

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg
Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Pupil absence

Ymateb gan Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru a
Cymdeithas Cyfarwyddwyr Addysg Cymru

Evidence from Welsh Local Government Association
and Association of Directors of Education in Wales

Welsh Local Government Association - The Voice of Welsh Councils

We are the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA); a politically led cross-party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level. We represent the interests of local government and promote local democracy in Wales.

The 22 councils in Wales are our members and the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities are associate members.

We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally.

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their council through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows communities to thrive.

Our ultimate goal is to promote, protect, support, and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

We'll achieve our vision by

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce



Introduction

This is a joint WLGA / ADEW response and has also received input from Education Welfare Officers and Principal Youth Officers across Wales.

Reasons

- Reasons for and levels of persistent absenteeism
- Whether and, if so why, non-covid related absenteeism is higher than prior to the COVID 19 pandemic
- 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)

Levels of persistent absenteeism (PA) have ranged from 3-8% for the last decade despite interventions and ongoing work by many organisations. Reasons for PA range from poor health, poor aspiration, poor parenting and support at home, low income or poverty related issues, unidentified or unsupported learning needs, a lack of appropriate provision, and poor communication or engagement with support services. Whilst recognising the incredibly difficult period society has been through, which has seen not only an increase in poor mental health and emotional well-being issues but also resulted in many people having experienced levels of trauma as a result of having lost loved ones, for example, there is a concerning level of apathy toward education and a view from some parents that the value of education has declined - they tend to link this to school closure periods.

The level of absence is currently higher than pre pandemic levels ranging from over 5% to 10%.

Those with ALN may have also suffered due to the movement to increased online learning and reliance on technology to provide support and engagement.

In terms of our eFSM learners, access to resources has improved however, time, quiet spaces or even just room to access a group lesson has been challenging. This combined with various pull factors away from education such as social media, gaming etc have meant it has been increasingly hard to reach and draw back young people into the structure of the school day and routines. Also, we are aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a higher impact in communities of deprivation and families may have felt the impact close to home.

We warmly welcomed the recent [Attendance Review](#) commissioned by the Welsh Government and undertaken by Meilyr Rowlands which helpfully highlighted the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for school attendance, specifically highlighting the extra workload issues and capacity challenges at both school and local authority level.



Risks and consequences

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

Short term:

Increased disaffection and patterns being embedded including staying indoors more and being less active. This can lead to increased social isolation and loneliness, compounded by more young people seeing little/no future in traditional classroom subjects and an increased view that options online are more attractive.

Longer term:

The potential for a deterioration in physical health e.g., lack of exercise leading to lethargy, deteriorating fitness and weight gain. Also, long term mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, agoraphobia etc.

Concern around support for young carers who support adults with mental health issues not being able to access full time education or support due to transport / time or access to technology.

Funding has been allocated to schools to support with areas of wellbeing but difficult to implement these interventions with children and young people who do not attend regularly, if at all. There is also a growing risk of an increase in the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) [Cutting youth NEET rate could save UK £38bn, research finds | CYP Now](#)

This is a situation which could be compounded in the next twelve months or so as European Union funded programmes (particularly those funded via the ESF element) come to an end, without any sign of replacement funding. This could mean the end of programmes of support which in recent times have shown great impact and positive outcomes in regard to re-engaging young people NEET and as early intervention for those at risk of becoming NEET under the Youth Engagement & Progression Framework (YEPPF).

Impact

- The impact on pupils' learning and attainment
- Whether absenteeism has resulted in a higher level of pupil de-registration and any cross-over with elective home education

Though blended learning has benefitted some learners such as those experiencing anxiety and school phobia, there are a different set of challenges in monitoring remote learning. This may, in the context of the point made above around the different levels of the value of learning in different families, see some learners taking opportunities not to engage in online learning where this occurs.

Young people and parents have reported feeling confused over exam arrangements and the validity of their exam results given previous assessment guidance and how this would compare in the future to employers / universities.



Widening of the gap in terms of pupil knowledge within classrooms as some learners engaged fully throughout the pandemic whilst others have not engaged at all. Difficulty for teaching staff in maintaining lessons aimed at these various levels of ability.

Levels of de-registrations from school have increased by over 50% in two years with many citing concerns about coronavirus and the return to schools. Some parents have also enjoyed educating their child/ren and have continued to do so.

Effectiveness of Policies

- Effectiveness of existing Welsh Government policies and guidance
- Level and effectiveness of action and support from schools, local government and the Welsh Government
- How effectively parents are engaged and supported

Guidance for parents around attendance has not always been clear throughout the pandemic and stronger messages from the Welsh Government to parents has been needed around the legality of ensuring children and young people attend. At various times, WG guidance has weakened the position of LA interventions. For example, at the time of writing, the Minister's statement on 3rd May 2022 created ambiguity around the use of FPN's. The statement refers both to LAs using '*in only the most extreme cases*' - an area normally reserved for prosecution cases and not FPN's - whilst simultaneously pointing to the immediate reintroduction of the 2013 guidance. The 2013 guidance states '*penalty notices will be most effective when issued for less entrenched attendance issues*'. This has left LAs in an uncomfortable position knowing whether to press forward with the use of FPN's.

Education Welfare services and schools have both been stretched during the pandemic. The level of absence is far higher than previously, and this has led to challenges for both parties.

Other

Whilst the information above relates primarily to levels of attendance for those children and young people registered at school, the sentiment also applies to the increasing number of children and young people being home schooled, many of whom have withdrawn during the pandemic. Whilst the hope is that many of these will return to school, councils extend services such as independent counselling services and youth provision to ALL young people e.g., counselling services are accessible in community buildings such as GP surgeries, Youth Clubs, Community Centres as well as in schools. Youth Services, which are recognised as important non-clinical interventions in the effort to re-engage learners are finding in some areas that demand is increasing as school attendance decreases.

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