendance with flat or falling trend lines'. Individuals work in a secondary school or a group of primary schools with vulnerable or low-attending pupils. Even in the short term, the attendance figures for these individuals have increased markedly. As these pupils acquire the necessary learning and life skills, they leave the project to be replaced by others. In this way they gain independence and no longer rely on the attendance worker.

Action plans/monitoring

The LEA now requires schools to prepare annual attendance action plans and set attendance targets for the forthcoming year. The targets are realistic and schools must prepare strategies to move towards their targets. This issue is always raised at the meetings between the school and its link development adviser. This establishes a close connection between attendance and school improvement. The LEA has plenty of data and makes very good use of the information about attendance during these reviews. Schools greatly value the amount of information available.

Overall, the LEA has played a significant strategic role in raising attendance levels in its schools.

Attendance figures in its secondary schools have risen from 86.28% to 89.74% in the last four years. During the same period, attendance in primary schools has risen from 89.84% to 92.31%.

Schools' work to improve attendance

31   Nearly all schools have an attendance policy. In most cases, these policies are concise and clear documents that outline roles and responsibilities for all the partners involved in educating children. The policies tend to be adapted from a more generic attendance policy produced by the LEA and are customised for individual schools. In a minority of schools, these policies are not reviewed regularly and are out-of-date.

32   Most primary schools place great importance on creating an environment that welcomes pupils and encourages them to attend. Staff in primary schools invest time in developing good links with parents. Headteachers will often make personal contact with parents and have an 'open door' policy which means that they are available to see parents at any time that a time can be agreed. Primary school staff generally know the children well and are often aware of family circumstances and understand where and when extra help and support are required.

33   Schools generally develop good communication links with the home when there are concerns about pupil attendance. They make contact using a variety of methods including personal face-to-face contact, telephone calls, letters via pupils and mail, and visits to the home by education welfare officers. They also sometimes send text messages.

34   Primary schools generally keep traditional class registers. Some schools adopt a system of using additional notebooks to record lateness and to alert the school administration team to concerns. More primary and secondary schools are now transferring the registration into an electronic record. The school clerk usually does this. Some schools use optical mark readers (OMRs). When these electronic systems are used, it is much easier for the school to track attendance patterns and to share concerns with other agencies and partners to whom the children are known. Software can be used to generate appropriate reports and letters. Some electronic registration systems also contact the parents automatically. One school has recently introduced a fingertip registration system for sixth form students. This system feeds into the school's existing electronic attendance arrangements, which facilitate data analysis and monitoring. It means that that there is no need for the school to have registration periods for its sixth form students. This system is still in the early stages of implementation.

35   Very few schools use the benchmarking data provided by the Welsh Assembly Government to set appropriately challenging targets for attendance. In particular, there are examples of schools setting targets that have already been exceeded.

Effective practice

36   Schools in Wales use a range of different strategies to address poor attendance. It is difficult to identify one single strategy that has the greatest impact. Schools achieve the best results by using a wide range of different strategies at the same time.

37   The strategies that are common features of the most effective practice are set out below.

First day response

38 The school contacts parents by telephone on the first day of a pupil's absence. If one of the parents cannot be spoken to directly, the school sends a letter asking the parents to contact the school as soon as possible. This ensures that parents are made aware of their child's absence at the earliest opportunity.

Deployment of education welfare officers and other attendance support staff

39 The roles and responsibilities of visiting staff in relation to school pastoral staff are clear and effective. For instance this might mean prioritising the education welfare officer's caseload in order to deal with those cases that have the greatest chances of success.

Use of attendance data

40 The school analyses attendance data to identify any trends and patterns, for example by individual, class group, year group or gender in order to help to identify the underlying causes of non-attendance.

Designated governor

41 The school has a designated governor with responsibility for attendance who monitors the school's attendance data and asks questions related to attendance during governor meetings. This ensures that attendance remains a high-profile issue.

Ensuring relevance in the curriculum

42 Schools that have broadened the curriculum they offer to some pupils and included, for example, more practical experiences, outdoor activities and extended work experience have improved attendance rates in the years leading up to examinations. These programmes need to be planned carefully so that they are not simply used as a convenient way of moving troublesome pupils out of school and into the job market early, but rather that they are part of a planned programme of activity and learning that will help pupils to progress onto the next stage of learning and acquire qualifications or credits along the way

Rewarding good attendance

43 The school sends letters home for those pupils who have good attendance and presents 'full attendance' certificates in school to pupils during assemblies. Rewards can also be provided for whole classes with the best attendance. They can take the form of certificates or school trips, for example to go bowling or to the cinema.

44 The most effective school strategies to raise attendance employ a range of approaches with each working to complement each other. Further case studies may be found in the appendix that illustrate some of these strategies.

Appendix

Case studies

Curriculum enrichment programme

One primary school has set aside time on one afternoon each week in order to provide a curriculum enrichment programme for pupils. The school felt that pupils needed opportunities to develop social and vocational skills in a way that encouraged greater self-esteem and stimulated an interest in lifelong learning.

The enriched curriculum consists of a range of activities that take place each Wednesday afternoon involving all pupils in the school. Activities include art and craft, sport, health and fitness, food and nutrition, music and language development. Vocational activities include building, hairdressing and gardening. As a result pupils develop skills in many ways. Subject-specific skills include learning to play cricket, learning a new language or playing a musical instrument. Life skills include problem-solving and team-building through outdoor pursuits. The majority of activities take place on the school site, but others, such as rock-climbing use local specialist facilities. Activities are chosen by pupils and are subject to a half-termly rotation. Whilst they have an open choice, pupils are encouraged to try out new experiences to balance choices that are more familiar.

The activities are led mainly by volunteers from the community, together with the school's learning support assistants. Others taking part include school governors and teachers from the local secondary school. Pupils therefore have the opportunity to work with a variety of adults. All activity leaders undergo security checks and receive appropriate training before working with pupils

The inclusive nature of the experience has led the school to avoid linking it explicitly to the rewards policy. The school does not exclude from the activities pupils whose behaviour is poor during the week unless their behaviour is unacceptable during the enrichment sessions themselves.

The enriched curriculum has proved to be popular with pupils. Improvements have been seen in behaviour, attendance and test results. Less measurable but equally valid has been the effect on individuals who have shown greater self-esteem and a more positive attitude to their achievement in school.

Benefits have not been confined to pupils. The enrichment scheme has enabled teachers to receive non-contact time and, with the introduction of the National Workload Agreement, this has become a convenient means of providing them with the statutory time for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA).

School Attendance Panel

A project in one LEA involved the establishment of a school attendance panel with powers to call parents to account for their children's poor attendance rates.

The school attendance panel consisted of a member of the school's senior management team, the head of year, the education welfare officer, a minute-taker, the pupil and the pupil's parents.

Prior to calling the school attendance panel meeting, the school and the education welfare officer submit evidence to show that they have tried to improve the pupil's attendance.

One secondary school working with the education welfare service identified nine families to be involved in this project. These were families whose children's attendance had not shown improvement despite the efforts of the school. The pupils' attendance rates ranged between 0% and 56%.

The school invites the parent/guardian to a panel meeting. At the meeting, the education welfare officer issues the parent with a formal warning and advises that the LEA will instigate legal proceedings if attendance does not improve.

The pupil and parents have the opportunity to explain the reasons for the poor attendance and explore any ways in which the panel can provide support. The panel then produces an action plan. If the parents refuse or fail to attend the meeting, the panel holds the meeting in their absence. The school makes it clear that attendance must improve in line with the targets in the action plan or legal proceedings will commence.

The EWO checks the pupil's attendance after two weeks. If attendance does not meet the set targets, the EWO begins legal action. If attendance is satisfactory, the EWO sends a letter to the home and continues to monitor the pupil's attendance.

If attendance subsequently falls off, the EWO will investigate and may begin legal action if necessary.

The attendance of seven pupils improved. The parents of the other two pupils were prosecuted.

Effective use of the Education Welfare Officer (EWO) in a secondary school

One large secondary school has two EWOs allocated to it. One of the EWOs is also the EWO for the associate primary schools. This has the advantage of ensuring continuity and sharing related issues between primary and secondary schools and also addressing issues related to siblings. The EWOs are key members of the school pastoral teams that meet weekly to discuss pupil-related issues. There are two teams, one for each key stage. Each team consists of the head and deputy of the key stage, year tutors, SEN staff, English as an additional language staff and EWOs.

An 'Information to Parents' Leaflet introducing the school's EWOs has been distributed to all new year 7 pupils. This leaflet gives parents some useful tips on routines and procedures for a successful transition from primary to secondary school. EWOs are present at all events relating to transition from year 6 to year 7.

EWOs attend all pastoral support programme reviews which are held half-termly. This arrangement ensures that EWOs are fully aware of all issues regarding each pupil which assists when liaising with the family. EWOs meet the appropriate year tutor weekly to discuss attendance and any welfare issues that they need to follow up.

EWOs have been present at parents' evenings for all year groups in order to raise parental awareness of the education welfare service and the ways in which it can support them. The evenings have also given EWOs the opportunity to assist with any attendance or welfare issues that parents might be facing. EWOs raise parents' awareness of attendance-related issues by means of letters sent to the home each half-term.

The way in which EWOs work emphasises to pupils and parents that the school considers the role of the EWO to be an important and integral part of the school's provision.

Effective Use of the Education Welfare Officer (EWO) in a primary school

In one primary school with very poor attendance, an EWO, funded under the BSF is based at the school for two and a half days each week.

This officer had experience of working with families and with schools. Having a base in the school enabled the EWO to become part of the school team and to foster close links with the school community. The EWO was able to offer counselling support, follow up absences on the first day, arrange meetings with parents and pupils, attend core meetings with a number of agencies and reduce the workload for staff in general and the headteacher in particular.

The EWO works closely with staff and is available to provide advice and support on a variety of issues including child protection matters when necessary.

Because the EWO is not a teacher and has built up a good relationship with parents in the community, some parents feel more confident in talking to him and his role has developed.

Since the establishment of the EWO at the school, attendance figures have improved and the number of late arrivals has reduced dramatically.

Rewarding good attendance

The most innovative feature of one school's approach is its system of rewards for good attendance. The rewards are awarded as follows:

(1) Letters are sent home and certificates are presented to all pupils who achieve 100% attendance.

(2) The names of all pupils with between 98% and 100% attendance in each year group are put into a draw and three winning names are each given a voucher for five pounds. This draw takes place during year assemblies.

(3) A certificate is presented every half term to the class in each year group that has achieved the highest attendance.

(4) A reward system has been developed to focus on whole school attendance. This has been introduced on the basis of a soccer league with four divisions (Premier division, First division, Second division and Third division). At the end of each term, the top two classes in each division are promoted and the bottom two classes in each division 'relegated'. The promotions and relegations are made during full school assembly. At the end of the school year, rewards will be given to all pupils in the class at the top of each division. Examples of the rewards are a school trip, a cinema trip, a bowling trip and vouchers for a local fast-food restaurant. These rewards are funded by local companies.