

## **WRITTEN EVIDENCE PAPER TO THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

### **Minister for Education and Welsh Language June 2022**

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We welcome the opportunity to provide information in support of the Committee's inquiry into *Pupil Absence*.

We have addressed each of the Committee's areas of interest below and look forward to discussing further with the Committee on 29 June.

#### **Reasons for and levels of persistent absenteeism**

A review of attendance patterns in Wales was undertaken between November 2021 and January 2022, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind non-attendance, thus enabling us to design appropriate interventions that are tailored to the needs/challenges facing particular cohorts. A full copy of the report can be found [here](#)

Since September 2021 12.5% of learners have been absent for 30.5+ days. It should be noted however that during the pandemic, the requirement to safeguard learners who are not physically present at school premises, resulted in all remote learning being classified as an absence.

The attendance report acknowledges there are a range of reasons or underlying causes for learner absence, and that this has been further exacerbated over the last two years. Those consulted as part of the review reported that learner absence had increased for all groups of learners and those common causes of learner absence are believed to be related to learner wellbeing and mental health; and to disengagement and more casual attitudes to learning. There is also a recognition that absences can be defined in two ways: new absences as a result of COVID-19; and pre-existing absences that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Whilst overall attendance is showing signs of recovery, attendance rates remain a concern, and particularly rates of unauthorised absences.

#### **Whether and if so, why, non-covid related absenteeism is higher than prior to the COVID 19 pandemic**

The attendance picture is a complex one and not easily generalised. Attendance patterns and trends in individual schools can change a lot over time and can be highly variable.

Section two of the report considers internal Welsh Government statistical analysis of attendance data. Data for the Spring 2022 term shows that on average non-covid related absenteeism was higher than overall absence prior to the pandemic.

However, because of the differences in how attendance is currently defined, collected, and published compared to before the pandemic, the report acknowledges that it is difficult to make accurate comparisons about attendance rates. This is also true when considering comparisons between UK nations. For example, the figures published for England during the pandemic were based on an optional survey of schools with a daily response rate of between 50-60%, whereas the WG regularly achieved close to 100% returns.

### **Whether and if so, reasons why persistent absenteeism is more prevalent among particular groups of pupils (those with Additional Learning Needs, eligible for free school meals, boys and girls, specific age groups, ethnicity)**

The statistical analysis referenced within the attendance report highlights the substantial increase in absence rates amongst particular groups of learners, namely Gypsy and Traveller learners, learners who are eFSM, and learners who have ALN. Whilst increases are not disproportionate to those seen amongst other learners, this is of particular concern because of the high levels of absence seen amongst these learners prior to the pandemic.

#### **eFSM learners**

Before the pandemic, absences amongst pupils eligible for free school meals was greater than those not eligible. The data shows that this gap has grown since the beginning of 2021/22 academic year, from 3.8% during w/c 6 September 2021 to 5.3% during w/c 16 May 2022.

In terms of persistent absence, 24.2% of eFSM learners were absent for more than 30 days, compared to 8.1% of non-FSM learners. This is of particular concern as it suggests the absences are becoming entrenched. Addressing this as part of the policy work we are taking forward on tackling the impact of poverty on attainment will be of high importance. The role of Family Engagement Officers, the Education Welfare Services and other key agencies, will be a key element of our approach.

#### **ALN**

Since September 2021, an average of 54.7% of ALN learners have been absent for 10.5+ days, compared with 31% of all learners. 16% of ALN learners have been absent for 30.5+ days pupils compared with 12.5% of all learners.

Both of these figures on the face of it are significantly higher than pre-pandemic, but as outlined above, because of the differences in how attendance is currently recorded, analysed and published compared to before the pandemic, it is difficult to make comparisons about attendance rates.

These numbers could be attributed to the vulnerability of pupils within this cohort who could be more susceptible, with families erring on the side of caution as and when infections arose

The attendance report found there was a general consensus that aspects of the ALN reforms should help improve the attendance of these learners, through person-centred planning. This should lead to better understanding of what's important to the learner and help identify issues before they escalate and should also help with early intervention. Extended professional development opportunities should also increase awareness of staff of the needs of these learners.

## **Gender**

Since September 2021 the percentage of male learners absent for 30.5+ days is 12.2% compared to 12.8% of female learners. Before the pandemic male learners were more likely to be persistently absent than female learners, however as previously outlined, the differences in how attendance is currently defined, collected, and published compared to before the pandemic, it is not possible to make direct comparisons.

## **Ethnicity**

Absence rates amongst pupils from Black and Minority Ethnic background was lower than the national average for both 10.5+ and 30.5+ days absence.

## **Age**

On the whole absence for statutory school age pupils has been poorest amongst Year 11 with an average of 66.2% of learners absent for 10.5+ days, with 22.6% absent for 30.5+ days.

We know that reasons for absence include anxiety amongst learners in this group around GCSE exams, and how prepared they will be for a return to the pre-Covid exam model. This had led to concerns about the impact this will have on longer term educational outcomes, and the number of learners who may become NEET as a result. Additional funding of £1.28m was provided in 2021-22 for the provision of targeted person-centred support for Year 11 learners who are not attending school and are not likely to complete GCSEs.

## **The short term and longer-term risks and consequences for learners for example in terms of mental health and well-being**

There is a well-established link between attendance, attainment and wellbeing. My priority, above all else, is to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to reach their potential, regardless of their background. Tackling learner absence is key to this.

The attendance review acknowledged that attendance is affected by wellbeing and mental health, and by attitudes towards learning and schooling. The inter-relationship between attendance and general wellbeing is considered so strong that attendance has often been taken as a proxy measure for wellbeing in the past. We also know that attendance has a strong impact on learner outcomes, standards and progression. For example, examination outcomes strongly correlate to attendance rates.

Our whole school approach is predicated on ensuring that children and young peoples' wellbeing is as valued as their progression and attainment. Children and young people must be emotionally and mentally prepared to learn and engage. Teaching and other school staff have an important role to play not, only in supporting the wellbeing of learners, but also their own wellbeing and that of the wider school community by creating a culture which values wellbeing. This is central to the statutory wellbeing guidance we published in March 2021, and which is why I am supporting its implementation with over £12m of funding in the current year, part of a package of over £43m over the next three years. Funding will be used to build resilience through the introduction of universal and targeted interventions in schools; training school staff on wellbeing; and ensuring that the wider system is able to support children and young people by ensuring they receive interventions appropriate to their need in a timely fashion.

Youth workers have a vital role to play in helping children and young people recover from the pandemic. In 2021-22, an extra £2.5m was made available to local authorities to provide additional emotional, mental health and wellbeing support to young people. This funding enabled local authorities to expand on the work they were already undertaking to help ensure that young people in Wales received the support they needed.

As part of the criteria of the funding local authorities were expected to work with, and fund additional, voluntary sector youth work services, and provide support for young people with protected characteristics and in harder-to-reach areas, to increase early intervention and prevention services for low level mental health and wellbeing issues.

In addition, the funding boosted existing dedicated resources such as detached and outreach provision. This included training for staff in supporting young people with mental health or wellbeing concerns, to help them better identify those who needed support and recognise when a young person needed to be referred on. As youth work covers 11-25 year olds, the funding was used in some areas to support young people at key transition points where there was likely to be higher levels of stress, for example as they transition between primary and secondary schools.

### **The impact on pupils' learning and attainment**

Estyn in the 2018-19 annual report of the Chief Inspector concluded that 'school attendance and educational outcomes are closely correlated, so improving attendance for pupils eligible for free school meals remains an important issue'. Their evidence suggested that 'the best schools focus on inspiring teachers to build strong relationships with pupils and provide engaging activities to meet their needs' and that in these schools 'pupils value learning and want to be in school regularly'.

A summary of research evidence in this area produced by University College London in 2020 came to similar conclusions, finding that 'pupils who do not attend school when open see a small decline in their academic achievement' with 'pupils from low-income households experiencing a larger negative effect from each day of absence'. It is for these reasons that a focus on attendance will be part of the policy work we are undertaking on tackling the impact of poverty on attainment to achieve High

Standards and Aspirations for all. Achieving improved rates of attendance for all learners including those from low-income households will be one of the indicators of success we will seek in this area.

### **Whether absenteeism has resulted in a higher level of pupil de-registration and any cross-over with elective home education**

The pandemic resulted in an increase in the number of children being home educated. The Elective Home Education proposals we have under development will help to ensure that those learners have access to an efficient and suitable education. We are making a wider package of support available which will enhance learning experience and development opportunities for EHE learners and will include full access to the educational resources on Hwb. We encourage local authorities to work together with families through a supportive approach to enable these learners to return to school.

Figures from Data Cymru in 2021, provide some insight into the underlying reasons and factors that can lead to deregistration. Between January 2020 and January 2021, 30% of parents/carers cited Covid19 as the reason for choosing to home educate their children. Anxiety, bullying, attendance prosecution, child medical need, SEN/ALN needs not being met in school and relationship breakdown with the school accounted for a further 27%.

Research conducted by University College London in 2021/22 on children in the UK with neurodevelopmental conditions, school attendance and barriers to attendance found that a mismatch between the school offer and child learning needs likely underpins attendance problems and de-registration.

Welsh Government recognise that the number of children and young people being home educated in Wales has increased in recent years and is providing LAs with £1.7m in the current year to support elective home education (EHE).

As part of the development of new proposals for EHE, Welsh Government have established two working groups focussing on the EHE/ALN interface and the wider package of support provided by local authorities. The groups will look to identify best practice in working with EHE families, addressing the potential de-registration of a child from school and supporting re-integration of learners into school.

### **The effectiveness of existing policies and guidance.**

The attendance review did not find any major gaps at a strategic policy level, but recommended a number of areas where reestablishment, extension and better coordination of existing best practice and policies would be beneficial.

I am determined to go further than this by undertaking a comprehensive review of all policies in this space, ensuring it is child-centric, takes a rights based and trauma informed approach. This will include a review of existing Welsh Government policies on attendance and exclusion.

The report also highlighted the link between deteriorating attendance and subsequent behavioural and emotional problems, that if not addressed may lead to exclusion of these learners from school. This reinforces the need for these policies to be considered and reviewed in parallel.

I am also acutely aware of the vulnerable learners who we know can be disproportionately subjected to permanent or fixed term exclusions; this includes, but is not limited to, ethnic minority learners and learners with special educational needs/ALN; as well as learners who are care experienced and young carers. This will be another guiding factor in the development of our new policy in this space.

It is vital that every school has a clear attendance policy. To help ensure that is the case, I will be asking that all schools publish their attendance policies. These should take a whole school approach, outlining how schools follow up on learner absence and highlight what actions schools are taking to support learners, particularly focussing on those learners who are at risk of becoming persistently absent.

As part of this work, we will also be reviewing the definition of 'persistent' absence, which is currently considered as being more than 20% absent. This is an important measure, as it is often used as the benchmark to instigate further intervention such as the involvement of the Education Welfare Service. I believe there is merit in considering having a lower threshold for intervention which would be accompanied with an increase in support for these services.

### **Level and effectiveness of action and support from schools, local government and the Welsh Government**

Schools have an important role to play in the promotion of effective attendance. We have already requested that schools publish their attendance policies, and we will be revising our guidance and clarifying our expectations of school-based actions so that there are clear expectations for schools and governing bodies on the level of attendance support to be provided to learners and their families. This will reference effective school-based practices in monitoring attendance and follow up actions when pupils are absent. As part of this approach, we are committed to exploring collaborative ways of improving attendance and access to learning for vulnerable cohorts of pupils for example those with FSM.

Education Welfare Services have an important role to play in supporting schools and families to ensure young people engage with schools and access learning. We recognise that Education Welfare Services have worked incredibly hard with schools and families to secure engagement of learners during the pandemic and continue to do so.

We are committed to sharing effective practice amongst Educational Welfare Services to achieve greater consistency in approach and identify best practice across Wales so that this practice is implemented more consistently.

During the pandemic, absence has been poorest amongst Year 11. To support learners to prepare for exams, we funded the provision of targeted person centred transition support of £1.28m for year 11 learners to support them to progress with

confidence, and make informed decisions about transition to next steps including FE and HE.

For both 2020-21 and 2021-22 £8.5m a year of dedicated transitions funding is being made available to further education colleges and school sixth forms to support young people with their transition to the next stage of their education or career. This is to enable providers to undertake activities such as taster sessions and other transitions events, as well as provide mentoring, advice and guidance and additional tutoring and support.

Careers Wales are exploring the expansion of the provision for tailored work experience with a focus on GCSE learners who have disengaged from education. In 2022 Careers Wales will be able to offer an additional 100 placements of this kind.

Discussions with stakeholders from FEIs and WBL providers have indicated that there is currently a difficulty in recruiting staff to certain vocational areas which could be a barrier to expansion of some vocational routes. In partnership with the EWC, a spring 2022 marketing campaign is planned to raise awareness of opportunities to join the education workforce in Wales.

The Welsh Government, working together with our partners, is committed to ensuring that changes are made to help learners successfully complete their assessments. These include extensive adaptations to assessment entry arrangements and to assessments themselves. For 2021/22 the WJEC has made a range of adaptations to course content, as well as making additional learning and exam revision resources available. This recognises the disruption that has affected current cohorts of learners. The aim is to help them to make the most of their time, taking their qualifications in the timescale they would usually expect.

Welsh Government recognises that specific learners will need more time and support to complete their qualification courses as a result of the disruption caused by the pandemic. It will continue to provide schools and colleges with the additional resource they need to support learners through the 2021/22 and 2022/23 academic year. Learners who need it, will be supported to repeat a year of their sixth-form or college studies, or to re-take GCSE assessments after they progress to sixth-form or to college. The Welsh Government has made changes so that learners progressing to sixth-form or college who need to resit GCSE Maths, English and/or Welsh alongside their main courses, can do this free of any charge or resit fee. For qualifications where completion times are flexible, such as many vocational qualifications, we will support providers if they need to use the ongoing pandemic related funding provided by WG to extend the time available for specific learners to successfully complete their courses in 2022.

However, there are no plans to introduce additional 'sittings' of examinations as part of the academic year calendar.

One of the key indicators used to identify young people at risk of not being in education, employment or training (NEET) is school attendance. The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework ('the Framework') provides a systematic mechanism to identify young people in need of support, to put the necessary

provision in place and to monitor their progression into education, training or employment. Strengthening the Framework is a Programme for Government commitment. Following consultation in 2021, the Framework is being expanded to include the prevention of youth homelessness. Guidance on the Framework is being updated and will be published this year. Following this we will work with local authorities to update our guidance on the early identification of young people who need support under the Framework.

Universal family engagement officers would be invaluable in helping to identify young people most in need of support. Participating in Framework multi-agency meetings where partner organisations share relevant information to ensure that young people who require support from more than one organisation experience a seamless and effective service.

Whilst NEET levels have not risen in the way we had feared at the start of the pandemic<sup>1</sup>, this is an area for ongoing focus as the impacts of the pandemic continue to be felt. Our ambition is that by 2050 at least 90% of 16 to 24 year olds in education, employment, or training. The Welsh Government will monitor NEET rates to determine progress towards this [milestone](#), and how the Framework and the Young Person's Guarantee are contributing to this aim.

Ensuring that learners and practitioners have access to high quality revision materials, particularly in exam years, remains a priority. We will continue to work with the WJEC, Qualifications Wales and E-sgol to improve the resources that are available and ensure that they are effective, easy to navigate and fully up to date. This will be an ongoing priority over the coming years and so it is critical that we continue to build an extensive range of materials so that learners and practitioners are fully supported. This will be enhanced through the launch of Blended Learning Strategy for Wales which is currently in development. The Blended Learning Strategy will be supported by a resource base of high quality professional learning materials. This will ensure that both practitioners and learners are fully supported and continue to have access to the highest quality resources over the long term.

As part of our wider work to support learners to engage with school, we provided £6.4m Winter of Wellbeing funding this academic year to all schools in Wales. This initiative supported all learners to access social, emotional, and physical wellbeing provision and create safe places for free play and physical activity where children and young people could develop and / or rebuild their social skills. The Winter of Wellbeing initiative encouraged young people to engage in social, cultural, and physical activities outside of formal learning with free activities available in both Welsh and English across the whole of Wales.

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<sup>1</sup> Overall, since we introduced the Framework, NEET figures have remained broadly stable: 12,000 (10.8%) 16 to 18 year olds being NEET in 2014, compared with 11,300 (11.1%) in 2020 (based on provisional figures for 2020, from the Welsh Government's Participation of young people in education and the labour market series).

Further, we have recently undertaken a small-scale national trial which guaranteed five additional hours a week of enrichment activities for groups of learners over 10-weeks this academic year. The schools volunteered to support disadvantaged learners, improve access to social and cultural capital and help to address the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on learning. Over 1,800 learners directly benefited from this extra enrichment activity.

We are following an approach that draws on international models and proposals made by the Education Policy Institute. We know that supporting learners to benefit from an extended range of activities, including arts and sports as well as social activities and academic programmes, can be good for attainment, well-being, and wider relationships. Research shows that programmes which provide enriching and stimulating additional sessions and support learners to re-engage with learning, can have a greater impact on attainment than those that are solely academic in focus.

### **How effectively parents are engaged and supported**

We recognise the important role of parents/carers in children's learning. Parents are a child's first teacher, and they will continue to be involved in their learning throughout the journey to adulthood. It is essential, therefore, that we engage all parents/carers and particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, in their children's learning so they can better understand what their children are being asked to do and are provided with the skills to support them.

We will therefore be increasing communications to parents and carers addressing any concerns they still have and emphasizing the importance of going to school.

As part of our work to revise the [All Wales attendance framework](#), sharing and disseminating best practice for improving attendance will be considered. This will, include how schools can best engage with learners and their families, and provide targeted professional development

We want all schools in Wales to be Community Focused Schools - responding to the needs of their community, building a strong partnership with families/ carers and collaborating effectively with other services. By working collaboratively across school, home and the community we can support our children and young people more effectively.

Over the coming months we will invest £3.84m in increasing the number of family engagement officers employed by schools. Working with families to improve attendance will be a key part of these roles.

A family engagement officer (or similar) can ensure that positive partnerships with families are developed, and that bespoke support and services are offered. We know that these additional staff can be a highly effective resource for schools in reaching out to parents and carers and engaging them in their children's learning.

A large focus of their role is on supporting attendance and working with families to encourage better levels of attendance and re-engagement with learning after the pandemic. We know that teachers often find it hard to reach out to families due to

other work pressures and these roles will provide a bridge between home and school.

The funding for family engagement officers will allow local authorities to target schools which require additional capacity in this area. In addition, as part of our policy development we will be advising schools on the effective practice of family engagement officers and the wider professional learning required.

We are also providing £660k for a trial of Community Focused School Manager positions in Wales. These roles will help develop better engagement between schools and their communities. The evaluation of these roles will help inform future policy making.

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