

Senedd Cymru

Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Children, Young People and Education
Committee

Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Pupil absence

Ymateb gan Cyngor Sir Gâr Carmarthenshire

Evidence from Carmarthenshire County Council

1. Reasons for and levels of persistent absenteeism

Carmarthenshire slightly below Wales in all sectors. Although attendance figures slightly worse than Wales average for 2021-22, differential between 2021-22 and 2018-19 is lower than Wales average in secondary schools. All Wales data for primary not available.

The main reason for absence across the county is authorised illness which accounts for 5.25% of all absence. This is followed by unauthorised absence (O code) which accounts for 1.95% of all absence and the covid 19 (temporary code ;) which relates to 1.92% of all absence.

In previous years, absence due to a positive covid test (; code) was classed as “not required to attend”, however, this year WG have changed the code so that it now counts as authorised absence. Given that Carmarthenshire schools have been significantly affected by covid this year, this will have had a major impact on overall attendance.

Absence linked to term time holidays remains low with 0.35% of absence due to authorised holiday leave and 0.19% absence linked to unauthorised holidays.

There are a significant number of N codes (no reason provided for absence) this year, particularly in secondary schools. the WG guidance on attendance codes 2010 states that these N codes should be changed within a maximum of 10 days. However, secondary schools report that in order for their SIMS system to identify and generate ‘Letters regarding poor attendance’, they can only mark pupils as N and not O. If they are marked as O, they will not be identified as needing a letter on the system. There is therefore a conflict between the admin needs of our secondary schools and the WG guidance. This has been raised with the data team and with headteachers.

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

Data suggests strongly that post-covid rates of attendance are higher than pre-covid.

Of the 343 referrals the Team have had this year, 281 children were referred when attendance was below 50%. As such, it has taken a substantial amount of work to make sustained and positive progress in their school attendance. It is evident that many of the children referred have developed patterns of dis-engagement from learning and regular absence from school over the covid period. Research has identified that risk factors for children having greater difficulties during the pandemic include poverty, pre-existing mental health difficulties, additional needs and children from lower socio-economic backgrounds also seem to be at greater risk of falling behind in their education compared to peers.

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2020-09/review-impact-mass-disruption-wellbeing-mental-health-children-young-people-possible-therapeutic-intervention>.

3. 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)

Overall attendance of boys is slightly higher than girls and this is reflected in secondary schools by greater than 1 percentage point. Girls slightly higher than boys in primary schools but the differential is small. FSM and ALN differential in secondary schools is considerably greater than in primary schools. Of the 343 referrals 156 referrals were for males and 187 were for female learners. Analysis of referrals also shows that the vast majority of the referrals (262) were for non FSM pupils, with 81 for pupils in receipt of FSM.

4. The impact on pupils' learning and attainment

An increasingly large cohort of pupils is suffering a lack of continuity in their learning, and this will inevitably impact on standards of achievement and attainment. This will particularly be felt in examination years where both GCSE and A Level cohorts have missed out on long periods of face-to-face learning and received at best, a diluted experience of examinations and formal assessments over the previous two years. With continuing higher levels of post-covid absence, this impact is likely to continue into the next academic year until attendance levels for these groups can be brought back to pre-covid levels. The grade inflation seen during the disruption of the pandemic is likely to be evened out over the next couple years and this will impact most severely on those with higher absence rates from key learning experiences.

At primary and KS3 levels, increasing numbers of pupils are lagging behind on acquisition of key personal and learning skills to equip them for future phases.

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

There has been a continued increase in electively home educated children during the pandemic. There are currently 560 electively home children known to the team, which is the highest local authority figure in Wales.

There continue to be a significant number of children being withdrawn from school in key stage 4 (Year 10 and 11) which is of concern. One of the key issues reported by these children and families is disengagement from the curriculum and the school environment. It should be noted that the majority of home educated learners known to the local authority have not been previously known to the team for poor school attendance. Absenteeism is therefore not a sole factor in the increasing numbers of home educated children and other reasons include, avoiding exclusion, ALN issues, peer group/ friendship issues and parental choice,

6. Effectiveness of existing Welsh Government policies and guidance

There is currently some conflict between the guidance for Fixed Penalty Notices which states that these fines should be used as an early intervention to address non-attendance and the current WG advice that these should only be used as a last resort. Further clarity is needed around this. There are also concerns that the issuing of fines as a first response could also drive more families towards elective home education as soon as children start to disengage from school.

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

Prior to covid, school systems for attendance were geared to improving those with <90% and increased intervention in collaboration with the LA for those with very low attendance. This cohort is now much larger with many more children with rates of attendance <85%. Schools will need to set up new systems to improve the attendance of increasingly larger groups of pupils to restore to pre-covid levels of over 94%. It is questionable whether there is capacity

at LA level to support schools with these increasing numbers. This may require short to medium term investment by schools, LAs and WG to build capacity from the bottom up in order to support those learners who, prior to the pandemic may not have caused significant concern with their attendance but who are now in the 85% category.

There are concerns in regard to the number of persistent absentees requiring support in Carmarthenshire schools. Therefore, it is important that schools develop internal strategies to improve school attendance and expand the work they are doing to address pupil absence. There is an existing attendance resource pack for schools which provides a 5-stage model and strategies. This will be reviewed and re-issued in Sept and will be accompanied by further training for schools.

8. How effectively parents are engaged and supported

The Team approach is based on a family engagement model and the response to referrals involves supportive, solution focused work. However, where there has been non engagement/ no progress then the team has referred to court in the most extreme cases.

This year, there have been 2 prosecutions for non-attendance with a further 4 cases listed to be heard in court over the coming month.

There are approximately a further 16 families where final warnings have been issued and attendance is being monitored in line with statutory timescales and processes.

The end of term report for the team (covering Sept 21 to April 22) indicates that, on average, pupils' attendance improves by 23.86% following referral to the team.