

## PA53 Children in Wales

Senedd Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Ymateb gan Plant yng Nghymru

Welsh Parliament

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Pupil absence

Evidence from Children in Wales

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

### 1. Reasons

Learner attendance has decreased compared to figures published before the pandemic, and has been most notable in respect of secondary school pupils and those classified as 'vulnerable learners'. This definition includes children eligible for FSMs and children with additional learning needs.

The pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the personal health, wellbeing and mental health needs of many learners, and is now having a negative impact on attendance rates. Many children will have struggled to re-engage and re-establish habits, structures and routines, whilst others will have experienced a range of emotional, health and psychological challenges directly linked to the pandemic and the restrictions imposed. Conversely, many children reported positive experiences of being at home during the pandemic which will also impact on school returns. Others will have had increased caring responsibilities in the home and additional pressures to support parents, siblings and other family members, some of which may well be continuing.

All these factors will have made children's ability and motivation to reintegrate and socialise back into a school environment and previous patterns of learning that much more challenging. Some learners may not have fully returned to an education settings since the pandemic or have experienced prolonged periods of disengagement with school, with very little learning.

There has also been an increase in the number of children home educated since the beginning of the pandemic, indicating that more parents are making different choices for their children's education, possibly due to the impact of the pandemic and different work patters emerging since. For those remaining in school, there may be different responses now being taken to a child illness, with more of a willingness to keep a child at home for short periods of time. Concerns regarding absenteeism and retention rates amongst the workforce, and overall capacity within an 'education system under strain' have also be noted.

There is a correlation between increased absence and deprivation. For disadvantaged learners, particularly those in low income families and/or eligible for FSMs , it is important to note that the pandemic has exacerbated poor attendance rates not caused poor attendance rates, with issues existing prior to the pandemic. Many families will have poorer physical resources, with parents often juggling several jobs meaning less time at home with less capacity to support learning. Many children in poverty will have experienced period of school closures very different to that of their peers, with issues in respect of digital barriers and related restrictions being well documented over the past two year.

There is growing recognition of the detrimental impact of poverty on pupils, due to the impact of the pandemic and the increasing financial pressures on families. The current cost of living crisis will have further exacerbated this worsening situation, as schools across Wales see a rise in the number of pupils entitled to FSM, especially amongst families who were financially secure prior to the pandemic and the current crisis, but now in need of additional support.

## 2. Risks and consequences

Poverty must never be a barrier to learning. There are many studies showing that children from deprived areas are more frequently absent from school than their peers from less disadvantaged backgrounds. Poorer children often face many barriers just to get to school.

These studies are supported by the findings from the Annual Child and Family Poverty Survey 2021, conducted by Children in Wales. Based on the experiences and observations of practitioners in Wales, 94% stated that poverty has an impact on the school experience of children. They recognised that many children were often bullied, leading to lower self-esteem; hungry, leading to inability to concentrate; anxious and worried about their families' finances; and often unable to afford the cost of school uniforms, which again regularly led to feelings of not fitting in and being equal to their peers.

Practitioners noted that children were less likely to attend school during 'dress down' days, fund raising events, school trips and the last day of term when presents are given to teachers. These events highlighted those living in poverty are often unable to take part and therefore for many, pupils would rather not attend school than have to explain to teachers and other pupils the reasons for absence. Practitioners identified that in some cases, families were aware of this, deeming it a necessity in order to 'save face'.

The report showed that the cost of transport to and from school was a barrier to pupils attending. Many families in poverty live hand to mouth and the ability to pay for buses and school transport can be sporadic. Through their observations and experiences, practitioners noted that many parents had similar negative experiences during school and this had led to a reduced ability to value education or have the confidence to support their children's learning.

Many of the findings from the practitioners' survey were echoed by children and young people themselves. They regularly spoke about poor mental health, lack of motivation, being bullied, feeling ashamed and embarrassed, all as a result of living in poverty. Being seen in a 'tatty' or ill-fitting second hand uniform; not being able to afford a PE kit and being in receipt of FSMs led children to feelings of isolation and 'not being good enough'.

They also cited practical aspects of poverty that had an impact on their education, including the need to stay home to help a parent'; not being able to get to school as the bus money was needed to pay for food; not being able to afford the energy costs to wash their uniform. Even the practical aspect of completing their homework online was highlighted, often due to data costs.

For some children, it is unlikely that they would explain their circumstances to peers and educators, with some becoming adept in creating reasons for absence. As one child under 10 explained, "Just have to be inventive with my stories".

Given the circumstances that poverty can create, it is therefore not surprising that pupils living in, or on the edge of poverty have an increased rate of absenteeism from school.

Solutions to prevent and reduce absenteeism from schools must therefore consider the urgent need to prioritise measures which prevent and tackle child poverty,

## 3. Impact

The impact on pupils learning and attainment due to persistent and ill-regular absences from school will be profound, especially amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds. All children have a right to education

(UNCRC Article 28) with the quality and benefits of education to help develop their talents, abilities and to enable them to fulfil their potential being the focus of Article 29.

The correlation between pupils eligible for FSMs and higher absenteeism rates will have disproportionately negative long term outcomes for poorer pupils. The links between poor attendance and lower attainment levels, leading to a range of challenges as adults, including poorer employment prospects, homelessness and poorer health have been well documented.

During the initial period of the pandemic and in lockdowns, concerns were raised around the visibility of some vulnerable children, and the need to ensure that all children were safe and protected and not at increased risk from not being seen by teachers and other support services. Safeguarding concerns must remain paramount if some children continue to not be seen and remain in unsafe home environments.

Given the number of days which are lost, every effort should also be made to avoid school exclusions. The WG should take further steps to reduce the high exclusion rates, especially for those children with protected characteristics who are presently overrepresented.

#### 4. Effectiveness of policies

The WG has stated that ‘it is our national mission to achieve high standards and aspirations for all by tackling the impact that poverty has on attainment and to create a truly equitable education system in Wales’. This is to be welcomed.

More must be done to protect and enable disadvantaged learners to better re-engage in education. The learning from the recent commissioned review of educational inequalities will no doubt help inform future priorities, and Committee members will no doubt be keen to review the content of the forthcoming action plan due for imminent release.

A Whole education system approach has to be prioritised to address disadvantaged and inequalities, and we need to ensure that partners outside education settings have an opportunity to, and do engage to support this agenda. It can't be left to schools alone.

Multi-agency partnerships and collaborations must include the active involvement of third sector organisations who have built trusted relationships with pupils and families by delivering outreach and support services in most local communities.

The ESTYN inspection framework will need to be revised to fully take account of the renewed focus on reducing inequalities, and to ensure there is a focus on steps being taken to address persistence absence of pupils affected by poverty, and how well schools are proactively engaging with the community and families.

Achieving equity is much broader than focusing on FSM eligibility alone, and interventions should take account of other vulnerable learner groups and types of disadvantage, notably pupils with ALNs, children in local authority care, young carers and pupils with protected characteristics. There is a need to ensure that interventions are better targeted as not all pupils start in the same place and have the same opportunities, and their circumstances may adversely change during their school journey.

There is also a need to ensure that data on attainment and attendance is fully captured and is disaggregated, both nationally and locally, in respect of different characteristic groups to enable better understanding, and enable interventions and solutions to be tailored to meet different requirements.

There is now growing recognition of the benefits of engaging with parents and the wider community, through using asset based approaches. We welcome the recent investment in Community Focused Schools,

including an announcement of grant funding for local authorities to increase the number of family engagement officers in schools. Committee members will be keen to ensure that this funding is used wisely to ensure money is targeted where it is most needed. It is essential that short-termism is avoided; that approaches which deliver positive outcomes are sustained, and learning is shared across the school community.

Whilst improving attendance will be one of many key goals of the WG strategy, it is typically the approach taken to achieve this objective which will determine whether outcomes are positive. We know that the life chances of learners are influenced by their home and community, and FEOs will need to understand the context of the community in which pupils live and have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the impact of disadvantage on pupil's attendance.

All schools should see parents & family members as assets and encourage involvement in their children's education journey, ensuring that those from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds are fully engaged. Schools will have to go to parents, where communities are dispersed, particularly in rural areas and where public transport is a barrier.

There is a need to ensure that responses are not punitive in that they become counterproductive in stigmatising behaviour and leading to longer or lasting periods of absence. The importance of listening to children, understanding their situations and tailoring support to reflect individual circumstance is the foundation for good school-pupil relations.

## 5. Other

Children in Wales are proactively supporting this agenda having established the Price of Pupil Poverty project with funding from the WG and support from the four Regional Education Consortia. The Price of Pupil Poverty guides are available to help all schools and educators in Wales to consider the impact of poverty on the everyday school experience of pupils from low income and disadvantaged families and provide low and no-cost solutions. One of the five Guides identifies solutions in respect of enhancing Home – School Relations, and we are currently working with a growing number of schools across Wales to make a real difference to enhancing equity, children's rights and pupil well-being by supporting school leaders and teaching staff to implement these guides.



