



## **Ymateb i Ymgynghoriad / Consultation Response**

Date / Dyddiad: 27<sup>th</sup> June 2022

Subject / Pwnc: Inquiry of the Children, Young People and Education Committee into absenteeism of pupils registered at maintained schools and pupil referral units

### **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.

### **Additional evidence to Children Young People and Education Committee Inquiry into pupil absence 27<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

#### **Background:**

At the request of Committee members during the oral evidence session on the 16<sup>th</sup> June, the Children's Commissioner is sending some additional written evidence in relation to two areas:

- Anonymised evidence from participatory programme and case work around flexi-schooling
- Evidence in relation to groups of learners who are most at risk of pupil absence

#### **Flexi-schooling**

- Case work and our programme of participatory engagement indicates that for some children flexi-schooling can help keep them engaged with their school and prevent deregistration.

- Some families report that a flexi-schooling approach, where the child spends some of the timetable in school, and some at home, means their child can cope far better in the school environment, have more positive experiences, and are more likely to want to attend. Families have explained a number of reasons for why this is, including neuro-divergence, the child's emotional or social needs, anxiety about school, or medical needs.
- As an office we are aware of examples where this has been supported for individual children on short term or longer term arrangements, and in these instances learning in school been blended with the child taking activities home and engaging in a home learning, or with the child being supported at home with learning or pastoral activities provided by the family. Sometimes it can be provided as a temporary measure with a view to incrementally increasing attendance at a setting to return to full time attendance.
- A small number of families have reported to us that this has meant their child has continued to be registered at a school setting, and if this flexibility was not on offer they would deregister. Anecdotal evidence from officers in local authorities shared with our office supports the position that for some families this enables children to stay engaged with a setting.
- This type of a blended approach was enabled by settings even pre-pandemic. Professional developments during the pandemic about supporting effective home learning suggest that there would be a wider range of tools, resources and experience that settings could draw on in order to do this.
- Previously barriers to doing this have included professional workload for teachers, the way that attendance is monitored and reported, and also concerns around safeguarding responsibilities, specifically, the need to ensure safeguarding arrangements for a flexi-schooled child or young person when they are being educated off-site but registered as a pupil at the setting. In relation to safeguarding, there are different considerations for young children at home with a parent, and older young people who may not have the same level of family supervision. The current redevelopment of attendance guidance offers an opportunity to work some of this through so that there is clarity around how safeguarding is ensured.
- Where flexi-schooling is in place, this should be regularly reviewed to ensure it is meeting the needs of the child and is in their best interests.

**What different groups of children are most affected? What more needs to be done?**

- More of a problem for **older ages**: In secondary schools, attendance decreases steadily by year from 88.8% in Year 7 to 84.5% for Year 11. Needs a different approach for older young people – youth work offers a very good resource and model. Participatory models will really help; young people need to be part of identifying their priorities and the best approach to support them.
- **Children that are eligible for free school meals** have been considerably more likely to be absent. Data shows this is true now as well as before the pandemic. Week by week data shows that there is a correlation between those from low income families and lower attendance - in the week ending 20<sup>th</sup> 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. 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.

- **Need for timely disaggregated data:** whilst data is disaggregated by eFSM it is not possible to access publicly available week-on-week data by all protected characteristics. This is perhaps understandable due to the speed at which this data is being shared, however I recommend that the attendance data for the last academic year is disaggregated and shared with education settings and other public services at a local and regional level 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: for example, very different approaches are needed for young children compared with older young people. Local authorities can also work with particular community groups where appropriate.
- **High absolute levels of persistent absence for some groups of children.** Meilyr Rowlands' report<sup>1</sup> shows that absences for Gypsy and Traveller learners have increased substantially, though not disproportionately more than for other learners, and similar increases are seen for eFSM learners and those with special educational needs. Increased absence for all these groups of pupils remains a considerable concern because of their high absolute level, both before and after the pandemic. This highlights a need for community based approaches with learners and families. The community school model may offer potential to develop specific outreach work with community groups. My office is aware of approaches to support Gypsy, Traveller and Roma children offered in several settings across Wales which children and young people themselves have valued and described as important in ensuring their attendance.
- **Disproportionate impacts of the pandemic and need for tailored and sensitive approaches.** The disproportionate impacts of the pandemic have been shown in reports of my office into the experiences of disabled children and children from Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups. Young carers have also been particularly affected by the pandemic, as disruption to health and social care services has often impacted their family life and caring responsibilities – as shown by the work of the predecessor committee.<sup>2</sup> Care experienced young people have also had specific impacts, with disruption to family contact arrangements. Children from each of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-04/attendance-review-implications-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-school-attendance.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://senedd.wales/media/ixzpwqr5/cr-ld14286-e.pdf>

these groups may need tailored and sensitive support with attendance, which offers wellbeing support that is bespoke for their individual needs.

- **Children involved with Youth Offending Teams.** There is also a high level of absenteeism in children that are involved with youth offending teams – this has been shown in the recent joint inspection report by HMI Probation, Estyn and Ofsted.<sup>3</sup> This report recommends that Welsh Government Education Directorate should work with the Ministry of Justice to ‘address how the unidentified and unmet needs of YOT children can be prevented by earlier specialist assessment, intervention and support of vulnerable children.’ Government should take forward this work bring forward research and policy action in this area.

Submitted by:



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Children’s Commissioner for Wales

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<sup>3</sup> [A joint inspection of education, training and employment services in youth offending teams in England and Wales \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)