

# Pupil absence

November 2022



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# Pupil absence

November 2022



# About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:  
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Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:  
Jayne Bryant MS**  
Welsh Labour



**James Evans MS**  
Welsh Conservatives



**Laura Anne Jones MS**  
Welsh Conservatives



**Ken Skates MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Buffy Williams MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Sioned Williams MS**  
Plaid Cymru

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The following Member attended as a substitute during this inquiry.



**Heledd Fychan MS**  
Plaid Cymru

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## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1.** 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 reinforces messages from the other campaigns.....Page 26

**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

**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

**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 38

**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

**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

**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

## 1. Background

This topic arose from annual scrutiny with Estyn. We wanted to investigate further because of the significant impact absence can have on learning, attainment and mental health. We gathered evidence through both formal and informal means.

**1.** During our annual scrutiny session of Estyn on 13 December 2021, the issue of pupil absence was raised. As a result, we wrote to all local authorities in Wales to ask about the data they hold on pupil absence, and how they are working with schools to improve the attendance of pupils who have not returned back to school regularly following the general school closures.<sup>1</sup> We received responses from 15 local authorities, which were considered at our meeting on 10 March 2022.<sup>2</sup>

**2.** At our meeting on 31 March 2022, we decided to undertake a short inquiry on pupil absence. In making the decision to do this inquiry, we considered it against our **strategic plan** and our identified priorities. We agreed it addressed a number of our objectives:

- Put children's rights at the heart of our work – Article 19 of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** ("UNCRC") states that children have a right to be protected from violence, abuse and neglect. Article 28 states that children have a right to education. Article 29 states that education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full.
- Undertake timely and constructive scrutiny – The weekly data on the numbers and rates of attendance, which as of 31 March was showing that an average of 90.0% of pupil were in attendance, and that 1.6% pupils were absent because of COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language ("the Minister") had previously announced a review of attendance patterns.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee to Welsh local authorities, 17 December 2021

<sup>2</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, papers to note 1-16, 10 March 2022

<sup>3</sup> Welsh Government, Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 6 September 2021 to 11 March 2021

<sup>4</sup> Minister for Education and Welsh Language, Written Statement: Update on Schools and Colleges, 14 October 2021

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- Consider the impact of children and young people’s emotional and mental well-being – Absence from school can relate to anxiety and mental health issues, but absence can also reduce children and young people’s access to the range of support that can be provided in educational settings.
- Focus on the negative impact of disadvantage on outcomes for children and young people, and resulting inequalities – Pupils who are eligible for free school meals are more likely to be absent from school and absence can have an impact on educational outcomes.

**3.** To inform our scoping work, we wrote to the Minister in April 2022 seeking an update on the work he had announced in October 2021.<sup>5</sup> The Minister replied, sharing the report.<sup>6</sup> We took the report and its findings into account when deciding upon the terms of reference and our general approach.

**4.** On 4 May 2022, we agreed our scope and approach to the inquiry. Our terms of reference were:

This inquiry will focus on the issue of absenteeism of pupils registered at maintained schools and pupil referral units. The inquiry will look specifically at:

- Reasons for and levels of persistent absenteeism
- Whether and if so, why, non-covid related absenteeism is higher than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic
- 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)
- The short term and longer-term risks and consequences for learners for example in terms of mental health and well-being
- The impact on pupils’ learning and attainment

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee to Minister for Education and Welsh Language, 7 April 2022

<sup>6</sup> Letter from the Minister for Education and Welsh Language to Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 April 2022

- Whether absenteeism has resulted in a higher level of pupil de-registration and any cross-over with elective home education
- Effectiveness of existing Welsh Government policies and guidance
- Level and effectiveness of action and support from schools, local government and the Welsh Government
- How effectively parents are engaged and supported

**5.** We launched a **written consultation** on 9 May, which closed on 20 June 2022. We received 59 responses, of which 26 came from individuals. Most of these individual responses were from parents sharing their own family's experiences. We are particularly appreciative of these responses, which were often sharing quite difficult or challenging experiences. As one of our strategic priorities is to listen to the lived experience of children and young people, so hearing directly from those affected by this issue was particularly powerful. Further details about the written evidence can be found in Annex B.

**6.** Alongside the written call for evidence, our Citizen Engagement Team held five focus groups and 7 interviews between 24 May and 9 June with a range of parents, young people and some staff in different areas of Wales. One individual and one group also provided comments via email.<sup>7</sup> Again, we are incredibly grateful to all those who give their time to contribute to this inquiry.

**7.** We took oral evidence from a range of stakeholders over the course of three meetings in June 2022, concluding with the Minister. We held two round table discussion sessions with Education Welfare Officers to hear directly from front line staff. We also had a private briefing with Meilyr Rowlands who authored the review commissioned by the Minister. Full details of the oral evidence can be found in Annex A.

**8.** Following our oral evidence session with Estyn, they provided further evidence outlining some good practice from across Wales. This was published on our **website**.

**9.** We would like to thank all those who contributed to our inquiry. We are reliant on high quality evidence to inform our work, deliberations and conclusions. We know it can be time consuming to submit evidence and sometimes difficult for people to share their own personal

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<sup>7</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, Pupil Absence, Engagement Findings, June 2022

experiences, we are therefore very grateful to all those who contributed in whichever format to this work.

## 2. What was the 2022 review into pupil absence?

There have been long standing concerns about pupil absence. Pre-pandemic there was a range of work to tackle the issue. The Welsh Government commissioned a review to look at the issue within the context of the pandemic, which made a number of recommendations.

**10.** In 2006, the then Welsh Assembly Government commissioned a National Review of Behaviour and Attendance. One of the key outcomes was the **All Wales Attendance Framework**. The Framework provides standards and guidance to practitioners to ensure greater consistency of practice throughout Wales. It is intended to be used as a practical toolkit for staff working with the Education Welfare Service.

**11.** In 2019, the then Minister for Education stated that the Welsh Government was “in the preliminary stages of a comprehensive review of compulsory aged school-attendance guidance in Wales.” In this letter, the then Minister noted that some of the guidance was “a number of years old and require updating.”<sup>8</sup>

**12.** The Minister commissioned a review of attendance patterns to inform the development of future policy interventions. Meilyr Rowlands, formerly HM Chief Inspector of Schools was asked to undertake the review. His report, “Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance” (“the review”) was published on 3 May 2022.<sup>9</sup>

**13.** Meilyr Rowlands outlined the scope of this work:

*“... to survey recent attendance trends in the light of the pandemic, to offer an understanding of the reasons behind non-attendance, and to suggest any additional measures of interventions that could help to support and re-engage learners in their education, especially those whose absence increased during this period.”<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Letter from the Minister for Education to Chair, Petitions Committee, 23 December 2019

<sup>9</sup> Welsh Government, Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance, February 2022

<sup>10</sup> Welsh Government, Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance, February 2022

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**14.** He stated that the review is based on the assumption that “there are a range of reasons or underlying causes for learner absence, including complex and multiple causes” and that “learner attendance lies on a broad continuum ...”. The review makes 18 recommendations across a number of areas, which cover:

- Family engagement and community schools;
- Supporting learners in key stage 4;
- Blended learning;
- Workload and staffing;
- Communication and sharing best practice; and
- Data and research.<sup>11</sup>

**15.** Following the publication of the review, the Minister made a statement to Plenary on 3 May 2022, outlining the steps that the Welsh Government would be implementing, and the steps already taken. These included:

- A ‘step up’ in national communication to families to address any concerns that they have and to stress the importance of children attending school;
- £3.84m funding for family engagement officers (previously announced);
- Reintroduction of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) as a last resort;
- Updating the all-Wales attendance framework and reviewing the definition of “persistent” absence;
- £1.28m of funding for the provision of targeted person-centred transition support for year 11 learners (previously announced);
- £8.5m of dedicated transition funding to colleges and school sixth forms to support young people in transitions to the next stages of education or career;

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<sup>11</sup> Welsh Government, Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance, February 2022

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- Estyn to collect data on pupil attendance, and as part of their pilot inspection framework, are considering school and pupil referral units' provision for monitoring and improving attendance; and
- All schools to be asked to publish their attendance policies.

He also said that the elective home education proposals under development would help to ensure that those learners have access to an efficient and suitable education.<sup>12</sup>

**16.** The Minister told us that the review had found:

*"... generally the range of policy interventions were in the right place, on the whole. There were some specific questions in terms of persistent absence. We are, of course, looking at that. But, the policy landscape, on the whole, provides what it is needed, and where focus was needed was to ensure that good practice is shared, and that schools are supported to be able to make those connections and links with families."*<sup>13</sup>

**17.** He said he was supportive of most of the recommendations, but indicated two recommendations where he was not convinced about the proposed way of "going about them". However, he supported the principles behind these two recommendations. One was to undertake a specific review of FPNs, which the Minister felt needed to be looked at in a "holistic" way, as part of the review of the wider suite of policy and guidance. The other was the recommendation to consider extending the scheme for employing NQTs who have not secured permanent employment. He said that whilst this funding had been extended to a further third term of the 2021/22 academic term meaning the funding had been available for a full school year, he did not "see those circumstances continuing for another year".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [Plenary, 3 May 2022, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 204 - 219](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 76-78](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 67-69](#)

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### 3. What is the scale of the issue?

While attendance data from before the pandemic and now is not directly comparable, broad trends show attendance has decreased and continues to be an issue of concern.

**18.** As the review sets out, the way in which the Welsh Government collects, analyses and publishes school attendance data has changed during the pandemic. This can make it difficult to come to concrete conclusions when comparing the data, although we can pick up some broad trends. Previously, data was published annually, and summarised a whole academic year. Since September 2020, attendance data has been collected and published on a weekly basis, with far more detail.

**19.** The review provides some useful tables which shows the broad trend of lower attendance than pre-pandemic. Both of these tables come from the review:

**Table 1: Pre-COVID-19 absences<sup>15</sup>**

Absences 2018-2019	Secondary	Primary
All pupils	6.2%	5.3%
Non-fsm	5.3%	4.7%
Fsm	10.5%	7.9%
SEN Statement	7.8%	7.7%
SA+	10.3%	7.0%

**Table 2: Attendance in autumn 2021<sup>16</sup>**

Week beginning	Average % of pupils who were in attendance
06/09/2021	91.4
13/09/2021	88.5
20/09/2021	84.7

<sup>15</sup> Welsh Government, Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance, February 2022

<sup>16</sup> Welsh Government, Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance, February 2022

Week beginning	Average % of pupils who were in attendance
27/09/2021	85.3
04/10/2021	87.3
11/10/2021	87.8
18/10/2021	85.5
01/11/2021	89.3
08/11/2021	89.1
15/11/2021	88.2
22/11/2021	86.7
29/11/2021	86.0
06/12/2021	85.7
13/12/2021	80.6

20. Data for Spring 2022 showed that according to the Welsh Government:

*"... on average non-covid related absenteeism was higher than overall absence prior to the pandemic. However, because of the differences in how attendance is currently defined, collected, and published compared to before the pandemic, the report acknowledges that it is difficult to make accurate comparisons about attendance rates."*<sup>17</sup>

21. As of the time of writing (28 October 2022), the latest data shows the following trends:

*"An average of 90.8% of half-day school sessions were recorded as present for pupils aged 5 to 15 over the week of 17 to 21 October 2022, down from 90.9% the week before. The figure for 10 to 14 October 2022 has been revised down from 91.0%. Data for the latest two weeks is provisional.*

*The average attendance for this academic year to date is 91.4%.*

*An average of 6.4% of half-day school sessions were recorded as authorised absence for pupils aged 5 to 15 over the week of 17 to 21 October 2022, unchanged from the week before.*

<sup>17</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government



*An average of 2.8% of half-day school sessions were recorded as unauthorised absence for pupils aged 5 to 15 over the week of 17 to 21 October 2022, up from 2.7% the week before.*

*There has been little difference in the attendance rate by gender for the academic year to date, 91.5% for boys and 91.3% for girls.*

*The attendance rate by year group for the academic year to date has been<sup>18</sup> highest for pupils in Year 7 (93.6%) and lowest for pupils in Year 11 (87.4%).*

*The attendance rate for the academic year to date has been higher for pupils not eligible for free school meals (93.1%) than pupils who are eligible for free school meals (86.9%).*

*The most common reason for absence for the academic year to date has been illness, with 48.8% of sessions missed being for this reason."*

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<sup>18</sup> Welsh Government, Statistics, Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 5 September to 21 October 2022

## 4. Why are pupils absent?

There are broad range of complex, often interlinked, factors that contribute to sustained absence. Often there will be a range of factors contributing to the absence of a single pupil. Some of the factors pre-date the pandemic, but the pandemic has also introduced new factors.

**22.** The review outlines the pre-existing reasons for absence that were compounded by COVID-19 as:

- Poverty, disadvantage and learners eligible for free school meals;
- Special and additional learning needs;
- Cultural issues;
- Parental influence and families with complex and multiple needs
- Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing and disengagement issues.

It also identifies the following new pandemic related reasons for absence:

- COVID-19 as an illness, self-isolation and school directed absences;
- Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues;
  - Relating to health concerns;
  - Relating to education concerns
- Disengagement and more casual attitudes to learning.<sup>19</sup>

**23.** The evidence we gathered confirmed these findings. We have focused in this report on four key areas.

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<sup>19</sup> [Welsh Government, Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance, February 2022](#)

## Mental health

**24.** It was clear that learners' mental health issues, both pre-existing and new issues compounded by the impact of the pandemic, are a key factor in driving pupil absence. We heard this both from stakeholders, and families.

**25.** One parent described the impact of the pandemic on their child's mental and physical well-being:

*"Covid completely ruined her. Locked in, she couldn't continue with her sports ... She became depressed and self harmed. She could not face school. She did not attend ... Loss of peers through lack of contact. Loss of muscle tone and fitness because of loss of sports. Made a major impact."*<sup>20</sup>

**26.** Barnardo's Cymru also highlighted how mental health issues relating to the pandemic had led to non-attendance:

*"Dad had been diagnosed with cancer during the pandemic and as a result the family had shielded for some time. During this time the young person had developed a phobia of germs and of bringing home Covid to her poorly Dad, which led to suicidal thoughts and self-harm. These mental health issues led to it becoming increasingly difficult for the young person to leave home at all, let alone attend school."*<sup>21</sup>

**27.** The impact of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health was a clear theme. Children in Wales said that some children and young people will have experienced a "range of emotional, health and psychological challenges directly linked to the pandemic and the restrictions imposed."<sup>22</sup> Estyn said that for "a small number of pupils" their emotional well-being and mental health had been affected "long-term" because of the pandemic. This includes pupils who are struggling with returning to school routines or have high levels of anxiety. They said as such absence was not recorded as "illness due to Covid-19" and that it could help explain why absence rates are higher than pre-pandemic.<sup>23</sup>

**28.** NASUWT Cymru reported the findings of their Big Question Survey and said 90% of teachers who responded felt that the "rates of adverse emotional, personal or social issues among pupils they taught had increased over the last 12 months and 97% of respondents said

<sup>20</sup> [Written evidence, PA15, Individual](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Written evidence, PA33, Barnardo's Cymru](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

that they taught pupils with mental health challenges”.<sup>24</sup> Whilst the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists said their members are reporting increased anxiety as a result of the pandemic, especially in those with pre-existing anxiety disorders such as selective mutism which they say is having a “significant impact on attendance”.<sup>25</sup>

**29.** We also heard of the mental health impact of examinations and assessments. This concern pre-dates the pandemic because of the often “high stakes” nature of examinations and assessments. But it has been compounded by the pandemic, according to Qualifications Wales, who said the disruption to young people’s learning, combined with changes to assessments and on-going uncertainty had an impact. Although they also said that “some learners often express positive views on assessment and examinations as they are perceived as providing a robust and reliable measure of attainment, minimising bias – providing a level playing field”. Qualifications Wales have run the “Lefel Nesa/Power Up” campaign to help alleviate some of these concerns and anxieties, as well as helping to support learning attendance and engagement.<sup>26</sup>

**30.** The Children’s Commissioner for Wales said the relationship between exam pressure and attendance was particularly acute for those in Y11. Her office have received feedback about exam stress. Additionally, she flagged the wider impact on self-esteem and motivation when learners are “considered by themselves and others to be failing”. In particular, the “demoralising” impact of receiving lower GCSE indication grades and the impact that has on their options. She indicated that a:

*“... narrow qualifications offer, in which significant numbers of young people do not achieve great success, undoubtedly demotivates young people and may contribute to the increasing rate of absence as young people progress toward summative assessments. ... some young people, demotivated by their learning between 14-16, will also de-register from school, or refuse to attend school, before the end of compulsory school age. Many of these young people supported by my case work service will not ever have been offered another qualification route to the GCSE.*

*... Importantly, these qualifications not only need to be developed, but they need to be made available to children in school before they disengage. Historically options on 14-19 pathways offered qualification routes that were valuable for many young people. Every young person should have a*

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<sup>24</sup> Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru

<sup>25</sup> Written evidence, PA62, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

<sup>26</sup> Written evidence PA54, Qualifications Wales

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*meaningful and rewarding course of study that they can access and achieve well in made available to them at the age of 14."*<sup>27</sup>

**31.** The National Education Union ("NEU") reminded us that this cohort of students are not used to taking exams, and are also aware of the "influence the unfair algorithm has over the exams ...". Adding to these pressures are the announcements that students will "receive lower grades than the cohort last year – unveiling to students that no matter how hard they work, their results will not be as high as last year's cohort".<sup>28</sup>

**32.** The Vale of Glamorgan Council also said that the "relevance of curriculum and assessment" is now questioned by learners "post covid". They said this is because alternative forms of assessment during the pandemic has shown it is "no longer the 'only way' to assess at end of KS4". The resulting "push and pull" is that learners are "being less resilient but also less accepting of the narrative about presenteeism and exam success in a broad range of compulsory subjects being the only suitable route".<sup>29</sup>

**33.** UCAC made the link between changes in attitudes to learning and exams, saying that for the first time, they recently had:

*"... with external exams, children phoning in and saying, 'We don't want to do it this week; we'll do it next week.' Well, no, the situation doesn't allow you to do an external exam next week. So, people's attitude towards education, I think, has changed during the pandemic."*<sup>30</sup>

## Learners with additional learning needs

**34.** We heard from a number of individual parents, and Parents Voices in Wales<sup>31</sup> about the impact of undiagnosed additional learning needs ("ALN") and/or of a lack of support having an impact on attendance. One parent told us:

*"My son is autistic. He started becoming anxious about school when he had his SAT'S, this was further exacerbated by Covid, and now his school anxiety is so severe, he's been out of school for a very long period. He hasn't been given an IDP, or had an assessment by the Educational Psychologist."*<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>28</sup> Written evidence, PA60, National Education Union

<sup>29</sup> Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council

<sup>30</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 11

<sup>31</sup> Written evidence, PA64, Parents Voices in Wales

<sup>32</sup> Written evidence, PA21, Individual

**35.** The National Autistic Society Cymru said they were “deeply concerned about high levels of non-attendance among autistic young people”.<sup>33</sup>

**36.** Barnardo’s Cymru cited examples of young people with ALN being advised to stay at home “until a suitable placement became available”. They were aware of at least one young person who as a result had been out of school for two and half months “with no sign of a placement”. They said this approach was forcing some families to home-school, without “having had a proper choice about whether this was the right option for their child”.<sup>34</sup> We consider home education in more detail in Chapter 7.

**37.** A parent said that school was a “hard and uncompromising place for those who are not neurotypical” adding that teachers and other school staff do not have sufficient training to “understand how challenging it is and this causes more stress”.<sup>35</sup> While another parent said that those on the autism spectrum would “benefit from smaller schools with more designated safe spaces and kind, supportive adults”.<sup>36</sup>

**38.** The National Autistic Society Cymru described the extra pressures faced by autistic children and young people, including:

- Struggling with the school environment due to the noises, strong smells or bright lights;
- Experiencing anxiety in social situations or finding it hard to make friends
- Getting into trouble for unintentionally being rude or inappropriate;
- Finding unstructured times such as lunch breaks hard;
- Struggling to cope with the demands of the school timetable or curriculum
- Finding transitions such as moving classrooms or school difficult;
- Taking things literally or misunderstanding a teacher’s instructions;
- Finding crowded assemblies or school transport too much;
- Becoming so overwhelmed they experience a ‘meltdown’ or ‘shut down’.

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<sup>33</sup> Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru

<sup>34</sup> Written evidence, PA33, Barnardo’s Cymru

<sup>35</sup> Written evidence, PA22, Individual

<sup>36</sup> Written evidence, PA25, Individual

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The conclude that these demands of school may become “unbearable” resulting in absence “or ‘school refusal’. It’s a term some feel unfairly implies the child or young person has a choice, when they may be willing but unable to tolerate school”. They call for more early intervention and tailored support for autistic pupils.<sup>37</sup>

**39.** We heard differing evidence about the impact of online learning for ALN learners. The Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales said that these learners “may have ... suffered due to the movement to increased online learning teaching and reliance on technology to provide support and engagement”.<sup>38</sup> Parents Voices in Wales described a “reduced engagement with online learning” for those learners who are neurodivergent.<sup>39</sup> Estyn told us about the “particular challenges” faced by these learners, who were used to receiving support in a classroom from either a teacher or teaching assistant. They said that whilst there was work to find different and “often innovative” ways to help these learners that they “often found it difficult to engage in online, remote learning”.<sup>40</sup>

**40.** Parents Voices in Wales said that neurodivergent learners are “often mainstream children who have not been identified as having differences”. They are often termed the “missing middle learners” and until the pandemic were “using their intelligence to find strategies to cope and benefit from the face to face support”. They said that these learners had “huge demands of digital independent learning placed upon them ...”. Additionally, these learners often have parents who are also neurodivergent, which meant that the whole family will have found online learning “too difficult to engage with and complete”.<sup>41</sup>

**41.** On the other hand, we heard that online learning had been a beneficial experience for some learners. The National Autistic Society said that some autistic young people had “reported positive experiences of online learning, with some excelling after struggling in traditional classrooms.” They called for blended learning to continue to be available, and for “greater flexibility on attendance” which may support continued school attendance and engagement.<sup>42</sup> We look at blended learning in more detail in Chapter 8.

## Managing absence and the pandemic

**42.** Clearly, absence related to COVID-19 is a factor that did not exist pre-pandemic. Estyn said that there was “broad correlation” between school absences in 2021/22 and the COVID-19

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<sup>37</sup> Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru

<sup>38</sup> Written evidence, PA55, Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales

<sup>39</sup> Written evidence, PA64, Parents Voices in Wales

<sup>40</sup> Written evidence, PA58, Estyn

<sup>41</sup> Written evidence, PA64, Parents Voices in Wales

<sup>42</sup> Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru

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case rate in the local authority. Although it did indicate that there was some variation between local authorities, with some having a “notably lower rate of absence (i.e higher attendance) than might be expected given the case rate ... and some have a notably higher rate of absence than might be expected ...”.<sup>43</sup> NASUWT Cymru said it was “clear” that COVID-19 related absence remains an issue.<sup>44</sup>

**43.** A very clear and consistent theme from the evidence we gathered was that the pandemic and school closures had led to a more accepting attitude to lower school attendance. This was raised by a number of stakeholders including:

- the Children’s Commissioner for Wales;<sup>45</sup>
- the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists;<sup>46</sup>
- UCAC;<sup>47</sup>
- NASUWT Cymru;<sup>48</sup> and
- Newport City Council.<sup>49</sup>

**44.** Prior to the pandemic messaging about school attendance was very clear, but this changed because of the pandemic. The Vale of Glamorgan Council suggested that the impact of broader social changes, with the move to working from home was also a contributory factor with attendance “no longer synonymous with attainment or outcomes”.<sup>50</sup> The Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL) said there has been “a significant drop in parental concern” on the importance of attendance, and that students also perceive attendance as not as important.<sup>51</sup>

**45.** Closely linked, has been changes in how families deal with minor illnesses, because of self-isolation rules and wider attitudinal changes. The Children’s Commissioner for Wales highlighted

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<sup>43</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

<sup>44</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>45</sup> [Written evidence, PA56, Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)

<sup>46</sup> [Written evidence, PA62, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists](#)

<sup>47</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 11](#)

<sup>48</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>49</sup> [Written evidence, PA45, Newport City Council](#)

<sup>50</sup> [Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council](#)

<sup>51</sup> [Written evidence, PA18, Association of School and College Leaders](#)

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that families “may now feel they should keep children at home” who might have mild symptoms but “is well enough to attend school”.<sup>52</sup> The Vale of Glamorgan Council supported this view.<sup>53</sup>

**46.** There were broad calls for the need of campaigns to emphasise the importance of regular school attendance. The Children’s Commissioner said that there should be a blend of national and local messaging, with local messaging being able to take into account the relationship schools have with their own learners and reflecting the local context. This work at a local level can be “much more effective” in understanding and overcoming non-attendance. She said it was important that this work does not penalise or stigmatise those children who “don’t or can’t” attend for whatever reason.<sup>54</sup> She said it was important to support schools in how they might think of encouraging attendance, to “really taking a very child-centred approach ...”.<sup>55</sup> NASUWT Cymru echoed this, saying that messaging needs to be done “sensitively” and be accompanied with “sign-posting to appropriate services”. They said to penalise learners and families without this support would be “counter-productive”.<sup>56</sup>

**47.** UCAC said the campaign should be focused at parents to “reconsider the importance of education”. It should be an encouraging campaign that shows the impact of non-attendance on children and young people. They said such a campaign should make parents aware that “If my child isn’t at school, I’m disenfranchising them from special and particular opportunities”.<sup>57</sup>

**48.** Some raised the impact of Long COVID-19, including the Children’s Commissioner for Wales. She indicated that this may be either the result of a child having it, or because of the impact of a family member having it.<sup>58</sup> NASUWT Cymru highlighted data from Public Health Wales which indicates that 10% of those who have COVID-19 are likely to experience Long Covid, they also flagged that some learners may have non diagnosed Long Covid which “may account for some apparent non-COVID absences”.<sup>59</sup>

**49.** The Minister said that he was already “looking at a communication strategy so that we can encourage parents and learners back into school”. He believed there was a need for both national as well as local messages, and that they will be “working and testing some of those most effective messages”. He also said that he was:

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<sup>52</sup> [Written evidence, PA56, Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)

<sup>53</sup> [Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council](#)

<sup>54</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 116-117](#)

<sup>55</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 142](#)

<sup>56</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>57</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 124](#)

<sup>58</sup> [Written evidence, PA56, Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)

<sup>59</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

*"... very struck—in fact, this was Ann John's evidence—by her reference to schools reminding learners and parents that they are places of belonging and connectedness, I think was the phrase that she used, which I thought was a very powerful way. And I think most people would feel the need to remake those connections and remake that sense of belonging in whatever walk of life we're in, and I think it's the same for schools."*<sup>60</sup>

**50.** He assumed that more positive messaging will be more effective than compliance based messages. He also thought the evidence we had gathered which suggests that local messages will be more impactful "seems sensible to me".<sup>61</sup>

### **Cost of living crisis/cost of the school day**

**51.** The Children's Commissioner was very clear that persistent absence needs to be seen in the context of poverty. She said that tackling child poverty "needs to be a key driver in reducing absence ...". This relates to national policies, but also to individual school policies to ensure that poverty is not acting as a barrier to attendance. Her office produced a report in 2019 which highlighted the impact of the costs of school, including:

- Uniforms (despite Welsh Government guidance and support with costs);
- Supplies such as books, technology, arts and craft, stationery, school bags;
- Special events at schools such as school trips and fundraising; and
- After school clubs and the lack of free transport.

**52.** She quoted one parent from the report saying: "Schools are far too expensive for people who can barely afford food".<sup>62</sup> Professor Ann John agreed that tackling poverty and its educational impact went "beyond schools. They're about wider policy reform".<sup>63</sup> She also highlighted the need to be more pro-active in improving the uptake of support such as free school meals or school uniform grants. She said that "we're often asking people who are under the most burden in terms of if they are in work that can be unpredictable or difficult and it's hard to get time off, to have the biggest administrative burden in their lives".<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 18

<sup>61</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 105

<sup>62</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>63</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 270

<sup>64</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 285

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**53.** ASCL Cymru said that they did not have hard evidence about the impact of the cost of living crisis on attendance, but they told us that anecdotal evidence suggested it was a factor.<sup>65</sup> NAHT Cymru agreed that it was “anecdotally evidenced”.<sup>66</sup>

**54.** A number of stakeholders raised specific issues around the cost of travel to and from school. The Children’s Commissioner said that attendance figures are “significantly lower” for children in year groups which are not entitled to free travel. She called for action to be taken to “extend entitlements to learner travel ...” and that the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2009 was “not fit for purpose”.<sup>67</sup> She said the eligibility criteria of a “current three-mile radius” was problematic, especially if the route was unsafe or they have to “carry very heavy school bags”. She also flagged that even for those who live within the three mile radius may still have challenges with walking to school.<sup>68</sup> Children in Wales also highlighted this issue, saying for many families in poverty they have to “live hand to mouth” meaning the ability to pay for school transport “can be sporadic.”<sup>69</sup> Other stakeholders called for a review of the Measure, but for different reasons. For example, the National Autistic Society Cymru highlighted that for some autistic people public transport can be “overwhelming due to sensory difficulties”.<sup>70</sup>

**55.** The Vale of Glamorgan Council said that factors such as children living in dual homes; or where previously established transport solutions have “broken down due to fuel costs ...”. They cited an example of a Y11 pupil not attending exams because organised bus provision stopped and they were unable to pay private bus costs, until they stepped in.<sup>71</sup>

**56.** The Minister accepted that there was a “very challenging picture” in relation to the cost of living pressures faced by many households. He referred us to the announcement by the First Minister that following an initial review of the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure, a more detailed review was underway. He also highlighted increases in the pupil deprivation grant access funding; and the work undertaken by Children in Wales in developing guides for schools as to how to minimise the cost of the school day.<sup>72</sup>

## Our view

**57.** We are concerned that there is a lack of consistency across Wales in terms of support for learners grappling with mental health challenges, or those learners with additional learning

<sup>65</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 26](#)

<sup>66</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 29](#)

<sup>67</sup> [Written evidence, PA56, Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)

<sup>68</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 122](#)

<sup>69</sup> [Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales](#)

<sup>70</sup> [Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru](#)

<sup>71</sup> [Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council](#)

<sup>72</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 24](#)

needs. We acknowledge the importance of being able to tailor support to individual needs and local contexts but this should not be at the expense of guaranteeing parity of support across Wales. There should be a baseline of support that all children and young people can expect to access regardless of where they live and study in Wales. Whilst the issue of funding and resources is critical, there is also a need for better sharing of good practice across Wales. When projects or approaches are proving to work, this should be shared across local authorities and schools, so that this good practice can be built upon.

**58.** For learners with additional learning needs, we are concerned that there are not sufficient resources within the system to provide the necessary support. As part of our Senedd long work looking at implementation of education reforms, we have recently written to the Welsh Government expressing concerns that a sizeable number of children formally categorized as having SEN are not being considered to have ALN under the new system.<sup>73</sup> We received a comprehensive response from the Minister on this issue.<sup>74</sup> Following receipt of this letter, we agreed to seek the views of stakeholders, and we will continue to monitor this issue as part of our ongoing work looking at the implementation of the education reforms.

**59.** It is clear that the pandemic induced school closures and restrictions have led to a more accepting attitude to school absence for some families. It is now essential that schools, local authorities, and the Welsh Government work together to reinforce messaging about the importance of school attendance. Such work must highlight the benefits for children and young people's education but also for their wider emotional and mental well-being. We agree with stakeholders that this messaging needs to be a mix of national, consistent messages, and local messaging that it is tailored to the specific needs and communities of individual schools and local areas. Both the local and national messaging should be positive providing supporting and encouraging messages about school attendance. They should not use scare tactics which can be counter-productive.

**Recommendation 1.** 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.

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<sup>73</sup> Letter from Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee to Minister for Education and Welsh Language, 8 August 2022

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Minister for Education and Welsh Language to Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee, 28 September 2022

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**60.** While the evidence on the impact of the cost of living and school attendance was broadly anecdotal, we know it builds on long standing issues around the cost of the school day which predate the current cost of living crisis. The current economic situation will have only deepened these existing challenges for some families. Whilst we welcome the work that has already been done in relation to these issues, we believe it is important that we move on from anecdotal evidence. Further work is needed to fully understand how the cost of living crisis is impacting on attendance. This should be done as a matter of urgency, and the findings made publicly available, supported by a clear action plan so we can understand how these barriers will be removed. No child should not be attending school because their family cannot afford them to attend.

**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.

**61.** The issue of access to appropriate learner travel is a long standing one. We are aware that the Welsh Government recently published their findings from the 2021 review, and that further work is on-going. At the time of writing, we have not received any additional information from the Welsh Government on this, although we have requested it. We understand the budgetary restraints faced by local authorities across all their services, but are concerned that decisions are being driven by this rather than a learner first approach. Children and young people should not be prevented from going to school because of difficulties accessing affordable and safe modes of travel. We think there is an opportunity for more innovative solutions to this perennial issue, and that the Welsh Government should look far and wide to ensure that all possible options are being considered.

**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.

## 5. Are particular groups of learners more likely to be absent?

The data is clear that there are some groups who are disproportionately more likely to have sustained absence from school. There is a need for more disaggregated data to be available to help inform policy to address these issues.

**62.** Estyn told us that the pandemic has “disproportionately affected” both the attendance and subsequently well-being, learning and attainment of some specific groups of learners, including:

- *“Learners younger than statutory school age*
- *Learners in older year groups in secondary education*
- *Learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds*
- *Learners with additional learning needs.”<sup>75</sup>*

In this chapter we examine the evidence we received around some of these groups.

**63.** NASUWT Cymru called for “further analysis” to be undertaken to better understand any “potential trends in absence” among groups with protected characteristics under the Equality Act and whether other groups have been disproportionately affected.<sup>76</sup>

**64.** The Welsh Government highlighted that it can be difficult to make comparisons between pre-pandemic data, and current data, “because of the differences in how attendance is currently recorded, analysed and published compared to before the pandemic, it is difficult to make comparisons about attendance rates”.<sup>77</sup>

### Learners with additional learning needs

**65.** The Welsh Government said that since September 2021:

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<sup>75</sup> Written evidence, PA58, Estyn

<sup>76</sup> Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru

<sup>77</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

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*"an average of 54.7% of ALN learners have been absent for 10.5+ days, compared with 31% of all learners. 16% of ALN learners have been absent for 30.5+ days pupils compared with 12.5% of all learners."*<sup>78</sup>

However, they reiterated that it is difficult to make direct comparisons for the reasons outlined in paragraph 64.

**66.** As we have detailed in the previous chapter, not getting the right type of support for learners with additional learning needs can play a major contributory factor in pupil absence.

**67.** The Children's Commissioner said that pre-pandemic absence was higher amongst those with additional learning needs.<sup>79</sup> The National Autistic Society Cymru highlighted a study looking at attendance rates in around 500 children with autism which found "a staggering 43% of these students were persistently absent".<sup>80</sup>

**68.** Capacity and resourcing within the system to support ALN learners was raised as impacting on attendance. Estyn said they had "particular concerns" about the impact it has had on learning, especially in the context of the pandemic. They were hopeful that levels of attendance for this group will increase as "as more staff become available, both within schools, and as services reopen up and are able to give them the support that they need".<sup>81</sup>

**69.** Professor Ann John highlighted that the response from schools can differ, due to the nature of the additional learning need:

*"... Basically, girls with neurodevelopmental disorders, learning difficulties, conduct disorder, depression and other psychotic disorders were much more likely to be absent than boys, whereas we saw higher levels of exclusion amongst boys. One of the things we say in the paper is that, in some ways, that's the way people express what they have. So, some of the expressions of things like conduct disorder are much more likely to result in exclusion, whereas anxiety might result in things like school refusal. So, I think that dichotomy we have about attendance refusal and behaviour is not actually helpful to highlighting that, actually, these are a lot of young people with extra vulnerabilities."*<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>79</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>80</sup> Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru

<sup>81</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 176-177

<sup>82</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 268



**70.** The Minister said that the current ALN reforms are “our best chance of being able to re-engage” these pupils and get them back into school. He said that the “general consensus” was that the reforms will “help improve the attendance” of this cohort of learners.<sup>83</sup>

## Impact of poverty

**71.** We have discussed in the previous chapter the impact of the cost of living crisis / cost of the school day on attendance. Children in Wales said that there are “many studies” which show that children in more deprived areas are more likely to be “frequently absent” from school than those from less disadvantaged backgrounds. They said this was supported by the findings from their own Annual Child and Family Poverty Survey 2021, where 94% of practitioners in Wales said that poverty had an impact on a child’s school experience. Bullying was a particular issue:

*“leading to lower self-esteem; hungry, leading to inability to concentrate; anxious and worried about their families’ finances; and often unable to afford the cost of school uniforms, which again regularly led to feelings of not fitting in and being equal to their peers.”*

Children in Wales said that the findings from their survey were then echoed by children and young people.

*“They regularly spoke about poor mental health, lack of motivation, being bullied, feeling ashamed and embarrassed, all as a result of living in poverty. Being seen in a ‘tatty’ or ill-fitting second hand uniform; not being able to afford a PE kit and being in receipt of FSMs led children to feelings of isolation and ‘not being good enough’.”*

They said some children would be “unlikely” to explain this to peers and school staff “with some becoming adept in creating reasons for absence.” They cited a 10 year old describing having to be “inventive with my stories”.<sup>84</sup>

**72.** ASCL Cymru said that the gap in attendance between those eligible for free school meals and those who are not has always been present. They cited data from May 2022, “with the gap being an average of 5.3 percentage points ...”.<sup>85</sup> While Estyn provided the data across the academic year, “the gap between the attendance of those pupils eligible for free school meals

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<sup>83</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 32

<sup>84</sup> Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales

<sup>85</sup> Written evidence, PA18, Association of School and College Leaders

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(82.5%) and those not entitled (88.9%) is 6.4%pts (compared to a gap of 5.2%pts pre pandemic and 5.8%pts last year)".<sup>86</sup>

**73.** Qualifications Wales described the increased level of absence for those eligible for free school meals simply as a "a vicious circle where those that most need the support of schools are the most likely to have higher absence".<sup>87</sup> Children in Wales said "more" needed to be done to enable disadvantaged learners to "re-engage" with school. They also cited the recent commissioned review of educational inequalities as potentially helping to shape further work in this area.<sup>88</sup>

**74.** The Vale of Glamorgan said there was a "risk" that learners who are eligible for free school meals "may be perceived as being school refusers rather than anxious or phobic if their parents have been less able to access advice and support or private diagnosis etc".<sup>89</sup>

**75.** Professor Ann John told us about the correlation between higher levels of mental health in more deprived communities. She highlighted that whilst there is quite a lot of work addressing this in schools in deprived areas, that "we mustn't lose sight of people from more deprived backgrounds in what would be considered wealthy and less-deprived-catchment schools." Sometimes, she said, "people with higher needs in lower-risk areas are sort of missed ...".<sup>90</sup>

**76.** The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists said there was a "significant correlation between disadvantaged and vulnerable learners who are more likely to have poor attendance records and the prevalence of speech, language and communication needs." They said early identification and support was "vital ... as part of the jigsaw" when dealing with absence for this group of learners.<sup>91</sup>

**77.** The Welsh Government said:

*"In terms of persistent absence, 24.2% of eFSM learners were absent for more than 30 days, compared to 8.1% of non-FSM learners. This is of particular concern as it suggests the absences are becoming entrenched. Addressing this as part of the policy work we are taking forward on tackling the impact of poverty on attainment will be of high importance. The role of Family*

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<sup>86</sup> Written evidence, PA58, Estyn

<sup>87</sup> Written evidence PA54, Qualifications Wales

<sup>88</sup> Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales

<sup>89</sup> Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council

<sup>90</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 257.

<sup>91</sup> Written evidence, PA62, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

*Engagement Officers, the Education Welfare Services and other key agencies, will be a key element of our approach.”<sup>92</sup>*

**78.** When we raised this issue with the Minister, he said he was “very, very mindful” of the attendance levels for pupils eligible for free school meals. He believed the funding for the family engagement officers was “so important” because it can offer a “tailored, bespoke approach”.<sup>93</sup> We look at the capacity and resourcing of family engagement officers in more detail in Chapter 8.

## Young Carers

**79.** We heard that young carers often have greater levels of absence. Barnardo’s Cymru said this was both because of the need to provide care, but also because there is “less support available from an adult to attend school”. They cited a young carer who was unable to go to school as there was nobody to wash her uniform. She herself undertook all caring roles at home. They said that young carers often feel “stigmatised and isolated” and that schools often didn’t know how attendance could be impacted by caring responsibilities, or in some instances that children were young carers.<sup>94</sup>

**80.** We also heard from a parent who drew on their own previous experience as a young carer to explain why she had often been absent from school. In line with the evidence from Barnardo’s she said her absences “were often out of my control, yet I was still made to feel like it was own fault if I was late or absent ...”. She called for a child’s personal circumstances to always be taken into account.<sup>95</sup>

**81.** The Minister acknowledged that more was needed to be done to “identify the support” that young carers need. He described it as “quite a hidden issue”, which chimes with the broader evidence we heard. He acknowledged that whilst teachers “will generally have a sense” of young carers, that it isn’t always the case.<sup>96</sup>

## Other groups

**82.** We also heard about pressures faced by other groups of children and young people.

## Children and young people from an ethnic minority background

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<sup>92</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>93</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 37

<sup>94</sup> Written evidence, PA33, Barnardo’s Cymru

<sup>95</sup> Written evidence, PA29, Individual

<sup>96</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 107

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**83.** The Children’s Commissioner highlighted that children and young people from an ethnic minority background have faced “disproportionate impacts” from the pandemic. She called for “tailored and sensitive support ... which offers well-being support that is bespoke ...”.<sup>97</sup> Estyn also highlighted that these communities were “hit very badly by the pandemic”. They cited a school that has “worked exceptionally hard to work” with local communities. They said working hard with community leaders had been “key” but that it takes a lot of time.<sup>98</sup>

**84.** The Welsh Government said that absence rates for this group of children and young people was “lower than the national average for both 10.5+ and 30.5+ days absence”.<sup>99</sup>

### **Children and young people from gypsy / roma / traveller backgrounds**

**85.** A number of stakeholders including Newport City Council;<sup>100</sup> NASUWT Cymru<sup>101</sup>; the Children’s Commissioner<sup>102</sup> and the NEU<sup>103</sup> highlighted that children and young people from the gypsy, roma and traveller continue to have lower rates of absence. This is a long standing issue that pre-dates the pandemic.

**86.** The Welsh Government identified absences of this group of learners (along with ALN learners and learners who are eligible for free school meals) of being of “particular concern because of the high levels of absence ... prior to the pandemic”.<sup>104</sup>

### **Older children and young people**

**87.** Estyn told us that that while attendance for primary year groups and year 7 was around 88-90%, it then “drops off through the secondary Year groups.” Attendance levels are lowest for those in the main exam years. They said that the average year 11 pupil has “missed more than 4 weeks of school this year”.<sup>105</sup>

**88.** The Children’s Commissioner said that there needed to be a “different approach for older young people”. She believed that youth work and participatory models were both good models that would help improve attendance in this cohort.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Additional information – Children’s Commissioner for Wales

<sup>98</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 177

<sup>99</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>100</sup> Written evidence, PA45, Newport City Council

<sup>101</sup> Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru

<sup>102</sup> Additional information – Children’s Commissioner for Wales

<sup>103</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 55

<sup>104</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>105</sup> Written evidence, PA58, Estyn

<sup>106</sup> Additional information – Children’s Commissioner for Wales

**89.** The Welsh Government said that 66.2% of year 11 pupils were absent for 10.5 days, with 22.6% absent for 30.5 days. They highlighted the additional funding of £1.28m in 2021-22 for person centred, targeted support for year 11 pupils who are not attending and are unlikely to complete GCSEs.<sup>107</sup>

**90.** Estyn also described the impact of absences of specialist staff on older children. They said that older pupils who are working towards qualifications may decide not to go into school if they are aware that a specialist teacher is off, and that the lesson will be covered by a non-specialist.<sup>108</sup>

**91.** We were aware of this happening as a result of casework, and that sometimes other pupils can feel pressure to help support fellow pupils, and this can cause undue stress. We raised this with the Minister in correspondence.<sup>109</sup> In response he said that whilst sourcing cover which is “suitable for the needs of the learners” is the responsibility of individual schools, there is ongoing work to deal with some “pockets of difficulty in recruiting to certain secondary subjects, in some geographical locations ... as well as certain Welsh medium provision”.<sup>110</sup>

### **Children and young people with medical conditions**

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**92.** We were told of the specific challenges faced by children and young people with diabetes. This is one of the most common chronic childhood illness (1 in 700 children). We were told that this group of children were absent for 9 additional sessions a year, and that those who had challenges managing their diabetes missed an additional 15 sessions. We heard that these children face multiple disadvantages, both the challenge of “daily self-management” of their diabetes and then the “cycle of missing schooling and then needing to catch up ... in their own time ...”. They called for more support and awareness by school staff to enable them to better support this group of children.<sup>111</sup>

**93.** The problems faced by children and young people with pain and / or chronic fatigue were also highlighted. We were told there are an “estimated 10 700” children attending school for less than 90% due to pain or chronic fatigue, and that there are “no coordinated and coherent pathways of care.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

<sup>108</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

<sup>109</sup> [Letter from the Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee to Minister for Education and Welsh Language, 6 July 2022](#)

<sup>110</sup> [Letter from Minister for Education and Welsh Language to Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 September 2022](#)

<sup>111</sup> [Written evidence, PA39, Cardiff University](#)

<sup>112</sup> [Written evidence, PA52, Paediatrician, University Hospital of Wales](#)

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## Use of data to identify trends and patterns

**94.** We heard that data could be better used to understand attendance patterns, trends and to identify what interventions are needed. The Children's Commissioner called for attendance data for the 2021/22 academic year to be "rigorously analysed" because:

*"the data on persistent and overall absence for this year may be very different from pre-pandemic data. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on particular groups of children and young people has been well-documented, including 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. Care experienced young people have also had specific impacts, with disruption to family contact arrangements. Children living in or close to poverty have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic."*<sup>113</sup>

**95.** The Children's Commissioner also called for "more disaggregated data" to be available earlier in the academic year to help local authorities and schools to "do some of that more granular planning and responding to the issues, so that they can really understand which particular groups are most affected".<sup>114</sup> She suggested that this would also enable local authorities to work with "particular community groups where appropriate".<sup>115</sup>

**96.** A number of other stakeholders also called for more detailed and timely publicly available data, including ASCL Cymru; and Professor Ann John.<sup>116</sup> ASCL Cymru said "global numbers are not really good for us to actually get in under the skin of why is it that attendance is so poor". They said it was important for the data to cover the "why" as that will help schools. They cited having one single global coding for illness as being unhelpful in understanding where these pupils are off.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>114</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 111

<sup>115</sup> Additional information – Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>116</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 292-293

<sup>117</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 36 - 37

**97.** Estyn agreed, saying that cross-analysis of data would help Welsh Government as well as local authorities.<sup>118</sup> They also highlighted the “inconsistent use of different attendance codes across individual schools”.<sup>119</sup>

**98.** Carmarthenshire County Council raised a specific issue around attendance codes that has caused difficulties locally:

*“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.”<sup>120</sup>*

**99.** Professor Ann John said that data that is routinely collected could be used to ensure children and young people “get the support that they need”. This support could then be provided “proportionally with high-risk groups”. In particular, she said, it can be harder for those from more deprived communities to access support services.<sup>121</sup> She also believed that:

*“... we could be using routinely collected absence and exclusion data, (1) to flag the children who might need extra support, but (2) to look at what’s happening in schools. We could be looking at trends in absences and exclusion, trends in managed moves, trends in how children are moving between schools. We found some evidence of off-rolling towards the 14 to 16-year-olds. I think there’s data that we can look at that can inform policy, but also service improvement in many ways.”<sup>122</sup>*

**100.** She said that “‘What gets counted matters.’ Sometimes when you count things, it brings strategic labelling and all sorts of quirky things into an environment.” She wanted to see more routine data collection for absence, that would enable better targeting of support.<sup>123</sup> The

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<sup>118</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 172

<sup>119</sup> Written evidence, PA58, Estyn

<sup>120</sup> Written evidence, PA66, Carmarthenshire County Council

<sup>121</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 287.-288

<sup>122</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 275

<sup>123</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 292

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Children's Commissioner also called for persistent absence to be seen as "a red flag" and saying that it was both a symptom and cause.<sup>124</sup>

**101.** Professor Ann John said that her research has found "an association" between a range of neurodevelopment disorders, and mental health problems with absence. She believes that means we need to use this data in different ways:

*"absence and exclusion data, because we also looked at exclusion, is routinely collected in schools, and we could use that data to highlight the young people that need extra support, rather than viewing it in a sometimes punitive way. So, I would say that our findings are that absences and exclusions are strongly associated with conditions—and it doesn't matter what label you put on those conditions—and children and young people who have extra need requirements and need extra mental health support."*<sup>125</sup>

**102.** The Minister said that the Government already does a lot of "recrunching" data in response to queries, and that they look to find ways to make it publicly available if there is demand for it. He is open to requests to consider different ways of evaluating and analysing data. He said that in the autumn they would be publishing a summary of the previous two years attendance data and that this would be disaggregated "by reference to additional learning needs, gender, free-school-meals eligibility, year groups and other cohorts ...".<sup>126</sup>

**103.** He also highlighted that there is currently some flexibility at a local authority level for them to attach their own codes to some of the data so that they can track their own initiatives or particular local areas of concern.<sup>127</sup>

**104.** In follow up correspondence, the Minister told us that schools do use attendance data to flag concerns with the Education Welfare Service, which can lead to a CAHMS referral. He said he was "interested" in how attendance data can be used to support early intervention. He said that the Welsh Government "intend to commission research to explore this". This will build on the existing research lead by Professor Ann John.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 129

<sup>125</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 263-264

<sup>126</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 34

<sup>127</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 35

<sup>128</sup> Letter from Minister for Education and Welsh Language to Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 September 2022

## Our view

**105.** It is clear that some groups of children and young people face additional barriers to sustaining regular attendance at school, many of which they do not have control over. It is important that schools recognise and take account of these. Schools need to be mindful of a child's individual circumstances, and how these may impact on attendance and engagement with school. We are particularly conscious of the barriers faced by young carers and children and young people with medical conditions or long term illnesses. We believe that some of the innovations that have arisen from the pandemic, such as blended learning may provide an effective option to help these groups of learners sustain attendance and engagement. We look at the issue of blended learning in more detail in Chapter 8.

**106.** We support the recommendations in the review which sought to improve the data collection, publication and analysis on pupil absence data. It is clear to us that there is pressing need for more disaggregated data to help identify trends of absence for particular groups of learners. This data should be publicly available, and published on a regular basis, enabling analysis of trends within academic years, and sharing of good practice. It is also important that this data is available at the earliest possible point so that it can help assist with planning for interventions.

**107.** We were persuaded by Professor Ann John's evidence that pupil absence data should be used as a tool to support early intervention for neurodevelopment and mental health issues. We believe this could be a significant move forward in ensuring children and young people who may be having issues are identified at the earliest opportunity. Early intervention is vital, and improves outcomes for children and young people. We welcome the Minister's response to this.

**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.



## 6. What is the impact of absence?

Sustained absence from school can have a significant impact on children and young people's learning and well-being.

**108.** It is clear that prolonged absence from school for whatever reasons may have an impact on learning, attainment and mental health. A number of stakeholders, including Children in Wales;<sup>129</sup> the Children's Commissioner;<sup>130</sup> and the NSPCC<sup>131</sup> framed this issue within the context of the UNCRC, and reminded us that all children have a right to education which develops their personality, talents and abilities to the full. The Children's Commissioner said that for most children school "brings a wide and profound range of benefits, providing for their education, wellbeing and safety".<sup>132</sup>

**109.** The Welsh Government said there was a "well-established link between attendance, attainment and wellbeing". They said that the review:

*"acknowledged that attendance is affected by wellbeing and mental health, and by attitudes towards learning and schooling. The inter-relationship between attendance and general wellbeing is considered so strong that attendance has often been taken as a proxy measure for wellbeing in the past. We also know that attendance has a strong impact on learner outcomes, standards and progression. For example, examination outcomes strongly correlate to attendance rates."*<sup>133</sup>

### Impact on learning and attainment

**110.** Qualifications Wales said that pre-pandemic:

*"only around two-fifths of pupils who missed between 10 and 20% of school time achieved 5 good GCSEs including English/Welsh and mathematics. ... Although the causes of lower attainment are complex, higher absence from school is unlikely to be beneficial to learning overall."*<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales

<sup>130</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>131</sup> Written evidence, PA57, NSPCC

<sup>132</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>133</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>134</sup> Written evidence PA54, Qualifications Wales

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**111.** Estyn told us that in 2021 there was a far higher proportion of U grades for English, Welsh and Maths GCSEs than in 2020. These learners are at “greater risk of becoming NEET [not in education, employment or training] in the years ahead”. They said it was not yet possible to accurately measure the impact of the pandemic on attainment, but that the “correlation between school attendance and attainment has historically been strong ...”.<sup>135</sup> For example, pre-pandemic they have “previously reported that the students who have over 95 per cent attendance at school are almost twice as likely to achieve a C grade in English or Welsh and mathematics, compared to a student with less than 90 per cent attendance”.<sup>136</sup>

**112.** NASUWT Cymru said that learning loss because of the pandemic is “high when compared with other nations” and that these differences are starkest amongst the “least economically advantaged”.<sup>137</sup>

**113.** Missing sustained periods of school can potentially lead to a child falling behind academically, creating a vicious cycle, which then feeds into disengagement and further absence as highlighted by a senior leader of primary school.<sup>138</sup> Carmarthenshire County Council expressed concerns that because there is an “increasing number” of primary and KS3 learners “lagging behind” on personal and learning skills, this will affect them in future phases of their education.<sup>139</sup> Estyn said that where learners have “important gaps in knowledge and key skills” that “school-level interventions are really important ...”.<sup>140</sup>

**114.** We heard from a senior leader of a primary school that if a child is struggling academically, it can be “difficult to identify if there is a specific learning need or if low levels of progress are a direct result of attendance”.<sup>141</sup>

**115.** As well as the impact on a child’s immediate ability to learn, we heard that absence from school can have longer term consequences, such as challenges in accessing education and training after 16; or securing employment. ASCL Cymru said it can also lead to criminal or anti-social behaviour within the community and increased youth violence.<sup>142</sup> They are aware of learners who are “caught up in county-lines groups”.<sup>143</sup> Professor Ann John said:

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<sup>135</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

<sup>136</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 186](#)

<sup>137</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>138</sup> [Written evidence, PA7, Senior Leader, Primary School](#)

<sup>139</sup> [Written evidence, PA66, Carmarthenshire County Council](#)

<sup>140</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 188](#)

<sup>141</sup> [Written evidence, PA7, Senior Leader, Primary School](#)

<sup>142</sup> [Written evidence, PA18, Association of School and College Leaders](#)

<sup>143</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 41](#)

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*"Attendance, absence and exclusions has been strongly associated in many studies with future trajectory. So, pupils' attainment in school, which is why it's an important factor for schools, but also employment and where you are economically in the future and mental health are predicted by those issues."*<sup>144</sup>

**116.** NASUWT Cymru said that the recent review, "suggests that unauthorised absences are not necessarily a direct causal factor for lower achievement. Unauthorised absences are often an indicator of other issues in a learner's life which need to be addressed if their well-being and achievement is to be effectively supported". They said that while schools have a role to play it is "relative to the role that other organisations must play".<sup>145</sup>

**117.** The WLGA and Association of Directors of Education in Wales raised the increasing learning gap between pupils in the classroom as a result of some learners engaging "fully" during the pandemic, when others may not have engaged at all. They said this will cause difficulties for staff "in maintaining lessons aimed at these various levels of ability".<sup>146</sup>

**118.** As we have already explored in the previous chapter, there are some groups who have higher levels of absence. Children in Wales highlighted that this correlation has a disproportionate impact on poorer pupils, saying the links between poor attendance and lower attainment levels leads to a range of challenges as adults, including "poorer employment prospects, homelessness and poorer health ...".<sup>147</sup>

**119.** The Vale of Glamorgan Council called for "prior assumptions about attainment and presenteeism" to be "better defined and refined" following the pandemic:

*"What does attendance mean in terms of wellbeing and safeguarding and socialisation benefits; and then separately, what does it mean in terms of outcomes and engagement and enjoyment of learning. Hard data in terms of qualifications and also soft data in terms of learner satisfaction and a form of happiness index ... Good performance needs to be measured using progress against baselines and with acceptance of the needs of the learner in the same way as is done for learners who are Children Looked After."*<sup>148</sup>

**120.** The Welsh Government highlighted work by Estyn and University College London which came to similar conclusions on the link between school attendance and educational outcomes,

<sup>144</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 248

<sup>145</sup> Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru

<sup>146</sup> Written evidence, PA55, Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales

<sup>147</sup> Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales

<sup>148</sup> Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council

and the impact this has for those from poorer backgrounds. They said that this is why their work on “tackling the impact of poverty on attainment to achieve High Standards and Aspirations for all” will have a focus on attendance. They said one of the measures they will be using to assess success in this area of work will be seeing “improved rates of attendance for all learners including those from low-income households”.<sup>149</sup>

## Impact on mental health and well-being

**121.** As we have outlined in Chapter 4, we heard directly from families about how mental health issues can lead to a decline in school attendance. Some education professionals said children and young people with lower levels of attendance may struggle socially because they “feel ‘out of the loop’ with their peer group as friendships evolve and move on in their absence”.<sup>150</sup> Others said it can impact on children and young people developing resilience as they “just choose to avoid the days that have specific learning in it”.<sup>151</sup> An ACEs Recovery Practitioner agreed saying “children learning that for their fears/worries to go away, they need to avoid the situation rather than facing it, which then provides no opportunity for resilience to build.”<sup>152</sup>

**122.** ASCL Cymru expressed concerns about not picking up those children or young people who may be at home “quietly sitting behind a door” who could have “deep-seated, pronounced mental health issues that may come as a consequence of that loneliness ...” They said children and young people need schools and the community that comes from school partly so such issues can be identified.<sup>153</sup> These concerns was shared by NAHT Cymru.<sup>154</sup>

**123.** Estyn said the “correlation between attendance and well-being is less straightforward”.

*“Missing a lot of school and getting behind in your learning can clearly have a negative impact on the learners’ well-being, and in the short term, that could result in low self-esteem or anxiety around returning to school. And the longer the absence, of course, the greater the impact may be. And we know that, in the long term, poor mental health is associated with weaker outcomes at key stage 4.*

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<sup>149</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>150</sup> Written evidence, PA7, Senior Leader, Primary School

<sup>151</sup> Written evidence, PA10, Head of School

<sup>152</sup> Written evidence, PA49, ACEs Recovery Practitioner

<sup>153</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 42

<sup>154</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 47

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*However, there is an alternative narrative here too that's important. Some pupils may have poor attendance at school because of their mental health. Sadly, school is not a pleasant experience for all learners. It may be because they feel unfairly treated, maybe they feel bullied or harassed, they don't feel valued, or they don't feel that their individual needs are being met. And for these learners, being absent from school over the last two years, for whatever period of time it may be, may, in some ways, have been a tonic for them, and being off school may actually have had a positive effect on their mental health. In these cases, the thought of returning to school is problematic."<sup>155</sup>*

**124.** Professor Ann John stressed the important role that schools can play in terms of identifying need and ensuring early intervention, she said, “more than half” of mental health issues “are evident by the age of 14”.<sup>156</sup>

**125.** The WLGA and Association of Directors of Education in Wales also highlighted the impact pupil absence can have on physical health “lack of exercise leading to lethargy, deteriorating fitness and weight gain”.<sup>157</sup>

**126.** The Minister told us that the Welsh Government was very committed to improving the mental health and well-being of children and young people. He cited the “significantly” increased funding to support the delivery of the whole-school approach, and that “it’s a very clear cross-Government commitment”.<sup>158</sup>

## Our view

**127.** Both the short term and long term impact of sustained absence on children and young people’s learning and attainment is clear. We also believe that it has an impact on their well-being, and that sustained absence can potentially pose a safeguarding risk. In terms of learning and attainment, we appreciate the challenges of comparing results of external examinations, but we believe that the Welsh Government along with the local authorities, regional consortia and individual schools should monitor outcomes such as the proportion of U-grades. This should be monitored in such a way that the data can be analysed to understand outcomes as linked to absence rates.

<sup>155</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 190-191

<sup>156</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 247

<sup>157</sup> Written evidence, PA55, Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales

<sup>158</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 28

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

**128.** As we have outlined in previous chapters, children and young people are facing a range of mental health challenges. Schools can play an important role in supporting the emotional well-being of children and young people and sustained absence may increase or compound mental health and wellbeing difficulties.

**129.** In relation to academic pressures being placed upon children, and exam pressures, we note that the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru make a commitment to reforming qualifications, including the expansion of vocational qualifications.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Welsh Government, The Co-operation Agreement, 1 December 2021

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## 7. What has been the impact of pupil absence on elective home education?

There has been a clear increase in numbers home educating in recent years. Some of this has been attributed to the pandemic. There is a mix of reasons for people choosing home education. The support services for home educating families are stretched.

**130.** This was not an inquiry focused on elective home education. However, one strand of our terms of reference was whether absenteeism has resulted in higher levels of pupil de-registration and any cross over with elective home education. The evidence we heard, and the statistics show a substantial increase in elective home education, although that is for a range of reasons.

**131.** The Welsh Government suggested that there were a number of reasons why families chose home education:

*"Between January 2020 and January 2021, 30% of parents/carers cited Covid19 as the reason for choosing to home educate their children. Anxiety, bullying, attendance prosecution, child medical need, SEN/ALN needs not being met in school and relationship breakdown with the school accounted for a further 27%.*

*Research conducted by University College London in 2021/22 on children in the UK with neurodevelopmental conditions, school attendance and barriers to attendance found that a mismatch between the school offer and child learning needs likely underpins attendance problems and de-registration."*<sup>160</sup>

**132.** The Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales said that de-registrations have "increased by over 50% in two years".<sup>161</sup> While Estyn described the number of home educators as "now approximately the size of the total school

<sup>160</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>161</sup> Written evidence, PA55, Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales

population in a small local authority". They said this increase was happening before the pandemic.<sup>162</sup>

**133.** Estyn also highlighted that the Welsh Government does not publish disaggregated data on learners moving into home education by age group, additional learning needs or free school meals eligibility. They said more disaggregated data could be useful to "identify areas for local or national support".<sup>163</sup> They said that pre-pandemic local authorities did have access to a range of data around de-registration, including demographic information. They expected that local authorities to analyse this data to understand patterns relating to "particular schools, particular year groups or particular groups of children that seem to be being deregistered by their families." However, they highlighted that this data was not routinely published by the Welsh Government. The publicly available data was "high-level information about the number of learners and the rate of learners by local authority by year."<sup>164</sup> The Minister told us that he has commissioned Data Cymru to analyse the annual local authority returns for the reasons why families are choosing home education.<sup>165</sup>

**134.** A number of stakeholders described the impact this increase has had on the capacity of local authorities to support home educating families. Both the Children's Commissioner<sup>166</sup> and the NSPCC<sup>167</sup> highlighted that even before the pandemic, not all children who were home educated met with a local authority professional. The Children's Commissioner suggested it was less than half of home educated families. They both cited the significant increase home educating as putting even further strain on the system.

**135.** The Children's Commissioner for Wales said that using "punitive measures" around absence "can lead to de-registration, and the underlying reasons for persistent absence can also lead to de-registration if they are not addressed". Both of these factors pre-date the pandemic. She said that de-registration for these reasons is not the same "as making a positive proactive choice to electively home educate". For those families who do not feel like they have a choice, she said they "may face real challenges in continuing to meet the educational needs of their child ...". This can be compounded by a lack of a regular external support, with the loss of access to wellbeing support delivered through the whole school approach and losing access to school counselling services. These challenges may then lead to some children who are de-registered "missing education". There are also capacity issues within local authorities which can pose "a

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<sup>162</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

<sup>163</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

<sup>164</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 199](#)

<sup>165</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 47](#)

<sup>166</sup> [Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales](#)

<sup>167</sup> [Written evidence, PA57, NSPCC](#)

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barrier to the ability of authorities to understand needs, offer ongoing support, or to support a return to a school setting if this is in the best interest of the child.”<sup>168</sup>

**136.** Barnardo’s Cymru said that some parents have reported “feeling forced into home schooling.” They said this could be for a range of reasons but they highlighted a lack of appropriate school placement for children with ALN; or because persistent absence may lead to penalties.<sup>169</sup> NSPCC said that “just under 9 out of 10 pupils educated other than at school ... had a special educational need”.<sup>170</sup> While Parents Voices in Wales said that often it is “a last resort” for families, who in some cases are being forced because of a lack of support and alternative provision for neurodivergent mainstream learners. They called for policies which are “child centred and flexible to allow a blended/inclusive approach to learning for those who may struggle to learn in the classroom on certain days”.<sup>171</sup> The National Autistic Society said that some parents who have been “left with no choice” to home educate would prefer for their child to remain in school “to develop the skills they will need to navigate the world as an autistic adult.”<sup>172</sup>

**137.** NASUWT Cymru said that when pupils are deregistered the reasons for this choice should be “examined” so that if there are “push factors” rather than “positive factors” schools can know and plans put in place to address them. They also cited differences in support provided by schools and local authorities which can lead to de-registration. They called for “massive investment” to put into adequate support so that pupils do not de-register due to a lack of support.<sup>173</sup>

**138.** For some the pandemic has led to a positive choice to home educate. In listing a range of reasons for choosing home education, Estyn said that for some families it was:

*“... simply a decision that, having been forced to try it during lockdowns, home learning worked well for the family and they wish to continue their education at home.”<sup>174</sup>*

**139.** NASUWT Cymru agreed also citing that the increase in flexibility in working for parents and carers may have also helped families choose home education.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>168</sup> [Written evidence, PA56, Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)

<sup>169</sup> [Written evidence, PA33, Barnardo’s Cymru](#)

<sup>170</sup> [Written evidence, PA57, NSPCC](#)

<sup>171</sup> [Written evidence, PA64, Parents Voices in Wales](#)

<sup>172</sup> [Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru](#)

<sup>173</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 75, 77](#)

<sup>174</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

<sup>175</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

**140.** One family described to us the choice to home educate one day a week, which they believed was important for their child's well-being. They did not want to home educate more than this, and said that without taking this decision there "would have been more sickness/stress absence as one of my children has anxiety." They said that aside from this absence, their child has 100% attendance. They called for more support from schools to allow "flexi schooling."<sup>176</sup>

**141.** The Vale of Glamorgan Council said they have "made a conscious effort to offer parents a more supportive approach to return to school post covid to stem the flow of EHE de-registrations due to concern about covid." They said this means they have had "relatively fewer" de-registrations than other local authorities, but as a result also had lower attendance rates. They believed this approach was justified because it was "learner focused and also less disruptive to school functions, school placing and transport obligations ...". However, they said they did "not encourage 'flexi' schooling" and that any part time provision should only be on a short term basis and "documented by a Pastoral Support Plan."<sup>177</sup>

**142.** NAHT Cymru said they believed that "the best place to educate and support learners is in school."<sup>178</sup> This was a view echoed and supported by all the education unions. The NEU agreed partly because of "well-being opportunities, mixing with other young people and learning other skills for life ...".<sup>179</sup>

**143.** We are aware that there have been some concerns about the impact on safeguarding of home education. The NSPCC said that home education does not pose "any additional safeguarding risks" for children, but that it does mean that "a child is less likely to be seen, heard and known to the Local Authority and this reduces the opportunities that professionals have to support them and take action to safeguard them if needed." They said that the decision to home educate by "most parents" is made in the child's best interest, but they are concerned that some home educated children "may not in all cases have their rights under the UNCRC realised". This is why they support the strengthening of forthcoming guidance, and support the previous Children's Commissioner's recommendations for primary legislation to place a duty on parents to register home educated children. They also called for local authorities to have "sufficient resource and funding to deliver enhanced support services ...".<sup>180</sup>

**144.** The Children's Commissioner said that her office has "well documented and ongoing concerns about a lack of support structures for home-educated children." She said that whilst

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<sup>176</sup> Written evidence, PA36, Individual

<sup>177</sup> Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council

<sup>178</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 56

<sup>179</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 71

<sup>180</sup> Written evidence, PA57, NSPCC

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many home educated children “thrive” and “really enjoyed” home education, many have said they wanted to return to school.<sup>181</sup>

**145.** The Children’s Commissioner said she was “aware of very positive impacts” of the increased funding from the Welsh Government (see paragraph 147). She said it has been positive both from a local authority perspective, but also for parents and learners “because it’s enabled increased opportunities for engagement and learning ...” She is now “advocating strongly for a national support offer ...”.<sup>182</sup>

**146.** The Minister said that:

*“in order to get the full benefit of [education] reforms, children need to be at school, so I want to see children coming back to school. There’s been a significant increase, as you say in your question, during the last period of COVID. For the overwhelming majority of children, being in school is far and away the best way of getting their education. Obviously, parents are entitled to make a different choice for their children, but the key thing is the right of the child to receive a suitable education, obviously.”<sup>183</sup>*

**147.** The Welsh Government told us that in recognition of the increase of home education, they have provided funding of £1.7m to local authorities to support elective home education. They are also establishing two working groups which will focus on “the EHE/ALN interface and the wider package of support provided by local authorities.” Part of their role will be to “identify best practice in working with EHE families, addressing the potential de-registration ... and supporting re-integration ...”.<sup>184</sup>

**148.** In terms of the package of support available to families who are home educating, the Minister described it as “the most generous package” across the UK. He said that he wanted to move from a compliance approach to one “where it’s about establishing a relationship, and that different kinds of relationships can exist with the school.” He outlined some of the support being made available including:

*“... looking at ways in which, for example, Hwb can be made available to parents who home educate their children, improved access to local exam centres, career support, resource and guidance, handbooks—a set of ways in which the resources available in school are more porous, if you wish, so that*

<sup>181</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 133

<sup>182</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 135-136

<sup>183</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 47

<sup>184</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

*parents who are choosing to home educate can make use of them, and I hope can develop a different kind of relationship with the school, and make it easier for those parents who have maybe recently made the decision to encourage their children back.”<sup>185</sup>*

**149.** In relation to the data on home education, the Minister told us that the data for 2021-22 has been compiled by Data Cymru. However this report is “intended for use for operational and management purposes and is not published.” He said officials were exploring whether there options for sharing an modified version, and that “official data, based on PLASC returns will be published in the autumn”.<sup>186</sup>

## Our view

**150.** It is very clear that there has been a significant increase in the number of families choosing home education since the pandemic. For some, this has been a very positive and active choice, whilst for others it may have been less so. Our inquiry has not been focused on home education, but we did want to understand the relationship between pupil absence and de-registration. We note that there is a commitment from the Welsh Government to bring forward changes in relation to home education, which the Senedd will have the opportunity to scrutinise in the coming months.

**151.** From the evidence we have gathered we feel that there needs to be more publicly available data on de-registration and home education. As Estyn told us, the publicly available data is very top level. We want more disaggregated data published, this should include the reasons for people de-registration, as well as data on the support that is being provide by local authorities and the Welsh Government to those home educating. We note that the Minister has said work is underway to explore ways of sharing some data publicly.

**152.** it is clear that resources were stretched pre-pandemic, and that the significant increase in numbers in the last two years will put even more pressure on these services. It is therefore important that there is data available to understand where resources and capacity should best be directed. It will also help identify what support provides a pathway back into schools, if this is the choice of the family. This is particularly important when the evidence we have heard seems to suggest that for some families they feel pushed into home education, rather than making an active choice.

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<sup>185</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 49](#)

<sup>186</sup> [Letter from the Minister for Education and Welsh Language to Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 September 2022](#)

**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.

## 8. How effective are current Welsh Government policies at tackling school absence?

The education system in Wales is currently undergoing significant reform. Some of these reforms may help deal with sustained absence, but the system is also struggling with capacity and resourcing issues.

### Current education reforms

**153.** The education system in Wales is currently overgoing a radical overhaul, with the introduction of the new curriculum, the new ALN system and the whole school approach to emotional and mental well-being. This is the subject of our on-going inquiry into **the implementation of education reforms**.

**154.** Stakeholders and the Minister all believed that the reforms provided an opportunity to help tackle some of the issues around absence. Qualifications Wales said they hoped if the new curriculum improves children and young people's experiences of school that this "in turn will improve pupil attendance." They cited schools who have "given particular attention to their curriculum offer" as having improved attendance levels. They believed a reshaped 14-16 offer would also include "qualifications that will likely appeal particularly to those learners whose attendance tends to be worse."<sup>187</sup> Estyn highlighted that the curriculum for years 10 and 11 has "narrowed over the years" with options "declining over time". This has been a particular issue for vocational courses "which can be more expensive to provide ...".<sup>188</sup>

**155.** The Children's Commissioner believed that "full implementation" of the whole school approach will enable a multi-disciplinary approach to support, which will help with school attendance.<sup>189</sup> Professor Ann John said that it was important to ensure that there was "parity of provision and environment and opportunities for all schools". She highlighted that it can be more challenging for people from deprived communities to access support services.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Written evidence PA54, Qualifications Wales

<sup>188</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 204

<sup>189</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>190</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 287 -288

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**156.** The education unions voiced a note of caution. NASUWT Cymru said that these reforms “will only be effective ... if they are rolled out in a well-planned and resourced manner. An exhausted and stressed teaching staff will not be able to do this effectively.”<sup>191</sup> They are concerned that reforms in the short term could “potentially ... undermine work” to tackle absence because of the increase in staff workload with “no additional ongoing resourcing or acknowledgement.”<sup>192</sup> ASCL Cymru said that the Welsh Government needed to recognise that schools “are currently swimming upstream against a tide of continued disruption.” They said the Government should not be “continually piling more reforms” into schools. They called for a focus on getting children back into schools and “getting them, their social, their emotional and their cognitive well-being back up and running without all of these other distractions that we have to the system.”<sup>193</sup>

**157.** NAHT Cymru agreed saying there needed to be realistic expectations. They called for pupil absence to be “a priority ... the sole focus ...” in education because if children are not in school reforms cannot have an impact.<sup>194</sup> The NEU said that it is currently the start of the curriculum reform process and that “the exams will not start to be taught for years ...”<sup>195</sup> UCAC said that there was too much dependence on the new curriculum, highlighting that there is already “a very wide-ranging curriculum in schools.”<sup>196</sup>

**158.** The NEU said it was important that a “bells-and-whistles experiential curriculum” does not lead to increased cost for children to go to school. They said it’s important to ensure that there is “equal access to the curriculum”.<sup>197</sup> This links backs to concerns about the cost of attending school, which we look at in Chapter 1.

**159.** When considering the impact of the current education reforms in relation to pupil absence the Minister said:

*“The first point is that, in terms of legislation and scrutiny and creating policy, there is a temptation to look at these things separately. But, in school life, you experience these things all at the same time, and that can be challenging, and it’s important that we continue to keep an eye on that. But, the opportunity is that we use these reforms to respond to more than one challenge. So, if you look at the context of the curriculum, I am confident,*

<sup>191</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>192</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 98](#)

<sup>193</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 61](#)

<sup>194</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 66](#)

<sup>195</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 94](#)

<sup>196</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 92](#)

<sup>197</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 95](#)

*particularly from discussion with school leaders who are enthusiastic about the new curriculum, that it is an opportunity, as I mentioned briefly at the beginning, to re-engage some pupils in school life. The intention of the new curriculum is to provide a bespoke pathway for the learner, and that's going to give us an opportunity to re-engage with some of those who found school and school attendance a challenge. So, it's looking at the whole picture.*

*There are reforms to ALN; again, that means that there is a bespoke pathway for an individual, and that's also likely to enable us to be more successful in encouraging people back. But we do have to look at all of this together. There was a question earlier on; if you're not at school, you're not going to be able to take advantage of this wider offer, and that's why it's so important.”<sup>198</sup>*

**160.** The Minister said that ensuring that a curriculum offers vocational subjects “is likely to improve the attendance and behaviour, perhaps, of some learners who have otherwise been somewhat disengaged.” He said that for pre-16s, a local key stage 4 offer must include “at least three vocational qualifications” and post-16 must offer five vocational qualifications. He said that the new curriculum will increase the emphasis on skills for life, and will provide:

*“... a very good opportunity to re-engage learners who otherwise might be disengaged, just because of the tailored, bespoke, learner-centred way in which it's designed. So, we mustn't put all our weight on that, because there is a wide range of things that we need to do, but I think that will be a step change in how we can go about re-engaging learners with the life of the school.”<sup>199</sup>*

## **The Welsh Government's definition of persistent absence**

**161.** In Wales, persistent absence is currently defined as being less than 80% attendance (more than 20% absence). This contrasts with Northern Ireland, where it is defined as less than 85%; and England, where it is defined as less than 90%. The review noted that “strong arguments” were made that bringing the definition in line with either of these could “lead to earlier intervention and better outcomes.”<sup>200</sup> Professor Ann John highlighted the Estyn report that “showed a strong association between absence at higher levels than 10 per cent and, I think, more than 40 per cent of children not achieving grades A to C at GCSE level.”<sup>201</sup> The Children's

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<sup>198</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 82

<sup>199</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 20-21

<sup>200</sup> Welsh Government, Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance, February 2022

<sup>201</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 254

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Commissioner also said that having a lower threshold would be beneficial if it led to earlier interventions.<sup>202</sup>

**162.** ASCL Cymru said that the thresholds for intervention have been raised "... as cited in one case, where learners need 10 or more consecutive days' absence before intervention. A learner under this radar, can attend just two days per week and have neither support nor consequence. A national approach is needed for the purposes of defining the point at which interventions should take place."<sup>203</sup> They called for consistent trigger points for intervention and definitions of "persistent non-attenders ..."<sup>204</sup> NAHT Cymru also called for consistency saying for learners it was "not fair" to have different triggers for support across Wales.<sup>205</sup> Estyn said that this inconsistency can be driven by the "range" of local authority support available, or whether a school makes their own arrangements for welfare support.<sup>206</sup>

**163.** Estyn also said that as a result of the significant increase in absence, local authorities have had to "change the thresholds for engagement". This has meant that support is only available to those with the lowest attendance, and not everybody who meets the current definition. They said that schools are unable "to make up for the lack of capacity in local authority services." This also means that pupils who previously would have been identified may be missing out on support or receiving diluted support.<sup>207</sup>

**164.** NASUWT raised concerns about a threshold becoming "the aspiration" for attendance, which could create a culture that as long as this being met, non-attendance is acceptable.<sup>208</sup> Estyn agreed that "sometimes, choosing a single indicator can drive unhelpful behaviours ..." They said it was important to take "into account the particular context of that family and that child's circumstances to make sure that your support is tailored to that."<sup>209</sup>

**165.** In their evidence, the Welsh Government said that this definition was an "important measure". The Minister believed that "there is merit in considering having a lower threshold for intervention which would be accompanied with an increase in support for these services."<sup>210</sup>

<sup>202</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 131](#)

<sup>203</sup> [Written evidence, PA18, Association of School and College Leaders](#)

<sup>204</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 70-71](#)

<sup>205</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 74](#)

<sup>206</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 221](#)

<sup>207</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

<sup>208</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 122](#)

<sup>209</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 221](#)

<sup>210</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

## Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs)

**166.** Since 2013, local authorities have been able to issue Fixed Penalty Notices (“FPNs”) to parents for their children’s regular unauthorised absence. Local authorities have to develop a code of conduct for issuing FPNs. During the pandemic, the Welsh Government said that it was their view that it would not be appropriate to issue a FPN or commence proceedings for non-attendance at school. This advice changed in May 2022.

**167.** We heard mixed evidence as to the effectiveness of FPNs. Although almost all who reflected on their use believed they should be a last resort.

**168.** Local authorities raised concerns about ambiguities between the Welsh Government guidance on their use. Newport Council said that at “various times” during the pandemic, the Welsh Government guidance “has weakened the position of LA interventions.” In particular:

*“... at the time of writing, the Minister’s statement on 3rd May 2022 created ambiguity around the use of FPN’s. The statement refers both to LAs using ‘in only the most extreme cases’ – an area normally reserved for prosecution cases and not FPN’s - whilst simultaneously pointing to the immediate reintroduction of the 2013 guidance. The 2013 guidance states ‘penalty notices will be most effective when issued for less entrenched attendance issues’. This has left LAs in an uncomfortable position knowing whether to press forward with the use of FPN’s.”<sup>211</sup>*

**169.** Other local authorities also shared these concerns, including Vale of Glamorgan<sup>212</sup>; and Carmarthenshire County Council.<sup>213</sup> The Vale of Glamorgan said that “effectively barring” FPN use had essentially de-penalised “non-attendance even when schools returned.” They said this impacts on a wide range of learners, and not just those who had poor attendance before the pandemic, but also “those who felt it acceptable to have a more relaxed approach to attendance overall ...”<sup>214</sup>

**170.** A secondary school head teacher said they were unsure they were effective, and “often target the wrong pupils/families.”<sup>215</sup> The National Autistic Society Cymru said they should “only ever be used as a last resort” and questioned their effectiveness as a tool to deal with absence. They said “children should be encouraged, rather than incentivised, to attend school because

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<sup>211</sup> Written evidence, PA45, Newport City Council

<sup>212</sup> Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council

<sup>213</sup> Written evidence, PA66, Carmarthenshire County Council

<sup>214</sup> Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council

<sup>215</sup> Written evidence, PA5, Headteacher, Secondary School

the latter can stigmatise nonattendance.”<sup>216</sup> NEU said the “reemphasis” on FPNs “is unhelpful”, and questioned the effectiveness of FPNs as a tool to improve attendance.<sup>217</sup>

**171.** Barnardo’s Cymru said whilst for some families the “threat of, or receiving” a FPN can help improve attendance, it is often “not as successful in motivating families to maintain that improvement.” They described working with Police Community Support Officers in Merthyr Tydfil, to visit families where a child is absent. They said in some cases this has been successful, but for others “the threat of a fixed penalty notices or the involvement of the police compounds the challenges that the family is already facing – parental mental health, child mental health, financial problems and much more.” They add that for some families they felt “forced” to home educate to avoid the fine or criminal proceedings.<sup>218</sup> Parentkind also said that use of FPNs can cause a “switch, from a school being solely a place of learning, to being a body where fines are issued ...” and that this change “can cause serious breakdown in the home and school relationship.”<sup>219</sup>

**172.** The Children’s Commissioner for Wales cautioned against the use of punitive measures. She said they should only be “an absolute last resort” when all other engagement has failed. She said that:

*“the issue of fixed penalty notices or school attendance orders should never be used in isolation. They must be accompanied by a support package, and key to that support package will be talking to the family and child, taking the time to understand the reasons for absence, and putting in place the right support for that particular child.”<sup>220</sup>*

**173.** When we discussed the issue of FPNs during our engagement with families and support workers, the majority felt that the use was unfair. Most of those we spoke to had not been fined or threatened with a fine, but those who had felt it had been unnecessary because their child was accessing ALN or CAHMS services or were awaiting assessments. This compounded an already stressful situation, which they felt was unjust given they were trying to get their child either back into school or to get support.

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<sup>216</sup> Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru

<sup>217</sup> Written evidence, PA60, National Education Union

<sup>218</sup> Written evidence, PA33, Barnardo’s Cymru

<sup>219</sup> Written evidence, PA61, Parentkind

<sup>220</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children’s Commissioner for Wales

*"I'm a single parent and have already had to cut my hours in work to support my daughter. To be fined would be the last straw and feel like I was being punished, as if I had done something wrong."*<sup>221</sup>

**174.** Education unions such as NAHT Cymru<sup>222</sup> and ASCL Cymru<sup>223</sup> both said that fines should be used only as a last resort. Although ASCL Cymru said there are few pieces of law "that don't have a penalty attached if these things are not followed." Both reiterated the importance of supporting families to address the underlying issues causing the absence. NEU expressed reservations even if they are only used as a last resort.<sup>224</sup> NASUWT Cymru called them the "nuclear option" only to be taken when other "reasonable measures" have been taken.<sup>225</sup> Estyn also believed they should only be used as a last resort. They said that in those circumstances when all options have been exhausted both by the school and other services then they may be appropriate.<sup>226</sup>

**175.** The Minister said that use of FPNs is being considered as part of the broader review of the all-Wales attendance framework. He said their role is currently "limited", that they should only be used as a last resort and in the "most extreme cases." But that in those circumstances he believed they had a role.<sup>227</sup>

## Blended and flexible learning

**176.** Different groups had different views on the extent to which blended and flexible learning should and could continue to be part of the package offered to learners, and how this may help with supporting pupil attendance and engagement.

**177.** The education unions were very clear in their reservations on the drive for increased blended learning. They all stressed the statutory nature of school education. ASCL told us that nothing can replace face-to-face learning,<sup>228</sup> and UCAC said their "vision" was to get pupils back in the classroom "not this idea of hybrid or blended learning ...".<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, Pupil absence – engagement findings, June 2022

<sup>222</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 96

<sup>223</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 98

<sup>224</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 120

<sup>225</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 132

<sup>226</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 228

<sup>227</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 91

<sup>228</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 9

<sup>229</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 43

**178.** Their concerns were for a number of reasons including ensuring the best quality of education provision, and the wider benefits school attendance brings for the learner both in attainment and mental well-being. NAHT Cymru told us:

*"... there is no replacement for being in school with your peers, with those teachers in front of you, and I think we need to make sure that the messaging around that is absolutely clear. There is very clear evidence that the best place for learners is in the classroom. That's not just about educational attainment, but also for their mental health and social well-being. I think what we need to be clear about is that the statutory obligation is that those children are back in school in the classroom, and what we don't want to be is a victim of our own success in certain circumstances where schools have been very good at offering that at-home provision and support for learners, and so therefore people think that is now an expectation."*<sup>230</sup>

**179.** NEU described the challenges of balancing remote learning with classroom teaching responsibilities, saying it was not just a question of teaching a lesson and some learners joining electronically:

*"It's not necessarily that what you teach in the classroom is transferrable to home learning, particularly for your practical subjects— ... It's very difficult. So, teachers are having to try and think of additional things that they need to provide to these learners in these environments ... becoming more of a workload issue ... children that are working at home require the support of the teacher, that verbal conversation with them about what they're doing well and how they can improve. So, that takes that extra time as well, which is what you do in the classroom when you're teaching; you do speak to the students there and then, and if a teacher can't do that with the online learning, then those children are not receiving their full opportunity of how they can improve—they're missing that part of the learning experience."*<sup>231</sup>

**180.** All the teaching unions raised the issue of workforce capacity. NAHT Cymru said that the remote learning offer during the pandemic had caused a "huge strain" on the workforce, which they had "bent over backwards to do" because "there was no other option". They said it is not a

<sup>230</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 19

<sup>231</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 25

“sustainable way of teaching and learning” and was only for “emergency circumstances.” They called for clear messaging that the best place for “our learners is back in the classroom.”<sup>232</sup>

**181.** NASUWT Cymru called for a review into how this provision is managed. Like NAHT Cymru, they stressed the national emergency context of the pandemic. They said that teachers struggled to deliver blended learning, and that “it is not a sustainable model without a full review of staffing and expectations.” They cited findings from their Big Question Survey:

*“... 27% of respondents were expected to simultaneously provide remote education and traditional classroom teaching whilst other teachers were expected to provide additional resources for those who were learning remotely. 86% of respondents providing remote learning were expected to do this with no adjustment to their pre-existing workload.*

*87% of respondents said their workload in the previous 12 months had increased, with 58% saying it had increased significantly. 82% of respondents reported that their job adversely affected their mental health, with workload being the most common reason.”<sup>233</sup>*

**182.** NASUWT Cymru also highlighted that the whole education system is “designed around providing in-school education ...”. They said if the Welsh Government want to continue to support blended learning there would need to both extra investment alongside a review into how this can be delivered, because the current system “isn’t sustainable.”<sup>234</sup>

**183.** The WLGA and Association of Directors of Education in Wales also raised the “different set of challenges” of monitoring remote learning.<sup>235</sup>

**184.** Yet, we heard from others that offering a blended learning may help maintain school attendance and reduce the risk of opting out of the school system entirely. The WLGA and Association of Directors of Education in Wales said that these opportunities may have “benefitted some learners”, in particular those who have anxiety and school phobia.<sup>236</sup> The Vale of Glamorgan Council said that there needed to be a shift in the narrative around education away from a “one size fits all approach ... based on presenteeism ...” suggesting that options such as remote, flexible, bespoke or hybrid learning could all help “prevent further entry into

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<sup>232</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 19](#)

<sup>233</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>234</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 27](#)

<sup>235</sup> [Written evidence, PA55, Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales](#)

<sup>236</sup> [Written evidence, PA55, Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales](#)

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EHE [elective home education] and / or into later escalation of contested ALN cases at tribunal.”<sup>237</sup>

**185.** The National Autistic Society said that:

*“Flexi-schooling can be a way of providing education in school, with social interaction with peers, learning vital skills and direct teaching from teachers, combined with learning in the less stressful home environment.”*<sup>238</sup>

**186.** One of the individuals who responded told us that:

*“Being able to offer alternatives learning opportunities or accept a more flexible approach to schooling would potentially engage learners more and encourage them positively re future aspirations.”*<sup>239</sup>

**187.** The Children’s Commissioner also said that through her office’s participation programme there has been an indication that, for some children, flexi schooling “can help keep them engaged” with school and avoid de-registration. Families have reported that this has enabled their child to cope better in the school environment and are “more likely to want to attend”. Some families have reported that without this flexibility their child would have been de-registered. She acknowledged some of the barriers to providing this type of flexibility 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.”*

However, she believed that the review and redevelopment of attendance guidance “offers an opportunity to work some of this through so that there is clarity around how safeguarding is ensured.” She also said this flexibility should be “regularly reviewed” to check it’s meeting the child’s needs and is in their best interest.<sup>240</sup>

**188.** When we explored the issue of blended learning with the Minister, he said that the Government was “committed” to looking at a “strategic way of undertaking digital learning.” He told us about the investment already provided for equipment, which was around £180m of

<sup>237</sup> Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council

<sup>238</sup> Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru

<sup>239</sup> Written evidence, PA22, Individual

<sup>240</sup> Additional information – Children’s Commissioner for Wales



funding so far. He said the “other challenge” was around supporting the workforce, and that the emphasis needed to shift from supplying equipment to this. He said this work would “allows us to look in an alternative or wider way at the role of digital in the curriculum, but specifically in this particular context, to encourage children back into school.”<sup>241</sup>

**189.** The Welsh Government also highlighted the forthcoming “Blended Learning Strategy for Wales” which is currently being developed. They said the strategy would be:

*“... supported by a resource base of high quality professional learning materials. This will ensure that both practitioners and learners are fully supported and continue to have access to the highest quality resources over the long term.”*<sup>242</sup>

**190.** The Minister also said that where flexible learning has been put in place that he would not advocate a flexible approach that “eats into the time that young people have for their break times”. He said that any changes to a timetable should not compromise the school’s ability to deliver its curriculum and that it should be done in consultation with parents.<sup>243</sup>

## Staffing capacity

**191.** The review makes it clear that one of the biggest barriers to tackling pupil absence is staff capacity and resourcing. It states that the recommendations made would necessitate the input of staff time and effort “especially if they are to be implemented rigorously and fully ... constitute an increase in workload for staff.” It adds that carrying out this work has been difficult because of “limited staff capacity”, a problem made worse because of COVID-19 related staff absence, and difficulties in securing supply staff to cover. It also flags capacity across the wider support services. Some work is already underway to help address these capacity issues, such as the Welsh Government’s Managing Workload and Reducing Bureaucracy Working Group. However, the report concludes that there are “few quick solutions to addressing these capacity limitations ...”.<sup>244</sup>

**192.** We also heard significant concerns about staffing capacity and resilience to support pupil attendance. Some of this was specifically in reference to supporting blended and flexible learning, which we cover in the preceding section.

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<sup>241</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 71-73

<sup>242</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>243</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 89

<sup>244</sup> Welsh Government, Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance, February 2022

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**193.** NASUWT Cymru contrasted the general increase in pupil numbers against reducing teacher numbers. They said that the number of full time equivalent teachers has decreased by 10% since 2006, which has had “a significantly detrimental impact on pupil-teacher ratios”. For example, they said that recommendations made in the review to share good practice “is insufficient if there is inadequate staffing in place to carry out this practice.”<sup>245</sup> ASCL Cymru also highlighted the impact of the reforms “piling onto an already tired workforce and being pulled in all directions ... all in a mix of exhausted teachers and SLT [Senior Leadership Team], many still recovering from the after-effects of COVID.”<sup>246</sup>

**194.** NAHT Cymru said the lack of capacity is “where the system breaks down”. They said schools go to “incredible lengths” to engage with families and provide support, but that across Wales there was an inconsistency in terms of support offered. They said it was a lack of resources that meant schools and local authorities were unable to engage with families.<sup>247</sup> They called for an end to “a postcode-lottery system of support.”<sup>248</sup>

**195.** ASCL Cymru agreed saying resourcing was “the biggest issue”.<sup>249</sup> Like NAHT Cymru they said it should not be dependent on an individual’s school funding situation whether they had access to support workers or counsellors.<sup>250</sup> They also cited large class sizes which leads to an increased proportion of children in an individual classroom who may be struggling and needing support.<sup>251</sup>

**196.** ASCL Cymru emphasised the importance of getting ahead of this issue, because of the far reaching consequences for individuals and for the wider economy:

*“They simply can't fix this without having an army of people who are well-resourced and well-trained to knock on doors and get kids back in. I know Welsh Government has done quite a lot of work towards this, but if these kids do not get back into school quickly, then they could be facing 30 years of economic inactivity. Now, that's not good for anyone, and we do need to get resources absolutely front and foremost within all of this. What's more important than getting kids back into school, as educationalists?”<sup>252</sup>*

<sup>245</sup> [Written evidence, PA59 NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>246</sup> [Written evidence, PA18, Association of School and College Leaders](#)

<sup>247</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 79-80](#)

<sup>248</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 48](#)

<sup>249</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 86](#)

<sup>250</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 52](#)

<sup>251</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 90](#)

<sup>252</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 45](#)

**197.** The UCAC representative, who is also a headteacher of a primary school, told us that “getting that capacity has been very challenging”. Their school had benefited from the additional funding from the Welsh Government, but they said that they had to recruit before they were certain the funding would be granted. They also have utilised the primary to secondary transition project, and the NQT funded programme (see paragraph 17). They called the funding “vital” but that recruiting staff to their jobs “has been a huge problem”.<sup>253</sup>

**198.** NASUWT Cymru welcomed the COVID-19 Renew and Reform funding, but noted this was “short-term” and that “no financial commitment has yet been made to increase long term capacity in the teaching workforce.”<sup>254</sup>

**199.** It was not just the education unions that highlighted issues around capacity. The Children’s Commissioner said that dealing with non-attendance was “very intensive work, with significant capacity implications ...” She said that in dealing with this issue, there was a need to take account of the “difficult circumstances in which children, families and teachers and schools find themselves.”<sup>255</sup> Children in Wales also noted concerns about capacity across the education system.<sup>256</sup> Whilst Rhwyd Arall said that “even the best schools find it difficult to meet the needs of every child because of a lack of resources.”<sup>257</sup>

**200.** Estyn talked about the need to increase capacity in the wider specialist services supporting learners and schools. They described the pressures on education welfare services, which has led to such services readjusting and refocusing their resources to “the most vulnerable pupils”, meaning that pupils who may have previously received support will either be receiving a reduced level of support, or in some cases, no support at all. Limited capacity in these services then has an impact on schools, who have to “try and mitigate” for the lack of this external support, compounding existing capacity issues in schools. Estyn said that it is “really challenging” to increase support services capacity quickly.<sup>258</sup>

**201.** Carmarthenshire County Council agreed with Estyn about the capacity at a local authority level to support schools. They said there may need to be short to medium term funding by “schools, LAs, and WG to build capacity from the bottom up” in order to support learners who pre-pandemic may not have needed support, but whose attendance has reduced.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 114](#)

<sup>254</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>255</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 142](#)

<sup>256</sup> [Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales](#)

<sup>257</sup> [Written evidence, PA19, Individual](#)

<sup>258</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 211-214](#)

<sup>259</sup> [Written evidence, PA66, Carmarthenshire County Council](#)

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**202.** The Minister told us that he was aware that schools have been using the additional funding made available to them to appoint education support workers, who can lead on support to get learners back into school. This has enabled an expansion of capacity to “strengthen existing pastoral systems.”<sup>260</sup> However, he added whereas the funding settlement in the current financial year had been “very good” in subsequent years it is likely to be challenging. The £3.84m funding for education support workers will run for the next two years, providing three years of funding in total for this intervention.<sup>261</sup>

**203.** This funding will play a key role in supporting attendance, according to the Welsh Government.

*“We know that these additional staff can be a highly effective resource for schools in reaching out to parents and carers and engaging them in their children’s learning.*

*A large focus of their role is on supporting attendance and working with families to encourage better levels of attendance and re-engagement with learning after the pandemic. We know that teachers often find it hard to reach out to families due to other work pressures and these roles will provide a bridge between home and school.*

*The funding for family engagement officers will allow local authorities to target schools which require additional capacity in this area. In addition, as part of our policy development we will be advising schools on the effective practice of family engagement officers and the wider professional learning required.”<sup>262</sup>*

## Welsh Government funding

**204.** As well as staffing capacity issues, we heard a number of concerns about the resources available within the education and wider support services to address the multi-faceted factors leading to pupil absence. This is within the broader context of implementing major education reforms within schools, in particular the new curriculum; changes to the ALN system and the whole school approach to emotional and mental health. This is all alongside the backdrop of

<sup>260</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 99

<sup>261</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 101

<sup>262</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

pandemic recovery, and the impact of austerity. Conwy Education Services said that there was a “need” for “a lot more resources” because of these two issues.<sup>263</sup>

**205.** The Welsh Government cited a number of different funding streams which they believed would help deal with pupil absence. This has included:

- £43m over the next three years to support implementation of the whole school approach. This funding will be used to “build resilience through the introduction of universal and targeted interventions in schools; training school staff on wellbeing; and ensuring that the wider system is able to support children and young people by ensuring their receive interventions appropriate to their need in a timely fashion”;<sup>264</sup>
- An extra £2.5m in 2021-22 to local authorities to “provide additional emotional, mental health and wellbeing support to young people.” The eligibility criteria for the funding was an expectation on local authorities “to work with, and fund additional, voluntary sector youth work services, and provide support for young people with protected characteristics and in harder-to-reach areas ...”;<sup>265</sup>
- £8.5m a year for 2020-21 and 2021-22 to support transitions. This funding is available to further education colleges and sixth forms to support young people in their next steps in either education or career;<sup>266</sup>
- £6.4m Winter of Wellbeing funding for 2021-22 academic year. “This initiative supported all learners to access social, emotional, and physical wellbeing provision and create safe places for free play and physical activity where children and young people could develop and / or rebuild their social skills.”<sup>267</sup>
- £3.84m over three years for family engagement officers.<sup>268</sup>

**206.** The additional funding was broadly welcomed. Although there was a call for additional funding in a range of different areas. ASCL Cymru called for more funding for a “a range of support workers to help reintegration and repair.”<sup>269</sup> The importance of monitoring and evaluation of the use of these funds and the impact they were having was highlighted a number of stakeholders. The National Autistic Society said the additional funding for ALN needed to be

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<sup>263</sup> [Written evidence, PA8, Conwy Education Services](#)

<sup>264</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

<sup>265</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

<sup>266</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

<sup>267</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

<sup>268</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

<sup>269</sup> [Written evidence, PA18, Association of School and College Leaders](#)

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robustly monitored to “ensure this funding reaches the children most impacted by the pandemic.”<sup>270</sup>

**207.** The WGLA highlighted that, even with funding, it can be “difficult to implement” interventions targeted at children who are not attending school regularly. They also had concerns about the end of European Union funding, particularly those which were funded by the European Social Fund. These programmes have included ones which have had “great impact and positive outcomes” to engage those at risk from not being in education or training.<sup>271</sup>

**208.** The NEU said that local authorities were currently inadequately funded to help them support schools in dealing with absence. These concerns extended beyond school funding, and also included other support services such as social services and CAHMS.<sup>272</sup> ASCL Cymru highlighted the backlog for support services and how this can impact on schools providing appropriate support.<sup>273</sup> NASUWT Cymru said that implementation of the whole-school framework “was not accompanied by any increased investment or workload impact assessment”. They believed that this lack of an assessment is “inconsistent” with the whole school concept.<sup>274</sup>

**209.** The Children’s Commissioner said that, even when funding is available to develop a more tailored, personalised support for a child/young person, recruitment can be a challenge. She described how local authorities are using pandemic recovery funding for youth workers or increased pastoral support from school staff but that:

*“it is possible that with the staff shortages seen across our public sector it can be difficult to deploy more staff to do the kind of individualised support that is the best way to tackle this, even with generous funding.”<sup>275</sup>*

**210.** ASCL Cymru said that the engagement officers who have been appointed are “making a difference”. They said “we can’t throw too much money at this and too much resource at this ...”.<sup>276</sup> A Family Liaison Officer told us during our engagement activity that when she started

<sup>270</sup> [Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru](#)

<sup>271</sup> [Written evidence, PA55, Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales](#)

<sup>272</sup> [Written evidence, PA60, National Education Union](#)

<sup>273</sup> [Written evidence, PA18, Association of School and College Leaders](#)

<sup>274</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>275</sup> [Written evidence, PA56, Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)

<sup>276</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 60](#)

her role before the pandemic she was supporting two families. She now supports 49.<sup>277</sup> NEU also talked about the importance of having dedicated support workers, saying that

*"they do need that focused time and we do need a designated person who looks at it, not just for the hour in the morning, but looking at tracking and monitoring, supporting families and challenging where it's needed. Because it is about making the correct referrals and getting the correct engagement and support packages in place for these learners from a very early point, when you can see the decline straight away."*<sup>278</sup>

NAHT Cymru said that it is important that support workers are the "same people so that they build up trust and support". They said if you only have a small number of officers across a single local authority you will only be able to scratch the surface.<sup>279</sup>

**211.** We heard directly from local authorities about how some of this additional funding has been used. For example the Vale of Glamorgan Council described that they have used funding to:

*"deliver LA managed Liaison Engagement officer posts who will act as a bridge between schools, home and the inclusion team. These 6 officers will support school attendance officers and will be trained in mental health first aid, trauma informed schools approaches and a range of engagement and wellbeing strategies."*<sup>280</sup>

**212.** Estyn said that whilst funding for counselling had increased fewer learners accessed the counselling services in 2020-21 compared to the year before the pandemic. They said:

*"Despite Welsh Government providing an additional £1.25m funding for services in 2020-2021, services in half of local authority areas (11 out of 22) saw a drop in numbers accessing services that year compared to 2019-2020 (partially disrupted by Covid-19), and services in 17/22 areas counselled fewer learners than in 2018-2019 (pre-pandemic). Services in only 1 local authority (Swansea) worked with a notably higher number of learners in 2020-2021 compared to the year pre-pandemic."*

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<sup>277</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, Pupil absence – engagement findings, June 2022

<sup>278</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 88

<sup>279</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 103

<sup>280</sup> Written evidence, PA63, The Vale of Glamorgan Council

*The 2020-2021 figures for the number of learners receiving counselling does not necessarily reflect the demand. Information from services suggests that demand was higher, but services struggled to meet the demand due to the impact of Covid-19 on counsellor availability and operating restrictions.”<sup>281</sup>*

**213.** When we explored this in more detail with Estyn, they said they didn’t have data on how many people have requested or been referred for counselling. They said that there is “huge variability” across Wales, and that they are aware of issues in some areas leading to the number of young people receiving the services being low “it’s because simply there isn’t the capacity there to take them on, not because young people don’t know about it or they haven’t been referred.” They said part of the issue is that it’s very difficult to appoint suitably qualified counsellors:

*“Where do you get qualified counsellors from when all local authorities are all looking to increase capacity at the same time in the middle of a crisis, really, where such staff are very much in demand across the whole public?”<sup>282</sup>*

**214.** ASCL Cymru also expressed concerns about the challenges of recruiting counsellors, saying it’s a “very high skilled job” and that there were “significant issues in the system”. They said it was important that the right “scaffolding” was put in place to help support learners back into the school environment.<sup>283</sup> NAHT Cymru agreed with this.<sup>284</sup>

**215.** The Minister highlighted that funding for the whole school approach could help by addressing “concerns before they require specialist intervention”. He said funding in this space has been increased “very significantly” and would help support “both targeted and universal well-being interventions ...”<sup>285</sup> He also acknowledged the importance of school staff play in delivering this, and the importance of their own well-being.<sup>286</sup>

**216.** The Welsh Government acknowledged the important role that Education Welfare Services play, and said that they are “committed” to share best practice amongst the services across Wales to “achieve greater consistency in approach and identify best practice across Wales so that this practice is implemented more consistently.”<sup>287</sup> He said that there are no targets in relation to the family engagement funding, but that there was already evidence that these roles

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<sup>281</sup> [Written evidence, PA58, Estyn](#)

<sup>282</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 217-218](#)

<sup>283</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 52](#)

<sup>284</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 54](#)

<sup>285</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 7](#)

<sup>286</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

<sup>287</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)



“bear fruit” because they are “dedicated to this function”. He said they want to ensure more schools can access these roles.<sup>288</sup>

**217.** In correspondence he confirmed that the funding for family engagement officers is “ringfenced for the purpose of expanding the provision of Family Engagement Officers in schools serving disadvantaged communities and where attendance issues are particularly challenging.” However, local authorities do have “some discretion” in how the funding is “apportioned in order to respond to local need.” The Welsh Government have provided information on essential and desirable criteria to help target this support. He also said there are “clear monitoring and reporting requirements” for the funding; and that schools who receive the funding will be “required to co-operate with researchers to help us understand the impact of the funding and build an evidence base for future support.”<sup>289</sup>

**218.** We asked the Minister about the funding to expand counselling provision, and in particular if lack of access could impact on pupil absence. He said he wasn’t aware of any “direct link”. He acknowledged that these services were popular and effective, hence the additional funding and effective. He did make the point that these services however are not appropriate for everybody, calling it a “very specific intervention.”<sup>290</sup> He reminded us that local authorities have a “statutory responsibility” to provide counselling services. The additional funding of £2.3m is to “support improvements in and an expansion of counselling provision, including extending appropriate support to the children below the current Year 6 threshold.”<sup>291</sup>

## Our view

### Current education reforms

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**219.** We agree with the Minister that for pupils to get the benefits from the current education reforms they need to be in school. We have a Senedd long piece of work looking at the implementation of education reform in Wales. We will continue to consider the impact of these reforms on pupil attendance over the coming years.

### Definition of persistent absence

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**220.** Having considered the evidence we have received, we are content with the current definition of persistent absence. However, we note the need for consistent application of the

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<sup>288</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 113-114](#)

<sup>289</sup> [Letter from the Minister for Education and Welsh Language to Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 September 2022](#)

<sup>290</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 13](#)

<sup>291</sup> [Letter from the Minister for Education and Welsh Language to Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 September 2022](#)

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definition and trigger levels for intervention across Wales. As noted earlier in the report, we are concerned about inconsistencies in support across Wales. We must avoid postcode lotteries, where a child will receive support with a particular level of absence, but a child in a different local authority with the same level of absence receives no support. We would like to see a consistent set of trigger levels for intervention across Wales, and believe this should be done as part of the on-going review of policy and guidance on school attendance.

**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.

## **FPNs**

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**221.** We agree with the overwhelming evidence we have received in relation to the use of FPNs, which is that they should only ever be used as a last resort. It is important that the carrot is used before the stick, and that support is provided to families in the first instance. It also links to the importance of ensuring positive messaging about attendance at schools, if families see the value in school attendance, they will be in a better position to support their children in going to school.

## **Blended learning**

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**222.** We are clear that school is the best place for the vast majority of learners. School should not be seen as optional. But for some learners, a more flexible approach to learning will help them sustain engagement with, and attendance at school. We believe blended learning should be offered in exceptional cases. Examples of exceptional cases could include supporting pupils with a medical condition, or young carers. Schools should take a learner first approach, and provide blended learning if it will help support longer term attendance and engagement.

**223.** We know that delivering blended learning puts pressure on schools which are already significantly stretched. We acknowledge the points raised by the education unions that it is not a simple case of live streaming a lesson that is being delivered within a class room. It takes time and expertise to pull together blended learning options. This is why we believe blended learning should only be offered in exceptional cases, and that funding should be made available to schools to ensure they have sufficient resources to support delivery for these exceptional cases.

## **Staffing capacity and Welsh Government funding**

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**224.** There has clearly been additional funding put into the education system recently. However, this has been partly to support the system as major reforms are implemented and embedded, whilst also tackling with the impact of the pandemic. It was very clear that there are

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significant concerns about the ability of the system to successfully do this. We are also aware of the impact of capacity and resourcing issues for support services that can then impact on a school's ability to adequately support their pupils.

**225.** We note that it can be difficult to understand how such funding is being spent and the impact of such expenditure. More needs to be done to increase the transparency of Welsh Government funding, where it is spent and the outcomes for such funding. This will help aid scrutiny, as well as aiding decision making about future funding decisions.

**226.** We are particularly concerned about the pressures on schools and support services in providing the essential and necessary mental health and emotional well-being support to pupils. This is not just about having funding to deliver these services, but also about the recruitment pressures. These are highly skilled roles, and are in high demand across Wales.

**227.** The pandemic has exacerbated what was already a very concerning picture for the mental health and well-being of our children and young people. Services that were already under strain pre-pandemic, are simply unable to meet the overwhelming calls on their services.

**228.** It is essential that schools and the wider support services provided by local authorities, the NHS and third sector have the right number of properly qualified and trained people to help support pupils and their families to engage with school and continue to attend, with all the follow on benefits that come for many pupils of school.

## 9. How effective are current local authority and school practices and policies?

There are inconsistencies in support offered by local authorities and schools across Wales, which needs to be addressed.

Families play a vital role in helping improve attendance, and need appropriate support from schools and local authorities.

**229.** Professor Ann John reminded us that schools cannot solve all the problems but that:

*"... they can do things ... the issue that impacts mental health and attendance and exclusion that they can do something about is school climate. And by school climate, what I mean is about connectedness in schools; it's about positive relationships, both between peers and with staff. It's about belonging. And I think if we shift that focus from things like behaviour policies to values and those sorts of things like connectedness that are embodied in the whole-school approach, then we can make progress in this area. It's very difficult for schools and staff without adequate provision ..."*<sup>292</sup>

**230.** The Children's Commissioner called schools and local authorities to include children and young people when developing approaches to tackling absence. This is both when developing plans for individual learners, but also when developing school wide initiatives. She said that "children need collective opportunities to consider what would increase attendance and to help settings develop positive strategies across the whole school."<sup>293</sup>

**231.** The Children's Commissioner cited Rwydd Arall project as an effective project which,

*"reported effective results from a person-centred approach working intensively with young people at risk of deregistration. At the heart of this approach is the meaningful participation of the young person and this is an essential step that should be central to all initiatives, with children of any age."*<sup>294</sup>

<sup>292</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 271

<sup>293</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

<sup>294</sup> Written evidence, PA56, Children's Commissioner for Wales

**232.** We also heard directly from Rwydd Arall. This pilot scheme has been running since 2018, and supports working class young people at risk from secondary school de-registration. The scheme's aims are to maintain these young people within the responsibility of either Gwynedd or Anglesey education departments. They said that the issues they are addressing all pre-dated the pandemic, but that the pandemic has made some long-standing issues more difficult. Most of the young people fall within three specific groups: young people with autism; young people with mental health issues; and those with additional learning needs. They described how it can take months/years to support those they work with back into education, training or employment but this was done by ensuring the right assessments are in place, with the right support to enable the young people to build confidence and communication skills, create new support networks and develop resilience.<sup>295</sup>

**233.** NASUWT Cymru said that the most effective ways to improve attainment:

*"would be one-to-one or small group tutoring, frequent teacher feedback, high expectations, increased instructional time, high dosage tutoring and the use of data to guide instruction. All of these require more teacher input per pupil and more staff-to staff communication in relation to pupils and therefore more teachers."*<sup>296</sup>

**234.** Estyn highlighted that one consequence of the pandemic has been school leaders reporting that they "now have a much better understanding of the needs and circumstances of the families within their school communities, and they're engaging well with parents on very many different levels. They've also identified that stronger multi-agency working, such as with agencies in health, youth justice and social services, has helped them to provide a much more joined-up approach to supporting learners to improve their attendance."<sup>297</sup>

**235.** Parentkind stressed the importance of families being involved in the development of school policies. They said their surveys of parents show that consistently they want more of a say in their child's education. They highlighted their own Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools, which includes ensuring the parent voice is heard when schools make significant changes or policies are developed that may particularly impact on a specific group. They said they were concerned that schools approaches to parental consultation can be "inconsistent", and that it is vital as helps parents "support schools more effectively."<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> [Written evidence, PA19, Individual](#)

<sup>296</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>297</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 226](#)

<sup>298</sup> [Written evidence, PA61, Parentkind](#)

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**236.** The Welsh Government said that it was “vital” that every school had a “clear attendance policy and that they are asking all schools to publish them. These policies should “take a whole school approach” and should have a particular focus on how schools will support learners, particularly those most at risk of becoming persistently absent. They will also be revising their guidance and making it clear their expectations of what school based actions should be taken by schools and governing bodies on the level of support that should be given to learners and their families. As part of this, good practice will be shared and they will be exploring “collaborative ways of improving attendance and access to learning for vulnerable cohorts of pupils for example those with FSM.”<sup>299</sup>

## Support for families

**237.** We have already touched on the importance of having a child-centred focus in developing policies, and drawing up individualised support to help children and young people maintain attendance in school. Our evidence also emphasised the central role which the family plays in supporting children and young people in school.

**238.** Children in Wales reminded us that the “life chances” of children and young people are “influenced by their home and community”. They said that all schools should see parents and families as “assets and encourage involvement in their children’s education journey”.<sup>300</sup> Estyn also said it was important for schools to work “carefully” with the families, and also take account of how the school “may need to change the way they work and understand where the young person is coming from.”<sup>301</sup>

**239.** Parents Voice in Wales said that by embedding The Right Way of the Child developed by the Children’s Commissioner, and moving beyond “relational approaches” to “working collaboratively with families” will lead to more improved outcomes. They called for a move away from “punitive approaches in managing attendance.”<sup>302</sup> One respondent to our consultation said the school policies which punish children and young people for poor attendance are “counter productive”.<sup>303</sup>

**240.** We heard first hand from parents and families who had struggled to get the necessary help to support their child’s attendance in school. This included one parent whose daughter was

<sup>299</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

<sup>300</sup> [Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales](#)

<sup>301</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 191](#)

<sup>302</sup> [Written evidence, PA64, Parents Voices in Wales](#)

<sup>303</sup> [Written evidence, PA22, Individual](#)

classed as being persistently absent, but had a long term illness which included a number of surgical procedures and repeated emergency hospital admissions. This parent told us:

*"Calling her a 'persistent absentee' set the tone for the utterly inadequate response by her school and local authority ... assumed from the outset took the view that non-attendance was a choice ... No arrangements were made for her education in her absence, which as she was in year 10 was a major gap. We had to fight for home tuition which was initially refused ... wasn't at a suitable level and basically comprised 'art' i.e. colouring in. When she was well enough to return to school, we had a battle to arrange a gradual return to ease her re-engagement. We felt her school was inflexible ... Arrangements for catch up were woeful ...*

*The school and local authority took a punitive approach and we received no support as parents ...*

*We are articulate parents who were able to advocate for our daughter and use our knowledge of the system (and our income) to try to achieve a good outcome for her. I was shocked to experience the negative and punitive approach of her school and local authority, and the absence of adequate support for her learning and eventual return to school. I dread to think what the experience of less well resourced parents and learners is, whatever the cause of their absence."*<sup>304</sup>

**241.** Others told us that schools had not engaged when they had raised concerns or problems. Some told us that they did not know how to approach their local authority or that when they had contacted the local authority they had no response when issues had been escalated from the school. One participant described her contact with the local authority as "disastrous", telling us that she felt they dismissed everything she said, and were not well informed on mental health or neurodivergence. She said they were:

*"speaking over me and treating me like I was an absolute idiot ... they weren't hearing anything I was saying about the children."*<sup>305</sup>

**242.** We also heard of families who had more positive experiences of support from schools and local authorities. During our engagement sessions with parents, we heard one talk about their daughter's school putting in place a reduced timetable; referrals to wellbeing programmes and

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<sup>304</sup> Written evidence, PA47, Individual

<sup>305</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, Pupil absence – engagement findings, June 2022

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other suggestions including working with her daughter's primary school in case she felt more comfortable attending a smaller, more familiar setting.<sup>306</sup>

**243.** We heard that there were issues with getting timely referrals in particular for assessments. Delays in assessments then contribute to prolonged absences from schools. We heard that the impact of waiting lists for CAHMS support further contributes to lengthy pupil absence. Children, young people and their families become frustrated with the delays to assessment and subsequent support. This is a particular issue for children with additional learning needs.<sup>307</sup> We have covered this issue in more detail in Chapter 4.

**244.** There were also concerns raised about the quality of communication between schools / local authorities and families. Youth Offending Team Managers from Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council said that communication needs to be "a two-way process", highlighting that some families may experience barriers to communicating which could be due to their own experiences of school, low literacy levels, or cultural differences.<sup>308</sup>

**245.** The National Autistic Society also stressed the importance of positive relationships between families and schools to help reduce the likelihood of absence. They said "open, positive lines of communication" are vital, yet too often they hear from parents being excluded from the process.<sup>309</sup> Parentkind also stressed the importance of two-way communication.<sup>310</sup>

**246.** We heard that there is a lot of variety in the support that schools provide across Wales. Parents Voices in Wales said they have "received considerable variations in feedback" on the support and guidance offered. They said that this can even vary within a single school, and that this can be a result of:

*"depending on their relationship with the school, different approach of staff and level of understanding on mental health and neurodivergent conditions. Where schools have an ALNCO with extensive knowledge and a compassionate senior leadership team, outcomes are improved for the family and learner. Where families have reported relationships breaking down due to discrepancies in opinion/inflexibility of approach or understanding of learner needs (being policy centred approaches or lack of interpersonal skills of parent and staff) the learner ultimately faces the consequences of non*

<sup>306</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, Pupil absence – engagement findings, June 2022

<sup>307</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, Pupil absence – engagement findings, June 2022

<sup>308</sup> Written evidence, PA43, YOT Managers, Head of Service, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

<sup>309</sup> Written evidence, PA50, National Autistic Society Cymru

<sup>310</sup> Written evidence, PA61, Parentkind

*inclusive, non child centred process. Some families reported that despite their contacting the schools there was little or no response, whilst other families received tremendous support. It was apparent that some schools were unable to signpost families appropriately for support (defaulting to primary care only) and were unaware of the benefits of third sector provision.*"<sup>311</sup>

**247.** One respondent said schools that were most effective had a child focused approach, and were less focused on attendance figures. They called for schools to "released from attendance pressure" in order to focus on a child focused approach.<sup>312</sup> Another called for schools to be "nurturing".<sup>313</sup> Barnardo's Cymru also said that there was a lack of a "trauma informed or child centred approach."<sup>314</sup>

**248.** Some stakeholders reminded us that for some families engagement with education can be challenging. Rhwyd Arall said that against the backdrop of the challenges outlined in Chapter 4, these can be further complicated by families of successive generations who have been failed by the education system and therefore find it difficult to support their children to attend.<sup>315</sup> A senior leader in a primary school also said that there can become a generational cycle, where children who do not attend school regularly then become adults "who do not value education" and the cycle continues.<sup>316</sup> Another school teacher who responded said that it was important to develop a culture that values education "so that parents understand the need and value of it."<sup>317</sup>

**249.** Rhwyd Arall described the challenges of middle class organisations engaging effectively with working class families. They said that it is not always an equal relationship, with teachers and officials not seen as 'people like us'. They called for better ways to be found to bridge this gap.<sup>318</sup>

**250.** Barnardo's Cymru said that families have told them that working with a third sector provider as a key link between the family, school and other services "is a meaningful intervention." They said such a key worker "can break down barriers to communication between parents/carers and schools and ensure that there are no siloes."<sup>319</sup> An ACEs Recovery Practitioner also said that the project they were working had very positive responses from those

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<sup>311</sup> [Written evidence, PA64, Parents Voices in Wales](#)

<sup>312</sup> [Written evidence, PA25, Individual](#)

<sup>313</sup> [Written evidence, PA22, Individual](#)

<sup>314</sup> [Written evidence, PA33, Barnardo's Cymru](#)

<sup>315</sup> [Written evidence, PA19, Individual](#)

<sup>316</sup> [Written evidence, PA7, Senior Leader, Primary School](#)

<sup>317</sup> [Written evidence, PA41, School Teacher](#)

<sup>318</sup> [Written evidence, PA19, Individual](#)

<sup>319</sup> [Written evidence, PA33, Barnardo's Cymru](#)

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families they have supported, and that the “Government need to further value work of charities, such as ourselves, so we can maintain reaching such children and young people.”<sup>320</sup>

**251.** ASCL Cymru emphasised the importance of partnership working “between schools, between parents, between the social services, local authorities and Government. There isn’t, as I say, one fix with one body that can actually accommodate all of the complexity around re-establishing those routines and patterns. It’s going to take a real, concerted, combined partnership effort to make sure that we’re getting these kids back into school again.”<sup>321</sup>

**252.** As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, and the section looking at funding and capacity, there has been an increase in funding for education welfare services. The Welsh Government acknowledging that they play an important role in supporting pupil attendance (see paragraph 216.)

**253.** The Welsh Government said that parents / carers have an important role to play:

*“Parents are a child’s first teacher, and they will continue to be involved in their learning throughout the journey to adulthood. It is essential, therefore, that we engage all parents/carers and particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, in their children’s learning so they can better understand what their children are being asked to do and are provided with the skills to support them. We will therefore be increasing communications to parents and carers addressing any concerns they still have and emphasizing the importance of going to school.”<sup>322</sup>*

**254.** When we raised issues about a lack of consistency across Wales with the Minister, he said that “difference isn’t always a bad thing” because it allows for a response tailored to local circumstances. However, he accepted the need for consistency of approach in policy. He cited the family engagement funding which enables local authorities to make “judgements about which schools are most in need of it.” In conjunction with this is the importance of ensuring consistent guidance across Wales. He cited the current reviews of the attendance framework, exclusions guidance that “will set expectations that are consistent”. He acknowledged that there is currently variance, but that this will be an opportunity to ensure there is a clear set of expectations and guidance and support underpinning it. He also believed a critical part of the

<sup>320</sup> [Written evidence, PA49, ACEs Recovery Practitioner](#)

<sup>321</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 13](#)

<sup>322</sup> [Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government](#)

jigsaw will be “universalising best practice”, and that there is currently a significant opportunity to do this. He said:

*“The role we can have as a Government is to say, ‘We have seen evidence of where this works well and this is how you can do that,’ and to provide those resources both as professional learning resources and other resources, so schools can draw on that. We’ve got a professional learning entitlement for all teachers and teaching assistants that is being launched for the next academic term, and I think there’ll be an opportunity in that to provide additional support for the profession in relation to some of these questions as well.”<sup>323</sup>*

## **Role of community focused schools**

**255.** In a 2020 thematic report, Estyn explains that the concept of community schools “has been part of Welsh education policy since the early years of devolution.” It states that community schools “are rooted in a wide community context and are “integral to community capacity building – providing a base for delivering, not just education and training but also a range of other services like family support, health and enterprise promotion”.<sup>324</sup>

**256.** The Welsh Government has adopted the concept and term ‘community focused school’ for many years, dating back to guidance it issued in 2003. Sections 27 and 28 of the Education Act 2002 give governing bodies powers to provide services to help meet the needs of their pupils, their families and the wider community. The Minister for Education and Welsh Language reiterated in March 2022 that the Welsh Government wants to see schools operate as community-focused schools, reaching out to parents and carers and engaging with the whole community, announcing funding for community-focused schools managers and family liaison officers.<sup>325</sup>

**257.** We heard that community focused schools could prove to be an useful tool in reducing levels of pupil absence and supporting wider engagement with families and the broader community. Children in Wales said there was “now growing recognition of the benefits of engaging with parents and the wider community, through using asset based approaches.” They welcomed the investment into community focused schools. They called for “short-termism” to be “avoided” and that the “approaches which deliver positive outcomes are sustained, and

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<sup>323</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 108

<sup>324</sup> Estyn, ‘Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life’, July 2020

<sup>325</sup> Plenary, 22 March 2022, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 148-159

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learning is shared across the school community.”<sup>326</sup> The Children’s Commissioner called for the voices and wishes of children and young people, alongside the views of families and wider community stakeholders to be at the heart of developing this model of school.<sup>327</sup>

**258.** The Children’s Commissioner for Wales said that “the strong research base” for community schools “suggests this has the potential to make a real difference”, in particular in disadvantaged communities. In line with Children in Wales comments she said:

*“This approach is not a quick fix, and will require steadfast commitment nationally and across the profession, and an asset-based approach to the meaningful participation of the community, including of children and young people. Developing a community school approach takes considerable time, and to succeed it needs to be led by schools and communities themselves.”*<sup>328</sup>

Although she also acknowledged that it seems to be more effective in primary schools than secondary. She said that distance may play a role in the level of effectiveness of a community based model.<sup>329</sup>

**259.** NASUWT Cymru said that “if well managed”, community schools “may provide scope” to deliver the necessary multi-disciplinary support for children and young people. However, they warn this approach will “require significant additional resourcing” and that “such a significant change in the way school premises are used will need to be strategically managed via a return to Local Authority control of schools.”<sup>330</sup> They also stressed the importance of developing a shared understanding of what community schools mean, saying that if left to individual schools, it may lead to significant variance between schools with children being the “losers”.<sup>331</sup> The Children’s Commissioner also acknowledge that this policy will need “intensive work and long-term planning to really achieve that vision ...”.<sup>332</sup>

**260.** NEU said that in principle community focused schools are “really great” but urged some caution, especially in terms of what the building may also be used for. As an example they cited the possibility of having a foodbank within a school which they said was “not necessarily a good

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<sup>326</sup> [Written evidence, PA53, Children in Wales](#)

<sup>327</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 162](#)

<sup>328</sup> [Written evidence, PA56, Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)

<sup>329</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 160-161](#)

<sup>330</sup> [Written evidence, PA59, NASUWT Cymru](#)

<sup>331</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 149](#)

<sup>332</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraphs 161](#)

thing” as this could “add a sense of shame and discourage young people from going to school”. They also stressed that further consideration would need to be given to workforce issues.<sup>333</sup>

**261.** Estyn said that one of the biggest barriers is that the vision “has not been realised in a comprehensive or sustained way.” This has led to the concept being “interpreted in a variety of ways.”<sup>334</sup>

**262.** The Welsh Government said they want all schools in Wales to be community focused schools, and that they are providing £660k for a pilot of Community Focused School manager positions.<sup>335</sup> This trial will look at what extra capacity will be helpful.<sup>336</sup>

**263.** The Minister also told us about the capital funding that is available for schools to make their facilities “more accessible to the community”. There is £20m of funding available. He said there’s a range of ways schools could be doing to work towards being community focused. A framework is being developed to help schools become community focused, however, he acknowledged that it will need “a collective effort across the system” but that it would be worth it:

*“I absolutely think it’s worth it, because just as we were talking earlier about the relationship between the school and those who make the choice to educate at home, I think there’s a way in which we can make that relationship stronger to encourage parents to look at schools in a different way. Some of that is about facilities, some of it is about services, some of it is about an approach to family engagement, and there’s a lot of good practice happening in different parts of Wales. Some of it is a capital challenge, some of it is operational, and we want to make sure that all schools are on that journey in Wales.”<sup>337</sup>*

## Our view

**264.** As we have noted throughout the report, we think there is an opportunity for greater sharing of good practice in terms of what works at a local level and disseminating this across Wales. We think this is particularly relevant when looking at support for families, especially as some of the most effective projects are very locally focused.

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<sup>333</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 147

<sup>334</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 23 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 232

<sup>335</sup> Written evidence, PA65, Welsh Government

<sup>336</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 111

<sup>337</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 June 2022, Record of Proceedings paragraph 111

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**265.** In relation to community focused schools, we note that there can be additional challenges in embedding this policy in Welsh medium schools and schools with religious characteristics (“faith schools”). This is because of the often additional geographical distances between these schools and their pupils. This is something that needs to be considered in more detail as the community focused school policies are developed.

## Annex A: List of oral evidence sessions.

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the committee on the dates noted below. Transcripts of all oral evidence sessions can be viewed on the [\*\*Committee's website\*\*](#).

Date	Name and Organisation
16 June 2022	<p><b>Education Welfare officers from across Wales and representatives from the Principal Youth Officers group</b></p> <p><b>Laura Doel, Director,</b> National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) Cymru</p> <p><b>Eithne Hughes, Director,</b> Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Cymru</p> <p><b>Rocio Cifuentes, Children's Commissioner for Wales</b></p> <p><b>Jane Houston, Policy Adviser,</b> Children's Commissioner for Wales</p>
23 June 2022	<p><b>Mary van den Heuvel, Senior Policy Officer,</b> National Education Union (NEU)</p> <p><b>Hannah O'Neill, District Secretary,</b> District Secretary for Blaenau Gwent, and National Education Union (NEU) Executive member for Wales</p> <p><b>Llinos Jones, Headteacher of Ysgol Bro Myrddin,</b> Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)</p> <p><b>Menai Jones, Policy and Casework Official,</b> NASUWT</p> <p><b>Catherine Evans, Assistant Director,</b> Estyn</p> <p><b>Liz Miles, Assistant Director,</b> Estyn</p> <p><b>Mark Champion, Her Majesty's Inspector,</b> Estyn</p> <p><b>Professor Ann John, Professor,</b> Health Data Science, Swansea University</p>

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Date	Name and Organisation
29 June 2022	<b>Jeremy Miles MS, Minister for Education and Welsh Language</b> Welsh Government
	<b>Sian Jones, Head of Supporting Achievement &amp; Safeguarding,</b> Welsh Government

## Annex B: List of written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee. All Consultation responses and additional written information can be viewed on the

**Committee's website.**

Reference	Organisation
PA 01	Invalid
PA 02	Invalid
PA 03	Invalid
PA 04	Individual
PA 05	Headteacher, Secondary School
PA 06	Pembrokeshire County Council
PA 07	Senior Leader, Primary School
PA 08	Conwy Education Services
PA 09	Invalid
PA 10	Head of School
PA 11	Head of Primary School
PA 12	Individual
PA 13	Individual
PA 14	Invalid
PA 15	Individual
PA 16	Individual
PA 17	Individual
PA 18	Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Cymru
PA 19	Individual



Reference	Organisation
<b>PA 20</b>	Individual
<b>PA 21</b>	Individual
<b>PA 22</b>	Individual
<b>PA 23</b>	Individual
<b>PA 24</b>	Primary School
<b>PA 25</b>	Individual
<b>PA 26</b>	Individual
<b>PA 27</b>	Individual
<b>PA 28</b>	Individual
<b>PA 29</b>	Individual
<b>PA 30</b>	Individual
<b>PA 31</b>	Individual
<b>PA 32</b>	Individual
<b>PA 33</b>	Barnardo's Cymru
<b>PA 34</b>	Individual
<b>PA 35</b>	Individual
<b>PA 36</b>	Individual
<b>PA 37</b>	Individual
<b>PA 38</b>	Individual
<b>PA 39</b>	Cardiff University
<b>PA 40</b>	Royal College of General Practitioners Wales
<b>PA 41</b>	School Teacher
<b>PA 42</b>	Individual
<b>PA 43</b>	YOT Managers, Head of Service, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
<b>PA 44</b>	Socialist Educational Association Cymru

Reference	Organisation
<b>PA 45</b>	Newport City Council
<b>PA 46</b>	The Bevan Foundation
<b>PA 47</b>	Individual
<b>PA 48</b>	Faith in Families
<b>PA 49</b>	ACEs Recovery Practitioner
<b>PA 50</b>	National Autistic Society Cymru
<b>PA 51</b>	Individual
<b>PA 52</b>	Paediatrician, University Hospital of Wales
<b>PA 53</b>	Children in Wales
<b>PA 54</b>	Qualifications Wales
<b>PA 55</b>	Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales
<b>PA 56</b>	Children's Commissioner for Wales
<b>PA 57</b>	NSPCC Cymru
<b>PA 58</b>	Estyn
<b>PA 59</b>	NASUWT
<b>PA 60</b>	National Education Union (NEU)
<b>PA 61</b>	Parentkind
<b>PA 62</b>	Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
<b>PA 63</b>	Vale of Glamorgan
<b>PA 64</b>	Parents Voices in Wales
<b>PA 65</b>	Welsh Government
<b>PA 66</b>	Carmarthenshire County Council

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## Additional Information

Title	Date received
Children's Commissioner for Wales	27 June 2022
National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) Cymru	6 July 2022
Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Cymru	4 July 2022
Estyn	11 July 2022