

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

Ymateb gan Comisiynydd Plant Cymru

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Pupil absence

Evidence from Children's Commissioner for Wales

Background information about the Children's Commissioner for Wales

The Children's Commissioner for Wales' principal aim is to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children. In exercising their functions, the Commissioner must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Commissioner's remit covers all areas of the devolved powers of the Senedd that affect children's rights and welfare.

The UNCRC is an international human rights treaty that applies to all children and young people up to the age of 18. The Welsh Government has adopted the UNCRC as the basis of all policy making for children and young people and the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 places a duty on Welsh Ministers, in exercising their functions, to have 'due regard' to the UNCRC.

This response is not confidential.

Overview of response

In this response I make the following key points:

- Education is a human right for children, and, for most children attending school brings a wide and profound range of benefits, providing for their education, wellbeing and safety.
- It is clear that since the pandemic overall absence and persistent absence rates have risen significantly, but in secondary schools persistent absence was a problem before the pandemic too.
- Messages from settings, and nationally, about overall absence rates have by necessity changed during the pandemic, and this is likely to have impacted overall absence rates.
- The rise in persistent absenteeism suggests that the problems some children have in attending school consistently may have been directly triggered as a response to the pandemic, or have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

- For some children, re-establishing school routines, and re-gaining the confidence and skills to attend school, socialise and learn in a classroom environment has been very difficult.
- Available data show that we need to understand persistent absence as a problem that can be related to poverty. Action to prevent and tackle child poverty needs to be a key driver in reducing absence from school.
- Attendance figures are significantly lower for children in those year groups who do not receive entitlements to free travel and action needs to be taken to extend entitlements to learner travel.
- Rigorous analysis of attendance data should be made available to education and other services to support individual, local and national approaches to preventing ongoing attendance.
- The use of punitive measures in relation to absence can lead to de-registration, and the underlying reasons for persistent absence can also lead to de-registration if they are not addressed. When a child is de-registered there can be challenges in ascertaining whether this child is in fact missing education.
- Policy measures to reduce absence at a national and local level should be accompanied by similar efforts to prevent and reduce exclusion: in 2017-18 (the most recent year for which figures are available) 79,750 days of learning were lost to exclusion.
- The redevelopment of 14-16 qualifications must ensure a qualifications offer in which every young person can progress and be awarded for their achievements, and there must be a shift away from a GCSE system in which too many young people are demotivated by feeling like they are failing.
- Data suggest that a sensible assumption would be to plan provision and services on the basis that at least ten percent of children and young people in education settings need more support than is currently available in order to consistently access education following the disruption of the last two years.
- Full implementation of the framework for the Whole School Approach to emotional and mental wellbeing is key to enabling a multi-agency approach. Schools need help from across the statutory and third sector to make sure children and families have all the support they need.
- Initiatives to support attendance at a setting level must be careful not to stigmatise children for absence.
- Punitive measures should only be on the table as an absolute last resort, when all other attempts at engagement has failed. They should never be used or suggested without an accompanying support package.
- Listening to children and young people will be essential to ensure effective individualised support.

Levels of persistent absenteeism and how these compare to pre-pandemic

Overall weekly attendance over the current academic year peaked at the start of September at 93.6% and was at its lowest in the week before the Christmas holiday, at 72.6%. In the last week for which data was available when compiling my evidence, the week until 20th May 2022, attendance was at 87.1%, a figure which appears fairly typical of attendance over the late spring and early summer terms.¹

To compare this national picture to pre-pandemic absenteeism it is necessary to look at the 2018-19 academic year, as this is the last full year unaffected by the pandemic. This is not straightforward as the

¹ <https://gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-6-september-2021-20-may-2022>

specific data that has been collected has changed. As stated in the Quality Report², *'Data [for 21-22 academic year] is also not comparable to the attendance data we have published in previous years... This historical data counts sessions attended rather than counting pupils physically present in school. Historically pupils away from the school premises on approved educational activity have been counted as attending school.*

However, with this caveat in mind, since the pandemic, it is clear that overall absence has risen. In 2018/19, overall absence in secondary schools stayed constant at 6.2%³, and in primary schools at 5.4%⁴, both of these figures are significantly lower than the likely overall absence for the 2021-2 academic year, which given the current data⁵ looks as if it may be double this figure.

Persistent absence is defined as being absent for more than 20% of overall sessions. In secondary schools the percentage of persistent absentees was at 4.6% in 2018/19; this was the then highest level since 2013/14. Therefore, prior to the pandemic more than one child in every secondary classroom was persistently absent, though it should be noted that older children are disproportionately more likely to be in this group rather than there being an even spread across age groups. So we know before the pandemic this was already a problem. In primary schools the percentage of persistent absentees was far lower, at 1.8%.⁶

Data around persistent absentees has not been published in relation to this academic year, but indicative data shared with my office suggests that persistent absentees may be more than double usual pre-pandemic levels, so we can correlate this very roughly to at least two children in every class of thirty. Of that group, some children have not returned to settings since the pandemic. Whilst the group that have not returned at all is not a large percentage, it is my understanding that across Wales this is the case for hundreds of children.

Why is non-covid related absenteeism higher than prior to the COVID 19 pandemic?

First, there is also an important distinction to make between persistent absence and the higher overall absence figures. It appears that there is a significant rise in both, but there might be quite different reasons underlying this.

In terms of general absence, before the pandemic there was very clear messaging from education settings about absence and a clear focus across schools to reduce and prevent absence. This has, through necessity, changed through the pandemic. As we transition from the pandemic there needs to be consideration of what messages families have around absence and the impact of absence. Our behaviours have changed

² <https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-quality-report-html#section-53409><https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-quality-report-html#section-53409>

³ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-08/absenteeism-from-secondary-schools-september-2018-august-2019-318.pdf>

⁴ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-12/absenteeism-primary-schools-september-2018-august-2019-975.pdf>

⁵ <https://gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-6-september-2021-20-may-2022>

⁶ <https://gov.wales/absenteeism-schools-pupil-characteristics-september-2018-august-2019>

over the pandemic: families may well now be questioning what they should do for minor illnesses, such as infections with mild symptoms, where their child is well enough to attend school. Given the public health messaging over the last two years, understandably families may now feel they should keep children at home. In addition, more families may feel willing to withdraw children from school for family engagements or holidays. This may be partly because schools have of course not been giving the same messages about reducing absences over the pandemic but also because families have had far fewer opportunities to do this over the last two years given the restrictions on socialising and travel.

Reasons for persistent absence can overlap with the above but can often be far more complex. We know that before the pandemic persistent absence was already a problem for around 5% of children in secondary settings. But the rise in absenteeism suggests that the problems some children have in attending school consistently may have been directly triggered as a response to the pandemic or have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Consultations delivered by my office during the periods of lockdown showed a wide range of reactions from children and young people^{7 8}. While there was a strong element of children and young people being desperate to be back in school for both socialisation and learning, some children and young people were happier out of school. Some children were relieved to have a break from bullying or the social pressures of school. Some children and young people preferred being at home, away from a busy and noisy school environment. Some survey respondents explained that this was due to being neuro-divergent and finding the school environment challenging. An observably high number of children and young people described loving the freedom to direct their own learning and their own play, and enjoyed spending more time with their family and 'not rushing'⁹.

Older young people also reported losing confidence and motivation around education. Confidence levels with learning decreased with age, and in January 2021, 55% of 15 year olds did not feel confident about their learning¹⁰. Very many older young people reported that they had lost motivation with their school work: in January 2021 59% of young people between 12-18 reported that they did not feel motivated to learn at home. 11% of this age range said they were not learning at home at all.¹¹

These data show that the impact of the pandemic on learning confidence was not only widespread but that a significant proportion of children and young people spent long periods not engaging at all with learning. They also show that some children and young people have welcomed time at home and may be reluctant or anxious to return to school environments. For some children, re-establishing school routines, and re-gaining the confidence and skills to attend school, socialise and learn in a classroom environment has been very difficult.

⁷ www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FINAL_formattedCVRep_EN.pdf

⁸ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/coronavirus-our-work/coronavirus-and-me-survey-results-2021/>

⁹ www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FINAL_formattedCVRep_EN.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/coronavirus-our-work/coronavirus-and-me-survey-results-2021/>

¹¹ Ibid.

There can also be complex reasons underlying the difficulties some children experience, which may have been exacerbated by the disruption to routines and services during the pandemic, both for the child and on the wider family or community. Barriers to attendance can include specific difficulties relating to neuro-divergence or other additional learning needs; pre-pandemic national data show that persistent absenteeism and overall absence was more common among pupils with special educational needs.¹²

Other factors can include health needs for the child or family members, including mental health needs. The disruption of continuous support over the last years has had the potential to entrench problems that were already complex, and difficulties may be further intensified by the cost of living crisis and the ongoing and profound impacts of child poverty.

Long covid is another possible factor that may be contributing to an increase in persistent absence. This could be experienced by the child, or by members of their family and have resultant impacts on the child. I would suggest additional research would be helpful to understand the medical and social impact of post-viral chronic fatigue conditions on children.

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)

Nationally, weekly data is published, disaggregated by age (year group), entitlement to free school meals, gender and local authority.

Percentages of absence appear broadly consistent between local authorities, without any stark outlying data immediately apparent: in the week until the 20th May there were four percentage points difference between the local authority with highest attendance, and the authority with the lowest, and this is a typical range for most recent weeks.¹³ There are small differences between the genders, but (with the exception of the run up to Christmas) these do not equate to more than 1% on any given week. By year group, the average attendance in the year to date is lowest for those not of compulsory school age: nursery children show an attendance of 83% (N1) and 83.9% (N2). Post 16 attendance is 83.7% in Year 12 and 77% in Year 13. In primary schools average attendance is around 89-90% for most year groups. In secondary schools, attendance decreases steadily by year from 88.8% in Year 7 to 84.5% for Year 11.

Children that are eligible for free school meals have been considerably more likely to be absent over the last academic year than those who are not eligible. In the week ending 20th May 2022, 81.6% of children eligible for free school meals attended school compared to 88.7 % of children who are not eligible – a difference of over 7%. This picture is consistent across every week of the last year: there is not a single week when children eligible for free school meals are more likely than their peers to be in school. This is consistent with pre-pandemic national data which show consistently that persistent absenteeism and overall absence was more common among pupils entitled to free school meals.¹⁴

¹² <https://gov.wales/absenteeism-schools-pupil-characteristics-september-2018-august-2019>

¹³ <https://gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-6-september-2021-20-may-2022>

¹⁴ <https://gov.wales/absenteeism-schools-pupil-characteristics-september-2018-august-2019>

This highlights again the impact that poverty can have on children in Wales: on their day to day experiences, and their long term outcomes. These data suggest that we need to understand persistent absence as a problem that can be related to poverty. Action to prevent and tackle child poverty needs to be a key driver in reducing absence from school. At a school level too, every effort must be taken to ensure that poverty isn't a barrier to attendance. A 2019 report from my office on the impact of child poverty¹⁵ shared pupils and parent/carers' worries about numerous additional costs associated with school attendance, including paying for supplies such as books, technology, arts and craft supplies, stationery, school bags, the costs of attending special events at school, school trips, and fundraising initiatives. Children and young people and parents/ carers also discussed the costs of after-school clubs where the option of a free bus from school is not available. As one parent put it, "*Schools are far too expensive for people who can barely afford food.*" Resources produced by my office¹⁶ as part of that work in 2019 will support schools to check the cost of their school day, and keep uniform and other costs to a minimum. Welsh Government statutory guidance on school uniform is also clear that this should be the case¹⁷. However, my office is still aware of schools with expensive uniform requirements and where many children are excluded from school trips and events by their prohibitive costs.

Travel to education settings continues to be a barrier also, particularly for children and young people that are not compulsory school age, where there is no statutory duty to provide transport. Again, this has the potential to disproportionately affect children in poverty who may not have ready access to transport options (for example unable to afford bus fares, and without a private vehicle). Attendance figures, as shown above, are significantly lower for children in those year groups who do not receive entitlements to free travel. Learner travel has been a priority for my office for some years, with formal recommendations in my predecessor's 2015/16 and 2018/19 Annual Reports¹⁸. The interim review¹⁹ into the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 is clear that the Measure is not fit for purpose, and I am continuing the work of my predecessor to push for Government to take timely action to undertake the actions proposed in the review, which I strongly recommend are completed this Senedd term.

I also recommend that the attendance data for this year is rigorously analysed. Given the impact of the pandemic, the data on persistent and overall absence for this year may be very different from pre-pandemic data. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on particular groups of children and young people has been well-documented, including in reports of my office into the experiences of disabled children²⁰ and children from Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups.²¹ Young carers have also been particularly affected by the pandemic, as disruption to health and social care services has often impacted

¹⁵ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/A-Charter-for-Change-Protecting-Welsh-Children-from-the-Impact-of-Poverty.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/a-charter-for-change-resources/>

¹⁷ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/statutory-guidance-for-school-governing-bodies-on-school-uniform-and-appearance-policies.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/categories/annual-reports/>

¹⁹ [Learner Travel \(Wales\) Measure \(2008\) review 2021 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

²⁰ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/coronavirus-our-work/coronavirus-and-me-bame-children/>

²¹ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/coronavirus-our-work/experiences-of-disabled-children/>

their family life and caring responsibilities.²² Care experienced young people have also had specific impacts, with disruption to family contact arrangements.²³ Children living in or close to poverty have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.²⁴

It is not possible to access publicly available data by all protected characteristics, nor by some of the other groups identified above. I do therefore recommend that at a national and local authority level the attendance data is disaggregated and shared with education settings and other public services at a local and regional level. I also recommend that this is done well in advance of the return to settings in September 2022. This will enable national and local services to plan according to the demographic characteristics indicated, and it will also enable approaches to be taken at a local level that are sensitive to the particular needs of certain groups: very different approaches are needed for young children compared with older young people.

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

All children and young people have a right to education; and the state has duty to ensure that all children experience an education. Missing education has immediate and long-term impacts for children, not only on their progression in learning but on their mental health and emotional wellbeing, and their social development. Education is a human right for children, and, for most children attending school brings a wide and profound range of benefits, providing for their education, wellbeing and safety.

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

My office is aware that there have been large increases in the numbers of pupils de-registering from settings since the start of the pandemic. High levels of absence can be linked to de-registration because punitive absence measures such as fixed penalty notices or school attendance orders may cause some families to choose to de-register their child. However, this is highly unlikely to have been the root cause for an increase in deregistration over the pandemic as Government has strongly discouraged local authorities from the use of any punitive measures, and very few punitive measures have been issued over the last two years. It seems more likely that the rise over the pandemic has been due in part to concerns about covid, perhaps particularly so in families where there are clinical vulnerabilities. The survey results from my office also indicate that many children enjoyed the experience of home learning over the lockdowns and the rise in home education could indicate that they and their families wanted to continue this experience.

However, prior to the pandemic local authorities reported to my office that they were aware of instances when the issue of punitive measures in relation to absence have led to de-registration. Families may make this decision to avoid paying fines, or because they are unable to pay fines. Families may also make this decision because punitive measures contribute to a breakdown in the relationship between the family and

²² <https://senedd.wales/media/ixzpwqr5/cr-ld14286-e.pdf>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

their local authority, or school, or because by the time these are issued relationships are already no longer constructive.

The underlying reasons for persistent absence can also lead to de-registration. Children and young people may be persistently absent due to bullying, including prejudice related bullying, racist abuse or sexual harassment. Children and young people may find learning or socialising in school too difficult because additional learning needs are not being met. Children may have caring responsibilities at home. There could be poor relationships between a child or a young person and their teachers, a child may not feel liked or welcome in school. In my office's Right Way Education Survey 2018 only 46% of secondary aged respondents stated that 'all young people feel welcome' in their place of education.²⁵ Where underlying reasons for absence are not explored and understood, and if steps are not put in place to try and resolve these and offer additional support, then the family may reach a point when school is no longer a place they feel their child can thrive, and they may feel they have no choice but to de-register.

Deregistration in these instances can be reactive and is not always the same as making a positive proactive choice to electively home educate. Home education can offer a very beneficial experience in which children learn, thrive, socialise and play. Home educated children and young people have described to my office the very positive experiences they have had, and also have described the dedication and skills of their families in supporting and enabling their experiences.

But when a family de-registers a child reactively because they feel they have no other choice, they may face real challenges in continuing to meet the educational needs of their child, who may have already had a difficult and at times traumatic experience whilst in school. Families that have de-registered will not necessarily receive any regular external support, for example from education professionals. Whilst families can still access universal health services and should also have support with Additional Learning Needs from their local authority, there will not be readily available access to services such as the wellbeing support available through the whole school approach to emotional and mental health, or to the independent school counselling service. There are also significant capacity and resource implications, not least in that home education can require a parent or carer to reduce working hours outside of the home, which has a resultant impact on family income. As a result of these difficulties, in some cases children who have been de-registered may be missing education.

As has been well documented by my predecessor, it can be challenging for local authorities to know whether this is the case or not: prior to the pandemic, less than half of home educated children were met by a professional in their local authority. A rise in numbers not receiving their education through a school setting is likely to create a further strain on limited resources in this area. This poses a barrier to the ability of authorities to understand needs, offer ongoing support, or to support a return to a school setting if this is in the best interest of the child.

Effectiveness of existing Welsh Government policies and guidance

I am dividing this section into policies and approaches that potentially undermine aims to reduce absence, and then focussing on the effectiveness of existing initiatives to prevent and respond to absence.

²⁵ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Childrens-Rights-Survey.pdf>

Exclusion and attendance

There is an inherent logical contradiction in issuing fixed term exclusions with the one hand, and taking measures to reduce absence with the other. Research by my office into exclusion and isolation of young children showed that in the 2018/9 academic year there were 768 fixed term exclusions issued to children aged eight and under across 19 local authorities.²⁶ In a wider context, in the academic year 2017/18 (the most recent year for which numbers are publicly available) there were 18,125 exclusions issued across Wales, for an average exclusion length of 4.4 days.²⁷ That represents 79,750 days of enforced absence from educational settings.

I strongly recommend that that policy drivers and measures to reduce absence at a national and local level should be accompanied by similar efforts to prevent and reduce exclusion. Government's planned revision of the statutory guidance on exclusion is an important opportunity to address this nationally.

I also suggest that it is possible that individual children receiving exclusions may be more likely to have high levels of absence, and it would be valuable for further research to investigate this in order to understand whether exclusion is also a contributing factor in the absence levels of individual children.

14-16 qualifications

The 2019 nationwide consultation held by my predecessor²⁸ highlighted worries about school work and exams as the highest priority concern for young people. This is shown through the 45% of young people aged 11-18 selecting they were worried or very worried about exams and school work, and through the qualitative responses: "I'm worried mostly about GCSEs." (Boy, 11). Exam pressures may also be a factor in driving higher rates of absence for older young people in Year 11.

The casework service and programme of participation with young people delivered by my office have provided further information that suggests this concern is not only related to exam stress but also to the impact on self-esteem and motivation when young people are considered by themselves and others to be failing. Young people have described to officers the demoralising impact of receiving low GCSE indication grades (or target grades), and the lack of options available to them to pursue a different course or obtain different qualifications. Many young people have explained how they have disengaged from a qualifications route that describes their progress as failing, and in Wales a significant proportion of young people do fail their GCSE every year.

A narrow qualifications offer, in which significant numbers of young people do not achieve great success, undoubtedly demotivates young people and may contribute to the increasing rate of absence as young people progress toward summative assessments. Contacts with my office's independent case work service show that some young people, demotivated by their learning between 14-16, will also de-register from school, or refuse to attend school, before the end of compulsory school age. Many of these young people supported by my case work service will not ever have been offered another qualification route to the GCSE.

²⁶ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/publications/building-blocks/>

²⁷ <https://gov.wales/ad-hoc-statistical-requests-17-28-february-2020>

²⁸ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/What-Now-Report.pdf>

A re-development of the GCSES and of the wider 14-16 offer is currently underway by Qualifications Wales to align with the implementation of the new curriculum. This offers an opportunity to develop a suite of 14-16 qualifications in which every young person can progress and be awarded for their achievements. Importantly, these qualifications not only need to be developed, but they need to be made available to children in school *before* they disengage. Historically options on 14-19 pathways offered qualification routes that were valuable for many young people. Every young person should have a meaningful and rewarding course of study that they can access and achieve well in made available to them at the age of 14. A system in which a high number of young people are expected to fail is one in which absenteeism is not surprising.

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

Additional funding has been provided by Welsh Government as part of pandemic recovery, particularly for Year 11s where £1.28million has been provided for year 11 learners to support them to progress and £8.5million of dedicated transition funding to colleges and school sixth forms to support young people into post-16 settings. Local settings have used some of this funding to address persistent absence. Local authorities have reported using the funding for multi-disciplinary panels to discuss the needs of the child and family and develop a broad support package. Other initiatives have included youth workers engaging with the young person to encourage them back into school and increased offers of individual support from more pastoral staff within schools. Local authorities also described some issues around recruitment over this academic year and it is possible that with the staff shortages seen across our public sector it can be difficult to deploy more staff to do the kind of individualised support that is the best way to tackle this, even with generous funding.

Levels of persistent absenteeism (as detailed previously in this response) suggest to me that a sensible assumption would be to plan provision and services on the basis that at least ten percent of children and young people in education settings need increased bespoke and targeted support to consistently access education following the disruption of the last two years. I note increased, because this planning assumption relates to those who are already persistently absent, and for whom additional measures, beyond what is currently available, are needed.

Hidden in the attendance figures will also be the group of children who are at risk of being persistently absent, but who, thanks to the commitment and skill of their teachers, families and other support professionals are attending school. Many of this group may continue to need this support to continue. Therefore, support for those who are persistently absent must be delivered in addition to ongoing support for the children who are already attending. National and local government, and schools, should be planning with this in mind.

Whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing

Ensuring attendance cannot be solely a job for schools: local authorities have a role in coordinating a cross-sector package. Full implementation of the framework for the whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing will enable this multi-agency approach. Schools need help from across the statutory and third sector to make sure children and families have all the support they need.

Preventing and responding to bullying

2017 research²⁹ by my office indicated that children and young people themselves considered bullying to be a significant factor to absence. Recent awareness of the prevalence of peer sexual harassment, and a building data picture of the impact of racist abuse and bullying highlights the impact this can have on attendance. A number of reports have recommended that more robust action is needed to prevent and tackle identity based bullying, including research by Race Alliance Wales³⁰, EYST³¹ and Show Racism the Red Card³². I welcome Government's recent commitment to strengthening the statutory duties around prejudice based bullying set out in Rights, Respect and Equality. I recommend strongly that this review is informed by the experiences of children and young people themselves, and that it sets out clear guidance about how to both prevent and respond to prejudice-based incidences at a school level.

Third sector examples

There are also examples of approaches in the third sector that could be learnt from by statutory services and implemented more widely. The Rwydd Arall project in Gwynedd and Ynys Mon³³ has reported effective results from a person-centred approach working intensively with young people at risk of deregistration. At the heart of this approach is the meaningful participation of the young person and this is an essential step that should be central to all initiatives, with children of any age. Children and young people need to be involved in discussions so that their needs, concerns and priorities can be understood and the right support put in place. Children can also be part of the solution: they can help identify what will improve their attendance and help establish their own routines, targets and support needs.

Avoiding the penalising of children in settings

Prior to the pandemic there were concerns among parents and professionals that some of the incentives to reduce absence had the impact of penalising or stigmatising children through no fault of their own. For example, awarding certificates of attendance to individuals or classes can highlight and stigmatise children who have low attendance in front of their peers. This can disproportionately affect children with healthcare needs, young carers and as previous statistics show, it will also disproportionately affect children from less affluent families. I would hope that as efforts to increase attendance are brought into focus, there is a general principle to the approach that children should not be penalised or stigmatised by incentives.

How effectively parents are engaged and supported

Community schools are a key part of the Government's strategy for Educational Equity and the Government have recently provided £3.48 million for the employment of family engagement officers. A key part of their role is to establish positive relationships with parents so they can provide clear guidance and support around attendance. The strong research base for the community school approach suggests this has the potential to make a real difference to children and young people, particularly in disadvantaged communities. This approach is not a quick fix, and will require steadfast commitment nationally and across

²⁹ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/our-work/commissioners-blog/sams-story/>

³⁰ <https://racealliance.wales/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Show-Us-You-Care-Full-Report-1.pdf>

³¹ <https://eyst.org.uk/assets/experiences-of-racism-and-race-in-schools-in-wales.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0OfKn36lvBK2RFMRnNNfZSt1m97svQTWMEuu3gtemcpvNMi3dfRAKtpfk>

³² Show Racism the Red Card (2020). Racism in Wales? Exploring Prejudice in the Welsh Education System

³³ sylfaen-cymunedol-rhwyd-arall.pdf (sylfaencymunedol.org)

the profession, and an asset-based approach to the meaningful participation of the community, including of children and young people. Developing a community school approach takes considerable time, and to succeed it needs to be led by schools and communities themselves.

I caution against the use of punitive measures. Punitive measures should only be on the table as an absolute last resort and when all other attempts at engagement have failed. Local authorities have explained to my office that on occasion, when parents are not communicating with the authority, then the use of punitive measures can be the only effective way to ensure that families respond to the efforts and engage with any support. However, the issue of fixed penalty notices or school attendance orders should never be used in isolation. They must be accompanied by a support package, and key to that support package will be talking to the family and child, taking the time to understand the reasons for absence, and putting in place the right support for that particular child.

Listening to children and young people

My focus this year will be on listening to children and their families about their life experiences including reasons behind persistent absences. My nationwide consultation, *Ambitions for Wales*³⁴, will enable me to develop my understanding of children's experiences, and to develop my strategic plan in line with the priorities and needs of children and young people. I urge that other professionals and organisations also enable participation of the child in their work, particularly in efforts to reduce absence. At an individual level this is essential: a child cannot be supported to return to a setting without understanding first what it is that is keeping them away. At a setting level too, children need to be involved in developing initiatives to support attendance in their school: children need collective opportunities to consider what would increase attendance and to help settings develop positive strategies across the whole school.

Submitted by:



Rocio Cifuentes
Children's Commissioner for Wales

³⁴ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/our-work/ambitions-for-wales/>