

# WELSH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE REPORT: PUPIL ABSENCE

## Minister for Education and Welsh Language JANUARY 2023

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We know there are a range of reasons or underlying causes for learner absence, and that this has been further exacerbated over the last two years.

The last two years have been incredibly difficult for many families, and it is understandable that many have been anxious. We have remained mindful of these anxieties however the balance of harms is now clear and we know that young people need to be attending school, seeing their friends, and learning in the classroom. This is vital for their wellbeing as well as for their education.

The Committee is already aware of our intention to develop new attendance guidance, but given the interconnections between attendance, exclusions, and behaviour, we are currently reviewing all guidance in this space.

Our new guidance will be child-centric, underpinned by trauma informed practice as well as evidence of what's working on the ground. It will outline the vital roles that Local Authority Education Welfare Services, education settings, governors and parents and caregivers play, in ensuring and maintaining learner engagement and attendance.

We aim to consult on all the refreshed guidance documents in the Spring, with a view to publication in September 2023.

I would like to thank the members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee for their report and I welcome the recommendations, which are fully aligned with Welsh Government priorities in this space.

I have set out my response to the Report's individual recommendations below.

<p><b>Recommendation 1.</b> The Welsh Government runs a national campaign to emphasise the positive impacts of regular school attendance, alongside this, the Welsh Government should provide support to local authorities and schools to deliver similar, local positive campaigns about school attendance. The different campaigns should reinforce messages from the other campaigns. <i>Page 26</i></p>
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### **Response: Accept**

We will be increasing communications to parents and carers addressing any concerns they still have and emphasising the importance of going to school. Community Focused Schools will play a key role in responding to this challenge. Family Engagement Officers are vital in ensuring that positive partnerships are created, and that bespoke support is offered.

**Financial Implications** – Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

**Recommendation 2.** The Welsh Government should commission an urgent study into how the cost of living crisis is impacting on pupils' ability to attend school. This should be done within two months following the Welsh Government's response to this report and made publicly available. The review should be supported by an action plan which details what work will be done to address any of the issues highlighted in the report. *Page 27*

**Response: Accept**

It will be challenging to commission this within the timescales referenced. However we are already in informal discussions with an LA about a research proposal they have been developing to take an in-depth look at attendance in secondary settings, with a focus on which approaches and interventions bring the most benefit to lower income families and their engagement with education.

**Financial Implications** – We anticipate this research to cost in the region of £70k but this can be drawn from existing programme budgets.

**Recommendation 3.** The Welsh Government should ensure that decisions on learner travel are driven by the individual and specific needs of children and young people. To support local authorities in taking this approach, the Welsh Government should ensure that local authorities have sufficient funding to ensure all children and young people have access to appropriate transport options to get them to school safely. The current review should look to prioritising a learner first solution; and should be radical in looking for innovative solutions. *Page 27*

**Response: Accept in principle**

Much has changed since the Learner Travel Measure came into force in 2008.

Our plan remains to undertake a further review but how we take forward any work coming out of that review is likely to take time and resource.

Home to school transport now accounts for a quarter of all local authority direct spending on education – this is a growing cost.

During 2020, we undertook a review of the existing Learner Travel Measure which involved gathering initial evidence. It found weaknesses in current networks and infrastructure that make implementing an expansion of provision difficult. We found there is inconsistency in provision across all of Wales.

Rather than tweaks, a long-term sustainable plan must be found.

The government has published a White Paper, One Network, One Timetable, One Ticket, which sets out an ambitious vision for transforming bus services in Wales.

The proposed bill will offer us a chance to look a fresh at bus service delivery across Wales, including the provision of school transport.

While the distance threshold to qualify for free school transport is a key issue, there are also other significant considerations. We are now looking at how we can take forward a wider programme of work to improve operator provision, and to better align transport with other wider policy aims, such as Welsh medium provision, support ALN pupils and consider provision to Further Education establishments.

As our aims are ambitious, these reforms will take time, but it is vital that we get this right in order to support learners and our wider reform programme. In the meantime, we will continue to work with Local Authorities to encourage a consistency in approach.

Enabling more children to walk, scoot and cycle to school is a key priority for the Welsh Government.

We are funding improvements to walking and cycling routes and facilities through our Active Travel Fund and the Safe Routes in Communities Grant each year.

All local authorities must plan networks of walking and cycling routes, shown on Active Travel Network Maps. We have made it a condition that all schools must be served by active travel routes, which can be walking and/ or cycling routes.

We furthermore are encouraging local authorities across Wales to introduce School Streets, which involve road closures around schools at the start and end of the school day, in order to improve conditions for walking and cycling, improve road safety and reduce air pollution. We have offered funding to all local authorities interested in undertaking preparatory work for the implementation of school streets schemes, if they can demonstrate that they are committed to progressing schemes.

We are working with Sustrans to provide support to schools to develop Active Travel School Plans, which aim to identify and address barriers to active travel to school, and increase the number of pupils and staff walking, scooting or cycling regularly. A set of resources and approaches is currently being piloted with the intention to begin national roll-out in 2023. This complements our long-standing Active Journeys programme and cycling and child pedestrian training.

**Financial Implications** – The costs of further learner travel review can be met from existing budgets. Any changes to provision as a result of the review may result in additional costs which would need to be considered.

**Recommendation 4.** That the Welsh Government outlines how they intend to take forward the work looking at the use of attendance data to support early interventions. In providing this detail the Welsh Government should provide outline timeframes for the delivery of this work. *Page 37*

**Response: Accept**

Our Framework on Embedding a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing (March 2021) highlights the need for schools to use the range of data sources available to them when considering the wellbeing needs of their community, both in terms of universal provision and specific targeted support for those who need it. Schools collect a range of data and intelligence, which can be used to inform and understand the well-being, both of the learners and the school staff and includes information on absence rates and on exclusions. Following publication of the Framework we are working with stakeholders to support implementation and also consider how we measure impact.

As part of our forward work programme, we will consider how absence and exclusion data can be used to help inform how schools support the wellbeing of learners to prevent persistent absence and exclusion.

**Financial Implications** – There are likely to be financial implications, but additional costs are likely to be drawn from existing programme budgets.

**Recommendation 5.** That the Welsh Government monitors educational outcomes and the links with attendance rates and publishes this data on a regular basis. *Page 44*

**Response: Accept in principle**

A key principle behind the new curriculum is that all learners can progress along their own pathways to enable them to move confidently to their next steps in employment, education or training. This is deliberately and actively inclusive of disadvantaged learners, including socio-economically disadvantaged and those with ALN.

We recognise the link between attendance and educational attainment and would in principle support any policy which encourages learners to attend school.

The Government Social Research report developed by Arad Research, *Scoping study for the evaluation of the curriculum and assessment reforms*, and the upcoming Social Finance report on the information needs of the school system, together set out how information about the school system could most constructively be used to support learner progress, school improvement, and published to describe educational outcomes at a national level. These reports will inform our approach to these issues. This will take time to develop. Publication of attendance data and qualifications data on My Local School was paused during the pandemic: these arrangements are considerations for the longer term as part of a broader information

landscape that promotes a focus on learner and teacher wellbeing, attainment at all levels, progress to next steps, and community and parental engagement.

**Financial Implications** —We expect the costs of this recommendation to be met from available programme budgets.

**Recommendation 6.** That the Welsh Government publishes more detailed data on the reasons for de-registration and for returning to schools after de-registration alongside with data on the support being provided to families. This data should be disaggregated by local authority and key demographics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and eligibility for free school meals. *Page 51*

**Response: Accept**

We are working with Data Cymru (WLGA) to improve the quality and level of data we currently capture in relation to de-registration and the key demographics of this cohort, including the reasons for de-registration

With the expected implementation of the new EHE proposals in 2023, including the wider package of support, we plan to gather additional data to help us evaluate the impact on EHE learners.

**Financial Implications** – None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

**Recommendation 7.** That the Welsh Government as part of its current review of school attendance policy and guidance, agrees and sets consistent trigger levels for intervention which apply across all local authorities in Wales. *Page 71*

**Response: Accept**

This will be actioned as part of development of revised guidance.

**Financial Implications** – Currently unknown. Any change to thresholds for intervention has a resource implication for local authorities. This will need further consideration along with an analysis of potential costs to support local authorities with any changes. A further update will be provided.

Jeremy Miles MS  
Minister for Education and Welsh Language