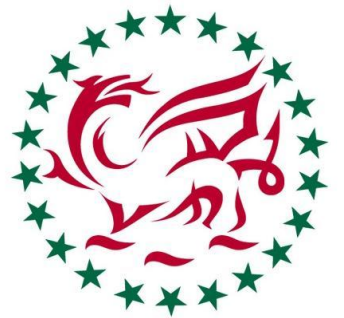




Inquiry into Attendance and Behaviour

March 2013



WLSAC • CLILC

INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities, the three fire and rescue authorities, and four police authorities are associate members.
2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.
3. The WLGA welcomes the opportunity to provide written evidence to the Children and Young People Committee as part of the inquiry into attendance and behaviour. The WLGA were part of the National Behaviour and Attendance Review (NBAR) in 2008 chaired by Professor Ken Reid and have continued to work with local authorities and the Welsh Government supporting the development and implementation of the recommendations contained in the Review report.
4. Local authorities have a statutory duty to secure, promote and improve education services for local communities; they also have a statutory duty to promote social inclusion and well-being. These duties are linked in so far as they place a clear responsibility on local authorities to ensure that all children and young people have access to, and support to engage with education. This is at the heart of the work that local authorities undertake in relation to attendance at schools, and the behaviour of children and young whilst they are attending school.
5. In February 2011 the Minister for Education and Skills launched his 20 actions to improve standards in school across Wales. Attendance and behaviour were highlighted in these actions as an area requiring development in order to support standards. Local government fully support these actions and the three key priorities (literacy, numeracy and narrowing the gap) which play a key role in addressing issues of attendance and behaviour. Local authorities are now working with Welsh Government to execute the actions in the national implementation plan for education 3 – 16; Improving Schools. The implementation plan has attendance and behaviour as a key strand.
6. Evidence shows that since 2005/2006 there has been an improvement in the number of children and young people who are absent from schools (for authorised and

unauthorised reasons) in both the primary and secondary sector. There is also evidence from Estyn inspections that up to one third of secondary schools have been told in inspection reports that attendance is not good enough. The majority of absences from schools were authorised and short-term, lasting only a few days, with over 50% of those being due to ill health. There is however, a significant core of absentees who are missing over 25 school days per year. Recently released figures show that the numbers of permanent exclusions from school are also decreasing. There has been a slight increase in the number of fixed term exclusions, with the main reasons sited for these temporary exclusions being associated with violence and assaults. According to Estyn inspection reports, however, behaviour is good in most secondary and primary schools.

7. The statistical and anecdotal evidence shows us that where there are issues with attendance and behaviour it is often in schools located in areas of high deprivation. This strong association between poverty and attendance at schools is demonstrated through the data which shows that schools with higher rates of pupils in receipt of free school meals also have higher rates of absenteeism. Schools that are in the independent sector have some of the lowest rates of absence in Wales. Local authorities in Wales that have areas of high deprivation are the authorities that have the greatest proportion of children and young people who are regular non-attendees; this creates a particular challenge for local authorities in these areas.
8. There is clearly a relationship between absenteeism and deprivation and evidence also shows us that there is a close link between deprivation and levels of attainment. In addition to the data, it is common sense to assume that if a child or young person is not in school, or is not behaving in a way that is conducive to learning, then this will have a detrimental impact on the education they receive and so their ability to perform well in exams and assessment. Local authorities in Wales understand this complex relationship and are linking the work they are doing on school improvement and the work they are undertaking to tackling attendance and behaviour issues. The interdependencies of these issues are complex but are they key to breaking the cycle of poverty and poor attainment.
9. Local authorities in Wales have created four regional school improvement services which are committed to improving performance in all schools. By working in collaboration local authorities are better able to support and challenge schools to improve performance. These regional services will be working closely with schools and local authorities to address the impact of attendance and behaviour issues on

attainment. Local authorities particularly welcome the recent announcement by the Welsh Government of funding over the next two years, for the four regions to support the use of attendance data. This additional support for local authorities will ensure that all authorities are utilising data on attendance effectively. Accurate, timely and relevant data is essential for local authorities to plan effect support for schools and individuals when addressing the issues associated with poor attendance and behaviour. The inclusion of data on attendance in the Welsh Government's school banding calculation has provided a focus for the work on attendance and has improved access to accurate attendance data (reported in a consistent and timely manner).

10. In addition to the links with school improvement and attainment, local authorities are also targeting support at the underlying issues that may be a factor for children and young people who are experiencing difficulties with attendance at school and behavioural issues. Children and young people who are experiencing challenging circumstances such as caring responsibilities, bullying at school, disengagement with the education system or wider family issues will need different levels of support in order to re-engage with education. Having a clear understanding of why a child or young person is not attending school or is experiencing behavioural problems is vital for the correct support to be put in place. In many areas this means support for all the family. This work is being supported in local authorities through the Families First programme, through youth support services and youth work, and in some cases through engagement with social services.
11. Local government is currently working with Welsh Government colleagues to ensure that there is a joined-up approach to engaging with these children and young people through early identification of those who are in danger of becoming disengaged. There are currently trails underway in local authorities, supported by Welsh Government, to pilot effective strategies for addressing issues of disengagement of, in particular young people so they are less at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment and training.)
12. The primary concern of local authorities in Wales is to support children and young people to enable them to fulfil their potential. Positive engagement with the education system is essential for children and young people to achieve this. For those children and young people who are living in poverty, education is a key factor in ensuring that as they move through their lives they are able to break the cycle of poverty for themselves and for their children. For other children and young people it may be a

matter of providing support through a challenging period in their lives. Whatever the reasons, tackling attendance and behaviour is a key priority for local government as part of the overall commitment to improving the education system in Wales.

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