

An Investigation into Queries that School Offices Receive from Parents and Carers

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**Research Report
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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) is committed to improving the quality of information parents/carers receive about their children's education. The provision of useful information is important to families and schools. An important aspect of family-school communication is the effective handling of queries and concerns. The school office is often the first contact for parents/carers seeking information or voicing concerns.

At present there is no existing documentation about the kinds of transactions that occur between parents/carers and office staff. This research was commissioned by the DfES in order to fill this gap in knowledge. It provides evidence on the number and type of queries received in school offices, materials that are used, referred queries, and effective methods of dealing with queries.

BACKGROUND

There is widespread agreement that communication between home and school is important. Epstein (1995) places it as one of six key aspects of effective school-home relationships. Communication can be understood as 'connectivity' (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), the reciprocal transfer of information in a climate of trust, which is established through both planned and spontaneous interactions. One of the places in which 'connectivity' is established is in the school office.

Most of the literature that highlights 'good practice' suggests that the school should investigate what information is valued by families, when and in what form, and also improve listening skills of staff. However, researchers working on aspects of school-home relationships draw attention to: access issues; the nature and use of written communication; potential differences between primary and secondary schools; ways in which schools understand and include groups of parents/carers from specific social and cultural backgrounds; the skills and training required of front office staff; and the policy framework and administrative practices of schools.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

In November 2003, the Department for Education and Skills commissioned a team from The University of Nottingham to undertake a small-scale inquiry into the queries received in school front offices by parents/carers.

The aims of the project were to: investigate available literature on parent/carer queries; gather and analyse data on queries and supporting documentation in a range of schools; investigate the value of responses and materials; and investigate the impact on the school's processes and planning of the above data.

METHODOLOGY

The research used a case study approach with a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Six modes of data collection and analysis were employed:

- document analysis

- ❑ 'first impressions' written and photographic observations of the school
- ❑ pre-logging interviews with school office staff and a member of the Senior Management Team (head-teacher, deputy head-teacher or registrar/bursar).
- ❑ logging queries to school offices for two separate weeks
- ❑ post-logging interview with an office staff member
- ❑ post-logging interviews with some parents/carers

The research was conducted in six primary and four secondary schools which were selected to represent a range of contexts. The sample included schools known for effective school-community relationships.

KEY FINDINGS

Findings cover five major issues: nature, type and frequency of queries, school communication practices, welcoming environment, training and school-family policies.

(i) Nature, type and frequency of queries

- Overall, the two most common reasons for contacting the school were to speak to a particular person or were related to health issues
- There were important differences between primary and secondary schools.
- The most common query in primary schools was related to money. These queries were mainly made in person by women.
- The most common query in secondary schools, generally made by telephone by women, related to speaking to a specific person. The staff member in question was usually teaching. Office staff reported that many parents/carers did not understand teacher availability.
- While men constituted a third of all enquirers, they were slightly more likely to make personal visits (over telephone calls) to secondary schools than mothers/female carers.
- 73.6% of queries (primary schools) and 47.9% (secondary schools) of queries were handled by office staff.
- 47% of all referred queries in primary schools were for the class teacher. In secondary schools 32% were for a teacher and 27% for a head of year or equivalent. In primary schools 18% of queries were referred to the head-teacher compared to only 2.9% in secondary schools. One primary head-teacher reported making specific time available for dealing with parents/carer queries.
- None of the schools had rigorous ways of ensuring that queries were followed through, nor did they have strategies for monitoring or auditing queries. Only one of the secondary schools had any policy of response time for answering queries. None made good use of new technologies in answering queries.
- Queries were most frequently made between 7.30 and 9 am. All the schools had staff in the office in the morning and some rostered additional staff, while others

organised the layout of the office so that assistance could be provided if it got too busy.

- Prospective enrolments generated significant numbers of queries year-round, but more so in popular schools. One secondary school dedicated more staff to deal with such inquiries daily.
- Schools in deprived areas and culturally diverse neighbourhoods dealt with queries beyond the usual school remit. These often involved an in-school interpreter and contact with other agencies. Some schools appointed staff who spoke community languages.
- All schools had experienced challenging queries and challenging enquirers.

(ii) School communication practices

- Office staff mainly used personal knowledge and school/pupil records in order to answer queries. However, what was described as personal knowledge was actually knowledge about school, Local Education Authority and DfES policy and procedures which originated in written materials.
- Although much of this information was also sent home via newsletter, letters, prospectuses etc., many parents/carers did not use the information. This could be due to the information not being delivered safely, not read, or parents/carers unable to read materials because of their own literacy levels or preferred community language.
- One primary school in the sample argued that, since it served a population which relied largely on oral communication, it needed to develop matching communication practices. It had developed a network of community members who were well informed about the school: they could answer queries themselves and also give and receive feedback about important issues.

(iii) Welcoming environment

- Not all of the schools gave equally welcoming first impressions.
- The primary schools ensured that there were displays of children's work in the foyer, and were more welcoming than the secondary schools which opted for a more office-like atmosphere.
- Secondary schools, being larger also had more staff and the person in the front office changed regularly during the day. In primary schools, parents/carers were likely to see the same person every time they visited.
- All primary schools and one secondary school had a range of opportunities (events, programmes etc) for parents/carers to come to the school, reducing the necessity for queries to be made via the front office, since much information was exchanged in a more social setting.
- Two primary schools and one secondary school in very culturally and ethnically diverse communities had employed staff who spoke community languages and

that there was a visual representation of cultural inclusivity in displays and materials. Translated written materials were less commonly in use.

- One primary school reported specific efforts to involve fathers in the school.
- The extended secondary school had yet to develop extensive links with its community and other agencies.

(iv) Training

- All of the office staff were women.
- Front office work was described as dependent on personal qualities – patience, flexibility, being calm, coping in a crisis, being a good communicator, staying good humoured and being able to juggle several tasks at once. Staff was selected on this basis. Office staff recognised the skills involved.
- While office staff did receive some formal training, it was less than continuous. Induction was conducted in-house. Some training in data packages was funded but the everyday demands of the school usually took precedence over attendance at training.

(v) School–family policies

- Schools stated that they wanted and valued family participation in activities through a variety of approaches and pathways, stressing that involving families is a long-term project.
- None of the schools had a parent participation policy other than the statutory home-school agreement.
- Only one school had a policy which covered the way in which complaints and queries would be handled. None of the schools had any way to monitor the queries made through the front office, nor formal procedures to ensure that there had been follow up if the query had been referred on. Indeed, the front office staff were so busy that the ways in which they handled queries were not regularly monitored or discussed.
- Four schools in the study had higher levels of parent/carer involvement due to higher levels of commitment and support from the Local Education Authority. Three served highly culturally and linguistically diverse populations, primarily of modest means or in challenging circumstances.
- Contexts created different opportunities for schools to build relationships with their communities. Small primary schools that served a discrete area had a head start in making close connections with their communities. Schools where there had been stability in staffing and in enrolment were also advantaged. Secondary schools had to make more effort than primary school, because of their greater size and the reluctance of some adolescents to have their parents/carers involved in their school.
- Head-teachers had different interpretations of 'participation'. Some were concerned about safety issues, about the capacity of parents/carers to provide

appropriate support for academic programmes and about the time it took to prepare parents/carers for involvement. Some felt let down when there was a lack of parental/ carer response.

CONCLUSION

- This study provides insights into an under-researched area vital to the establishment of effective school-home communication and the development of parent/carers satisfaction with schools.
- Schools in this study that were most successful in dealing with queries from parents and carers were 'family friendly'. They established the climate for connectivity and systems and practices for the effective handling of queries by:
 - ❑ attending to their physical environment in the yard and foyer
 - ❑ using a wide range of written materials as the basis for school-home communication, but also finding innovative ways to work in communities where there were strong oral cultures.
 - ❑ attending to parents/carers promptly, and if necessary, giving clear information about when the person or information would be available.
 - ❑ ensuring that parent/carers queries were followed up by keeping sufficient records to monitor what happened after an enquiry.
 - ❑ using the occasion on which parents/carers made queries as an opportunity to build relationships and strengthen connectivity.
 - ❑ building extensive networks in their local community to extend their capacity to deal with parent/carers queries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The DfES consider developing

(1) an online training package for office staff in handling queries from parents and carers.

The module might:

- be self paced to match the working patterns of office staff
- be used for the induction of new office staff and the development of serving office staff
- require the support of an in-school mentor, thus particularising the training while building on in-school expertise.
- be case-based and cover both routine and challenging queries and circumstances.
- encourage office staff to learn about the particular social, cultural and economic mix of the school in which they are employed together with relevant policy frameworks and information about local community services.

(2) a professional development pack which shares examples of welcoming and responsive best practice in schools

The package could include:

- providing a welcoming first impression
- going beyond statutory home-school information
- handling queries.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Context

The Department for Education and Skills is committed to improving the quality of information parents/carers receive about their children's education.

The provision of useful explanatory information is integral to good communication between families and schools. Another important aspect of family-school communication is the effective handling of queries and concerns.

The school office is significant in the provision of information and is often the first contact for parents/carers seeking information or voicing concerns.

At present there is no existing documentation about the kinds of transactions that occur between parents/carers and school secretaries and other office staff.

This research has been commissioned in order to fill this gap in knowledge. It aims to provide evidence on the number and type of queries received in school offices, materials that are used, queries which are referred on, and effective methods of dealing with queries.

The findings will be used to inform the further development of policy and materials that will support schools in their interactions with parents and carers.

1.2 Aims and objectives of the research

In November 2003, the Department for Education and Skills commissioned a team, from the Centre for Research on Teacher and School Development at The University of Nottingham, to undertake a small scale inquiry into the queries received in school front offices from parents/carers.

The aims of the project were to:

- investigate available literature on parent/carer queries;
- gather and analyse data on queries and supporting documentation in a range of schools;
- investigate the value of responses and materials;
- investigate the impact on the school's processes and planning of the above data.

These aims were translated into specific questions to scope and focus the research. The research questions were:

- what are the number, types and patterns across the year of parent/carer queries received in school offices?
- in what ways are these queries recorded and handled by the school and the personnel involved?
- what information is made available for parents and carers via office staff?

- how is information about queries and responses used to improve the school's responsiveness and service ?
- what are key practices in the effective handling of queries from parents/carers?

The methodology is explained in the next section.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Approach

The chosen research approach was a collective, exploratory case study approach (Yin, 1989). Case studies were conducted at ten schools with each school site counting as one case.

It is widely agreed that case study is particularly appropriate for a holistic investigation of a specific practice since the focus is most commonly on a 'system of action' rather than on any individual (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). The object is to obtain multiple perspectives on a small number of issues that are key to understanding the system under examination. Case studies do not generate 'exemplar cases' that can be replicated in other site (Stablein, 1999). Rather, because case study research is not based in representative sampling, it builds up 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassegy, 1999) that can be used as the basis for action, pilot interventions and/or further research. Case studies typically use multiple sources of data in order to draw out details and viewpoints of key participants (Stake, 1995). They are also typically triangulated: this project uses methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1984).

This project does not report findings on a case by case basis since the schools might be identifiable. Instead, cross-case analysis is used as the means of discussing key issues.

The project began with a literature review which investigated literature related to queries made by parents/carers to front offices. The search was limited to research reports, articles and books published since 1990. Three major academic data-bases (Ingenta, Ebscohost and ERIC) were searched using a variety of search terms (home-school; parent-school; family-school; school communication; school office; parents' participation; parent involvement in education). The DfES Research Portal and ESRC data base *Regard* were also examined. Texts from the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand were selected. Where there was a significant number of texts covering the same specific area, selection ensured that those cited were recent and covered a number of countries, including the UK.

The project used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. The logging materials and initial interview schedules were piloted in an inner city primary school in Nottingham and some modifications to the initial design were made as a result of the feedback. The pilot data do not form part of the research corpus.

The research employed six modes of data collection and analysis. These are presented in chronological order, as they happened in the actual project.

(1) document analysis

Public documentation from the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) and the Department for Education and Skills websites was collected for each school in order to obtain contextual data. The school was also asked to provide copies of policies pertaining to parents/carers and any information that was routinely sent to parents such as welcome material and newsletters. School prospectuses and other statutory information were also collected. These documents were analysed to ascertain the general framework within which queries in the office would be handled.

(2) 'first impressions' written and photographic observations of the school

Notes were taken about signage, parking, security measures, layout of front office, displays and material, seating arrangements for visitors and greetings. 360 degree photographs were taken of each school foyer. This information was aggregated and summarised.

(3) pre-logging interviews with school office staff and a member of the Senior Management Team (head teacher, deputy head teacher or registrar/bursar).

Initial interviews covered issues arising from school context, policy approach, communication patterns and office management (see Appendix 1). Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and returned to each interviewee for checking.

(4) logging of queries for two separate weeks

Office staff were asked to complete a logging sheet for each query received every day during two separate weeks. The sheets (Appendix 2) required staff to record the means of receiving the query and the ways in which each was handled. The sheets were aggregated and cross-tabulated using SPSS to show: the numbers and nature of queries by school, sector and in total; the gender of parents/carers making queries; the medium of the query (in person, telephone, letter or email); and materials used in handling queries.

(5) post-logging interview with an office staff member

Following the completion of logging and after the analysis of the first round of interviews, a follow-up interview was conducted with one office staff member. The purpose of this interview was to clarify issues arising out of the data and to probe further views on training, parent/carer participation and patterns in queries, as well as to seek reflections on the actual logging process (see Appendix 3).

These interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, returned to interviewees for checking, thematised and coded.

(6) post-logging interviews with parents who visited the school on one day

A survey of parents/carers was not integral to this project. However, on the day on which the follow-up interviews were conducted, all parents/carers who visited the school were interviewed. Notes were kept of responses.

The research team used two approaches to working with the interview transcripts. One member of the team aggregated and summarised the responses using the categories set in the interview schedule. Another member of the team undertook a coded analysis of the major themes. Final decisions about the findings were made by the whole research team in a further reading of the data in combination with the two sets of analyses.

Data were analysed on a single site basis (vertical aggregation) as well as across all of the sites (horizontal aggregation).

Details of the data collection are summarised in Table 2.1 on page 13.

In this report, quantitative data have been reported for the whole sample and by sector where appropriate. However, interview data have been separated from location in order to assure anonymity. No names of people, sites or organisations are used in the text. For consistency, the terms head teacher, deputy head teacher, registrar/bursar for the member of the Senior Management Team, and office manager and office staff member, are used to delineate the front office roles, even if these were not the titles used in each school and regardless of whether the incumbent was acting in the position or not.

2.2 The school sites

Schools were selected to give a geographical and demographic spread. They covered rural areas, towns and cities, including Inner and Outer London.

10 schools were involved in the study, six of which were primary schools. The remaining four were secondary schools. In the ten schools the numbers of pupils on the roll ranged from 50 to 1500 pupils and staff in school offices ranged between one part time officer to nine full time officers. They included schools serving highly diverse as well as more homogenous communities and schools located in a variety of economic settings, ranging from relatively well off to quite deprived neighbourhoods. None of the schools was in special measures. The sample included a former Beacon school noted for its community involvement programmes, a school commended by OfSTED for its parent/carer relationships, a community school and an extended school. Details of the school sample are given in Appendix 4.

Schools were initially telephoned and in most cases the Principal Investigators (Thomson, Ellison) spoke directly to the head teacher, asking if s/he would be prepared to be involved. Two schools refused to take part. Schools were offered some reimbursement for the costs of cover for the duration of the study.

The researchers also undertook to return to each school its own data together with the overall results.

School	Number of personnel involved in logging	Total number of queries recorded	Number of staff interviews pre-logging	Number of staff re-interviews post-logging	Number of parent/carer interviews
1	3	237	2	1	0
2	4	747	2	1	1
3	3	101	2	1	0
4	9	840	3	1	1
5	2	44	2	1	1
6	2	220	2	1	1
7	3	192	2	1	1
8	2	55	2	1	3
9	1	43	2	1	2
10	2	85	2	1	2
Total	31	2564	21	10	12

Table 2.1 Details of personnel involvement and number of queries recorded during logging process

A total of thirty one interviews with staff and twelve interviews with parents/carers was conducted (see Table 2.1.). These consisted of two pre-logging interviews in each school with either the office manager or senior office staff member, and a member of the senior management team (head teacher, deputy head teacher, registrar/bursar). A post-logging re-interview was carried out with a front office staff member. Parents/carers who visited the school on the day of the post-logging re-interview were also interviewed.

2.3 Limitations to the study

This was a study with a small sample of schools and it occurred within a limited time frame.

There were some inconsistencies in the data collected. Post-logging interviews suggest that during extremely busy times one return stood for many interactions. There were also differences in interpretation when multiple people were filling in forms. In some schools some queries went direct to specialist staff and year level coordinators, bypassing the front office. Nevertheless, there was a significant number of completed returns and despite these limitations, the data does provide a robust snapshot.

The next section provides a review of the literature. The findings are reported in Sections 4 and 5.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a great deal of international research which addresses aspects of family-school relationships. For this particular study, the literatures deemed most relevant were those relating to issues affecting communication and good school-family practice.¹

The review begins with literatures that address aspects of the making and handling of queries and then briefly considers the literatures that cover the context in which queries are handled. In each section the implications for this research project are noted.

3.1 The importance of home-school communication

There is widespread agreement that communication between home and school is important. Possibly the most recognised scholar in the field, Joyce Epstein (1994; 1995; Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997), suggests that there are six aspects to developing good family-school relationships. They are

- (1) **Parenting.** Assisting families with parenting and child-rearing skills, and assisting schools in understanding their families;
- (2) **Communicating.** Developing effective communication from home to school and school to home;
- (3) **Volunteering.** Creating ways that families can be involved in the schools or school programmes and effective methods of parent recruitment;
- (4) **Learning at home.** Linking families with their child's curriculum through learning activities that can be done at home, as well as homework;
- (5) **Decision-making.** Including families as decision-makers, advocates, members of School Councils, and committees;
- (6) **Collaborating with the community.** Coordinating services in the community with families' needs, and providing services to the community.

Communication is described in the research literatures as a basic building-block in establishing relationships with families that are supportive of pupils' learning.

3.2 Home-school communication as connectivity

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), in a literature review commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills, describe communication as 'connectivity' (p. 52). They argue that 'a basic level of teacher-parent interaction is necessary to afford the transfer of information and to effect mutual support and shared values'. They suggest that the basis of connectivity is 'information about programmes, courses, expectations, assessment processes and the like' and that this 'is crucial to the parents' role'. They also stress the reciprocal nature of communication, suggesting that 'information about the child is crucial to the teacher's role' (p.52).

Desforges and Abouchaar note that parent-school communication is established through both planned and spontaneous interactions. Their analysis suggests that queries to school front offices should be seen as a part of the interactive processes

¹ The literature uses the term parents rather than parents and carers. The wording from the literature has been changed to indicate that the interpretation made in this study extends extant findings to cover both parents and carers.

through which schools establish ongoing relationships with parents/carers, and through which the reciprocal exchange of information can be managed effectively and productively.

3.3 The importance of the front office in home-school communication

There seems to be almost no research which focuses directly on the office as a site of interaction. One US case-study (Tatto et al., 2001) examined one school's attempts to reconstruct teacher-parent relations; this did provide some helpful survey data about the micro-transactions between parents/carers and schools. Specifically addressing the question of access, Tatto et al. say that while parents were expected by the school to make an appointment in order to receive and give information, many of them came anyway 'only to be turned away by the school secretary'. At the same time, school personnel from the head teacher to the office staff, complained about the parents' 'lack of awareness regarding the need to make appointments' (p.320), a requirement that a survey revealed very few of the parent body knew about.

Tatto et al. suggest that although school staff were very busy during school time, this was not evident to parents and this caused friction between them and school personnel. The research suggests that most of the available school time was restricted to the parents of children who were 'causing trouble' and, thus, access and interaction was 'remedial' rather than 'preventative'. In interviews, parents interpreted this restricted access as the school showing animosity towards parents and being defensive when questioned (p. 320). The researchers suggest that teachers saw themselves as being available for consultation and were surprised when they learnt of parents' concerns. Thus, 'a gap seemed to exist between what parents needed and what teachers and schools perceive as given' (p. 321). Furthermore the requirement for appointments and the formal nature of school communication seemed to 'legitimate' school actions and work to 'assure compliance' amongst parents (p. 323).

The Tatto et al. study points to the significance of collecting data about the casual versus appointment practices of schools and of considering general questions of accessibility since the office is seen by the wider community as an important symbol of school attitude towards parents/carers.

3.4 Family satisfaction with home-school communication

In a project also undertaken for the Department for Education and Skills, Williams, Williams and Ullman (2002) explored the broad question of school-home communication and reported that:

- the vast majority (all but 3% of their sample) of parents/carers talked with the school about their child's progress, with nearly one in two claiming that this was a regular occurrence;
- a quarter (27%) of the parents/carers claimed to talk regularly about their child's behaviour, with parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) most likely to talk about this regularly (44% compared with 24% of parents of other children);

- one in five (21%) parents/carers claimed to talk regularly about their child's relationships with other children (perhaps bullying or other issues), and parents of children with SEN were more likely to talk about this regularly;
- a very small number (2% of the sample) of parents/carers said they talked to their child's teachers about problems at home.

Williams, Williams and Ullman report that while most parents/carers found the school welcoming, this was skewed in favour of primary schooling, and towards those parents/carers whose children were least likely to need special help from the school (p. 32). In addition, just over half the parents/carers in this study claimed to have had meetings with teachers outside of the standard parents' evening structure with primary school parents in particular citing informal meetings in the playground. Parents/carers of secondary age children were less likely to have regular opportunities to talk with teachers out of class than parents/carers in primary schools.

Potential differences between primary and secondary schools are thus an important issue in any study of family-school interactions and school front offices.

3.5. The dominance of written communication

Australian researchers Cuttance and Stokes (2000) suggest that the vast majority of Australian schools are much better at giving 'good news' about extra-curricular activities and school social and sporting events than they are about other equally if not more important issues e.g. who to contact about particular issues and what procedures are appropriate; school policies and programmes; system policies; key dates and events. But, the Williams et al (2002) study found that parents' evenings and written communication via pupil post were the most common ways for parents and carers to find out about their child's progress at school. Their study suggests that 'parents seem largely happy with the quality of written communication coming from schools' (p.50).

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) argue that written 'home/school communication is an important conduit but it soon reaches a sufficiency level' (p.49). Taken together with the findings of the Tatto et al. study (2001) it is clear that a study of school office interactions should also note the ways in which schools used other than conventional means to open up dialogue with parents and carers. Another important finding from the Desforges and Abouchaar review of literature is located in their comment that 'supportive interaction skills', that is, those which enhance connectivity and build relationships 'can be learned' (p. 49). Skilful practices ensure that spontaneous interactions can be 'lubricated' so that they become conduits to more coherent relationships. While their review of literature did not specifically address the ways in which queries are handled, it is likely that micro-transactions in the front office require such supportive interaction skills and are integral to the construction of the connectivity advocated by Desforges and Abouchaar.

Thus, any research designed to fill the gap in existing knowledge about school offices as a site of interaction, connectivity and relationship building must also address the competences required for this work and the training given to office staff.

3.6 Parent/carers confidence in approaching schools

In the Williams et al (2002) study, the vast majority of parent/carers reported that they felt confident talking to teachers, with over half saying they felt 'very confident'. However, the more education parents/carers had had and/or the more involved they were in the school, the more confident they felt (p.28-29).

Nevertheless, a minority of parents/ carers in this study also reported degrees of discomfort. A significant minority felt that general – as opposed to child-specific – information was 'spoilt by jargon.' In particular, 'parents who had left school at 16 were most likely to feel this way (p. 50).

International research suggests that many parents and carers, regardless of their cultural and economic position, feel some degree of trepidation and anxiety when approaching their child's school. However, this is particularly the case for parents/carers who are working class, of minority cultural and language backgrounds or who have low levels of educational attainment themselves (Crozier, 2000; David, 1993; Epstein, 1987; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Reay, 1998; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Tett, 2001; Vincent, 1996). Nichols-Solomon (2000) reports an interaction in which the apparent hostile body language of a school principal caused considerable distress to parents and carers. Some discomfort and frustration has also been documented during parent-teacher discussions of children's progress: Maclure and Walker (2000) dub such events 'disenchanted evenings', to highlight the kinds of emotions produced for parents/carers by their interactions with the school (see also Crozier, 1998a; Power & Clark, 2000).

It is important therefore to ensure that parent/carers views on the approachability of schools via the front office are taken into account in any research on school-home communication.

3.7 The effects of social context on home-school communication

Much of the literature suggests that some school-home communication is unsatisfactory for parents/carers, the school or both. It is argued that social context is a significant factor in shaping school-parent/carers interactions.

Explanations offered for contextual disconnections between schools and parents/carers include:

- (1) parent/carers memories of bad experiences with schools which are transferred from their past to their children's present (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Fuerstein, 2000; Heymann, 2000; Westcott, Perry, Jones, & Dockett, 2003);
- (2) parent/carers fears of being labelled a troublemaker by the school with adverse consequences for their children (Williams et al., 2002);
- (3) school lack of sympathy and understanding of family cultural practices, life circumstances and employment conditions (Davis, 1995; de Carvalho, 1997; McKinley & Else, 2002; Nguyen & Griffin, 2003);
- (4) power differentials between parents/carers and school systems which mean that schools have the upper hand in most transactions (Crozier, 1998b; Cullingford & Morrison, 1999; Fine, 1993; Henry, 1996).

It is important to note, however, that there is also evidence of middle class parents and carers who are discontented in their interactions with schools. In an article

entitled "They're going to tear the doors off this place", McGrath and Kuriloff (2004) note the pressure brought to bear by upper middle class mothers on a school through formal and informal means in order to introduce additional tracking which would separate their children from 'low status' children. Other American studies show parent resistance to the elimination of setting and tracking (Lipman, 1998) and to more general reforms including the introduction of new forms of assessment (Tittle, 1995). UK studies (e.g. Ball, 2003; Power, Edwards, Whitty, & Wigfall, 2002) investigating the ways in which middle class parents and carers manipulate the process of school choice have focused on residential mobility, pressure exerted via governing bodies and the take up of policy initiatives in ways that benefit particular, already privileged children. While none of these studies focuses specifically on communication, they do provide a counterbalance to the view that it is only 'disadvantaged' groups of parents and carers who might be dissatisfied with their child's schooling.

Taken together, these studies also are a useful reminder that transactions in the front office may well be patterned around questions of class, gender and ethnicity and it is only through the accumulation and analysis of evidence that such patterns might become obvious.

Given this, it is important to consider how it is that the conduct of school offices might need to accommodate parents/carers who potentially 'fit' these categories. School responses need to encompass access – opening and closing times and after hours provision; and also accessibility – staff who are not only approachable, sensitive and empathetic but who possess knowledge about the diverse school community, have appropriate skills, including community languages and who are able to quickly refer parent/carers with specific needs to the appropriate person or service. These specific strategies complement a general school approach to parent/carer-school relationships which is responsive, timely and able to accommodate both planned and spontaneous interactions.

It is important that research into school-home interactions investigate a spread of socio-economic and culturally diverse contexts.

3.8 Some challenging interactions

There is also mounting public and professional concern about the small minority of parents and carers who are abusive and invasive. There is as yet very little research into this phenomenon (for an account in Australia, see Thomson, 2002a) although it is clear from anecdotes and media reports that at least some of these incidents occur in the front office.

A study by Ranson, Martin and Vincent (2004) examined school-home communication in a secondary school in the Black Country. The 25 parents/carers in this study reported that they were generally satisfied with the school in question and that when they had concerns with their child's school experience or with a particular school policy they mostly said nothing. If they did anything it was to have informal conversations to find out more. They would sometimes write or request a meeting. Only on a few occasions when they were particularly upset, for example when their child reported being bullied, were they 'vehement in their response'. Ranson et al call this 'storming' (p.263) and located 16 such incidents among the group of 25 satisfied parents/carers.

Ranson et al argue that storming is an action undertaken by parents/carers keen to seek immediate action and redress for perceived injustices, inaction and implied judgments about their competence. They found that middle class parents/carers were more successful in their subsequent negotiations with the school; parents/carers who were categorised by the school as having 'welfare needs' and/or those who queried the educational practices of the school 'typically received no helpful response from the school and felt treated with indifference'. In some instances 'the school did not always communicate the need to reach mutual agreement' (p.272). Ranson et al suggest that schools need to alter their practices to 'reposition parents as complementary educators and citizens rather than as subordinate clients' (p.272).

It is important that research into school communication practices seek to place challenging interactions in the wider context of general parent/carer satisfaction while recognising issues related to power, trust and citizens' rights.

3. 9 Home-school relations and school choice

School-home communication practices occur within a more general policy and practice framework. One issue that is frequently studied relates to the impact of school choice.

Some researchers argue that the introduction of school choice has changed irrevocably the relationship of parents/carers to schools (Ball, 1997b, 2003; Edwards & Whitty, 1992; Gillbourn, 1997; Gorard, Taylor, & Fitz, 2003; Munn, 1993). This body of research suggests that all parents/carers and children are now likely to be involved actively in 'choice', that is, considering the relative merits of various schools potentially and unevenly available to them (Adnett & Davies, 2000; Reay & Ball, 1997; Tomlinson, 1997; Whitty, 1997). Schools must now engage in promotion activities to attract enrolments. There is now much more attention and funds expended on foyers, brochures and advertising materials (Hesketh & Knight, 1998; Maguire, Ball, & Macrae, 1999). These highlight the school's image and successes.

It is argued that schools may be reluctant to reveal their shortcomings for fear of adverse publicity (Ball, 1997a; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). The brochures and avoidance of imperfections or acknowledgement of areas for improvement may create high expectations among parents/families which may or may not be realised. However, the existence of school choice also means that schools conduct parent/carer 'satisfaction surveys', seeking out information to enhance the retention of existing pupils as well as to garner new enrolments. In this case, parent/carer concerns about school front offices could well be expressed by such means, allowing schools to take action to remediate any concerns.

Research into school-home communication needs to take into account the impact of choice policies and how they might be implicated in query-handling procedures.

3.10 Parents and carers as volunteers

Schools often seek to involve parents/carers in a range of voluntary activities. These provide incidental and informal opportunities for communication while creating a school culture in which communication is valued and queries are welcomed.

Many schools actively seek the involvement of parents/carers as volunteers in school programmes and one-off activities. Some researchers see this as a practice which contains elements of exploitation (Vincent, 1996), others regard it as a response to shortfalls in funding (Brook & Hancock, 2000), while others suggest that it is an important avenue for parents/carers to find out about contemporary education while making a contribution to the learning of their own and other people's children (Gelsthorpe & West-Burnham, 2003).

In a school where there is an emphasis on voluntary labour one might expect to see a range of materials available about parent training and voluntary activities, and office staff might be trained to encourage any parents and carers, including those coming to make general queries, to consider becoming involved in such activities.

Research into school communication should encompass the ways in which parents/carers are invited into the life of the school and are given opportunities for information sharing.

3. 11 Parents and carers as stakeholders

The giving and getting of information is fundamental to good school-home communication.

In recent times, parents/carers have been seen as 'stakeholders' with rights to be consulted about key decisions. This is integral to schools being seen as a site for building democratic practices, social capital and practical citizenship (Driscoll & Kerchner, 1999; Levin, 1998; Soder, 1996). Schools thus must create opportunities for 'stakeholders' to be consulted and to express their views.

There are a range of ways in which schools might take up and put into action the notion of parents/carers as stakeholders in relation to communication in general and specifically, in the making and handling of queries. These include: the development of a communication strategy to provide regular information about relevant policies, procedures, key contacts and dates; the development of a parent/carer charter of rights and responsibilities; a formal policy for handling queries² in which there is aggregation and analysis of data to inform school policy and management practices (c.f. MacBeath, 1999; MacBeath & Sugimine, 2002).

Research into school-home communication must examine how commitments to stakeholder rights are embedded in school practices and policies.

3.12 Good practice in home-school communication

Queries to front offices are just one aspect of communication between school and home. The literatures which burrow more deeply into what constitutes effective school communication highlight the importance of:

² From 1 September 2003, governing bodies of all maintained schools and maintained nursery schools in England are required, under Section 29 of the Education Act 2002, to have in place a procedure to deal with complaints relating to the school and to any community facilities or services that the school provides. The law also requires the procedure to be publicised.

(1) creating a welcoming climate

Rasmussen (1998) tells of schools that made themselves inviting to parents and carers. The US North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (1998) urges schools to pay attention to foyers, signs, welcome processes and engage in planning to improve the school climate.

(2) developing a repertoire of information-giving strategies

Most frequently mentioned are welcome letters, information packs about the school, home-school handbooks, Open House, personal contact, and positive phone calls about children (Berger, 1995; US Department of Education, 1996), and student-led parent-teacher conferences (Le Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). There are also examples in the literature of: a school district using talk-back television to give information and receive feedback (Hewitt, 2001); websites as a means of parents getting information and asking questions in confidence (Bransberg, 2001; Johnson, 2000); telephone-based inquiry and information systems (Davis, 1995; Winters & August, 2001) and home-visiting programmes (Morse et al., 2001). Some schools have begun to experiment with new information and communication technologies including text messaging. Some schools have homework telephone hot-lines where family members can ring to find out what homework has been set for the week.

(3) building information-getting strategies

The literatures note the benefits of surveys, focus groups, polls and student involvement in community studies (Fege, 2000), having parents working as researchers (Meadows, 1993), town meetings (Gross, 1996) and neighbourhood meetings (Mulford, 1995).

Each of these offers insights about the context in which queries are handled and pointed to the need for research to take account of general school communication practices, welcoming strategies and the physical environment in the front office.

3.13 Summary

The literatures highlight the importance of:

- access issues – how welcoming, efficient and effective the office staff is in handling queries
- the nature and use of written communication;
- potential differences between primary and secondary schools;
- ways in which schools understood and included specific social and cultural groups of parents/carers;
- the skills and training required of front office staff;
- the policy framework and administrative practices of schools.

While there is continued emphasis on family-school relationships in policy (Thomson, 2002b), most writers seem to work at a level above the ways in which schools handle routine complaints and queries. Most of the literatures that highlight 'good practice' suggest simply that at the heart of school-family communication is a commitment from the school to continue to investigate what information is valued by families, when and in what form, as well as work on how they can improve their listening

skills (Brandt, 1998). While these understandings frame this research project, it is apparent that this investigation is working in a relatively unexplored space.

The findings from the research follow in Sections 4 and 5.

4. QUERIES TO SCHOOL OFFICES AND SYSTEMS FOR HANDLING QUERIES

The discussion of these findings begins with the actual queries that are made to school offices. Section 4.1 examines the queries coming into the school office and is followed by an investigation into the ways in which office staff respond to them in Section 4.2. Section 4.3 elaborates the patterns of queries and Sections 4.4 to 4.6 consider the systems and training, as well as some of the challenges, which are found in this work.³

4.1 Queries to school offices

4.1.1 The nature of queries

During the two weeks of the logging, schools received many parental/carers queries. The number of queries received totalled 2564 and across the whole sample, the majority of calls concerned requests to speak to someone (32.1%) or health issues (22.3%) with 23% of queries being classified as 'other', as shown in figure 4.1.

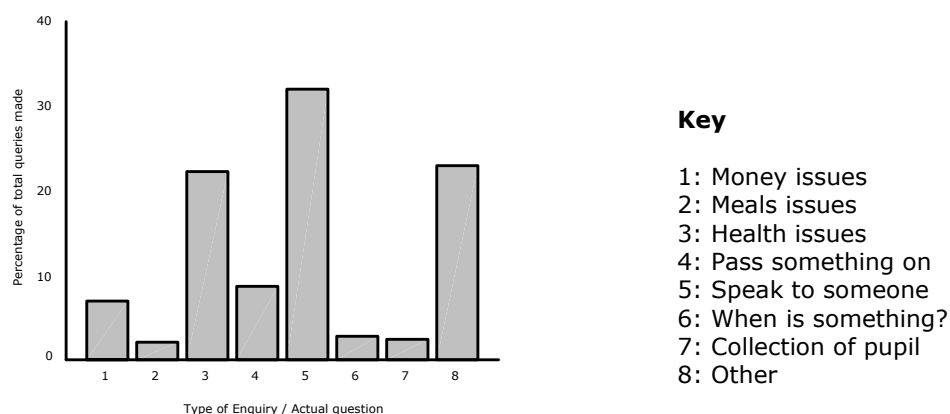


Figure 4.1 The types of enquiries made to office staff (whole sample)

This pattern, however, varied between primary and secondary sectors.

Primary schools dealt with many more enquiries about money issues (this was also confirmed in the interview data). These queries included the collection of dinner and school trip monies. Primary schools also recorded more enquiries in the 'other' category: these included room booking, uniform sales, checking on whether a child has settled down, admission queries, pastoral issues and cultural issues. In one particular primary school a number of enquiries that were recorded in the 'other' category referred to parent/carers queries about staffing and school closure issues. Figure 4.2 illustrates the overall spread of the types of enquiries made to primary schools during the logging period.

³ Interviewees routinely used the term parent to refer to both parents and carers. Therefore, in this report, when the word parent is used it is intended to reflect interviewees' words and understood to cover both parents and carers.

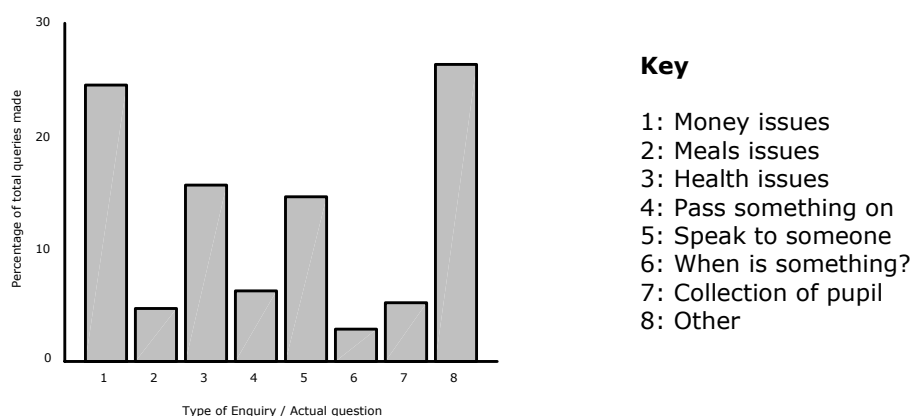


Figure 4.2 The types of enquiries made to office staff (primary sector)

For secondary schools, the majority of calls concerned wanting to speak with someone (38.1%), health issues (21.3%) and other (18.9%) as shown in figure 4.3.

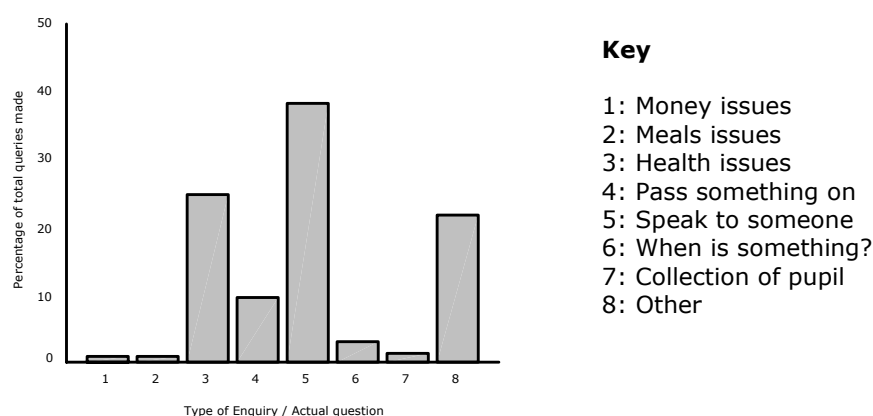


Figure 4.3 The types of enquiries made to office staff (secondary sector)

Within the 'wanting to speak to someone' category⁴, the data showed attendance, pastoral and progress issues together with some enquiries about admissions issues (including questions concerning proximity to the school and position on the school waiting list). The high percentage of queries concerning health issues was influenced by the large number of pupils in one school visiting the medical room and attending dentist and doctor's appointments during the school day. Enquiries reported in the 'other' category included: absence interviews, transport issues, attending meetings, school closure, being shown around the school and collection of confiscated items. Interview data indicated that all ten schools had a diverse range of community links (as might be expected from the sample chosen). These included dancing classes, English language classes, links with local churches and hospitals, arts sessions, adult education classes and links with other schools and colleges.

⁴ Follow up interview data suggested that parents/carers would often not specify the nature of the query when asking to speak with someone.

Although all schools indicated strong links with local communities, only one primary school reported receiving enquiries concerning the community facilities and events during the two week logging period (a total number of 12). Interestingly, they also had a Community Tutor who dealt with such queries.

Schools in inner city areas that had an extended community designation, strong links with other schools or shared facilities also received some calls concerning the timing of activities or extra-curricular events (recorded within category 6, 'When is something?'). Community schools received more calls concerning room bookings although this was not significantly greater.

These schools often had extensive networks with their local communities and these were maintained by out of hours work by heads, teachers and office staff, many of whom were drawn from the local community. The schools had more interconnections with the community than others in the study, and the interview data provided significant evidence of the ways in which these personal connections allowed information to flow between the school and its community in mutually beneficial ways.

4.1.2 Medium of enquiry

Media for communication available in the schools included telephone, fax, e-mail, answering machine, and voice mail. Six of the schools (two secondary and four primary) had no answering machines for after-hours messages. In most schools which had answer-phones, office staff were responsible for checking phone messages. Only two schools mentioned text messaging but neither used this method often. E-mail was more often used internally than to communicate with parents and carers. Two schools indicated that they had a network manager who was able to determine if emails were being answered. Two schools indicated that no one monitored the technology.

Across the whole sample, the most common methods for making an enquiry were by telephone and in person as illustrated in figure 4.4. Although the data indicated limited use of email, a number of schools had only recently introduced such systems for parental/ carer communication. There was varied practice in this: most schools published a generic email address on letter-headed paper and one secondary school published on their web site the email addresses of all staff members with responsibilities in curriculum or pastoral areas and other key people (e.g. bursar and business manager). This particular school had a very strong focus on communication with parents/carers.

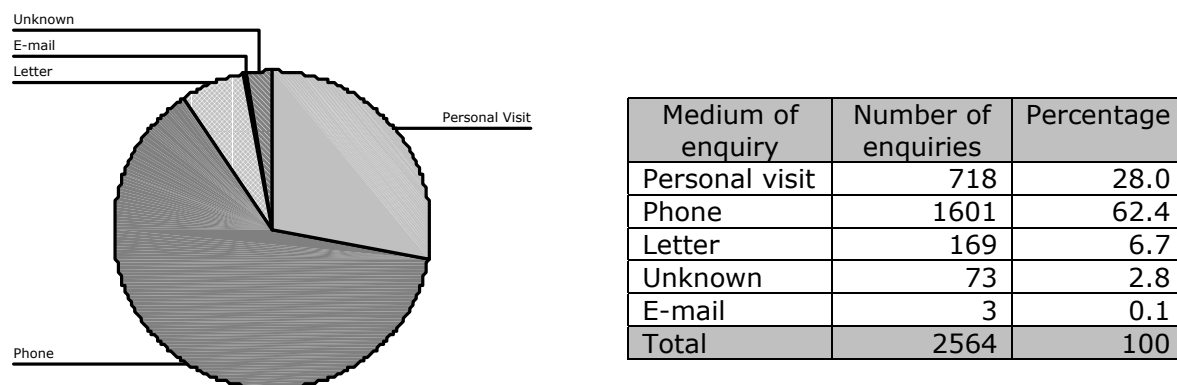


Figure 4.4 Medium of enquiry

The pattern shown in figure 4.4 varied by sector.

Parents/carers of primary school aged pupils were more likely to make a personal visit to the school than to phone. This result was influenced by the large number of parents/carers visiting their child's primary school to pay dinner money. Conversely, parents/carers of secondary school aged pupils were more likely to phone than visit the school when making enquiries. Table 4.1 illustrates the number of enquiries within each of the specified categories.

Medium of enquiry	Sector			
	Primary		Secondary	
	Number of enquiries	Percentage	Number of enquiries	Percentage
Personal visit	400	62.7	318	16.5
Phone	212	33.1	1389	72.1
Letter	11	1.7	158	8.2
E-mail	0	0	3	.2
Other	0	0	0	0
Unknown	16	2.5	57	3.0
Total	639	100.0	1925	100.0

Table 4.1 Number of enquiries made within medium of enquiry, according to sector

Although interview transcripts indicated the increasing use of e-mail, only a little was evident within the logging period. In addition, three schools (two secondary and one primary) reported that parents/carers left messages on answer machines. Although these were checked on a daily basis, no enquiries to the school were made through this medium during the two week logging period. The majority of enquiries by letter came from one secondary school. The nature of the enquiries was not specified on the logging sheet.

4.1.3 Gender and enquiries

Who makes the enquiries?

The gender of the callers was predominantly female (66%; male 16.5%) as shown in figure 4.5. In some cases (17.5%) the gender of the caller was not recorded on the logging sheets.

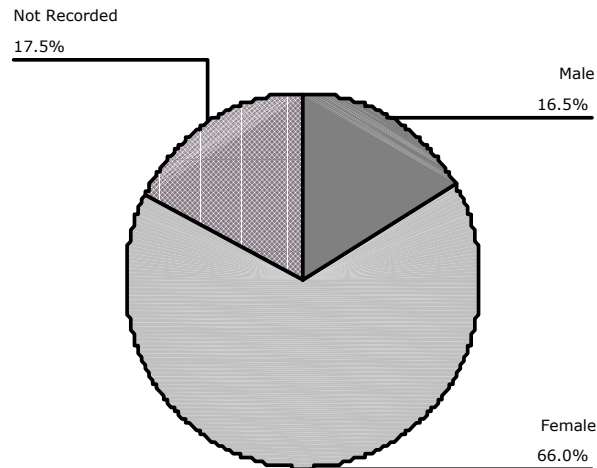


Figure 4.5 *Spread of enquiries made according to gender (whole sample)*

There was little difference in the number of enquiries made within each sector according to gender as table 4.2 shows, with men appearing slightly more likely to make enquiries in secondary schools than in primary, although this is unclear because of the high percentage of secondary school calls where gender was 'not recorded'. Missing data concerning gender represented 7% in primary schools and 21% in secondary.

	Sector			
	Primary		Secondary	
	Number of Enquiries	Percentage	Number of Enquiries	Percentage
Female	496	77.7	1196	62.1
Male	98	15.3	325	16.9
Not recorded	45	7.0	404	21.0
Total	639	100	1925	100

Table 4.2 *Number of enquiries made within each sector according to gender*

The type of enquiry by gender

The reported frequencies across the whole sample, in the type of queries made according to gender resulted in insignificant differences and showed similar patterns as shown in figure 4.6.

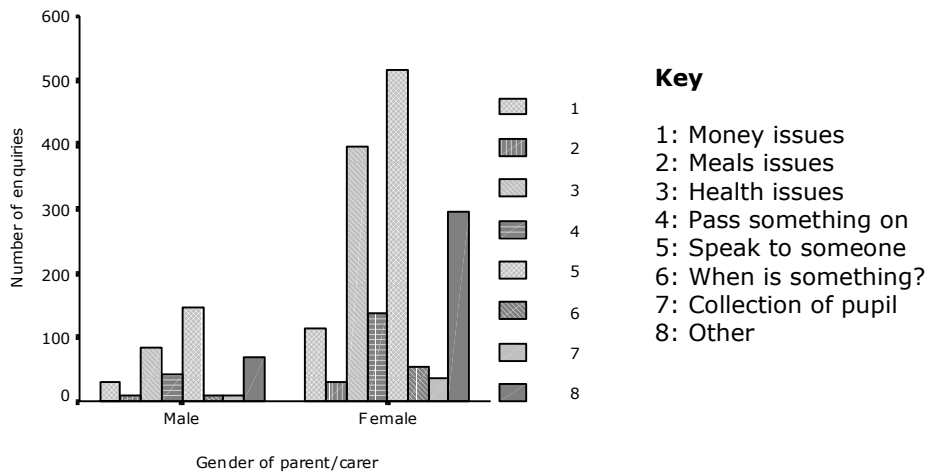


Figure 4.6 Nature of enquiry by gender

This pattern was repeated for both the primary and secondary sectors and results were also found to be insignificant.

The medium of enquiry by gender

Statistical analysis of the data was carried out to ascertain whether 'medium of enquiry' was influenced by gender but only a weak relationship was found. Results indicate that both men and women were more likely to phone when making an enquiry. However, there was some evidence to suggest that women were more likely to phone than visit, compared to men (67.6% and 58.9% respectively) and men were more likely than women to make a personal visit (39% and 31.5% respectively), as opposed to other choices, as shown in table 4.3.

		Medium of enquiry				Total
		Personal visit	Phone	Letter	E-mail	
Male	Count	165	246	6	1	418
	% within Gender	39.5%	58.9%	1.4%	.2%	100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	24.1%	18.1%	31.6%	33.3%	20.3%
Female	Count	519	1112	13	2	1646
	% within Gender	31.5%	67.6%	.8%	.1%	100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	75.9%	81.9%	68.4%	66.7%	79.7%
Total	Count	684	1358	19	3	2064
	% within Gender	33.14%	65.79%	.92%	.15%	100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4.3 Details of medium of enquiry by gender (whole sample⁵)

⁵ Excludes the 'gender not recorded' category.

Analysis was carried out by sector to explore further the influence of gender on medium of enquiry. Results for the primary sector did not produce significant results and indicated that of the enquiries made, women were as likely as men to make a personal visit (both 66%) and phone (32.8% and 32.8% respectively). Table 4.7 shows an even spread of the medium of enquiry according to gender for the primary sector and also indicates that few parents/carers contacted their child's primary school by letter and no parents/carers used email during the logging periods.

		Medium of enquiry				Total
		Personal visit	Phone	Letter	E-mail	
Male	Count	64	31	2	0	97
	% within Gender	66%	32%	2%		100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	16.8%	16.4%	25%		16.8%
Female	Count	318	158	6	0	482
	% within Gender	66%	32.8%	1.2%		100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	83.2%	83.6%	75%		83.2%
Total	Count	382	189	8	0	579
	% within Gender	66%	32.6%	1.4%		100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4.4 Details of medium of enquiry by gender (primary sector)

However, when considering the medium of enquiry and gender for the secondary sector, significant results were found although the relationship was weak. Results demonstrated that men were more likely to choose to make a personal visit to the secondary school than women (31.5% and 17.3% respectively). This supports existing literature surrounding the gendered nature of parent/carer involvement with schools (e.g. Crozier, 2000). Table 4.5 also shows that women were more likely to contact secondary schools by phone than men (82% and 67% respectively) and that few enquiries were made by letter and e-mail during the logging periods.

		Medium of enquiry				Total
		Personal visit	Phone	Letter	E-mail	
Male	Count	101	215	4	1	321
	% within Gender	31.5%	67%	1.2%	.3%	100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	33.4%	18.4%	36.4%	33.3%	21.6%
Female	Count	201	954	7	2	1164
	% within Gender	17.3%	81.9%	.6%	.2%	100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	66.6%	81.6%	63.6%	66.7%	78.4%
Total	Count	302	1169	11	3	1485
	% within Gender	20.3%	78.7%	.7%	.2%	100%
	% within Medium of enquiry	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4.5 Details of medium of enquiry by gender (secondary sector)

4.1.4 Summary

While there were many differences across the schools, there were also similarities, particularly within the same sector. In primary schools most enquiries related to money and in secondary schools to wanting to speak to someone.

There were few queries relating to community facilities but assistance with a wide range of issues was sought by visitors to schools in inner city areas.

Across the whole sample, the most common methods for making an enquiry were by telephone and in person. Parents/carers of primary school aged pupils were more likely to make a personal visit to the school than to phone. Conversely, parents/carers of secondary school aged pupils were more likely to phone than visit the school when making enquiries. The use of email was minimal.

Enquirers were mostly female, but a greater proportion of males made queries in secondary than in primary schools. Males had a higher preference than females for choosing to make a personal visit over a phone call (although phone calls still predominated).

The next section reports the responses that were made by office staff and to what effect.

4.2 Responding to queries

This section examines the ways in which office staff found the answers to the queries, the materials used and the routes which they used to pass on enquiries to other people.

4.2.1 Existing knowledge

In the logging period, office staff reported (both in the interviews and through their logging) that they were generally able to deal with queries. This covered dealing with queries directly and also when referring a query on to another member of staff. They reported knowing the answer to enquiries made in a large percentage of cases across both the primary (73.6%) and secondary (47.9%) sectors, as illustrated in figures 4.7 and 4.8.

It is important, however, to note that in the case of the primary sector, details for this question were not recorded in 18.3% of cases and in the case of the secondary sector, details for this question were not recorded in 41% of cases.

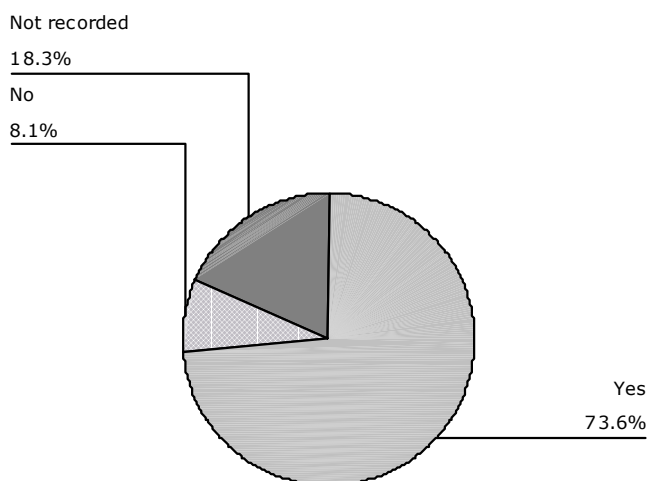


Figure 4.7 Whether office staff knew the answer to a query (primary sector)

Office staff referred to using their own knowledge when responding to queries. In interview, they talked of high levels of autonomy and said that they knew how to deal with a large percentage of calls that came into their schools. Routine and everyday matters could usually be answered immediately. Examples of this included: sickness, examination dates, term dates, school holidays, school meals, school uniforms, residential visits, booster classes, after school activities, and change of address.

It was not surprising that some of the queries to which office staff didn't 'know the answer' arose when a parent/carers wished to speak with someone. Often, office staff reported, the parent/carers refused to disclose the nature of the query to them.

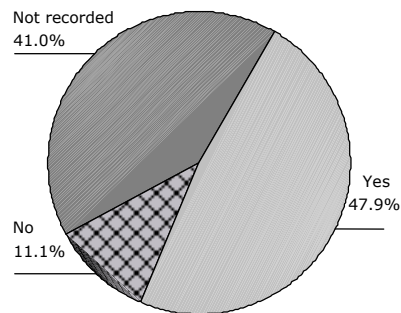


Figure 4.8 Whether office staff knew the answer to a query (secondary sector)

Sometimes dealing with a query was a time consuming affair. One office staff member suggested that it could take up to an hour to deal with particular kinds of queries if it involved speaking to staff and searching records.

4.2.2 Information sources to inform the answer and use of materials

The logging indicated that although some materials were referred to in order to answer queries, this applied to only 27% of all queries. This was backed up by interviews with office staff who reported dealing with queries through 'own knowledge' and 'experience'; indeed this was written consistently on the logging pads in one school. Table 4.6 provides an overview of the materials that were used during the two logging periods for the whole sample.

Materials used	Type of Enquiry								% of materials used
	Money Issues	Meals Issues	Health Issues	Pass something on	Speak with someone	When is something?	Collect-ion of pupil	Other	
School records/ documents									51.0%
Other*									19.9%
Pupil Records									19.1%
Timetable									7.5%
Prospectus									2.4%
School web-site									0.1%
LEA web-site									0%
Totals									100%

* Other includes: absence slips; admissions sheet; interview sheet; book club leaflet; cover sheet; diary; taxi number; LEA brochure; own records; signing out slip

Table 4.6 Materials used when dealing with queries (whole sample)

4.2.3 Referred queries

Knowing what to do did not always mean dealing with it in the office. Very often it meant referring the parent/carer to the person in the school who had the authority and/or the required knowledge. Queries were referred on to a wide range of personnel and, as table 4.7 indicates, the type of query referred varied extensively.

Referred on to	Type of Enquiry								Percentage of Referrals
	Money Issues	Meals Issues	Health Issues	Pass something on	Speak with someone	When is something?	Collection of pupil	Other	
Class teacher									33.2%
Head of Year/Key Stage									24.0%
Other*									9.5%
Support staff									6.6%
Head									6.2%
Home-school liaison officer									5.8%
Curriculum staff									4.6%
Deputy									4.3%
SENCO									3.7%
Peripatetic									0.8%
LEA									0.7%
Non-school									0.4%
School nurse									0.2%
Police officer									0
Social services									0
Totals									100%

* Other includes: W. Ex staff; students; transport; work experience co-ordinator; on to voice mail; Financial Manager; 6th form admin; Admissions tutor

Table 4.7 Where types of queries are referred (whole sample)

The data do not determine accurately whether office staff knew the answer to the actual query but had no authority to give it and so had to refer the matter on to another member of staff. For example, queries related to extended leave for children usually couldn't be answered immediately, as approval from a senior member of staff was required. Issues typically referred included those about bullying, child protection or child custody and complaints about a particular teacher. It was therefore difficult to determine whether a positive response by an office staff member to the item about referring something on meant that they did not know the answer but knew who did, that they themselves knew the answer but were not able to provide it, or that they did not know the answer, did not know who did and were moving the query along to someone who might know more.

A higher proportion of queries was referred on to the class teacher in primary schools (47%) than in secondary schools (32%), where the Head of Year/Key Stage had a bigger role. Interview data corroborated the logging data; interviewees suggested that there were more opportunities to discuss issues with the class teachers of a primary school aged child. This was largely due to the ease of access parents/carers had with the class teacher when dropping off and collecting their child from school.

Referred on to	Type of Enquiry								Percentage of Referrals
	Money Issues	Meals Issues	Health Issues	Pass Something on	Speak with someone	When is something	Collect-ion of pupil	Other	
Class teacher									47.3%
Other*									22.0%
Head									18.7%
SENCO									2.7%
Support staff									2.7%
LEA									2.0%
Head of Year/Key Stage									1.3%
Non-school									1.3%
Deputy									1.3%
School nurse									0.7%
Peripatetic									0
Curriculum staff									0
Police officer									0
Social services									0
Home-school liaison officer									0
Totals									100%

* Other includes: Community centre; after school club; admin; premises officer;

Table 4.8 Where queries are referred (primary sector)

It was evident that secondary schools in the study made use of home-school liaison workers when communicating with parents/carers. Although some primary schools in the study also had such staff, and in interviews discussed their importance and their role, it is interesting to note that there were no instances during the logging period of primary school queries being referred on to home school liaison officers.

One of the designated community schools had become a general information point.

With being a community school, people do query with us, we direct them to our community tutor because she has a finger on the pulse and ... she knows where to go for a doctor (office manager).

Referred on to	Type of Enquiry							% of Referrals
	Money Issues	Meals Issues	Health Issues	Pass Something on	Speak with someone	When is something	Collect-ion of pupil	
Class teacher								32.3%
Head of Year/Key Stage								27.1%
Other*								7.9%
Home-school liaison officer								7.4%
Support staff								7.0%
Curriculum staff								5.8%
Deputy								4.8%
SENCO								4.1%
Head								2.9%
LEA								0.5%
Peripatetic								0.1%
School nurse								0.1%
Non-school								0
Social services								0
Police officer								0
Totals								100%

* Other includes: W.Ex. staff; students; transport; work experience co-ordinator; Voice mail; Financial Manager; 6th form admin; Admissions tutor

Table 4.9 Where queries are referred (secondary sector)

Information or queries that were generally passed on included questions about homework, behaviour (bullying), child progress or curriculum-based questions. Often, these went directly to the teacher involved.

4.2.5 Summary of findings of responding to queries

In the study, for the majority of enquiries, the office staff knew the answer to a query, even when they passed it on at the request of a parent/carer.

Most enquiries did not require reference to documents as the staff had good knowledge which had come through experience. However, key documents (such as timetables) were used regularly and needed to be on hand (or an electronic version available).

Many enquirers wished to speak to someone beyond the office, usually a teacher or Head of Year/Key Stage (totalling 48.6% in primary schools and 59.4% in secondary schools) yet systems were often not in place to route telephone calls elsewhere, through the use of voice mail.

Many messages were passed on to the head and other staff for reasons of authority or because they concerned sensitive issues. Very few messages were passed on to people who were not core to the teaching and learning process.

4.3 Patterns in queries

This section details the timings of the day and contact required by enquirers and then examines a number of themes which caused patterns of enquiries to vary across the year and across types of schools.

4.3.1 Time of day

The logging data indicate that many queries made to the school offices were during the morning. Our data indicate that 73.4% of enquiries were made between 7.30 a.m. and 12.00 mid-day. The data show that the largest percentage of enquiries made to the office occurred prior to the school day commencing, that is between the hours of 7.30 a.m. and 9.00 a.m. as illustrated in figure 4.9. This is due to the numbers of parents reporting absence and the accessibility of staff members to whom parents/carers wished to speak.

The time bands 2, 3 and 5 represent teaching times and it is clear that parents/carers who made queries to schools during those times would have found teachers unavailable. A regular occurrence, according to office staff reported was parents/carers trying to contact teachers during teaching time and not appreciating that the teacher would be unavailable during that time.

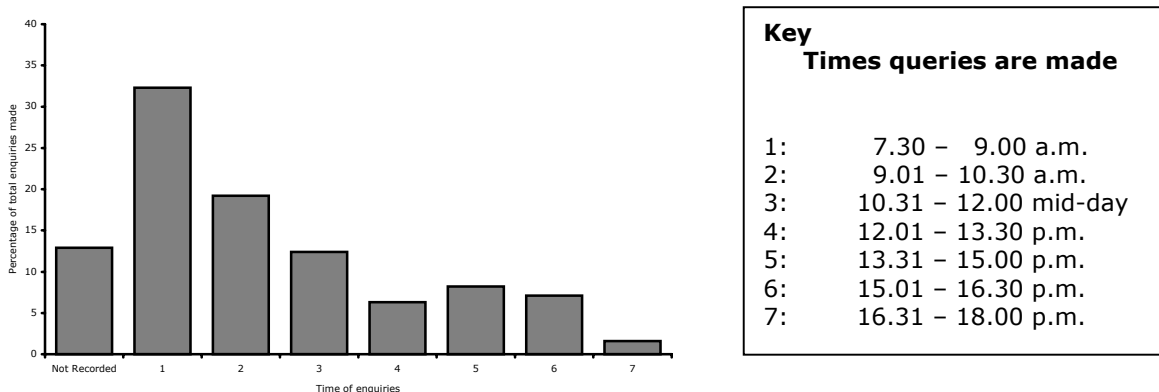


Figure 4.9 Frequency graph of time band within which query is made

Cross tabulation was performed to ascertain whether certain types of enquiries were being made at specific times in the school day. This analysis supports the finding that most parents/carers did attempt to speak with their child's class teacher prior to the school day commencing. Table 4.10 highlights the time that enquiries were made and to whom they were referred.

Referred on to	Time band of enquiry								% of enquiries
	7.30 – 9.00	9.01 – 10.30	10.31 – 12.00	12.01 – 13.30	13.31 – 15.00	15.01 – 16.30	16.31 – 18.00	18.01 – 19.30	
Class teacher									34.9%
Head of Year/Key Stage									25.4%
Other*									9.4%
Support staff									7.1%
Home-school liaison officer									6.2%
Curriculum staff									4.9%
Deputy									4.6%
SENCO									3.9%
Head									2.4%
LEA									0.7%
Non-school									0.2%
School nurse									0.2%
Peripatetic									0.1%
Social services									0
Police officer									0
Totals									100%

Table 4.10 Time of query and who referred to

4.3.2 Annual themes

As the research was carried out in a limited time frame (February-March) it was clear that some 'seasonal' or episodic queries would be missing from the logging data. Interviews with office staff (ten) and senior staff (eleven) at the pre-logging stage identified patterns of queries that were made within an academic year. The main themes identified across the study sites can be summarised as follows: admissions, cultural inclusion, school events, uniform purchase. There was also a spread of 'other issues' which are noted here in relation to specific populations and episodic issues.

(1) Admissions

Although admissions queries were more prevalent at particular points in the year, there were also a number at all times of the year, especially where there was competition for places or high pupil mobility.

The beginning of the academic year brought in a number of queries from parents/carers of new pupils in primary schools and Year 7 pupils in secondary schools. Office staff indicated that it took some time for many new parents/carers to understand and familiarise themselves with the expected routines and regulations.

Well initially in September it's a lot of queries from new parents double-checking uniforms, school term dates... September tends to be our busy time with lots of new people not familiar with the routine (business manager, secondary).

September we've got all the new children coming in and so it's just... people just generally wanting to know about the school meals, uniform, this sort of thing (office staff, primary).

Office staff linked this process to the idea of an induction period for parents/carers. Parents/carers and children alike needed time in getting to know the culture and

structures of the new school. This learning often took place in and through interactions with the front office.

In addition to dealing with expected admissions at the beginning of the school year, there were queries concerning admissions at other times during the academic year.

Well admissions is a sort of seasonal work-load if you like, we do almost, not on a daily basis but certainly five or six enquiries a week for casual admissions (office manager).

Dealing with enquiries on admissions was time-consuming and included, on top of responding to specific questions, various tasks such as taking parents/carers and children around the school and helping them to fill out the right forms.

Schools in this study dealt with admissions differently. In some cases the office staff dealt with the entire process, in others it was the responsibility of a senior member of staff. In one area the LEA was the admission authority and, hence, dealt with all issues concerning admissions. This was welcomed by office staff.

I think it's good...because it stops queue jumping...everybody knows where they are. It's the best system. It's better than how it used to be (office staff).

(2) Cultural inclusion

Queries that linked to cultural issues were reported in interview, including fasting and festivals. While all schools were likely to experience some of these kinds of queries, there were more of them in schools where there were high concentrations of pupils with specific cultural and religious practices. Several of the inner city schools were in areas where the population was predominantly of Asian heritage and lived quite close to the school. One had a wider cultural mix but the catchment was more widespread so the community had fewer connections with the school.

Many of the office staff stressed the importance of knowing what was happening in the community and being able to accommodate it without making a fuss.

Understanding fasting, when they're [particular pupils] ... not allowed to drink or whatever and they're fasting in daylight hours and understanding what they're going through (office staff).

Some schools made special provisions which required some negotiation between home and school, such as the provision of a room or permission to leave the premises.

To ensure inclusion, school office staff also often had to provide ad hoc translation and interpreter services.

... sometimes you have to fetch somebody else to interpret for you because there's a lot of languages in the school spoken and we only speak English (office staff).

Six schools with the most culturally and linguistically diverse populations deliberately employed multilingual⁶ staff as teachers, teaching assistants and office staff.

(3) School Events

Events on the school calendar generated parent/carer queries. Office staff identified some patterns and highlighted summer fêtes and activities in particular. This variation in patterns of queries across the school year was also associated with busy times in the office.

... some weeks are worse than others, the busy time is at the beginning of school year and summer term (office staff).

Well summer term is of course outings, so people are coming in to find out about those (office manager).

In most of the study sites, responsibility for most of the organisation of school trips had been assigned to office staff. All school office staff reported being involved with the collection of trip money and queries arising from this task.

One school in the study used participation in trips as their main method of getting parents involved. This took much current administration time as the office staff member involved was in the process of developing a school web-site to 'market' the request for help.

We ask for parents to help on school trips, in fact I'm just doing a website on 'how can we help our children at school?' and the only thing we could think of to put was help on school trips, which is quite sad. Now are we going to look at what other things can they help with (office manager).

Most office staff saw the administration of trips as a task which had been shifted from teachers to the front office.

... the administrative tasks that you've had to take from the teachers, one has been the money issues, uniform and trips (office manager).

Office staff reported that this shift had produced more queries.

(4) Uniform purchase

Other common queries included the purchase of school uniform. This was especially so in the primary schools within the study and was more prevalent in the summer or early autumn as parents/carers purchased items for the new school year.

... almost every day somebody will come ordering a sweatshirt or T-shirt or – (it takes) quite a lot of my time, but some weeks are worse than others. The busy time is at the beginning of school year and summer term (office manager).

Although dealing with the purchase of uniforms was relatively straightforward in most schools, one school reported that they had experienced some problems when dealing with complaints about uniforms. Referring to it as one of the frustrating aspects of the job, one office manager reported

⁶ The community languages represented were Gujarati and Bengali.

At the moment I've got a parent who is not happy with what she bought last week, so I've got someone coming in next week to discuss that, it's not straightforward (Office manager)

One of the schools in the study had recently changed part of its uniform and they had a number of queries related not only to purchase, but also the consequences of wearing the incorrect attire. These latter interactions were often related to complaints and the office staff found that they had to be clear about school policy so that they could explain it to the parents/carers.

(5) Specific populations of pupils

The study included a number of schools serving low socio-economic communities where parents/carers whose child was not eligible for school meals (or the parent/carer did not wish to claim) saw them as good value for money. Here, office staff reported and logged large numbers of queries related to cash payments, particularly on Monday morning. In three of the schools, parents/carers preferred to bring the money to the school, rather than to send it with the child. The schools had to put additional staff into the office at that time in order to deal not only with the taking of monies, but with other requests that were made at the same time.

In two primary schools, this time was seen as an opportunity to welcome parents/carers and to encourage participation in homework, classroom activities, adult education and other community and school events. One of the schools provided tea, coffee and seating, and the front foyer became a place for general social interaction. Meeting in the school after paying for dinners had become part of the rhythm of the week for many mothers and carers and the school formed a significant node in community networks. What was important here was that what could simply be an additional and hidden cost, the administration of school meals, had been transformed into a benefit for both the parents/carers and the schools concerned.

Schools serving families who were at present in difficult circumstances also found that the front office became a site for the provision of assistance with more general health and welfare issues. One school with high numbers of asylum seekers had become a significant source of support.

... there's at least 40% plus kids here who are refugees, have got refugee status or asylum seekers who we get on a daily basis, parents coming in and asking us to write letters to the Home Office, it's something that we don't have to do, we do do it (office manager, primary).

(6) Episodic issues

A number of issues were identified during the interviews which occurred irregularly or occasionally, but not at particular times of the year.

There were two cases in the logging data that probably represented a large pattern. The first was related to weather. One school in the sample had a significant number of telephone queries on one day related to possible snow closure. Another had a large number of queries throughout the logging period about the future of the school, about which there was some doubt. There had been a difficult and public issue in the school the previous year resulting in the departure of the head and enrolments were known to be falling. While parents/carers largely knew that

decisions about the fate of the school lay elsewhere, this did not prevent them ringing the school on a regular basis to see if there was any news.

Interviews also revealed issues which, while not entirely regular, were of a type that could impact significantly on the front office. One school had had pupils who had had a contagious disease which had been reported in the local paper. Another had had a child severely hurt in an accident. These one-off events produced a rush of queries and are indicative of the kinds of events that most schools have to deal with at some time or another. They are significant not only in that they place additional demands on staff, but they also require specific kinds of responses and knowledge.

We did have a child snatched from the school, unfortunately, once but we were not expecting it at the time, we hadn't been significantly forewarned, so you know, when the parent turned up and suddenly snatched the child, we couldn't do a lot about it but it did have a happy ending fortunately (office staff).

There were also reports of more common queries that were irregular although expected. Some were related to issues of custody and access: these required office staff to call on legal knowledge, exercise considerable explanatory capacity and demonstrate sympathy and tact while holding firm to the law.

You have to be very careful, don't side with anybody because if you've got a parent who wants to take the children away we have to be very careful (office staff)

Such neutrality often taxed staff who felt very responsible for ensuring children's safety.

Interview data suggested that some school policies were problematic. There were a number of reports from one school about parents/carers complaining about collecting confiscated items such as mobile phones and non-uniform clothing. While this was an isolated case in the data, it is possible that problems arising from school policies may be more widespread than data indicate and the office staff are always at the home-school interface in relation to these kinds of queries.

Such queries required the office staff to have a response ready and a clear system in place for dealing with the issue.

4.3.3 Summary

School offices received enquiries from early morning into the evening. Most parents/carers knew when teachers were available but some did not.

Admissions issues occurred at all times of the year and caused extra work and some challenging interactions. The actual admittance of the pupils at the beginning of the school year resulted in a greater number of queries as parents/carers familiarised themselves with school routines and regulations.

There were uneven patterns of enquiries across the year: the busiest times were thought to be the start of the year (about routines); summer outings; and uniform purchase.

There were also queries relating to general issues such as bad weather, and one-off events such as infectious diseases and possible school closures.

4.4 Systems for handling queries

4.4.1 Office personnel

All office personnel in the project schools were female as indicated in Table 4.11.

In secondary schools there was a more senior member of administrative staff who was located elsewhere e.g. Office Manager or Bursar (and was not the first point of contact for enquirers unless it was a particularly busy period). In smaller schools, the senior member of administrative staff was located in the school office and was part of the logging process. In the smallest school, there was only one part time member of administrative staff. Six schools (in areas with a large English as an Additional Language (EAL) population) had recruited office staff who could speak one of the community languages such as Gujarati or Bengali.

School	Number of personnel involved in logging – all female	Gender of head teacher or alternative
1 - secondary	3	female bursar
2 - secondary	4	male head
3 - secondary	3	female bursar
4 - secondary	9	female deputy; female bursar
5 - primary	2	male head
6 - primary	2	female head
7 - primary	3	male head
8 - primary	2	female head
9 - primary	1	female head
10- primary	2	male head
Total	31	

Table 4.11 Details of personnel

4.4.2 Layout of office

All schools had attempted to provide a counter or focal point. In some case this was in an open plan space and in other schools it was a partitioned off space. In all cases, the position of the counter allowed for close proximity to other administrative staff or the head teacher so that support could be provided in busy or stressful situations.

4.4.3 Strategies to handle queries (formal and informal)

Systems for dealing with parent/carers queries varied significantly across the sample. Influencing factors included the size of the school and access to appropriate technology.

Interviews made it clear that the daily volume of queries was unpredictable and therefore difficult to plan for. This was exemplified by the response from one primary school office staff member who commented, 'Just panic and stumble through really.'

One possible effect of this unpredictability was that child or parent/carer queries were sometimes seen as an interruption to other more important work.

It was reported in interview by both office staff and their supervisors that those responsible for the front office did everything they could to find the appropriate member of staff to deal with a query before resorting to relaying a message. One school had very precise internal systems in place using a telephone routing system. Two schools had initial recorded messages for callers, which provided them with options: these included admission queries, absence reporting and messages for specific personnel. Both of these schools provided the option of going through to the main switchboard.

However the remaining schools used informal systems for communicating messages to staff. E-mails were forwarded to the appropriate person. Messages were written down and placed in teachers' pigeonholes, drawers, or registers. In one school all notes to teachers about students would go in the student's file if the subject matter was felt to be long term. Sometimes messages were delivered in person. In one school anything 'delicate' was passed on to the head teacher. Some queries were responded to by arranging appointments with the people involved. Problems associated with informal methods for passing on information were highlighted in most interviews and most of the schools put on record the deficiencies in their current system.

I think any organisation with two people in it and more than one letter a day is going to find problems in allocating things properly (head teacher, primary).

Office staff did generally know where, how and to whom to pass messages despite no written documentation being provided for this in any of the schools. This knowledge was gained through experience rather than formal training.

In instances where messages were taken, these were normally in the form of notes.

Yes, if the person is available, check the timetable and obviously the best thing to do is to put them through there and then if you know they're free and the next point of call then is to write a message or do an email and depending on how urgent as well, you tend to see how urgent the message is really (office staff).

Two schools spoke of increased use of e-mail communications between staff. They also said that parents/carers used email to directly contact individual members of staff.

We'll say please let us know your views, email us, ring us etc.... if you look at any of the parents' meetings we invite comments and feedback so that they can contribute if you like to school policy or they can give their views ... consequently we always provide our email addresses ... so all the contact addresses are here of the key players, via email which is much easier for most people (deputy head teacher, secondary).

4.4.4 Busy periods in the office

Staff used individual strategies such as prioritising phone calls and queries, and planning their individual tasks around the busy periods.

Some schools had deliberately laid out the office space so that staff 'inside' could observe if things were getting hectic in the front office and move to help. The larger schools had front office rosters so that the jobs could be shared out. In one secondary school the 'time on' was only a matter of an hour or so at a time. Another secondary school reported putting on additional staff to cope with the busiest times in the year. In one large secondary school, staff working patterns had been adjusted to provide more cover during the early morning busy period and to provide cover at the end of the day.

In small schools, the head teacher literally came out of her/his office to help.

It seems that, in this sample, schools that had formal systems for dealing with busy periods were in the minority. Often the smooth running of busy periods was more dependent upon the patience of parents/carers and the good will of staff than any formal arrangements such as rosters.

4.4.5 Record-keeping and monitoring systems

Nine of the ten schools had no formal policy or process for the follow-up of queries, and none had any formal central process for recording queries made, their nature and their follow-up.

One school in this study had opted to develop turn-around times for dealing with parent/carer queries. This secondary school had developed a detailed policy for pupils, parents/carers and staff.

We have guidelines about the manner, the tone, the timing, the nature (of communication)... it's seen as a three-way thing actually because pupils are involved in this. There's one (set of guidelines) for pupils, one for parents and carers and one for staff, so it's about any two of those three, bearing in mind that relationships with three people are not easy. So in other words, parents, you know, if your child comes home and says X and Y, they won't necessarily pick the phone up and shout at the school. Approaches in the spirit of the enquiry, we are very pleased to help them, let's remember there needs to be two sides of the story in the same way that we do too (deputy head, secondary).

In this school, all parent/carer queries by letter were to have a response within a maximum of three days, and within twenty four hours if made by telephone.

Many of the problems associated with the passing on of information were identified as follow-up issues. The most common of these was when follow-up did not occur as quickly as a parent/carer would like. Office staff stated that they knew when a message had not been dealt with due to a repeat call being made by the parent/carer. In these cases they were left to apologise and repeat the process in an attempt to move things along. In addition, some office staff made verbal checks to ensure parent/carer queries were being dealt with.

The key to how well office staff dealt with queries was their competence. Staff skills and training are considered in Section 4.5.

4.4.6 Summary

All office staff were female. Numbers varied from nine to one part time with the size of the school. Senior staff were not involved in receiving queries unless they stepped in at busy times.

The office layout varied but all reception areas provided a focal point for those making queries.

Staff found ways to support each other in busy periods or challenging situations.

Strategies varied depending on size and type of school, especially in relation to the type of queries which predominated. These included trying to locate a member of staff, passing on messages by paper or email and the use of voicemail.

Email was seen as having potential for passing on queries and messages or for making direct links between home and school.

There was little evidence of monitoring and following up of enquiries which had been passed on. Only one school had developed turn-around times for dealing with queries.

4.5 Skills and training

Interview data yielded categories of information about skills and training. They were: (1) selection of staff with pre-existing skills, (2) provision of training, (3) training for working with parents/carers, and (4) impediments to training.

4.5.1 Selection of staff with pre-existing skills

Head teachers reported that they looked for office staff with particular personal qualities as well as skills.

I suppose when we're appointing them we're looking for people who are going to be hardworking, who are going to be reliable, who are going to be well organized, who are going to be pleasant, courteous, good listeners, efficient communicators, good team players and very often of course have specific typing skills ... (head teacher, primary).

...interpersonal skills definitely. The ability to remain calm under pressure, to remain polite and to perceive that a parent's query is important no matter how trivial it may appear to you at that moment in time. To ensure that they give really good customer satisfaction, to have a good sense of humour, to be at all times polite even though they are less than polite to you sometimes. In terms of actually managing the workload, to be able to multi-task, to be able to record accurately and equipped to be able to make decisions, to pass them on, about where their school, how their school and where to put an unusual call through... (head teacher, secondary).

They've got to be pleasant to begin with, they're the first face that people see and the same with their telephone answering techniques, again they've got to be warm, pleasant, friendly. Secondly of course, good IT skills, got to have good IT skills (bursar).

Most office staff considered themselves to be at the 'forefront', being the first point of contact for parents/carers, visitors and the general public. They took this responsibility very seriously and were highly conscious of the 'first impression' for which they were responsible. They thought that this was not something which was simply about personal qualities, but also a matter of values, skills and knowledge. Therefore, when office staff spoke about their jobs and the skills they needed, they generally began by listing skills and then moved to the interpersonal arena.

Well we've all got word-processing skills, typing skills, we all have to have a good knowledge of the school of course. We all have to be polite and as helpful as we possibly can be and be friendly as well, so those are the main things, but we are all qualified, we've all got qualifications (office staff, secondary).

In interview, office staff stressed the capacity to manage multiple tasks at once, while remaining calm. They emphasised the importance of making the 'right call'.

We all get busy periods regularly and it just depends on just juggling and making sure that you prioritise and deal with calls, if a call can be held for a while whilst we deal with maybe an urgent visitor or something like that, it's a question of common sense and professionalism and making judgements (office staff, secondary).

Given this emphasis, it might be expected that schools would make training a high priority.

4.5.2 Provision of training

Two of the sample schools, both secondary, were heavily oriented to training.

In one, the office staff all received training, although this was weighted towards business management. The professional development of office staff was supported enthusiastically by the recently appointed acting head teacher. The Bursar had completed the Certificate in School Business Management offered through the National College for School Leadership. She was keen to develop more training for office and other staff.

I think the function and status of stakeholders is really important, so I'd like to put in in-house training, to have a section about who the stakeholders are, what their roles and responsibilities are, you know, and maybe that could be introduced in an induction pack for all staff, ... all staff are dealing with queries from parents really (bursar).

The second training-oriented school referred to the evolving role of office staff.

In a way I think office staff as a term is actually quite demeaning, I know they are based in an office but that kind of demeans their role. The roles are developing all the time and yes remodelling the workforce means that their roles are changing, they're evolving, they're taking on board more and more skills and a lot of them to do with ICT as well so those skills have developed. Their understanding of interpersonal skills and the need to use them are heightened and they are developing all the time, they see themselves as professionals (business manager).

The office staff member in this school reported two hours training for dealing with the switchboard.

In the remaining eight schools training for the front office position could be described as, at best, patchy.

In these schools, office administrators felt they received little training. Only two interviewees made any reference to induction or orientation. Specific courses that were mentioned included First Aid, updates on admission procedures, and support from EDIS with the SIMS program. Additionally, one interviewee indicated that the LEA had identified that education for school office staff was important. This LEA offered some courses for office staff about working through difficult situations. The training most mentioned was geared to learning how to use computer-based packages which enabled office staff to complete administrative aspects of their roles. This was the one school in the sample which knew about, although no-one had yet undertaken, the DfES training package *Introductory Training for School Support Staff* offered through the local LEA.

Some office staff also reported the importance of knowing about the cultural and religious heritages and practices of the local community, and suggested that they had learnt about this either by being part of the community, or through working with others who did have the relevant information.

One of the staff spoke explicitly about the importance of 'on the job training'.

You can go on as many courses as you like but actually working in the school office is the best training for the basic thing (office staff).

Several staff spoke about training new staff members as being part of their work.

4.5.3 Training for working with parents and carers

All office staff reported having had no specific training for dealing with parents/carers. The emphasis placed on experience in selection is assumed to provide the essential tools and requisite skills for dealing with parent/carer queries.

No training has been provided, I think because the administrator here was actually a playgroup leader or the support assistant... and sort of stepped in and is actually just learning the job as she's been going along but she's a cheerful personality, so that helps (head teacher, primary).

Nothing formal. I suppose it's just experience really and they obviously – I did ask the Head this because I thought well there's no formal training and she said well at the interview they chose someone that they thought had got reasonable PR skills, but that's it. There isn't any training (office staff).

It's come with 20 years' experience (office staff).

Some felt that training was not likely to do what was required.

If we see a course that we feel is appropriate, that will help someone respond with a difficult parent or a difficult visitor, then we will put them on that course. Generally, because we choose the right people, it isn't really that necessary. We do find that the training is very much reactive, it's actually dealing with a situation as it occurs and then always someone being around to offer the support (business manager).

One head suggested that training in this area would be inappropriate.

I appointed her for her interpersonal skills, I would insult her by saying she needed any training at all (head teacher, secondary).

However, one school office did have a person who had had training, as part of her previous job in the industrial sector, in handling difficult clients, and her colleague spoke of the tangible difference in the way that she managed critical incidents.

4.5.4 Barriers to training

The data is replete with instances of office staff reports of not having the time to go to courses. Six spoke of booking a course and then not going because there was too much to do at school. A few mentioned the expense both of the courses and temporary replacement. One office manager spoke of the priorities that caused training to drop down the list of things to do.

Well I'm afraid we're a bit lacking in that area, not because the will isn't there. We can all go on any training courses within financial constraints of course, but quite often we don't allow them because they don't have time (office manager).

This was just one explicit example of the common practice of putting immediate and short term school needs above the longer-term training needs of office staff.

4.5.5 Summary

In the ten sample schools, staff were selected for pre-existing skills which were expected to equip them to handle a number of aspects of the job, including dealing with parent/carers queries.

Only two of the secondary schools demonstrated a strong commitment to staff training. Training offered in the remaining eight schools was patchy and focused on new administrative tasks. It was reported that even when training was arranged, immediate demands in the school could prohibit attendance.

The majority of the schools were unaware of the DfES *Introductory Training for School Support Staff* course and only one of the schools had taken up the NCSL training for bursars. All office staff felt strongly that on the job training was the most relevant to their needs.

Staff reported that pressure of work in the office often took precedence over attendance at training.

4.6 Challenging situations

Parents/carers who were interviewed for this study were satisfied with the service they received from the school.

This is congruent with the findings of Ranson, Martin and Vincent (2004) who found generally high levels of support for school-home communication. However, Ranson et al. reported several incidents which were challenging to both parents/carers and the school suggesting that satisfaction and challenge, while seemingly contradictory, may sometimes paradoxically be experienced simultaneously.

In this study data about challenges, and possible parent/carer dissatisfaction, was forthcoming from office staff. There were three major types of challenges discussed during interviews. They were: (1) challenging queries, (2) challenging enquirers, and (3) challenging contexts.

4.6.1 Challenging queries

Office staff reported two types of challenging queries (i) those arising from the school being oversubscribed, and (ii) difficulties in re-enrolment after extended unapproved leave.

(i) The oversubscribed school

The sample did contain at least two schools, one primary and one secondary, that appeared to be over subscribed. These both catered for relatively middle class catchment areas. Of course, some schools serving less affluent populations are also oversubscribed, but in this sample, it was the more economically comfortable areas in which this occurred.

...admissions ... that's Easter, September and January. You have parents asking, or potential parents asking 'Has my child got a place?'... there might only be 10 or 15 places left for other people that live near and this is a quite populated area and in the past we've had people refused from the third road and that's quite an anxious time for them (office manager, secondary).

Office staff reported that a few parents/carers sought to gain entry through making persistent queries to the office. It was reported that this kind of insistence created some difficulty for office staff who did not have any influence on the rules arrangements: in one of the schools in question the decisions were made by the LEA and in the other it was the school's senior management team.

Head teachers in oversubscribed schools also had to deal with queries from parents/carers unhappy about decisions related to admissions.

The issue of oversubscription is well known and the impact on school staff also documented in media stories. The research data support the view that there is a 'hidden cost' to being a popular school – more office and senior management time is spent on this 'external' issue; if external is understood to mean dealing with parents/carers who are not yet part of, and may not ever be part of, the school community. While some saw this as integral to marketing, it was also suggested that this was time taken away from 'internal' demands, including dealing with the queries and concerns of parents/carers who were already part of the school community.

(ii) Unofficial extended leave

Office staff reported difficulties arising from queries about the official extended leave policy. In situations where families decided to take children out of school regardless of the policy then there were sometimes difficulties when they returned and attempted to re-enrol.

We take them off roll now, after two weeks, we take them off roll and they have to reapply to come to the school, which they're not very happy with, but that's the rule. If there are places they get their place back, but if not... (office staff).

Office staff were divided in their view about the value of extended leave. Some office staff articulated the need to respect religious practices.

We find whenever [Eid] is or a few months before Eid or when it's Haj... a lot of parents tend to go that time, then we'll get lots of queries for that and their passports (office staff, primary).

However, this perspective was not universal among the office staff. The educational value of extended leave was negated in one case and in another referred to as 'a problem'.

...parents seem to be going on holiday and they're asking for extended holidays and the Head is not very happy giving them time off unless it is for a specific reason...but we normally say no. Sometimes they do take it up or they sometimes just ignore it and go anyway (office staff).

...on extended leave and we're talking 2 months to 6 months and then of course the impact on the education of the children, it's not just impacting on the school. It's a big urban wide problem... (office manager).

It was not within the purview of this study to see how such attitudes might play out in the handling of queries, although there is obvious potential for it to affect the process. In the sample, head teachers in schools in areas serving culturally diverse communities all expressed concerns about the difficulties of dealing with queries related to the issue of extended leave. They argued that the queries could not be separated from the broader policy context of cultural inclusion.

Office staff in interview often suggested that their job was to support the school to implement existing policies by explaining the rules and expectations to parents/carers making queries. In this situation, this placed them in a position of conflict with the wishes of parents/carers and this led to challenging interactions when dealing with these particular queries.

4.6.2 Challenging inquirers

All of the schools reported the difficulty of dealing with parents/carers who did not understand the routines of the school.

There is a problem in terms of how quickly parents expect Directors of Learning to deal with them, trying ... to get across to them they're in charge of 220 children ... they're teaching from 9 'til 3.30 ... they think that directors of learning and teachers are there to call and getting that message across to parents is quite difficult, we pass the message on and if they don't have time, which they don't, it might take them two or three days to

get back because they have 220 kids ... but they can't seem to grasp that they're teaching all day, they might have one free, they might not because they need to cover, then they make their appointments to see parents, if there's an issue, in that free period so technically they're not available from half past eight to half past three and that's difficult because parents quite often say 'Oh I rang this morning and you haven't got back and I rang yesterday', so basically we support the teacher by explaining to the parents, 'Yes I do realise and I know it's frustrating, however, they're teaching all day and I've put at least 20 messages in the tray, they will eventually get round to ringing you back' (office manager, secondary).

No school indicated on the logging forms that there had been any difficult interactions with parents/carers during the two week logging period. However, in interview, one secondary school reported dealing with at least two difficult interactions per day arising from queries from parents/carers. Another secondary school talked of an incident the week before the logging began, and one secondary school reported that an incident had occurred after the logging was completed and before the post logging interview. However, every interviewee not only discussed difficult interactions, but each transcript also contained at least one serious example. These varied considerably. There were several causes for these incidents:

- things out of the school's control e.g. litter around the school, behaviour of pupils on buses and in shops in town
- school policy e.g. car parking, uniform, attendance
- LEA policy e.g. admissions
- external policy. e.g. child protection
- a particular teacher e.g. alleged unfairness or incompetence
- another pupil or pupils e.g. bullying, disagreement
- effects of pupil's non compliance e.g. being home-visited by the Educational Welfare Officer (EWO)
- parent/carer issues e.g. custodial matters, neighbourhood disputes, alcohol or substance abuse related behaviour, mental illness.

In most cases these issues first became a matter for front office staff, or a member of the senior management team. They had to deal with an initial burst of anger, calm the person down and then listen to the concerns. It was suggested that this could become difficult to deal with, especially if it was a regular occurrence.

On some occasions interviewees stated that such interactions became more physical.

... the state of the school grounds has been a big (issue) because we've put bark underneath the new play equipment which was a major disaster and during the heavy rain over Christmas, this bark just became a sea of black oozing clay mud, so parents were sort of slinging school uniforms down and asking me if I was going to wash them (head teacher, primary).

And far less frequently, a minority of incidents became problematic.

parents complain that cars park in the wrong areas so they're bringing numbers of car registration numbers in and I'll put that out in newsletters as a name and shame policy... (head teacher, primary).

One interviewee referred to the difficulties new and young staff had in adjusting to such interactions and another to a high turnover of office staff. It was reported that

even the 'run of the mill' difficult queries and resulting transactions could become wearing and eventually overwhelming.

In this study, nobody presented a picture of such interactions as the most common activity that occurred when parents/carers made queries. However it was an issue that dominated the thinking of both office staff and their line managers.

4.6.3 Challenging contexts

There were two types of challenges that arose from the nature of office work: these impacted on the capacity of the office staff to deal with queries. One was related to the context of the school office and the other to the socio-economic context of the community.

(1) the office context

The data suggest that the school office was a particular busy place. In addition to handling queries from parents/carers, a number of other important school functions were performed. A significant number of tasks were directed towards office staff. Their capacity to deal with all of them, in quick succession, was critical for the effective functioning of the school. While there were important differences between the sectors (office staff in small primary schools tended to have a greater range of tasks than those in bigger secondary schools), the picture of busy, multitasked work was consistent across the two sectors, and across schools of various sizes.

In this study, office staff talked about the intensification of their work. These changes probably began as schools took on more locally managed responsibilities, as accountability frameworks changed to require significantly more data and data analysis to be conducted at the local level, and as ICT was introduced into schools. Three office staff members in the study specifically attributed increased work to the effects of the remodeling agenda. They mentioned dealing with money, responsibility for receiving and ordering equipment and paper work associated with pupil discipline.

There were important issues at stake here to do with occupational health and equitable management of work across the school. These issues were largely outside the questions at the heart of this research, but they are noted here because they affected the capacity of office staff to attend to queries.

(ii) the socio-economic context

The schools that served communities with high levels of social and economic deprivation faced particular queries. Despite having additional resources and networks, the continued demand for support from some parents/ carers did prove a strain for one of the primary schools in the study. Even with a commitment to providing assistance to the parents/carers some staff felt resentful about the continued requests for support.

... they're looking for direction in every aspect of their lives from getting on a bus to filling in a free school meals form (office staff, primary).

It is in these circumstances that such schools needed to be able to call on other community services for assistance. The extended school and community school in

the study reported an equal number of such inquiries, but had more resources and contacts at their disposal to deal with them.

4.6.4 Summary

Some queries presented particular challenges within school, as did occasional inquirers.

The study found that:

- Oversubscribed schools handled ongoing inquiries and complaints related to admissions.
- Some office staff reported difficulties related to handling queries about the official leave policy
- All office staff reported that some parents/carers telephoned the school during lesson times and were reluctant to accept teacher unavailability
- There were a range of queries which required office staff to exercise conflict resolution skills
- School offices were very busy and queries were often one of a series of tasks being managed simultaneously
- Schools in low socio-economic neighbourhoods needed extended networks and resources to handle the range of queries they received.

The next chapter discusses school-home communication practices, the framework within which handling queries takes place.

5. SCHOOL-HOME COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Queries to the front office are made within a broader context. Drawing on the literatures and the data, five significant features of school-home communication are highlighted: (1) creating a welcoming environment, (2) school-home communication, (3) parent/carer participation, (4) formal policies, and (5) extended services.

5.1 Creating a welcoming environment

Researchers took systematic notes on their first visit to each of the schools. Ease of parking, signage, security measures, seating arrangements, layout of the office and foyer and displays were noted. While some schools in this study were advantaged by their architecture, it was also clear that some had made more effort than others to provide a warm welcome for parents/carers and visitors.

Most of the schools had obviously addressed the appearance and ease of use of the school entrance. Despite the presence of locked doors, CCTV and signing-in books, most of the schools had managed to recognise the impact of these security measures.

There was a marked difference between the foyers of primary and secondary schools with most of the primaries being more colourful, displaying more pupils' work, and the secondaries being more business-like. In one secondary school the office staff wore a uniform in keeping with the 'professional' image they articulated as important for their particular middle class community. One of the primary schools had a dedicated space for parents/carers in the foyer with continuous tea and coffee, reading material and samples of activities that families were undertaking at home, in the community and at school with their children. Colourful flags representing the heritages of the school population were on display together with other culturally diverse images and signs.

Primary

The foyer was large and comprised a rectangular shaped middle section with many doors leading off from it. There was a seating area opposite the reception 'window' for parents, although this only comprised two chairs and a table. The area was a designated library and there were many shelves with books. There was a 'child friendly' seating area with cushions and 'animal' wooden chairs. The area was bright and had many displays. Immediately on entering the foyer, there was a board with the school uniform pinned to it. There were some recent press articles about the school on the head teacher's door. There were photos and certificates placed around the area.

First impression notes

There were, however, two sites where the welcome was not so evident.

Signage was limited and certainly posed some difficulties approaching the school from the main road. There was one small sign, which depicted a school map. The arrows indicating the position of the reception area were slightly visible and the one indicating current location was indecipherable. Signage at the front was equally vague with two signs visible; one stated the school name and was close to the perimeter fence and the other consisted of huge letters in white, on the side of the school wall.

First impression notes

Most of the schools separated disruptive children from the visitors, but this was not always the case.

No seats in the foyer. There are two chairs in the waiting area of the school office which is also shared by the two administrative staff. I had to wait with a child who was sick and also watched as a child was reprimanded for bad behaviour.

First impression notes

Some schools did not separate regular deliveries, such as boxes of paper and fruit, from the visitors seating area.

Secondary

The foyer was a relatively small rectangle shaped area. On entrance to the building the reception window was partially concealed behind a section of a wall, and was on the right. From this area, there were two main doors; one leading to a large dining room and the other leading to the staff room (no pupils went down there during my visit). Other doors from the entrance area led to female toilets, a medical room and a room which functioned as a kitchen for the office staff. There were two light brown/beige rectangular sofas facing each other. These were for visitors and could seat up to six people. It appeared that naughty pupils also used these sofas, so at times, it was difficult for visitors to the school to locate a seat. It was painted a light magnolia colour. There was a security camera directed towards the entrance doors. In one corner, close to the ceiling, there was a television screen. This was a visual display of notices. There were two plants in the reception area.

First impression notes

Only one of the schools had provided a range of reading material for parents/carers. Two schools had a prospectus available (one was translated into community languages) and some had pupil work and other school information displayed on a notice board. Two of the primary schools displayed their school uniform.

5.2 School-home communication

All of the schools in the study suggested that communication was very important.

Information was collected about two aspects of communication: (i) general information giving and (ii) interactive communication

(i) General information

All schools had school prospectuses which they used as information for prospective enrolments (see table 5.1). School 1 did not supply the research team with a prospectus.

Details in Prospectus	School									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Headteacher statement/letter		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Statement of the aims/ethos of the school		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Policies		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Mission statement		✓		✓					✓	✓
Home-school agreement/links		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
School organisation (staff information)		✓		✓		✓			✓	✓
Members of the Governing Body		✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
School Uniform		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Term dates		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Timing of the day				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Pastoral care information		✓	✓	✓					✓	
Special Needs		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
School Curriculum		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Extra curricular		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Homework		✓	✓				✓	✓		
Assemblies/Acts of Worship/RE		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
National Curriculum results		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Examination results		✓	✓	✓						
Destination of leavers		✓		✓						
Symbols of any awards		✓	✓	✓		✓				
Contact information		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Social mix of students			✓							
Catchment details					✓				✓	
Accommodation and resources				✓		✓			✓	✓
Sample Menu/Meals information						✓			✓	
Inspection report/summary						✓	✓			
School Finance						✓	✓			
Development areas		✓		✓		✓	✓			

Table 5.1 Contents of prospectuses

It is clear that if parents/carers kept this information, it would form a helpful part of the transition to the new school. However they would also need supplementary information.

All ten schools sent home written information in regular newsletters (see Table 5.2).

School	Newsletter Frequency
01	Termly
02	Not recorded
03	Weekly
04	Termly
05	Not recorded
06	Frequently
07	Monthly
08	One per half-term
09	Termly
10	One per half term

Table 5.2 Frequency of information sent home

Eight schools also sent home additional specific written information about the curriculum.

(ii) interactive communication

A response was not generally required to newsletters and curriculum information. An exception was one school that required pupils to return the newsletter with a parent/carer signature within a given time period: failure to do so resulted in detention for the pupil.

There were other forms of school-initiated communication which did require a written response from the parent/carer (see Table 5.3).

Topic	Number of schools requiring response from home
Trips	10
Behaviour/attendance reports	9
Behaviour letters	9
Exclusion documents	9
Annual report	8
Pupil reports	8
Annual data verification	8
Invitations	7
Lunch money	6

Table 5.3 Responses required from home

Three schools involved families in the annual review process by means of a written questionnaire.

It was apparent that schools saw written information as the key communication strategy. Office staff reported that while this was necessary it was not always effective. In interview they reported regular instances of parents/carers making queries about events or policies about which information was sent home regularly. Various instances were logged during the two data collection periods.

One primary school was conscious of the limitations of relying on written communication in a multi-ethnic community: they regularly supplemented written information with oral messages.

... we have certain key people in the school community who we will make sure know what's going on and we ask them to spread the word within their group of friends and houses and so on. Because of the language difficulty we try to arrange this with the parent and rely on oral tradition because of different dialects (primary head teacher).

One of the secondary schools stressed the importance of a student organiser (diary) as the key means of communication between the school and home. Students were encouraged to use it everyday and show it to their parent/carer. Teachers detailed positive achievements, progress, late or missing homework, detentions, and course work not done in class.

Two secondary schools in the study had a much more formal approach to interactive home-school communication. One reported three points of contact: (1) a short report during the first term; (2) a parents' evening during the second term; and (3) a summative report at the end of the summer term. In addition there were parents' evenings for pupils in Years 9 and 11 to explain subject choices. Secondary schools initiated contact with parents/carers at other times when there were concerns.

By contrast, primary schools typically saw class teachers as the major point of contact for parents/carers. The head teacher only became involved if there was a problem and this happened rarely. One school had moved to recognise the class teacher as the most important point of information exchange. They provided a five minute period every morning during which time parents/carers could pop into the classroom 'for a quick word' or to make a mutually convenient time for a lengthier discussion. Another primary school had programmed in regular social events, such as a monthly 'teatime and chat' which brought parents/carers and teachers together in a relaxed atmosphere.

Two of the secondary schools also saw direct contact between year level and form teachers and parents/carers as important.

5.3 Parent and carer participation

Schools ran a variety of events which parents/carers were invited to attend. Such events often provided the occasion during which queries might be made. They were also, as the literature suggests, significant in shaping the culture in which queries were handled. Events ranged from one-off meetings to longer-term involvement in workshops, classroom activities and decision-making bodies. But such events were not always successful.

Curriculum information... we've largely dropped it now because we tried to have evenings to talk to parents about what their child would be doing that year and to be quite frank, the last time there were something like ten parents for the whole school, it seemed a negative experience, those parents were embarrassed then because two teachers would pounce on them. So instead children take a lot of homework home and we encourage parents to look through the books and things (head teacher, primary).

Some schools had developed other strategies specific to their particular communities. In areas where there were large numbers of families with diverse cultural and language traditions, they ensured that there were teachers and office staff who spoke a range of relevant community languages. These schools placed particular emphasis on their early interactions with families

We've started doing home visits... for the new intake. We make sure it's a Bangladeshi speaking person who goes... and a nursery or reception teacher goes to visit the child at their home and takes a toy along from the school and introduces themselves... the child gets to know the teacher for the first time in their own environment... parents also get to know the adult so they feel secure because the first meeting isn't in this unknown place (head teacher, primary).

One primary school used assemblies as a key strategy for getting parents/carers involved in the school. The head teacher saw these as the backbone of the parent/carer involvement in the school. Assemblies and meetings were accompanied by 'spotlight sessions' where parents were invited to come in and work with their children. In this particular school, interactions between families and the staff were a product of close proximity.

We had a Saturday afternoon fair and it hadn't started brilliantly and of course there was a panic because it was the first ever time they'd ever had a Friends' Association event, so I did stand out in the playground and shout and they came. But I don't think it was the shouting that won, I think they were coming anyway but it was one of those things! (head teacher, primary).

The school had also invested heavily in games and books that could be borrowed and taken home. It ran afternoon sessions when parents worked with teachers to make story sacks for the children. It also offered accredited training to parents/carers and then employed them in the school as teaching assistants.

Another primary school organised events with both mothers and fathers in mind. They ran team-building family days at outdoor adventure centres to engage fathers and storytelling days on the weekend, which were popular with mothers. They consciously celebrated the full range of religious festivals as well as running other events such as concerts and discos.

However, there were also barriers to getting all parents/carers involved. One school reported that the use of Criminal Records Bureau checks had reduced the number of parents/carers willing to volunteer. Another suggested that it was difficult to involve parents/carers in classroom activities if their own levels of literacy were not good.

In the sample, primary schools were more likely than secondary schools to offer a variety of opportunities for parents/carers to be involved and to articulate the importance of multiple options for becoming involved and for supporting children's formal school learning. The most common face-to-face activities in which parents/carers were involved are shown in Table 5.4.

Activity	Number of schools
Attendance at performances and/or exhibitions	9

Involvement in behaviour support programmes with individuals or groups	8
Supporting school trips and excursions	7
Providing general in class support	6
Attending achievement assemblies	6
Attending curriculum workshops	6
Attending adult education classes	4
Involvement in Creative Partnerships programme	4
Attending parenting classes	3
Involvement in Share ⁷ programme	2

Table 5.4 Common activities to involve parents/carers

5.4 Formal policies

None of the schools had a formal parent/carer participation policy aside from the statutory home-school agreement. Most had general policy statements that they believed covered school relationships with parents/carers. One primary school had written parent participation into their school action plan.

All schools had their full complement of parent/carer governors but there were mixed reports about how well governance was going. One primary school was concerned that a minority group had been elected to the governing body and were making decisions that were not representative of the bulk of parents/carers⁸. They were considering ways in which they could increase consultation with 'parents who are around the school a lot, and come to sports day... to hear what they have to say' (deputy head teacher, primary). Several of the schools reported having difficulty in getting parents/carers to come to meetings.

The Parent Staff Friends Association is a very small organisation. It's a very tiny core of four to five people... but they nevertheless are the key organisers of some of the major events we do. And then a lot of people get involved in the event (primary head teacher).

Others, on the other hand, argued that if there was a problem with parent attendance, then it was largely a question of the school rethinking its approach.

In one secondary school there was some ambivalence about having parents/carers in the building. Concern was expressed about possible health and safety and security issues with adults crowding the halls at home time.

5.5 Extended services

All of the senior managers (head teachers, deputy head teachers, bursars/registrars) we interviewed provided detailed information about the communities that they served. They had a strong sense of the uniqueness of their particular location, pupils and families. Many of them also had strong links into the community, regardless of whether they were formally nominated as a community⁹ or extended school. Schools

⁷ Share is a family learning programme funded by the Community Education Development Centre. Teachers in disadvantaged schools are released to work with parents/carers on ways to help their children with their academic learning.

⁸ This concern was also expressed by another secondary head teacher.

⁹ In the sense of having a role in the provision of community activities, as opposed to 'community' in terms of governance structure – seven of the schools had the latter designation but only six the former.

which had achieved stability in senior staffing and were located in relatively peaceful communities were particularly well networked.

Having been here for 15 years...generations of children we've gone through now, we're onto the children of the children we taught and as such we become very much a factor in the community, the school tends not to change and that stability is reflected in the community (head teacher, primary).

Three of the schools (two primary and one secondary) in one of the LEAs were notable for the depth and breadth of their community networks, staffing, facilities and programmes. These were seen as 'core business' rather than an add-on that took resources away from more important things. There was evidence of ongoing support and encouragement from the LEA for work with communities.

One other primary school in the study had been nationally recognised for its community involvement programmes and another of the study sites (secondary) was an extended school.

The data thus reflect a rich mix of community-school activities (see Table 5.5 for frequently mentioned activities).

Local sports clubs coaching and running activities for children
Combined events with local churches and mosques
Designing a community tool kit with community groups for other schools
On site nursery (secondary schools)
Coordination with social services
Use of facilities by local organisations
Community arts centre on site
EAL classes
Diverse range of adult education classes for parents
After school clubs
Projects with local community centres and ethnic and cultural organisations
Family learning projects
Parenting classes
Co-located health service
Co-located sports centre
Dance centre
Employment programmes for parents

Table 5.5 Frequently mentioned school-community activities

In addition, the schools that served communities with high levels of unemployment and poverty were strongly committed to being accessible and helping wherever possible.

Sometimes you need to put everything aside because this parent actually has a crisis they need me to deal with and at that point I think everything goes out of the window, it doesn't really matter because that needs to be dealt with. That could be a myriad of issues, it could be a child issue, it could be something they're experiencing at home, it could be a letter they need for their benefit, if they don't get it they're not going to be able to pay their rent and then they're going to be evicted.... it could be at that level and those I would deal with straight away and they would come straight into the

office, regardless of what I'm doing, whoever I'm with, because that needs to be dealt with because families are what we're about (head teacher, primary).

One school had formalised arrangements for staff availability.

..we have each morning until 9.30 a drop-in centre just for people to go there just to begin with so there's always at least two members of staff there each day. Quite a few people in our community are refugees or asylum seekers who are pretty traumatised in various ways, so we help with housing, medical issues, doctors, dentists, that sort of thing, social security and on occasions we've helped people with appeals, solicitors and that sort of thing. It came about really from demand being recognised, we simply recognised the demand (head teacher, primary).

Sometimes supporting the local community stretched the resources of the school quite considerably. One school had begun to charge a nominal fee for the preparation of passport applications but this had not slowed down the number of requests. The study was unable to ascertain whether families came to their children's school for assistance because there were simply no other accessible services available in the local area, or whether it was because they knew and trusted the local school. First impressions observations suggest the latter, since each of these schools had made considerable effort to recognise and include the various populations that made up their school communities.

These schools in challenging circumstances were also in receipt of additional support in recognition of the issues faced by their communities. Parent/carer and community liaison staff, Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant staff, and Special Educational Needs Coordinators in these schools all became part of a team approach to meeting community needs, a team which stretched from the head teacher to the staff in the front office. In such schools, dealing with the range of queries presented was a team effort.

5.6 Summary

Schools in the study had generally taken care to ensure that parents/carers were made to feel welcome. They paid attention to parking, signage and the appearance of the outside of the school and the front foyer. Security measures were unobtrusive. Seating was provided for visitors. Primary schools had gone to greater lengths than secondary schools to display student work. Schools in culturally diverse communities had ensured that their displays included the range of community groups. One school ensured that there were reading materials in a range of community languages available for parents/carers.

The ten schools provided a range of written information for parents/carers but the written newsletter was the major means of regular school-home communication. Front office staff reported that queries they received showed that written information was not always received or understood. The schools had a range of ways of promoting interaction with parents/carers; secondary schools used student organisers or diaries while primary schools saw direct contact with the class teacher by telephone or face-to-face as the primary means of communication. Primary schools in particular had a range of opportunities, events and longer term opportunities to involve parents/carers. These provided informal occasions in which queries could be made.

None of the schools had a formal parent/carers participation policy although some covered parent/carers involvement through action and development plans.

The majority of schools in the study had some services which extended into the community: these ranged from adult education to more welfare oriented services. Schools in challenging circumstances were committed to supporting their communities and dealing with all queries that were presented, even though this sometimes proved time-consuming.

6. DISCUSSION

The discussion of findings focuses on three areas: (1) queries, (2) training for front office staff, and (3) the school context, in which queries are managed.

6.1 Queries

Three issues are dealt with here: the nature, type and frequency of queries; school communication practices; and welcoming environment

(i) The nature, type and frequency of queries

In the sample of ten schools, the two most common reasons for contacting the school were request to speak to a particular person, or were related to health issues.

There were important differences between primary and secondary schools.

The most common reason for parents/carers to make a query in the front office in primary school was related to money. The interview data and observation suggests that two thirds of such queries were personal visits by local mothers who were at home in the mornings.

By contrast in secondary school, the most common reason for making a query was to speak to a specific person. Such queries were generally made by telephone and the majority of such interactions were again with women. The staff member in question was most often not a member of the senior staff, but was someone who was teaching and highly likely to be unavailable. The lack of immediate accessibility often created a problem for office staff who took messages. Office staff reported that even though information about availability times were sent home, many parents/carers did not appear to know this information and were not understanding about the lack of immediate access. Further, only one of the secondary schools had any policy of response time for answering queries.

While men constituted only a third of all inquirers, in this sample, fathers/male carers made slightly more personal visits to secondary schools than mothers/female carers. Only one of the primary schools reported specific efforts to involve fathers in the school. It should not be taken for granted that father/male carers are more likely to be working during the day than mothers/female carers and it is likely that all schools could explore further ways in which to involve fathers/male carers.

47% of all referred queries in primary school were for the class teacher. In secondary schools 32% were for a teacher and 27% for a head of year or equivalent. There were obvious opportunities here for the development and use of an in-school intranet email system which would allow inquiries to be both routed and tracked. In primary schools 18% of queries were referred to the head teacher compared to only 2.9% in secondary. Only one primary head teacher reported making specific time available for dealing with parents/carer queries. The others dealt with them as they came.

However none of the primary and secondary schools had rigorous ways of ensuring that queries from parents/carers were followed through, nor any way of monitoring or auditing the queries that were made. None of them made particular good use of opportunities for telephone sorting and routing of queries and none used websites or

emails as a means of dealing with queries. Given that there is now high internet usage in many communities and increased provision of community provided access points in deprived neighbourhoods, this is an avenue for further school development.

Queries were most frequently made in the morning. All of the schools in the sample did have office staff in the office quite early in the morning. Some of the schools rostered additional staff on at this busy time, while others organised the layout of the office so that immediate assistance could be provided if the staff member on duty was unable to cope with the flow of business.

All of the schools experienced the need for additional staffing around transition times, when pupils moved from nursery to primary or primary to secondary. Prospective enrolments generated significant numbers of queries in popular schools. One secondary school in the sample had dedicated more senior office staff to deal with such inquiries: this took some time each day. Schools in deprived neighbourhoods dealt with a considerable number of time-consuming queries which often involved an in-school interpreter and contact with other agencies. They had built this into the composition of the staff and into the way they organised work routines.

While not without significant challenges and difficulties, the sample schools that did serve specific cultural and economic communities also demonstrated what could be done with commitment, LEA support and the right resources and staff mix.

(ii) school communication practices

Office staff reported that they mainly used personal knowledge and school/pupil records in order to answer queries. Clearly school data needs to be up to date and readily accessible in order for this to happen, and this was the case in the sample schools. However, what was described as personal knowledge was actually knowledge about school, LEA and DfES policy and procedure which originated in written materials.

Even though much of this information was also sent home via newsletter, letters, and prospectuses, many parents/carers did not seem to have the necessary information, according to office staff. This could have been because the information was not delivered safely if sent with pupils, not read if posted, or not able to be read if the language spoken at home was not English or if parents/carers had low levels of literacy themselves.

One primary school in the sample argued that, since it served a population which relied largely on oral communication, it needed to develop matching communication practices. It had developed a network of community members who were well informed about the school: they could answer queries themselves and also give and receive feedback about important issues.

Written information is clearly a necessary aspect of school-home communication, but in itself is insufficient. The dependence of schools on written communication was clearly problematic and did result in some queries that might have been resolved if other forms of communication were in use.

(iii) Welcoming environment

Primary schools in the sample were not only smaller in size but also served a specific geographic neighbourhood. They had all ensured that there were displays of children's work in the foyer, and were more 'friendly' than the secondary schools which opted for a more 'professional' office atmosphere. Secondary schools, being larger also had more staff and the person in the front office changed regularly during the day. In primary schools, parents/carers were likely to see the same person every time they visited.

All primary schools and one secondary school evinced a stronger commitment to engaging closely with parents/carers and had a menu of opportunities for parents/carers to come to the school. These events reduced the necessity for queries to be made via the front office, since much information was exchanged in a more social setting. Two primary schools and one secondary school in very culturally and ethnically diverse communities had also made considerable effort to ensure that staff spoke community languages and that there was a visual representation of cultural inclusivity in displays and materials. Translated written materials were less commonly in use.

The extended secondary school in the study had yet to develop extensive links with its community and other agencies. It was apparent that they could learn from the good practice in other schools in the sample if such information was made available.

6.2 Training

All of the office staff in the study were women. Heads and line managers described their work as dependent on personal qualities – patience, flexibility, being calm, coping in a crisis, being a good communicator, staying good humoured, being able to juggle several tasks at once. Head teachers reported that they selected office staff on the basis of these interpersonal qualities. While it was the case that such personal attributes were critical to effectively handling the range of queries and other situations in the front office, it is important to note that most of the office staff themselves began describing their jobs by listing skills and knowledge and then moved to the interpersonal. There is no evidence to suggest a causal link between the importance attributed to interpersonal skills by senior managers and the lack of training provided to office staff, but the coexistence of the two phenomena is noteworthy.

In the sample, while office staff did receive some formal training, it was less than continuous. Induction was conducted in-house by existing staff. Some training in new administrative data packages was funded. However, by and large, the everyday demands of the school took precedence over attendance at training.

Nevertheless, there is much to be learnt from the good practice of schools in the study. This includes:

- A formal induction which examines educational policy contexts and practices
- Principles of good service
- Understanding and working with specific religious and language communities
- Understanding and working with families from economically and socially challenging circumstances
- Understanding and dealing with school stakeholder groups

- Dealing with conflict situations
- School-family relations
- The importance of the educational involvement of parents/carers in children's academic learning.

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) Certificate in School Business Management does address the issues of staff training and it is to be hoped that as more Bursars /registrars undertake this course, there will be greater understanding of the training needs of office staff and awareness raised about the DfES Introductory Training for School Support Staff course. But there is also a training issue for head teachers who ultimately are the ones responsible for the provision of professional development and the creation of a learning culture inclusive of everyone on the school site.

6.3 School–family policies

School-family policies provide the rationale and principles for effective handling of queries. Schools that are committed to building good relationships with parents/carers and establishing sound communication practices seem to be more likely to handle queries more effectively.

Schools in this study did want and value family participation in school activities and programmes. They understood that they should help families to take up opportunities for involvement, and that different families wanted different options for involvement. Therefore they recognised that they needed a variety of approaches to, and pathways for, family involvement. Several heads stressed that involving families was a long-term project.

There were obvious differences between primary and secondary schools in the data set. Small primary schools that served a discrete geographical area in either the inner city, a village or outer suburb had a head start in making close connections with their communities. Schools where there had been some stability in staffing and in enrolment were also advantaged. In the sample four schools were clearly more committed and had higher levels of parent and carer involvement. Three of them were located in one LEA and served highly culturally and linguistically diverse populations, primarily of modest means or in challenging circumstances.

This finding does not suggest that it is these kinds of schools that have greater commitment or better practices. Schools serving middle class populations outside the sample also have similar networks and strong programmes. This study does however lend weight to the general sentiment that secondary schools have to make more effort than primary schools in this area, because of their greater size and the reluctance of some adolescents to have their parents/carers involved in their school. Evidence from this sample, and from other research, suggests that this can be overcome.

There was evidence in the data that head teachers had different interpretations of what participation meant in practice. Some were concerned about safety issues, about the capacity of parents/carers to provide appropriate support for academic programmes and about the time it took to prepare parents/carers for involvement in programmes. Some spoke of events intended to attract families into the school but of being let down when they did not attend. In particular, annual governors' meetings seemed to attract little community support (although this might equally

indicate lack of dissatisfaction with the school). In a few cases the transcripts show office staff blaming families for their lack of interest and being frustrated when they turned to the school for help or turned on the school in anger. There is no direct evidence in this study how this did or did not affect the handling of queries.

None of the schools had a parent/ carer participation policy per se. Only one had a policy which covered the way in which complaints and queries would be handled. None of the schools had any way to monitor the queries made through the front office, nor did they have formal procedures to ensure that there had been follow up if the query had been referred on. Indeed, the front office staff were so busy that the ways in which office staff handled queries were not regularly monitored or discussed. The data provides hints that not many of the schools deliberately sought an outside view of the entrance to the site. These are all issues which deserve an airing in head teacher and bursar meetings and in professional reflections.

However, some schools in the study did have practices which other schools could find helpful.

6. 4 Family-friendly schools

Schools in this study with high levels of family involvement

- **demonstrated commitment**

The school had a narrative about the importance of family involvement in the school which underpinned most of the school activities. They did not see family relations as a time-consuming extra, but as fundamental to the social and educational mission of their school. They saw the school as serving the needs of community, and staff as having a responsibility to build social capital as well as the pupils' educational repertoires and resources.

- **took responsibility**

Support for family involvement was seen as part of the regular duties of all staff. A key senior staff member ensured that the school offered diverse opportunities for family involvement and these were monitored, reported on and celebrated.

- **provided resources**

Time was allocated for supporting family involvement. This might have been release time for classroom teachers, teaching assistants, of office staff and/or a specific family-liaison position. There were sufficient funds available to support school-parent organisations and family events. Staff who were from the local community were employed as assistants and office staff and there was a deliberate effort made to 'cover' community languages.

- **aspired to be an inclusive, learning organisation**

There was support for structured school-based inquiry into family involvement such as systematic trialling of family teaching and learning approaches that could be integrated with other school initiatives and programmes. Staff, governors and the wider group of parents/carers were involved in discussions about school goals and programmes and there was regular consultation about innovations and changes.

These four elements were the basis of whole school strategies and programmes. In addition to the usual sports events, theatre performances, Open Days, working bees, workshops and committees, schools with high levels of family involvement focussed

on classroom-based activities, adult education, coordination with other community organisations and service providers, and parent/carer help with academic work at home.

In these cases the handling of queries was integrated into a family-friendly web of practice.

The findings and review of the literature suggest that issues key to the effective handling of queries include:

(1) Accessibility

Family friendly schools attend to their physical environment. There is: adequate car parking and egress is clearly indicated from the roadway; clear signage showing how to get to the reception area; well-lit walkways from all entry points into the school and non-intrusive security systems that are effective but non threatening to legitimate visitors.

Family friendly schools ensure that they can be reached. There are answer phones for after hours periods: these are monitored regularly. School websites have 'email us' sections which allow for web based contact.

(2) Good communication

Family friendly schools use a wide range of written materials, but also find innovative ways to work in communities where there are strong oral cultures. They consult parents/carers in the development and review of their communication strategy, and also involve pupils, since they are often the carriers of messages between home and school. Family friendly schools have brochures which explain how to make a complaint and they detail what kind of turnaround time parents/carers can expect. They ensure that front office staff can speak community languages where appropriate.

(3) A welcoming environment

Family friendly schools provide comfortable seating for parents/carers and other visitors. These are separated from pupils who have misbehaved or who are ill. They provide a range of materials specifically of interest to parents/carers. These extend beyond promotional materials to include information about community services, current and successful school projects, activities in which parents/carers can become involved, reports of parents/carer activities and reports from governors. Refreshments are provided for those who have to wait.

(4) Attentiveness

Family friendly schools attend to parents/carers promptly. If the person they need to see, or the information they require is unavailable, they are given clear information about when the person or information will be available. All office staff are trained in the specific needs of the school catchment and are confident about their conflict resolution skills.

(5) Well connectedness

Family friendly schools have extensive networks in their local community and communicate their programmes to a range of other community organisations and service providers. They have protocols for sharing information about families and are able to access specialist legal, health and welfare support as needed.

(6) Follow through

Family friendly schools want to ensure that parent/carers queries are followed up. They keep sufficient records to monitor what happens after parents/carers have made an enquiry. They also audit queries. Some might keep records for the entire year while others take snapshots at regular intervals so that they can use the data for planning purposes.

(7) take advantage of opportunities

Family friendly schools use the occasion on which parents/carers make queries as an opportunity to build relationships. They ask what else the school can do to help, what parents/carers might like to do in the school, and what they have to offer. They work to make all interactions friendly and sociable. They offer information about other events and invite parents/carers to return in the near future for continued conversation.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has produced a snapshot into the ways in which queries are handled in school offices. It is the first such data available in the UK.

There are many pointers for schools to be found in each of the chapters. Because each school is unique the data will not mirror exactly the situation of any other specific site. However, data from this study might form the basis for individual schools to conduct their own systematic inquiry, utilising some of the same research tools to conduct: first impressions descriptors; logging of queries made; and discussion of the effectiveness of handling queries. In addition, schools could also undertake follow-up surveys with parents/carers about ways to improve communication practices and in particular how to move beyond the written word and how to take advantage of new technologies and. Detailed inquiries into specific local challenges, combined with follow-up of good practice documented in this study, are also worthy of consideration.

There are two major recommendations arising from this study. One concerns the training of office staff, and the second the sharing of good practice among schools.

They are:

(1) The DfES to consider the development of an online training package for front office staff in handling queries from parents and carers.

Such a module could:

- be self paced

An online, self-paced programme is a cost effective way of delivering training for staff whose work patterns are unpredictable. Unlike more conventional training, self paced training does not require staff to leave the school for long periods of time. It can be accessed at times when the office is less busy.

- be used for the induction of new office staff

The findings suggest that new staff are taught about administrative procedures and tools. Early systematic induction in handling queries would increase the confidence of new staff and improve the effectiveness of the front office service.

- require the support of an in-school mentor

School office staff already possess considerable expertise. Building a local mentor into the training process is congruent with current practice and would value and use existing on-the-job learning, as well as provide a means of particularising the training.

- be case-based

Case based learning would encourage staff to actively engage with realistic examples which require conversation with the mentor. These could cover routine and challenging queries and circumstances.

- encourage office staff to learn about their school community

It is important that front office staff understand the particular social, cultural and economic mix of the school in which they are employed, as well as the relevant policy framework now covered in the DfES *Introductory Training for School Support Staff* course. The online package should provide a diverse range of information and

cases from which participants can choose relevant examples and build in opportunities for office staff to develop knowledge about relevant community services.

(2) The DfES to consider the development of a professional development pack which shares examples of welcoming and responsive best practice in schools

The package could include:

- Providing a welcoming first impression

Examples of welcoming behaviour include:

- ☐ easy to see and read signage in a range of community languages
- ☐ adequate and accessible visitor parking
- ☐ unobtrusive but effective security measures
- ☐ dedicated seating
- ☐ refreshments
- ☐ culturally inclusive displays and exhibitions
- ☐ a range of school and community reading materials for parents/carers
- ☐ welcome messages on answer machines

- Going beyond statutory home-school information

Examples of good communication include:

- ☐ Using the school website
- ☐ E newsletters
- ☐ Non written communication – including using community networks
- ☐ Taking advantage of occasions when parents/carers are in school
- ☐ Designated times to promote social interactions
- ☐ Using community languages
- ☐ Induction packs for new enrolments
- ☐ Safe and effective home visits
- ☐ Special events, assemblies and programmes

- Handling queries

Examples of responsiveness include:

- ☐ Explicit policy which specifies service standards
- ☐ Monitoring and auditing processes which examine type, frequency, follow through
- ☐ Smart technologies for recording and routing queries
- ☐ Front office procedures for recording and following through queries
- ☐ Use of educational and community materials
- ☐ Links with community agencies
- ☐ In house training for front office staff

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APPENDICES

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APPENDIX One

INITIAL INTERVIEW DATA GATHERING AND SCHEDULES

Interview clusters and informants

Issue	Head (sec)	Head (prim)	Office manager	School assistant
Contextual cluster				
Size of school	By document			
Age range of pupils	By document			
% Free school meals	By document			
Pupil output data	By document			
Inspection reports	By document			
Intake breakdown- gender, ethnicity etc	By document			
Size and nature of catchment Pupil travel to school (independent, with parent/carers or school bus)	x	x		
Senior leadership structure and responsibilities – how is this related to parent/carers queries?	x	x		
Policy				
Parent participation policies and communication strategies	x	x		
Governance: how many and which parents	x	x		
Levels of parent involvement – where and how	x	x		
Pastoral and pupil administrative structures that impact on parent queries	x	x	x	
Facilities for parents	x	x		
Office Management				
Training for office staff	X	x	x	
Procedures and protocols for dealing with queries: who takes them, what is passed on to whom, how busy periods are prepared for and covered	x	x	x	
How are queries currently logged	x	x	x	
What happens to this information?	x	x	x	
What forms of technology are there in the school – email, answerphones, routing system, ring home absence (auto/manual), school hours system, 'out of hours' system	X	x	x	
Communication patterns				
Patterns of queries across the school year – topics and intensity	x	x	x	x
Common topics	x	x	x	x
Particularly difficult queries to deal with			x	x

What happens as a result of queries	x	x	x	x
Any significant issues in the last year – type, volume. (We will also come back to these in the post logging interview)	x	x	x	x

Interview questions: head teacher

Context
<p><i>We would like to begin with some general questions about the school.</i></p> <p>How would you describe the community that this school serves?</p>
<p>How many students are enrolled? How big is the catchment area for the school ? (RA note – this may not be relevant) How do the majority of pupils get to school each day?</p>
<p>What is the senior leadership structure in the school? What are the responsibilities of each member of the SLT? Who has responsibility for dealing with parent/carers queries? (probe: formal and informal arrangements) How does the SLT as a whole find out what queries are being made by parents/carers?</p>
Policy
<p>Do you have a formal or informal parent participation policy? Could you tell us about its major purposes? How well do you think it is working?</p>
<p>How do parents find out about what is happening with their children in the school? (probe: pupil progress and formal events) How do they find out what is happening in the school generally? Could you look at the sheet we have provided and tell us how many of these things you do? Are there any others? Do you have a formal communication strategy? If so, could you describe what it covers and how well it is working?</p>
<p>How are parents given the opportunity to be involved in the school? What levels of involvement do parents have in the school? How are parents involved in school governance? How many parents are active in school decision making? Are there any patterns about which parents get involved in the school?</p>
<p>What are the pastoral structures in the school? How do these connect with parents? What kind of questions can parents/carers ask of pastoral staff? (probe: actual extent of queries compared to possible) What student support structures are in the school? How do these connect with parents? What kind of questions can parents/carers ask of school support staff? (probe: actual extent of queries compared to possible) What kind of pupil administrative structures are there in the school? How do these connect with parents? What kinds of questions can parents/carers ask of the pupil administrative structures? (probe: actual extent of queries compared to possible) RA note- Some of these may not apply to all schools</p>

<p><i>Do you have any facilities and/or staff specifically for parents/carers?</i> (probe Home-school liaison) What are they? How are they used? (probe how often? When? If not used, why not?) Do parents/carers make queries of the school through this avenue?</p>
<p><i>Office management</i></p>
<p>What skills do front office staff need to have? What training is provided for office staff in dealing with parent/carer queries? (note to RA- do not push too hard here)</p>
<p>We want to ask about procedures and protocols for dealing with queries. Who generally deals with queries? What kinds of queries can generally be dealt with on the spot? What is usually passed on? To whom are things most often directed? (probe: heads and teachers – who gets what) How do you manage time to deal with parent/care queries? How are busy periods in the office prepared for and covered?</p>
<p>How are queries currently logged?</p>
<p>What happens to this information? How is it used?</p>
<p>What forms of technology are there in the school – email, answer-phones, routing system, ring home absence (auto/manual), school hours system, 'out of hours' system? Who monitors these? How are queries dealt with? Are there any problems with these?</p>
<p><i>Communication patterns</i></p>
<p>What patterns of queries are there across the school year? What are they about? (probe how much is non school related eg passports, social work) We also want to get a sense of the patterns of intensity of work across the year. Can you describe what it is like in the office when you have a lot of queries? (probe – coincidence with other busy period activities)</p>
<p>Are there common topics that parents/carers have? What are they?</p>
<p>Are there any queries that are particularly difficult to deal with? Why?</p>
<p>What happens as a result of queries? How are they followed up?</p>
<p>Have you encountered any really significant issues in dealing with parent/carer queries this year – for example, the type of volume? (We will also come back to these in the post logging interview)</p> <p>Thankyou for your time. We will send you a transcription of this interview for checking.</p>

ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

(1) Written information

School initiated – no response required

- Newsletters
- School brochures
- Curriculum information

School initiated – response required

- Annual governors report
- Trips
- Annual reports
- Annual data verification
- Behaviour/attendance reports
- Behaviour letters
- Exclusion
- Requests for meetings
- Requests for lunch monies
- Invitations to events

(2) Events for parents

- Parents evenings
- IEP review
- PSP reviews
- Annual parent/governor meeting
- Support for trips
- Class support
- Behaviour support
- Achievement assemblies
- Performances/exhibitions
- SHARE programme
- Adult education
- Curriculum workshops
- Parenting classes
- Creative Partnerships

Interview questions: office staff

Office management
<p>What skills do front office staff need to have?</p> <p>What training is provided for office staff in dealing with parent/carers queries? (note to RA- do not push too hard here)</p>
<p>We want to ask about procedures and protocols for dealing with queries.</p> <p>Who generally deals with queries?</p> <p>What kinds of queries can generally be dealt with on the spot?</p> <p>What is usually passed on?</p> <p>To whom are things most often directed? (probe: heads and teachers – who gets what)</p> <p>How do you manage time to deal with parent/carers queries?</p> <p>How are busy periods in the office prepared for and covered?</p>
How are queries currently logged?
What happens to this information? How is it used?
<p>What forms of technology are there in the school – email, answer-phones, routing system, ring home absence (auto/manual), school hours system, 'out of hours' system?</p> <p>Who monitors these?</p> <p>How are queries dealt with?</p> <p>Are there any problems with these?</p>
Communication patterns
<p>What patterns of queries are there across the school year?</p> <p>What are they about? (probe how much is non school related eg passports, social work)</p> <p>We also want to get a sense of the patterns of intensity of work across the year. Can you describe what it is like in the office when you have a lot of queries? (probe – coincidence with other busy period activities)</p>
Are there common topics that parents/carers have? What are they?
<p>Are there any queries that are particularly difficult to deal with?</p> <p>Why?</p>
<p>What happens as a result of queries?</p> <p>How are they followed up?</p>
<p>Have you encountered any really significant issues in dealing with parent/carers queries this year – for example, the type of volume?</p> <p>(We will also come back to these in the post logging interview)</p> <p>Thankyou for your time.</p> <p>We will send you a transcription of this interview for checking.</p>

CODE:	MEDIUM OF ENQUIRY personal visit <input type="checkbox"/> phone <input type="checkbox"/> letter <input type="checkbox"/> email <input type="checkbox"/> other <input type="checkbox"/> please specify _____		
DATE:			
TIME:			

CALLER:	PUPIL:		
Gender M/F	is in school <input type="checkbox"/>	class(es)/years <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Parent/carers <input type="checkbox"/>	is in local primary <input type="checkbox"/>		
Other relative <input type="checkbox"/>	is moving into area <input type="checkbox"/>		
Childminder etc <input type="checkbox"/>	has left the school <input type="checkbox"/>		
	other <input type="checkbox"/>	please specify _____	

TYPE OF ENQUIRY/ACTUAL QUESTION			
Money issues <input type="checkbox"/>	Speak to someone	When is something?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meals issues <input type="checkbox"/>	Other (pls specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	Collection of pupil	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health issues <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Pass something on <input type="checkbox"/>	_____		

ACTION			
DEALT WITH BY ME <input type="checkbox"/>	REFERRED ON TO WHOM?		
I know the answer Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Materials Used prospectus <input type="checkbox"/> school records/docs <input type="checkbox"/> timetable <input type="checkbox"/> pupil records <input type="checkbox"/> school website <input type="checkbox"/> LEA website <input type="checkbox"/> other <input type="checkbox"/> (pls specify) <input type="checkbox"/>	SENCO <input type="checkbox"/> Class teacher <input type="checkbox"/> HOY/KS <input type="checkbox"/> Head <input type="checkbox"/> Deputy <input type="checkbox"/> Curric Staff <input type="checkbox"/> Support Staff <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/>	Police officer <input type="checkbox"/> School nurse <input type="checkbox"/> LEA <input type="checkbox"/> Social Services <input type="checkbox"/> Hm/sc liais wkr <input type="checkbox"/> Peripatetic <input type="checkbox"/> Non-school <input type="checkbox"/>

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED			
no information in office <input type="checkbox"/>	not know who to pass enquirer on to <input type="checkbox"/>		
person wanted is not available at present <input type="checkbox"/>	standard information doesn't satisfy query <input type="checkbox"/>		
query can't be understood (language) <input type="checkbox"/>	material not available in required language <input type="checkbox"/>		
caller doesn't have technology to reach <input type="checkbox"/>	other (pls specify) <input type="checkbox"/>		
answer (eg if on website) <input type="checkbox"/>			

FURTHER ACTION	
POSTED SOMETHING <input type="checkbox"/>	→ WHAT?
FOLLOW UP CALL <input type="checkbox"/>	→ BY WHOM?
MEETING SET UP <input type="checkbox"/>	→ WITH WHOM?

APPENDIX THREE

FOLLOW UP INTERVIEWS – OFFICE AND PARENTS/ CARER INTERVIEWS

OFFICE STAFF QUESTIONS

(1) Reflecting on the logging

- How did you find the logging process?
- Were the logging periods representative of the usual range and number of queries? If not, in which ways did they differ?
- Did you learn anything new from doing the logging?
- If so, did you talk to anyone else about it?
- Have you taken any steps to change anything about the way queries are dealt with as a result of the logging?

(2) Queries

- We are interested to know whether you have noticed any patterns over the year in the kinds of parents/carers who visit or ring the school? If so what are they?
- If there is a pattern, why do you think this is so?
- Do you have any suggestions for addressing this?
- How many really difficult interactions have you had this year?
- In these difficult interactions, are there any patterns in the kinds of people or kinds of queries? If so what are they?
- If there is a pattern, why do you think this is so?
- Do you have any suggestions for addressing this?

(3) Training

- Have you heard about Introductory Training for School Support Staff that the DfES launched last autumn for support staff? If so, have you attended and did you find it useful?
- Does your LEA (or school) offer other courses for School Support Staff? If so, do you attend them? Which ones have been most useful?

(4) Parents/carers

We are interested in your views on how schools involve parents/carers.

- As someone who deals with parents/ carers all the time, what kind of participation do you think schools should have? In which ways does this influence interactions between parents and schools?
- What kinds of things do you think schools could do to encourage parents/carers to participate in the school?
- (If secondary) Some people suggest that it is really difficult to involve secondary school students' families. What do you think about that?

There will be specific questions about logging from specific schools.

PARENT/CARER QUESTIONS

Preamble points to be made

- Research for the DfES about queries made in school front office by parents/carers
- Answers anonymous and confidential
- The school is getting the overall results of the survey
- This will be quick.
- We appreciate your time.

- (1) Have you made queries to the school office (through various means)?
- (2) Were you happy with the quality of the response you got from the school?
- (3) Do you have any suggestions about how schools could handle queries better?

Thank you again for your time.

APPENDIX FOUR
DETAILS OF SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY

SCHOOL	01
TYPE	Secondary, mixed comprehensive Community
LOCATION	Inner city East Midlands
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	11-16 1200-1400
STRUCTURES	Male head Office manager 3 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	Asian heritage (nearly all) with a few Afro-Caribbean and white 90% + EAL (30%+ at early stage of learning English) FSM above average Below average socio-economic backgrounds
RESULTS ETC	44% 5 A* to C (from a well below average intake) Graded B when compared to similar schools
ABSENCE	Authorised 5.1%; unauthorised 2.2%
PARENTS	Very good partnership with parents. 2 criticisms given to OfSTED were not held up by Inspection Team

SCHOOL	02
TYPE	Secondary, mixed comprehensive Community
LOCATION	Rural LEA West Midlands
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	11-18 1000-1200
STRUCTURES	Male head 4 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	Small town and its rural area FSM 7% Low ethnic minority population – none at early stages of learning English Socio-economic status in line with national average Some rural deprivation and low income
RESULTS ETC	64% 5 A* to C above average at 11
ABSENCE	Authorised 7.3%; unauthorised 0.3%
PARENTS	Very supportive Find head and staff approachable

SCHOOL	03
TYPE	Secondary, Extended School, mixed comprehensive Community
LOCATION	Inner London A
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	11-18 1000-1200
STRUCTURES	Female head Office manager 3 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	Pupils not from immediate local area Come from wide area More boys than girls Wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicity – 49 additional languages spoken 63% EAL Main group is English/Scottish/Welsh/Irish – 33% Then Afro-Caribbean Then Bangladeshi Above average FSM Very high turnover of pupils Many from war torn areas and troubled home lives
RESULTS ETC	48% 5 A* to C (up from 24-33-38)
ABSENCE	Authorised 5.9%; unauthorised 1.6%
PARENTS	(From OfSTED report which is over 5 years old) Feel school is friendly and easy to approach

SCHOOL	04
TYPE	Secondary, girls' comprehensive (but see below) Foundation
LOCATION	Outer London
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	11-18 1500-1700
STRUCTURES	Female head 9 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	Pupils from immediate area Most pupils are white but from a variety of ethnic backgrounds Some EAL but none at early stages of learning English FSM below average
RESULTS ETC	81% 5 A* to C (from an intake that was 10% selected on a specific ability; 15% selected on general ability)
ABSENCE	Authorised 6.3%; unauthorised 0.3%
PARENTS	Feel comfortable about approaching school with questions

SCHOOL	05
TYPE	Primary Community
LOCATION	Inner city East Midlands
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	3-11 250-300
STRUCTURES	Male head – 4 years in post 2 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	90%+ EAL Mainly Asian origin Mainly non-English speaking when join nursery FSM 40%+ High density housing
RESULTS ETC	Pupils make rapid progress KS2 2003 English 54% Mathematics 46% Science 64% APS 23.4
ABSENCE	Authorised 4.4%; unauthorised 1.5%
PARENTS	Contributions of parents and all staff have a positive effect on the quality of education

SCHOOL	06
TYPE	Primary Community
LOCATION	Suburbs of city East Midlands
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	3-11 450-500
STRUCTURES	Female head 2 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	Few EAL or ethnic minorities FSM 23% (average) Immediate area is terraced or semi-detached housing 40% pupils travel from outside the obvious 'catchment' (from 2 large council estates) favouring this over closer schools
RESULTS ETC	KS2 - at least level 4 English 95% Mathematics 95% Science 100% APS 29.7
ABSENCE	Authorised 5.3%; unauthorised 0.2%
PARENTS	The partnership between parents and the school is very good

SCHOOL	07
TYPE	Primary Community
LOCATION	Inner city East Midlands
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	3-11 450-500
STRUCTURES	Male head 3 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	90% EAL (half at early stage of learning English) FSM 40%+ Serves local area but many choose it over closer schools Fluid population, many from turbulent war torn areas
RESULTS ETC	KS2 - at least level 4 English 63% Mathematics 61% Science 89% APS 26.2
ABSENCE	Authorised 5.3%; unauthorised 0.1%
PARENTS	Links with parents and the wider community are very good

SCHOOL	08
TYPE	Primary Community
LOCATION	Inner London LEA B Inner city
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	3-11 200-250
STRUCTURES	Female acting head 2 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	Asian heritage Most start with little of no English but are at or above national expectations by age of 5 95% EAL FSM?? Many take extended holidays
RESULTS ETC	Recognised as very high value added KS2 - at least level 4 English 92% Mathematics 92% Science 92% APS 29.7
ABSENCE	Authorised 4.8%; unauthorised 0.2%
PARENTS	Parents are very supportive

SCHOOL	09
TYPE	Primary Voluntary controlled
LOCATION	Small village school Rural LEA West Midlands
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	4-11 below 50-75
STRUCTURES	Female acting head 1 office staff in survey (part time)
COMMUNITY	Rural area with a few from town, very few from actual village Mainly private housing Travel in by car or minibus All of white ethnic origin Above average attainment when start school
RESULTS ETC	9 pupils therefore not published
ABSENCE	Authorised 4.7%; unauthorised 0%
PARENTS	Very strong parental involvement School is valued by community Parents feel teachers are very approachable

SCHOOL	10
TYPE	Junior Foundation
LOCATION	County town Rural LEA West Midlands
AGE RANGE AND ROLL	7-11 150-200
STRUCTURES	Male head 2 office staff in survey
COMMUNITY	White British – no EAL FSM 17% Average pupil turnover Range of socio-economic circumstances Area of significant deprivation
RESULTS ETC	KS2 - at least level 4 English 94% Mathematics 88% Science 96% APS 29.2 (average on entry)
ABSENCE	Authorised 5.9%; unauthorised 0%
PARENTS	Partnership with parents is good Information is clear, helpful and readable

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