

Senedd Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Ymateb gan Barnardo's Cymru

Welsh Parliament

Children, Young People and Education
Committee

Pupil absence

Evidence from Barnardo's Cymru

Record your views against the inquiry's terms of reference, which have been grouped into 5 themes.

1. Reasons

Mental health issues

Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey recently found that 42% of practitioners said the impact on mental health and wellbeing was their main concern about the impact of COVID-19 on the children, young people, and families they support, compared to 38% in January 2022. This was further highlighted by practitioners who report that absence from school can be a particular issue for some young people with mental health issues. One support worker described a family where Dad had been diagnosed with cancer during the pandemic and as a result the family had shielded for some time. During this time the young person had developed a phobia of germs and of bringing home Covid to her poorly Dad, which led to suicidal thoughts and self-harm. These mental health issues led to it becoming increasingly difficult for the young person to leave home at all, let alone attend school.

With long waiting lists for support and an increase in mental health difficulties, this reason for pupil absence is increasing.

Barnardo's key workers are working with this young person to work towards leaving home once a week, working up towards visiting school for short periods of time. Clearly, attending school in any meaningful way is a huge challenge for a young person facing serious mental health challenges.

Young carers

Young carers are often absent from school, both because of needing to support their cared-for relative, and also because when they are already occupying the caring role in their home, there is perhaps less support available from an adult to attend school. One young carer told us about having missed school because there was no one to wash her uniform, as she undertakes all of the caring roles at home.

Young carers feel stigmatised and isolated. Barnardo's Cymru practitioners have regularly engaged with schools because the school had no idea that a young person's attendance was impacted by their caring responsibilities – and in many cases, that they were a young carer -, let alone the impact this has on the rest of their academic and non-academic life.

We would urge the committee to ensure that young carers are represented within this inquiry, as their needs and circumstances are so often overlooked in many parts of their lives.

Students with additional learning needs

Practitioners gave examples of young people with additional learning needs which could not be accommodated in school and had been advised to remain at home until a suitable placement became available. One young person has been out of school for two and a half months with no sign of a placement.

This has led to some families being forced to home school their children, without having had a proper choice about whether this was the right option for their child. Atebion, Barnardo's disability support service in Bridgend, raised this as an issue for parents of children where an appropriate school place cannot be found or cannot be found within the area.

Another challenge is the often-long waiting times for diagnosis, with diagnoses often being required to receive additional support.

Family support

Practitioners highlight that some families they work with struggle to motivate themselves and their child to attend school. In a number of our family support services, practitioners work with families to make a plan to set alarms, prepare school uniform etc, but for some families and for a range of reasons (including parental mental health etc) this can be challenging.

Where one child is persistently absent from school, this can have a knock-on effect for younger siblings.

Impact of Covid-19

The pandemic has affected children and young people in all kinds of ways and has impacted their ability to return to school. Colleagues spoke of challenges for children who missed the usual transition from primary to secondary school, being in Year 5 or 6 in March 2020 and now being expected to manage being in Year 7 or 8 without any transitional support.

2. Risks and consequences

Financial issues for the family

Practitioners noted that there are several financial issues for families where a child regularly does not attend school.

Firstly, where a child regularly does not attend school or is offered a reduced timetable to manage this, parents can struggle to work around these arrangements. One such example of this from within Barnardo's services is that a young person was on a reduced timetable to manage his attendance at school, and his Mum, who worked in social care, could not work as often as she needed to as a result. The family experienced financial hardship, rent was overdue, and threats of eviction were facing them, and they needed to access a foodbank.

A Barnardo's Cymru key worker worked with the family to rebuild links with the school to ensure that the child could aim to return full-time, help make a debt repayment plan and assist with foodbank vouchers.

Secondly, if a child is persistently absent from school and would otherwise receive free school meals, there is additional financial pressure on the family, including during the school holidays when they would receive a free school meals payment.

Finally, when many families are struggling with the cost of living, Fixed Penalty Notices add an additional financial pressure at an already difficult time.

3. Impact

Some parents report feeling forced into home schooling

As noted above, some parents have felt forced into home schooling as a result of persistent school absence. For some parents, this is because an appropriate school placement cannot be found, as noted in relation to children with additional learning needs. For other parents, this is because of persistent child absence that would otherwise lead to a fixed penalty notice. One practitioner discussed the case of a traveller family that were trying to home school their daughter as a result of persistent absence, but that they are illiterate themselves. In some cases, there is little oversight of elective home schooling.

Academic and attainment challenges for students

There are obvious potential academic and attainment-related challenges for children who are missing school for long periods of time, which other organisations will have more of an expertise on in order to comment.

4. Effectiveness of policies

Welsh Government policies and guidance

Fixed Penalty Notices

For some families, the threat of, or receiving, a Fixed Penalty Notice related to pupil absence is a motivating factor in improving school attendance, but often it is not as successful in motivating families to maintain that improvement.

Barnardo's Cymru Merthyr Families First keyworkers work with local Police Community Support Officers who will visit some families where there is a child persistently absent from school (where it is felt that this would be appropriate), to explain the potential implications of continuing non-attendance. In some cases, this has been successful. For other families, the threat of a fixed penalty notices or the involvement of the police compounds the challenges that the family is already facing – parental mental health, child mental health, financial problems and much more. This is one reason that some families stated that they felt forced to begin home schooling, to avoid a fine or criminal proceedings.

Action from schools and local government

Lack of a trauma-informed or child-centred approach

Many colleagues felt that children and young people were not being listened to at their schools, and the realities of their lives were not acknowledged or understood. 'Bad behaviour' at school is often a manifestation of disability, mental health condition, or trauma, and rather than schools working with those children and families to understand what was going on and understanding that the behaviour is communicating a need, children and young people are treated as though these behaviours are choices and being punished for them. These punishments often result in children and young people spending even less time at school, making them feel even more alienated.

Colleagues had a range of experiences when working with schools and advocating for the children and young people they support. Some felt that their views were ignored even though they have close relationships with these children and families, while others felt that they were often able to advocate successfully for children they support.

Practitioners that work as a link between families and schools note that, even in relatively small communities, some schools are better than others.

It is reported that some schools are not curious about the reasons behind a pupil's absence. We have seen several instances of young carers who were not identified, or other students who did not have their needs recognised by their school. Whilst schools are generally receptive when contacted by Barnardo's in order to communicate about a student's attendance and how this can be improved, this is not the same as a school being proactively curious about the reasons behind a student's absence and how the school can support them.

Ongoing staffing issues related to Covid-19 and top-down pressure on getting students academically caught up as quickly as possible has made it harder than ever for schools and teachers to prioritise student wellbeing. There is a huge variation in schools' approaches, where some are very committed to providing a nurturing environment that prioritises pastoral care, and others are focused on academic achievement and Estyn ratings and are much more reluctant to make allowances or support students with additional needs.

Practitioners noted that where a school has a Family Liaison Officer (FLO) there tends to be a better level of outreach and focus on student welfare. This is because in the absence of a FLO it is teaching staff that are expected to pick up on this activity when they are already stretched.

Other forms of support

Families tell Barnardo's that working with us (or another third sector provider) as a key worker / link between the family, school and any other services involved in a child's life is a meaningful intervention. The key worker can break down barriers to communication between parents / carers and schools and ensure that there are no siloes.

5. Other

This submission is based on a number of conversations and focus groups with colleagues working in various Barnardo's Cymru children's services in Wales where pupil absenteeism is an issue.

From our focus groups with colleagues, the biggest challenges were often within mainstream secondary schools. Partly this is due to the needs of those students, particularly older teenagers and children who had missed out on the usual experience of transitioning from primary to secondary school. This is also partly because of a lack of support or flexibility from those schools, which could be to do with limited staff capacity, lack of resources to support students with SEND, or schools taking a disciplinarian approach leading to sanctions, detentions, isolations and exclusions that exacerbate underlying issues.