

Senedd Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Ymateb gan Cyngor Bro Morgannwg

Welsh Parliament

Children, Young People and Education  
Committee

Pupil absence

Evidence from The Vale of Glamorgan Council

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## 1 - Reasons for and levels of persistent absenteeism

Q1: School-based reasons:

- The relevance of curriculum and assessment has been further questioned by many learners and cohorts post covid. School based assessment in the covid closure years has now reverted to the pressures of exams with learners who have had less exposure to exam pressure and also awareness that this is no longer the “only way” to assess at end of KS4. There is both a push and pull here in terms of learners 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. There has been a flourishing of online providers that cater for EHE learners for instance that promote online module-based learning in core interest topics of study.
- Schools sometimes still see the mixed offer 14-19 alternative provisions as being a “reward” for promoting attendance rather than as an entitlement to learners who are at risk of disengaging and who would be motivated by a more varied offer. Earlier intervention in terms of learner disengagement and more localised varied offers with less dependency upon transport and travel (cost and time and accessibility implications) would be beneficial as would wider access to alternative pathways on site in secondary schools.
- Changing approaches to ALN mean that social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs are often not seen as an ALN until far down the line when mainstream is considered unable to support need. Earlier support and acknowledgment of anxiety and phobia and low mood etc. including where this is linked to other needs and presentations such as those linked to gender identity and undiagnosed neural divergence would make the school experience more inclusive and able to meet bespoke learner needs earlier on. This would potentially prevent disengagement and escalation of need.

Learners often report they have not had access to emotionally available adults or Trauma Informed Schools/ pupil centred approaches even when these have been flagged up as being associated with attendance, since school timetabling and staffing simply does not permit this level of bespoke approach for such a wide cohort.

- Other factors are the changing approaches to society as a whole and the social media age of preoccupation with appearance and fitting in culturally and visually. This digital age leads to an increase of pressure upon potentially vulnerable learners to dress or appear a certain way regardless of cost and also leads to escalation and cascade of negative behaviours that can become online bullying and pressure. As was noted in the first lock down by research, many learners felt happier not socialising in school for this reason. For many learners, this intense pressure to conform and to be “resilient” to derogatory and negative comment about them is an unmanageable pressure and not one that adults in a workplace would be expected to thrive in or sustain. Again, deregistration into EHE often gives an indication of some of these issues and how difficult it is to resolve them at school or LA level even when school is made aware of them and have the will to do so.
- Social changes mean that presenteeism at school and at work has altered in the past 3 years. Many adults no longer work in the office and perceptions around this have altered and this has had a range of impacts on school attendance. Attendance is no longer synonymous with attainment or outcomes. Home schooling / remote and blended learning or hybrid learning was more successful for some learners and more wellbeing perceived by them and their families. Again, the covid experience has altered many adult and learner perceptions of wellbeing and “success”.
- Parents also have felt justified in making their own decisions about the value of family and home life experiences after the last two years of reduced family contact and travel and so this combined with rising cost pressures on travel etc means parents are willing to take days off school now if they feel it, is a worthwhile activity. Even a fine of £60 or even more, is often no disincentive if a single week’s holiday can be up to a thousand pounds cheaper during term time.
- Cost of living pressures mean fuel costs for travel have increased and will continue to rise, so schools that are out of catchment are also an issue in places where school places are oversubscribed. We have learners who are

living in dual home situations and where now the cost of travel to the school on the second parent becomes more of an issue. In some places previously set up transport solutions have now broken down due to fuel costs in both commercial and private situations. The LA does not have discretionary transport in such situations and so in these cases getting a child to school does often cost money. We have had cases of even a Year 11 learner not attending for exams due to the ceasing of an organised bus provision and not being able to fund private bus costs until we intervened and sought help.

- Attendance has also been impacted by the fact that pre covid, parents were encouraged to send learners in even if unwell in some regards, whereas covid health and safety risk assessments all relied upon any unwell learners not being in school. The social acceptance of a child sneezing or coughing in class also changed radically.
- The WG policy effectively barring the use of fixed penalty notices (FPN) and on making prosecutions for non-attendance only in extreme cases and not at all where covid was a factor had a major impact on effectively de penalising non-attendance even when schools returned. This has an impact on a wide range of learners; those who had prior poor attendance but also those who felt it acceptable to have a more relaxed approach to attendance overall and supported by all the above reasons. Current WG guidance is unhelpful and unclear as it creates a confusion as to the way FPN should be used and adds a layer of input that is unnecessary when all LAs must adhere to the law and public interest criteria before issue of legal measures in any event. The WG statement issued on 3rd May 2022 refers both to LAs using FPN 'in only the most extreme cases' whereas the 2013 guidance states 'penalty notices will be most effective when issued for less entrenched attendance issues'.
- For older learners who have parents who work, the power of a parent to compel attendance is often very limited and negative patterns of attendance and engagement which were set up/established over the 2 years of Covid will be hard to break.
- Where there are parental mental health needs or substance misuse issues these make the resilience of parents lower and less able to effect change after this period of dysregulation.
- There is a back log of undiagnosed ALN needs, linked to covid NHS capacity issues etc which makes it challenging to identify appropriate support.

Schools and LA support in both education and social care, usually relies on an ALN or NHS diagnosis which currently may be many months or even years down the line. Social care thresholds are high and only the most significant concerns will result in an allocated social worker offering support. Many school-based services have previously relied upon attendance at school for access to the support and changing contracts and job roles etc to become outreach based is not a quick fix. There also needs suitably trained, experienced and qualified people to deliver effectively and safely (and who are willing to take on short term contracts).

## **2 - Whether and if so, why, non-covid related absenteeism is higher than prior to the COVID 19 pandemic**

Yes for all the reasons above – changes to narrative, entrenched behaviours, reduced social skills. Lowered social resilience and confidence in anxious learners, more acceptance of absence, ongoing WG impediments to “business as usual” in relation to penalties, changes to adult working patterns, changes to immunity and thresholds for keeping learners off and worsening economic factors.

It is important to distinguish between authorised and unauthorised absences and to note that the impact may be the same in terms of entrenching these habits. However, the response is very different in terms of what can and should be done.

## **3 - Whether and if so, reasons why persistent absenteeism is more prevalent among groups of pupils (those with Additional Learning Needs, eligible for free school meals, boys and girls, specific age groups, ethnicity)**

Where there is an undiagnosed ALN need that has mental health aspects (ADHD and ASD have anxiety and Mental health associations) such learners have found the return to school much harder. Many may not have a diagnosis entitling them to support in either social care or health or education for some time. Any learner whose mental health has deteriorated over lock downs is now more likely to have long wait time for NHS mental health support and also there are longer waiting times for lower tier support including school counselling etc.

Learners whose parents are more affluent may have left the system entirely either to independent education or EHE with or without top up by tutors. EFSM learners are less likely to become EHE but thus have a concentrated impact of non-attendance or low attendance. There is a risk that FSM learners 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. We have seen increases in the number of low attenders amongst girls and this may be linked to gender and cultural expectations around flight, fright and freeze responses to trauma. For example, boys often being more likely to attend but to respond to anxiety or trauma with negative behaviour responses whilst girls may be more likely to not attend and to show more obvious signs of anxiety or distress.

#### **4 · The short term and longer-term risks and consequences for learners for example in terms of mental health and well-being.**

The rise in Mental health need and referrals is already evident. Recovery from this will take many years and will call for extra support not just a return to pre covid. We have increased our mental health (MH) provision and continue to do so in all tiers of our graduated response. We also seek to enhance and extend the expertise of officer and schools in dealing with MH need. Much of the MH need may also be linked to as yet undiagnosed ALN neural pathway needs and gender identity needs.

The long term change of narrative from a one size fits all approach to mainstream education based on presenteeism being the best (and only) option for learning and assessment of learning only by exam. Remote learning, flexible learning, more bespoke learning and remote and hybrid learning will need to become more prevalent in some way to prevent further entry into EHE and/ or into later escalation of contested ALN cases at tribunal.

#### **5 · The impact on pupils' learning and attainment**

As above the prior assumptions about attainment and presenteeism need to be better defined and refined post covid. 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 as well as measurable

indicators of “success,” are required. 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. This needs to be considered in terms of preventing circumstances deteriorating whilst being mindful of the parental right to elect to electively home educate (EHE) at any point.

There could be lower grades and more students who are at risk of becoming NEET in current KS4 cohorts. There may also be greater demand for alternative provisions in KS4 and for more college places and exam retake places.

Within the cohort there needs to be that awareness of those who have left the system to become EHE or privately educated. There should be consideration as to why these decisions were made and why schools that retain learners on roll may not always have such good attendance data. This is within the context that they may have supported better outcomes by having a flexible and child focused approach to maintaining the learner on roll, supported within a bespoke plan and pathway.

#### **6 · Whether absenteeism has resulted in a higher level of pupil de-registration and any cross-over with elective home education**

EHE continues to rise in all LAs. The Vale of Glamorgan Council 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. This means we have relatively fewer EHE deregistrations compared to other LAs but this has also meant the attendance rates were lower. In terms of this being learner focused and also less disruptive to school functions, school placing and transport obligations etc. this has been a justified approach. The challenges necessitated our officers to work to support re-engagement and attendance using pastoral support plans with learners’ parents and schools. We also established a new attainment wellbeing and engagement (AEW) team to enable learners to have a bridge of provision in the home or in a newly established hub before being able to return to school environments. This made it possible to give learners with valid and evidenced covid concerns such as immune impaired family members when formal shielding ceased, to access some education without being forced to EHE or return to school.

We do not encourage “flexi” schooling so any learner on roll and with a less than full time provision should only have this on a short term basis documented by a Pastoral Support Plan (PSE). We have as per above worked hard to ensure that covid related EHE decisions were kept to a minimum and where the parent wanted more time to adjust or had valid medical concerns we were able to work with schools under the PSP with the new attainment AWE team to ensure learners have access to learning. This supported learners to maintain their school places which enabled a subsequent full return to school.

#### **7 · Effectiveness of existing Welsh Government policies and guidance**

As above WG guidance on penalty measures since schools reopened has been unhelpful since it effectively de-penalised non-attendance whilst at the same time asserting attendance was compulsory. The guidance continues to be unhelpful with regards the use of fixed penalty notices and penal measures by adding in an extra criterion of “extreme” without giving any indication of what this is.

#### **8 · Level and effectiveness of action and support from schools, local government and the Welsh Government**

Under lock downs VoG officers used a vulnerability matrix and worked with schools to offer sighting and wellbeing support.

The education welfare service was restructured to become a year round inclusion team. There has been an emphasis on enhanced training and skills development in mental health and multiagency working. Our referral forms were revised to scaffold the support expected by schools to ensure they looked at learner voice, learner communication and wellbeing by use of selfie and TIS motional wellbeing profiles and considered the use of PSPs and alternative mixed curriculum offers.

We are using the WG funding for secondary learners 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. They will

have the ability to work in and out of school with learners and their parents/ carers.

The inclusion team have offered strategic support to schools in terms of inclusion liaison meetings, use of audits on attendance, use of inclusion monthly clinics in schools and better quality assurance of alternative providers.

### **9 · How effectively parents are engaged and supported**

Parents and learners are a key part of the PSP process and are expected to participate in the meetings and all reviews.

AWE officers have supplemented the Inclusion officers and school teams. We have rolled out training to schools and other teams including colleagues in early help and the Youth Offending Service so they all also understand the remit of the Inclusion team and how the PSP process works. We have enhanced EHE processes in place which are designed to flag up at an early stage if the choice to EHE is one that links to covid, mental health or any aspect that can be supported and mediated to enable the learner to stay on roll. Parents can self-refer to the team direct or via the family's first advice line.

The Inclusion team referral form asks for evidence of parent and learner voice explicitly.