## SAFE, INCLUDED AND HEARD

**NOVEMBER 2025** 

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## **CONTENTS**

Introduction		6
Glossary		
1.	Safety, Bullying and Disruptive Behaviour	9
2.	Mental Health	12
3.	Pupil Engagement, and Relationships	14
4.	Recommendations	19
Annex		23

## INTRODUCTION

We are a group of 20 Welsh Youth Parliament Members (WYPMs), who represent the Crime and Safety Committee. The Committee was created after all 60 WYPMs chose Crime and Safety as one of three issues to prioritise for this term.

There has been growing concern about crime and safety in schools and colleges in Wales, with news reports suggesting some pupils' behaviour is getting worse including serious examples of aggression and violence, to disruptive behaviour like disobeying rules, and lower attendance levels.

Some of our Committee members have seen these issues first-hand, with one attending a school where a pupil stabbed teachers, while others have witnessed pupils bringing weapons to school. We know that some pupils don't feel safe where they learn, which needs to be addressed for their own wellbeing, and to allow them to give 100% towards their education. A recent **Welsh Government workforce survey** showed that over 90% of respondents felt the variety, range, magnitude and frequency of challenging or disruptive behaviours had increased since the pandemic.

We wanted to explore this issue and give young people a voice in the conversation. Our aim was to understand their feelings and experiences, and hear their opinions on what might be causing these challenges. We also wanted their ideas on how to improve behaviours, relationships, and ultimately overall safety in the places where they receive their education. We know that these issues don't exist in a bubble away from wider problems and challenges we face in society. A young person's family and home environment, poverty, discrimination and inequality are just a few factors that can shape their behaviour and actions. Because these issues are so wide ranging and complex, we decided to concentrate our efforts where we thought we could make the biggest difference – by focusing on what's happening at school and college.

We wanted our consultation to give as many young people as possible the opportunity to have their say. It was also important to us that young people from

different backgrounds, and in different education settings took part to see if there were differences in their experiences and perspectives. Our consultation ran between 8September to 12 November 2025. It included an online survey, and focus groups with specific groups of young people from marginalised backgrounds and communities. 1,985 young people contributed to the survey, and 106 took part in focus group discussions.

Our focus groups involved sessions with young people in alternative education, LGBTQ+ young people, those with additional learning needs, young people at risk of homelessness, and experiencing poverty. We are extremely grateful to all the young people who took the time to have their say, and to the schools, colleges, and youth groups who helped us connect with them. The amount of people who participated in a relatively short period of time shows just how important this issue is, and how vital it is to make changes that will improve experiences in schools and college.

The findings in our report reflect the views of self-selecting respondents who chose to participate in the survey, and those who were invited to take part in our focus groups. This means the results may not fully represent every young person in Wales, but it does give us a strong picture of the concerns and ideas shared by those who did take part.

### **GLOSSARY**

### **Feeling safe**

When we say 'feeling safe' we mean knowing you're protected, that no one is going to hurt you physically or emotionally, or make you feel scared.

### Behaviour that disrupts pupils education

When we say 'behaviour that disrupts pupils education' we would include things like not listening or paying attention in lessons, not following rules, bullying, not attending lessons

### Violent or abusive behaviour

When we say 'violent or abusive behaviour' we would include things like trying to cause physical harm to someone like hitting, kicking or pushing.

### Unwanted sexual behaviour that may make people feel unsafe

When we say 'unwanted sexual behaviour that may make people feel unsafe' we would include things like sexually touching someone's body, being focused on to take part in a sexual activity without permission, or being sent sexual pictures or videos online.

# 1. SAFETY, BULLYING AND DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

We asked how safe young people feel, how often they see violent or abusive behaviour, unwanted sexual behaviour, bullying, and behaviour that disrupts their education at their school or college.

Most young people who answered our survey (72%) said they felt safe at their school or college, but fewer(62%) felt it was both a safe and inclusive place.

20% had witnessed staff being the victims of violent or abusive behaviour sometimes, often, or all the time. 11% had seen other pupils, and 4% had seen staff being the victim of unwanted sexual behaviour sometimes, often, or all the time.

40% of young people in our survey told us they had seen other pupils being the victim of violent or abusive behaviour sometimes, often, or all the time, but only 19% felt that this was a problem.

Responses from both our survey and the focus groups told us that young people from marginalised groups had worse experiences:

A higher number of disabled respondents said violent or abusive behaviour, and unsafe sexual behaviour was a problem (10%, and 12% higher than the total survey sample respectively).

Those who identified as bisexual, gay or lesbian were more likely to feel that school or college was not safe and inclusive (12% lower than the total survey sample).

Respondents identifying as trans or genderfluid felt school or college was less safe and inclusive, and felt that violent or abusive behaviour, and unwanted sexual behaviour was more of a problem than the totally survey sample.

Focus group participants from marginalised groups confirmed the themes in our survey, telling us that they felt more vulnerable at their school or college than

other pupils. Some young people, especially those in Pupil Referral Units (PRU) told us how common violent or abusive behaviour was when they attended school.

## 'Abusive behaviour was really, really common in my school. Fights on the yard, arguments in class, shouting in class – everyday.'

A significant majority of young people responding to our survey told us that pupils were disruptive on a regular basis. Only 11% felt that pupils were never, or rarely disruptive in their school or college, and 43% said this kind of behaviour was a problem.

Disabled young people responding in our survey were even more likely to say that disruptive behaviour was an issue (14% higher than the overall survey sample). Respondents in our survey who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual also reported more problems with disruptive behaviour (12% higher than the overall survey sample).

"I was one of them people that refused to go in. But when I did, it was all kicking off. You'd have people going from classroom to classroom, screaming at each other."

Bullying was a strong theme that came up frequently in our focus groups. They told us that those from marginalised groups - such as disabled young people, those with additional learning needs, LGBTQ+ young people, and young people from different ethnic backgrounds were regularly being targeted more than others.

"In school for me, the more marginalised people were getting picked on. In primary school, there were 30 people in my class. I was picked on heavily until I was 16, until I went to college. I got bullied all the way through primary and into comp and it was horrible. There isn't any support at all. I've always known I'm on the spectrum when it comes to autism and ADHD. but the school never saw it like that."

"I do feel that minorities are treated badly and some of the things that people come out with..."

#### Conclusions

Many of us on the Committee were not surprised by what young people told us in this section. When we looked at the views shared with us in our survey and focus groups, nothing stood out as shocking. But when we compared the results with what we think our ambition should be, it was obvious that things aren't good enough.

What's clear to us is that we, and other young people in Wales, have become used to aggressive behaviour at school and college. This has become the norm. This is emphasised by the fact that only 19% felt that violent or abusive behaviour was a problem, despite 40% having seen it happen.

We think that 62% of young people feeling their school or college is safe and inclusive to be just about acceptable, but again, still not good enough, especially as we are aware of examples where young people are bringing weapons to school because they feel they need it to keep themselves safe. From our own experiences we feel that schools and colleges can focus too much on pupils' uniform being correct, rather than looking at what they're carrying in their bags which could potentially be dangerous. More needs to be done to create an environment where all young people feel protected, and where they are fully involved in reviewing security procedures and systems in schools and colleges to help students feel safe.

We are also worried about young people from marginalised groups, who are clearly being affected more than others. Even though the number of respondents to our survey from these groups was relatively small, the feedback we received in our focus groups matched much of what came across in our survey. Urgent action is needed to better understand why these differences exist, and what can be done to stop young people being treated differently because of their skin colour, beliefs, disability, gender, or identity.

The Senedd's Children, Young People, and Education Committee identified similar themes in its work on **Disabled Access to Education and Childcare**:

"It is clear that there are widespread incidents of disability related bullying happening across schools in Wales. Some of the statistics that we heard were shocking, along with the acceptance that it is almost the norm."

Disruptive behaviour is also a major issue. Less than a quarter of young people surveyed said it wasn't a problem, which means most feel it affects their learning. This level of disruption is very problematic and a big barrier to young people's learning, making it harder to focus, feel safe and do their best.

### 2. MENTAL HEALTH

We asked young people how often they struggle with their mental health, if they have asked for support, and what they think about the support available at their school or college.

66% of young people we asked told us that feeling stressed or having poor mental health had a negative impact on their behaviour and attendance in school. Almost half (44%) said exam pressures were a particular cause of stress. Stress and poor mental health had a bigger impact on the behaviour and attendance of young people with a disability, and respondents identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual (20% higher than the total survey sample).

We repeated some of the same questions used in earlier mental health consultations carried out by the WYP in 2020 and 2022 so we could compare the results over time.

How often do you struggle with your mental health?	2020	2022	2025
Every day	28%	28%	16%
At least once a week	17%	16%	12%
More than once a week	16%	16%	13%
Once a fortnight	6%	5%	8%
Once a month	3%	5%	5%
Every now and then	24%	20%	27%
Never	8%	10%	19%

There was a drop of 12% in the amount of young people saying they struggle with mental health every day, and a 9% increase in young people saying they never struggle with their mental health. Those with a disability, those identifying as trans or genderfluid, and gay, lesbian or bisexual respondents were more likely to

struggle with their mental health every day or once a week (between 19-27% higher than the total survey sample).

53% of young people responding to our survey said they were happy with the availability and reliability of mental health support (up 22% from 2022), and 32% said they had tried to speak with someone about their mental health (up 9% from 2022) at their school or college.

58% said they were happy with the quality of support they received (similar to the 59% in 2022). 28% said they didn't ask for help because they didn't feel comfortable doing so (compared to 31% in 2022).

### **Conclusions**

It's encouraging to see that more young people seem to feel positive about the amount of mental health support available. We think this is helping more people reach out for help and therefore struggle less often with poor mental health. This also matches what some of us have seen personally in schools and colleges, where there is an increased focus in supporting pupils' mental wellbeing. This could be due to the increased emphasis the Welsh Government has placed on the 'whole school approach to mental health'. But we are disappointed that similar progress hasn't been made when it comes to young people's opinion on the quality of support they receive, which hasn't changed much since the WYP's 'Young Minds Matter' report in 2022. Our findings also show that stigma around seeking support is still a barrier. While more people are seeking help, the percentage of respondents who said they haven't because they didn't feel comfortable is around the same as it was in 2022. Even though support is more available and reliable in schools and colleges, that will not solve the problem if young people still worry about being judged or treated differently when they do seek help.

Two thirds of young people told us that stress or poor mental health negatively impacts their behaviour and attendance at school, and that figure is significantly higher among young people from marginalised groups. Because of this, we believe schools and colleges should be tasked with improving the quality of support on offer and given adequate resources to do so. They need to proactively plan support in the lead-up to exam periods. It's also important to keep working to make conversations about mental health feel normal, so that getting help is seen as a natural part of school life—not something unusual or embarrassing.

# 3. PUPIL ENGAGEMENT, AND RELATIONSHIPS

We asked young people about the information they receive at school or college, how engaged they feel, and what their relationships with staff and other pupils is like.

Two thirds of survey respondents said they would know what to do if they saw or experienced violent or abusive behaviour, or unwanted sexual behaviour that may make people feel unsafe. 57% also said they had received enough information about topics like mental health, healthy relationships, sex education, developing emotional skills, managing emotions, and violence prevention at their school or college.

In our focus groups, there were many young people who felt that information and education about positive relationships is important - especially when it helps pupils and teachers to understand and empathise with young people from different backgrounds, cultures, religions, beliefs, and abilities

"More information about differences, race, LBGT, disabilities, need to understand more to get people to have more empathy and realise the effect of their words or actions."

64% of young people said staff would respond properly if concerns were reported to them. Half said their school or college were effective at creating positive relationships between pupils and staff, and 58% thought staff are approachable and would talk to them comfortably if they had worries about abuse or unwanted sexual behaviour.

Lots of comments in our survey highlighted how important it is for staff to set positive examples, and demonstrate leadership to foster healthy relationships. Many young people said they wanted more time with school and college staff, and they also valued 'safe spaces' where they can talk openly about difficult issues.

"Teachers setting an example for students - showing kindness/positive relationships with each other for younger students to follow."

"In college my tutor was really helpful and he would make time for 1-2-1 meetings, and he'd ask you to put an emoji in your profile picture so he could see how you were feeling that day, so he'd know if you needed help. It helps to have that little bit more attention if you are having a rough time. A visual check-in."

"Y Porth - Quiet room with motivational information and sayings on the wall, it is good to have somewhere to go to decompress. The staff there are good and supportive. We can catch up with work there."

Just over half of young people in our survey (54%) said they felt heard and respected at their school or college, with younger pupils (13-15 year-olds) less likely to feel this way than older pupils (16-18 year-olds). 30% said they'd been involved in making plans and decisions on keeping pupils safe. Most of the comments in our survey showed that pupil involvement usually happened through school councils.

When asked what could improve relationships, attendance and behaviour at school or college, there were some recurring themes:

Make lessons more fun, interactive and engaging. "Having lessons that feel engaging and relevant to real life would encourage people to show up more regularly."

"Changing teaching techniques, nobody wants to sit and look at a projector all day. it needs to be more interactive, especially for people with learning difficulties such as ADHD."

Increase social activities and group opportunities.

"Include group activities, open discussions, or even peer mentoring. It would help students get to know each other better and build a more supportive and respectful environment."

Provision of inclusivity groups.

"We have a Queer Straight Alliance council which supports our LGBTQIA+ students, and we have an ALN advocates council which supports pupils with additional learning needs. We also have a Mental Health Council. Each of these are run by staff, but sixth formers are chairs on the council, and younger pupils on the councils are really good at coming up with ideas to help promote a safer environment."

Give pupils a greater say on decisions made in their schools and colleges, and in setting policies. "More opportunities to feed into policies on how the college interacts with students."

"Better communication with students and co-producing polices on behaviour."

"There could be a system of gaining feedback about things that week that have made school a bad environment which can then be worked on by school teachers for the next term."

Creating a culture where achievements are recognised.

"Celebrating achievements, even small ones, and recognising good behaviour can motivate people, while having clear and fair rules helps everyone know what's expected."

"Rewards for good attendance like a little postcard home just to know that the college does recognise their hard enthusiasm and how brilliant they are doing."

#### **Conclusions**

Even though most young people said they receive enough information on things like healthy relationships, violence prevention and mental health, our experience – and what we heard in focus groups – suggests this isn't consistent across schools and colleges in Wales. We agree with those in our focus groups who called for schools and colleges to place a stronger emphasis on these topics. This responsibility shouldn't only be put on teachers. Youth groups and organisations can also play an important role in delivering expert information to pupils and staff, and older pupils acting as role models can also deliver impactful messages to their peers.

Young people need a wide range of information provided consistently throughout their time in education to help them understand how to build positive relationships, to develop skills in managing their emotions, and understand people from different cultures and backgrounds. It needs to be relevant to their life experiences at the time, for example as young people grow older, they are more likely to be exposed to drugs, alcohol and crime, making financial decisions becomes more important and so on. The information and training provided should prepare students for vital tasks in the world they wouldn't otherwise know how to navigate.

We also believe that young people should be clearly informed about the real-life consequences of serious issues like carrying weapons to school, abusive behaviour,

unwanted sexual behaviour, and bullying can have on them, their future, and the people around them, which should deter more pupils away from this path.

The importance of staff who are kind, understanding and approachable can't be overstated. We heard so many examples where young people referenced staff at their school and college being warm, welcoming and supportive, who took time to build positive relationships. Staff members like this make a huge difference by setting a good example. But we also heard from young people who felt the opposite - especially those from marginalised groups, who often felt misunderstood. The picture seems to change from school to school and college to college. It's important that young people have access to teachers and staff at their school or college to support them. We know teachers are under a lot of pressure, so it's important they have the space to develop the right skills and access the information they need. They also need time to provide support and build strong, effective relationships with their pupils. When this happens, it makes a world of difference and creates a much more positive and supportive environment for young people. We also think there's a role for older students to be involved in delivering messages as sometimes hearing it from your peers can be even more impactful for pupils.

### "Have students who are seen as 'role models' for the younger years, for example if they teach a few lessons or go into feeder schools and teach year sixes.""

There were lots of good examples shared by young people where lessons included social and practical elements. Taking part in less formal activities as part of the school day makes learning more varied, fun and engaging, and helps stop pupils from losing interest – which can often lead to disruptive behaviour. We also support young people's call for more clubs, groups, bonding days, and school or college trips, that also help develop a different dynamic between pupils and staff that isn't always possible in a normal classroom setting.

While most young people (54%) felt listened to and respected at their school or college, we feel this number should be higher. Pupil voice is an area of concern for us as a Committee, with only 30% of young people saying they'd been involved in making plans and decisions on keeping pupils safe. We think this is revealing and shows how the culture in places of learning needs to change to give young people more of a say and influence over all aspects of their school or college life. Pupils want to be more involved in discussions in how decisions are made, how policies are set, and how lessons are shaped. When this happens pupils feel more respected and valued, more engaged, and have a greater sense of ownership, all of which will contribute to better behaviour, and healthier relationships. Our

experience is that this is something schools and colleges are trying to do with varying levels of success. In some places this is done well, it's meaningful and taken seriously – but in others, pupils are asked for their opinions but then ignored, decisions are made and not explained properly, and feedback isn't given. A lot of this work also focuses more on older pupils, and we think there needs to be much more focus on Key Stage 3 so that habits are built early.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that by acting on the conclusions and recommendations in this report, schools and colleges can build a more positive culture, where young people are better able to develop respectful, empathetic and understanding relationships with both staff and other pupils, that makes places of learning safer for all.

Creating safe, supportive and inclusive schools and colleges is essential for helping young people thrive and reach their full potential. We want an education system that, prepares young people for life, not just exams. For that to happen, pupils need an environment where they feel respected, listened to, and confident to express who they are. If young people feel more involved in decisions and have a voice in how things are done, this could help reduce disruptive behaviour.

Many young people's needs simply aren't being met, which we think is a significant contributing factor leading to problematic behaviour.

Despite some positive results around the availability of mental health support, what we heard in our consultation didn't surprise us. Instead, it confirmed what we have seen ourselves and what many young people have been saying for years:

- Disruptive behaviour in classrooms is a big problem.
- Marginalised young people are more negatively impacted, they feel less safe, and are being targeted for abuse and bullying.
- Young people deeply value supportive, empathetic staff, and want more access to them - but it isn't a consistent picture across the country.
- Lessons and the way in which education is delivered needs to be more engaging and varied.
- Poor mental health and stress have by far the biggest impact on pupil behaviour, especially around exam periods.

- There is still stigma around young people asking for mental health support.
- Young people don't feel involved in decisions or able to influence what happens in their school or college.

There are a number of recommendations made in previous WYP reports that could be considered as relevant today as they were at the time they were published:

"Training programmes for professionals who work with and support young people to improve awareness and understanding of the mental health challenges faced by young people from different backgrounds, such as neurodiverse people, those with a disability, members of the LGBTQ+ community, in poverty, and different ethnicities."

(Young Minds Matter report, November 2022)

"Places of learning to create more safe spaces for young people to talk with other young people and professionals" (Young Minds Matter report, November 2022)

"Steps to tackle intolerance when young people receive their education, to inform young people to understand different cultures, viewpoints and beliefs."

(Young Minds Matter report, November 2022)

"Provide youth groups, schools and colleges the resources to enable more school visits and activities."

(My School Day report, November 2023)

"Young people should be at the heart of decisions in terms of which school activities are provided."

(My School Day report, November 2023)

When it comes to covering the issues raised by marginalised groups of young people, while we're conscious that we've only been able to scratch the surface with our research, the Children's Commissioner for Wales has repeatedly highlighted the inequality of experiences in their 'Ambitions for Wales', and 'Coronavirus and Me' reports spotlighting young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and young people with disabilities.. Feedback from our survey and focus groups highlight serious concerns, but we haven't had the time to fully explore the root causes, and the support needed. We want our work to be built upon, to dig deeper into these areas, especially with young people outside of formal education settings, those with disabilities, additional learning needs, young

people from different ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQ+ young people, and those living in poorer areas.

One of our biggest concerns is that young people seem to have become used to problematic behaviour. They often accept things that shouldn't be considered normal or acceptable, which suggests a worrying level of resignation. The fact that 40% of respondents told us that they witnessed violent or abusive behaviour at their school or college, but only 19% thought it was a problem emphasises this point. This kind of behaviour has become normalised. This is not okay, and we must aim higher.

There were lots of positive examples given by young people on how their places of learning are working towards creating safe and supportive environments where relationships can thrive. The challenge now is making sure this happens more consistently across the country, and to do that schools and colleges need to learn from one another's successes and mistakes so that all young people can benefit.

We know that major social issues like crime, inequality, discrimination, and poverty don't start or end at the school gates. However, there are practical actions that can be taken within schools and colleges that are both realistic and achievable. These actions can make a real difference to young people's daily lives, helping them feel safer, more included, and better supported.

**Recommendation 1.** As a matter of priority, the Welsh Government should act to improve the experiences of young people from marginalised groups where they receive their education. They should build on our work and engage further with the groups highlighted in this report to identify solutions that will improve their safety and therefore their educational experience..

**Recommendation 2.** Review guidance for schools and colleges about reporting incidents, and security procedures and systems to make sure they're tightened so young people are kept safe.

**Recommendation 3.** Continue with efforts to improve mental health support in schools and college, with a focus on tackling stigma around getting support, improving the quality of support available, and making sure safe spaces are available to de-stress. Clear plans need to be in place to support pupils in the lead up to particularly stressful times, like exam periods.

**Recommendation 4.** Improve pupil voice, ensure young people across all age ranges are involved in shaping policies and decisions about safety, inclusion, and the overall educational environment.

**Recommendation 5.** Make lessons more engaging, interactive and connected to issues that are important to young people, so pupils feel more involved and motivated.

**Recommendation 6.** Make sure schools and colleges have the resources they need to provide more opportunities for pupils to access one-to-one support from teachers and staff. They should also have resources to deliver more social activities and groups that help build positive relationships between pupils and staff.

**Recommendation 7.** Provide more lessons for pupils, and training for staff that demonstrates the consequences of serious crimes, how to stay safe, healthy relationships, positive behaviours, and diversity and inclusion to improve the educational experience for all young people including those from marginalised groups. This needs to be a meaningful and ongoing programme, not a one-off tick box exercise.

**Recommendation 8.** Provide support and facilitate sharing of good practice and guidance to schools and colleges to improve consistency across the country in respect of inclusion, managing pupil behaviour and bullying.



### **Focus Groups**

- ITEC Bridgend
- Ysgol y Grango
- Ysgol y Creuddyn
- GISDA LGBTQ+ group
- DIGON Plasmawr
- Balch Plasmawr
- PRU Aberaeron
- Meddwl Ymlaen Barnados Anglesey
- Umbrella Allies Cardiff Youth Service
- YMCA Swansea

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