

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar [Bil Addysg Awyr Agored Breswyl \(Cymru\)](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) on the [Residential Outdoor Education \(Wales\) Bill](#)

ROE 09

Ymateb gan: Parentkind

Response from: Parentkind

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11<sup>th</sup> January 2024

## Introduction to Parentkind

Parentkind is one of the largest federated charities in the UK. Our network of almost 13,000 Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) and more than 100,000 parent volunteers means we are a strong voice for parents in education.

## Supporting evidence

In December 2023 Parentkind published the National Parent Survey 2023 and National Parent Survey for Wales 2023. The National Parent Survey 2023<sup>1</sup> has a sample size of 5, 126 parents including 768 from Wales. The National Parent Survey for Wales was published alongside the UK research<sup>2</sup> to give parents, policymakers and education stakeholders in Wales a nation-specific overview.

In providing this submission to the Committee we also draw on survey results from polling conducted in January 2022, the *'Wales reform of the school day and year March 2022 survey'*, where Parentkind spoke to 6,843 parents in Wales<sup>3</sup>. This research was conducted in collaboration with Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalparentsurvey.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nationalparentsurvey.com/wales-report/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/parent-research/research-library/school-education-policies/wales-reform-of-the-school-day-and-year>

## How the Bill could relate to parents and the importance of parent voice

The Explanatory Memorandum to the Bill published on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2023 rightly mentions parents/carers on twenty-five occasions. This acknowledges the importance of parents in any changes to education policy and recognises that providing residential outdoor education will have to require an understanding of how the move affects parents.

References to the role of parents largely focus on the financial burden that school trips already place upon them, but there is also a recognition of the mental health benefits for their child receiving residential outdoor learning, or parental anxieties about the suitability of it.

The first mention of parents rightly raises awareness of the impact of childhood poverty, quoting Welsh Government guidance where *"one or both parents/carers are in low paid employment and often fall just outside the threshold for their children to be eligible for additional financial support to help with the cost of school, such as free school meals entitlement and so fall between the cracks of the very systems that should be in place to support them."* Our written evidence set out below draws from research on this area to demonstrate the different educational experiences of children living in low-income households.

The same guidance, as the Explanatory Memorandum says, *"goes on to suggest that schools should consider whether the cost of visits is realistic for parents"*.

The National Parent Survey uncovers considerable parental anxiety over school costs, with school trips seen as one of the biggest financial burdens in this area. Paragraph 31 makes clear that the status quo *"means that many schools can only enable a visit to go ahead if they receive enough voluntary parental contributions to pay for it or if they fund it from their own resources."* Reliance on parental contributions creates a barrier to participation for families on low incomes (a point made again in paragraph 110), and perhaps others, such as larger families with more children to pay for. This consideration is raised in paragraph 39 (*"this may be impossible to*

*access for parents, with costs making them prohibitive, and the situation is worse for larger families.”)*

Paragraph 32 highlights the issue of parents of children in receipt of free school meals (FSM), and paragraph 36 says, *“The ability of parents to contribute to their children’s residential is concerning.”* Paragraph 32 picks out that, *“not all those entitled to FSM take them up due to stigma or embarrassment and, crucially, many low-income families do not meet the threshold of FSM entitlement.”* This is a worthwhile point to make as FSM-eligibility is not the only indicator of poverty and therefore not wholly reliable when taken in isolation from other factors. The Welsh Government's provision of Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) is intended to reduce stigma or the risk of not meeting eligibility requirements for the meals for primary school pupils who would otherwise benefit from them. If the provision of Residential Outdoor Education is seen to benefit mostly secondary school pupils, then it is essential that it is *“free of charge”*, as the Bill proposes several times, to ensure that cost is not a barrier to the participation of FSM-eligible pupils or others in low-income or larger households.

The issue of child or parental anxiety about residential trips is the secondary consideration that is nonetheless important. Paragraph 170 of the Explanatory memorandum encapsulates both the barrier and the best solution to overcome it. *“It will be important for pupils and parents to receive information about residential outdoor education so they both know what to expect, which, along with the removal of financial worries related to paying for the visit, will hopefully alleviate any anxieties.”*

The Parentkind Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools<sup>4</sup> provides a framework of best-practice parental participation that school leaders can map onto existing parental engagement strategies. Clear two-way communication between school and home is one of five key drivers for successful implementation.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/for-schools/blueprint-for-parent-friendly-schools>

Paragraph 48 promises that, *"The Bill will contribute to easing the pressure on schools and parents, reducing anxiety for parents, children and teachers. By making a course of residential outdoor education an entitlement within the curriculum, every child will have the opportunity to access the benefits, no matter what their circumstances."* From a parental perspective, this issue of universal accessibility and eligibility is an important point which is reflected in Parentkind research contained in this submission.

It is important that parents are considered and consulted when new legislation is created and Parentkind would recommend further direct consultation with parents ahead of any major policy change. We welcome the invitation to submit written and oral evidence to the Committee.

### **The impact of the Bill upon parents**

The wording of the Bill lays out that the guidance *"must provide that residential outdoor education is not compulsory for pupils to attend."*

We set out below (in a section on mental health) that this may mean pupils who have barriers to attendance related to mental health could be at potential risk of missing out on new provision, these children will often have the most to gain from outdoor education. It is important to ensure that schools communicate effectively with parents to overcome potential barriers.

The Bill also states that the guidance, *"must make provision in respect of the costs that it would be reasonable to incur in connection with residential outdoor education."* The National Parent Survey for Wales found half of parents were concerned about the cost of school trips. The Explanatory Memorandum explains that the aim of the Bill is for, *"Welsh Government to provide funding to finance the provision (section 2): The Welsh Ministers will have a duty to provide local authorities with sufficient funding to enable the provision of a course of residential outdoor education under the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, as amended by the Bill."* In developing the Bill, consideration will need to be given to ensure that the provision is funded by local authorities rather than additional cost pressures falling onto parents.

## The Explanatory Memorandum and pupil access to residential outdoor education

The Explanatory Memorandum cites Welsh government guidance 'The Price of Pupil Poverty'. It mentions families where both parents are in low-paid employment but who nevertheless fall outside the threshold for their child to be eligible for additional financial support to help with the cost of school.

The need to identify those parents who would benefit most from additional support is also raised by the Explanatory Memorandum. Although eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) is one indicator of poverty, it is true to say that *"not all those entitled to FSM take them up due to stigma or embarrassment and, crucially, many low-income families do not meet the threshold of FSM entitlement"* (paragraph 32).

The Explanatory Memorandum states that Option 1 would *"continue with Welsh Government's future plans says that, 'schools and parents would continue to cover the majority of costs to enable pupils to attend residential outdoor activities, which would result in individuals, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, continuing to miss out on participating in residential outdoor activity experiences with their peers'"* (paragraph 228). If Welsh Government opts for Option 1 rather than 2 (which would introduce the Bill and make residential outdoor education *"free of charge"*), then this issue remains acute, especially when voluntary parental contributions would be needed to secure children's access. Currently, the number of families living in relative income poverty is increasing (paragraph 36).

Option 2 contributes to *"easing the pressure on schools and parents, reducing anxiety for parents, children and teachers. By making a course of residential outdoor education an entitlement within the curriculum, every child will have the opportunity to access the benefits, no matter what their circumstances."*

## **Residential outdoor education and the impact on pupil mental health**

The emphasis that the Explanatory Memorandum places on improving children's mental health is likely to be welcomed by parents (paragraph 94). The National Parent Survey shows that anxiety and depression have become major concerns for parents in Wales and the rest of the UK.

A whole system approach that includes developing mental health support services encompassing *"parents, carers and their wider families across Wales"* (paragraph 94) would be supported by our research. Parents tell us they are often unhappy with the support received for their child's anxiety and depression when they report it.

Paragraph 166 mentions *"parental and child anxiety/uncertainty"* as a common barrier to access. These anxieties can be reduced by managing expectations and providing as much information as possible so that families know what to expect. Clear, accessible and concise communications, written with parents in mind, will help to minimise such barriers. See the section on mental health below that details Parentkind's research findings.

## **Parentkind research on the cost of school day**

Parentkind's National Parent Survey has evidence to support the necessity of the Bill's ambition, as the Explanatory Memorandum says, *"to ensure a course of residential outdoor education is provided to registered pupils at maintained schools once, free of charge, during their schooling,"* (paragraph 114).

The National Parent Survey found that an increasing number of families are struggling to meet the day-to-day costs of sending a child to school. Many families on low incomes live in relative poverty but do not meet the eligibility criteria for FSM. Subsidised outdoor residential (paragraph 34) may not be enough to keep costs sufficiently low for families living in reduced socio-economic circumstances.

Many of the issues relating to the burden of cost that would otherwise fall upon parents warned about in the Explanatory Memorandum are evidenced

by Parentkind's National Parent Survey data. The results show that school uniform (53% in Wales, 50% across the UK), school trips (50% in Wales, 44% across the UK) and school meals/drinks (32% in Wales, 30% across the UK) are the top three costs parents are most concerned about when sending their child to school.

Overall, 30% of parents in Wales are concerned about the cost of sending their child to school, although 60% also say that the cost is acceptable. Parents on lower incomes are more likely to struggle with the costs. Out of parents across the UK, 49% of those eligible for FSM say that they are concerned about the cost of sending their child to school. The burden is also higher for households with three or more children, where overall 40% of UK parents in this category indicate concern over school costs (as mentioned above, the Explanatory Memorandum's paragraph 39 acknowledges the impact of costs on larger families).

When it comes to meeting the cost of sending a child to school, 25% of parents in Wales say that they struggle to afford them. The issue is more pressing for parents on low incomes. Overall, in the UK, a full half (50%) of parents whose children are eligible for FSM say that they struggle to afford them, which is double the average percentage for Wales.

### **Parental concerns about the cost of school trips**

Half (50%) of parents in Wales say the cost of school trips is a concern. That compares to 44% of parents in the UK overall, demonstrating that this concern is already higher among parents in Wales. Out of those parents in Wales, mothers (55% vs 46% of fathers), parents with a child at secondary school (56% vs 45% of primary parents), parents with a child eligible for free school meals (59% vs 48% not eligible) or with a child with Additional Learning Needs (58% vs 48% with a child without ALN) are all more likely to be concerned about the cost of school trips than other parents in Wales.

Parentkind's evidence lends weight for the need of the Bill to ensure that any residential outdoor education provision does not increase the costs on parents, and particularly those in low-income households.

## **Learning activities as a family**

The National Parent Survey for Wales found that almost two thirds (64%) of parents in Wales report doing learning activities as a family outside of school (e.g. visits to museums, nature walks) at least monthly.

The figure is higher for younger parents (73% of parents aged 18–34 and 69% of parents aged 35–44 vs 59% aged 45–54 and 49% of parents aged 55+), parents with two children (70% vs 58% of parents with one child) and those with a child at primary school (82% vs 58% of parents with a child at secondary school).

Just 60% of parents in the UK whose children are eligible for FSM report doing so at least monthly, and one barrier is likely to be cost. These results show that parents, regardless of background or financial circumstances, recognise the importance of opportunities for children to learn outside of the classroom. This includes activities outdoors that can demonstrably improve wellbeing (see the section on mental health).

## **Children taking part in activities outside of school**

The '*Wales reform of the school day and year March 2022 survey*' was run in conjunction with the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). Results show that more than four in five parents in Wales (83%) would welcome the opportunity for their child to take part in activities at school outside of core school hours. Parents expressed an interest in a range of extra-curricular activities, with the most popular across primary and secondary being physical activity and sports (65%). Primary school parents also expressed interest in extra art and drama activities (53%) and music (52%), while secondary school parents wanted a stronger focus on additional opportunities for academic learning (39%) and access to homework clubs (41%).

## **Mental health**

The Explanatory Memorandum section on mental health (paragraphs 92–95) picks up on the benefits of outdoor education on children's wellbeing.

Children's mental health is a major concern of many parents regardless of

socio-economic circumstances. The educational experience of children from low-income households (taking eligibility for FSM as an indicator of poverty) reveals some stark differences in wellbeing. Initiatives to improve the mental wellbeing of all pupils would be welcomed by most parents. However, it is children from less affluent households who stand to benefit the most from the provision of outdoor education. The National Parent Survey 2023 found the following key differences between parents across the UK:

- Just under six in ten (59%) parents of children eligible for FSM say their child enjoys learning at school. This compares to just over seven in ten (71%) parents whose child is not eligible for FSM.
- Just over half (52%) of parents of children who are eligible for FSM say that their child enjoys wider school life, compared to more than six in ten (63%) parents whose children are not eligible for FSM.
- Just under two thirds (65%) of parents of children who are eligible for FSM say that their child feels safe at school. This compares to more than eight in ten (81%) parents of children who are not eligible for FSM.
- Parents of children who are eligible for FSM are significantly less likely to say that their child is happy (70%) than parents of children who are not eligible for FSM (83%).
- Parents of children eligible for FSM are both significantly more likely to be worried about depression (31%) than parents of children who are not eligible for FSM (19%). They are also more likely to say that their child has experience of it (23% vs 12%). Overall, they are more likely to say that their child has experienced at least one mental health issue (84%) than parents whose children are not eligible for FSM (75%). They are also more likely to be concerned about their child self-harming (16% vs 10%) and say that their child has experience of it compared to parents of children not eligible for FSM (12% vs 6%).

Parents recognise the benefit of outdoor activities on their children's mental health and wellbeing. The *'Wales reform of the school day and year March 2022 survey'* found that parents identified a need for activities that support

their child's mental and emotional wellbeing. More than two in five (45%) of all parents say they would appreciate these activities being offered at their child's school. For families living on a lower income, this need was higher still with nearly half (49%) requesting this option. Families on a lower income were also more likely to want to take part in wellbeing and learning activities as a family at their school, suggesting they might not have as many opportunities to do this elsewhere. This suggests that many parents of all backgrounds would recognise the wellbeing benefits of their child experiencing a week of outdoor education.

Paragraph 170 identifies childhood experience of anxiety as a common barrier to attendance at residential outdoor education. Yet the benefits of outdoor education are laid out in paragraph 174. The provision of information to parents about residential outdoor education should highlight the potential mental health benefits of the scheme. For parents who may struggle with literacy or whose first language is not English, direct communication through the ready availability of members of staff who are ambassadors for the scheme may help to ensure that children who will benefit most, but who may be resistant to join, understand what they may gain. This will ensure that, in conjunction with their parents, a decision can be reached about whether or not they will attend.

### **Eligibility for entitlement to residential outdoor education**

To ensure that new provision of residential outdoor education is as inclusive as possible the Welsh government (paragraph 119) should consider how children educated otherwise than at school (EOTAS) might be included as part of new provision. Effective communication with parents will be important so that children not attending a mainstream school do not miss out on new provision.

Parentkind suggests that access to the scheme should be as broad as possible, encompassing all families who feel that the child would benefit from it.

## **Methodologies**

### **National Parent Survey 2023**

The National Parent Survey was conducted online by YouGov. The fieldwork took place 5th – 26th June 2023 amongst 5,126 parents in England (3,067), of which 476 are from the East of England, Scotland (1,032), Wales (768) and Northern Ireland (259) who have at least one child aged 4–18 in school. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK parents aged 18+. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc.

### **Wales reform of the school day and year March 2022 survey**

Parents and carers across Wales were invited to take part in an online survey during January 2022. The survey was available in English and Welsh. In total, we heard from 6,843 parents and carers. 5,350 had a youngest child in primary school, and 1,493 had their youngest child in secondary school. 1,676 were either in receipt of, or in the process of applying for, means-tested benefits. This represents 25% of the entire sample; we refer to these respondents as ‘lower income families’ in our analysis.