

Agenda – Children, Young People, and Education Committee

Meeting Venue:

Video Conference via Zoom

Meeting date: 4 May 2022

Meeting time: 09.00

For further information contact:

Naomi Stocks

Committee Clerk

0300 200 6565

SeneddChildren@senedd.wales

1 Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

(09.00)

2 Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners – evidence session 13

(09.00 – 10.15)

(Pages 1 – 43)

Jeremy Miles MS, Minister for Education and Welsh Language

Kirsty Davies–Warner, Deputy Director, Equity in Education Division, Welsh
Government

Sian Jones, Head of Supporting Achievement & Safeguarding, Welsh
Government

Jane Hutt MS, Minister for Social Justice

Zsanett Swain, Senior Policy Manager – Violence Against Women & Domestic
Abuse, Welsh Government

Emily Keoghane, Head of LGBTQ+ Policy, Welsh Government

Alessandro Ceccarelli, Head of LGBTQ+ Policy, Welsh Government

Attached Documents:

Research Brief

CYPE(6)–10–22 – Paper 1 – Welsh Government



3 Papers to note

(10.15)

3.1 Pupil absence

(Pages 44 – 102)

Attached Documents:

Letter from the Minister for Education and Welsh Language – CYPE(6)–10–22
– Paper to note 1

3.2 Forward work programme

(Pages 103 – 154)

Attached Documents:

Letter from the Chair of the Cross Party Autism Group – CYPE(6)–10–22 –
Paper to note 2

4 Motion under Standing Order 17.42(ix) to resolve to exclude the public from the remainder of this meeting

(10.15)

5 Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners – consideration of the evidence and key issues

(10.30 – 11.30)

(Pages 155 – 165)

Attached Documents:

CYPE(6)–10–22 – Private Paper 1

6 Pupil absence – consideration of the approach to the inquiry

(11.30 – 12.00)

(Pages 166 – 172)

Attached Documents:

CYPE(6)–10–22 – Private Paper 2

Document is Restricted

WRITTEN EVIDENCE PAPER TO THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Minister for Education and Welsh Language; Minister for Social Justice April 2022

We welcome the opportunity to provide information in support of the Committee's inquiry into *Peer on Peer sexual Harassment Among Young Learners*.

We have addressed each of the Committee's areas of interest below and look forward to discussing further with the Committee on 27 April.

The scale and nature of the issue in education settings and how many learners are affected.

We welcome [Estyn's report](#) which provides valuable information on the incidence of peer on peer sexual harassment in schools. The Everyone's Invited website was used by Estyn to inform their report, and at the time of writing over 15,000 anonymous testimonies had been submitted from across the UK and shared on the website

We acknowledge bullying and harassment in our schools and education settings, and agree with the findings of Estyn's report that there is a lack of robust reporting. The impact of an inconsistent reporting system is that we cannot be sure of the scale of the problem– we do not currently collect this data at a national level. Most Welsh local authorities collect data on different forms of bullying and harassment, however it is very inconsistent and can vary from school to school.

The School Health Research Network's 2019-2020 report on student health and wellbeing in Wales, published in March 2021¹, found that:

- 33% of children and young people in years 7-11 had been bullied at least once or twice in the past couple of months; and
- Girls were more likely than boys to have been bullied (35% vs. 30%), but less likely than those who identified as neither a boy nor a girl, of whom over 3 in 5 had been bullied in the past couple of months.

The 2020 Crime Survey for England and Wales² estimated that:

- Around one in five children aged 10 to 15 years in England and Wales (19%) experienced at least one type of online bullying behaviour in the year ending March 2020;

¹ Page N., Hewitt G., Young H., Moore G., Murphy S. (2021) *Student Health and Wellbeing in Wales: Report of the 2019/20 School Health Research Network Student Health and Wellbeing Survey*. Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK [SHRN-NR-FINAL-23_03_21-en-AMENDED06.08.21.pdf](#)

² [Online bullying in England and Wales: year ending March 2020 - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

- One in four (26%) did not report their experiences to anyone; and
- Nearly three out of four children (72%) who had experienced an online bullying behaviour experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.

However, this data in itself is inconsistent – it does not cover different types of education settings and does not give an accurate picture of the current situation. The Welsh Government is currently undertaking scoping work to ascertain how we can meet the need for more robust data in this space, which covers the different forms of bullying and harassment in our education settings.

We will use the findings of Estyn’s report to inform our ongoing cross government response and work with stakeholders to deal with this important issue. The Minister for Education and Welsh Language has also asked Estyn to carry out a further review in 2022-23, which will focus on further education institutions.

The extent to which this issue also occurs outside the formal education setting, including online.

The Estyn report is clear that we need to think wider than the school day. Violence against women and girls, including harassment, is far too common. This is a societal problem, which requires a societal response. We must challenge attitudes and change behaviours of those who behave abusively. It is not for women and girls to modify their behaviour, it is for abusers to change theirs.

That is why the Welsh Government Programme for Government commits to strengthening the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Strategy to include a focus on violence against women in the street and workplace as well as the home in order to make Wales the safest place in Europe to be a woman. A public consultation on the draft VAWDASV National Strategy 2022-2026 was held between 7 December and 7 February, with a proposed publication date of late spring 2022.

The Strategy clearly outlines our vision that tackling all forms of VAWDASV is everyone’s business. It is not the responsibility of the Welsh Government alone. It is for us all to join together, to recognise the levers we each have and to make best use of them to ensure women, girls and all those experiencing or at risk of VAWDASV are protected and supported but also to ensure that the root causes of such behaviour are effectively challenged and eradicated.

Our whole Wales approach can only be effective if all parties feel a sense of ownership of the Strategy and commitment to the shared endeavour necessary to achieve this vision. The Cabinet has confirmed their support for the Strategy and we will be adopting a cross-Government approach to ensuring its success.

Estyn found that peer on peer sexual harassment is more prevalent online and outside school than in school.

We are committed to keeping learners safe online and our [‘Enhancing digital resilience in education: An action plan to protect children and young people online’](#), sets out the coordinated work that we are taking forward with UK-wide partners and other key stakeholders to meet our common aim of enhancing the digital safety and resilience of children and young people in Wales.

Through the [Keeping safe online](#) area of Hwb, we have developed resources to support practitioners to address online sexual harassment with learners in an age-appropriate way. Resources include the ‘Step up, speak up’ and ‘Just a joke?’ teaching toolkits, which are designed to support a whole school approach in understanding, preventing and responding to online sexual harassment. Guidance for education settings in responding to incidents of sharing nude and semi-nude images is also available, and an accompanying [training module](#) was developed and published in October 2021 to support schools to embed this guidance.

To ensure that children and young people are supported to have positive online experiences, a new ‘Online worries answered’ area has been launched on Hwb. The advice has been shaped by the Welsh Government research conducted during 2021 into children and young people’s online experiences and worries and some of the barriers to getting help.

The new area includes information and advice for children and young people on 10 different online safety topics, including online bullying, sharing nudes and online sexual harassment. The advice pages offer children and young people important information and guidance on what to do and where to turn for help if they are worried about something that has happened online. The online sexual harassment page aims to help learners understand the different forms it can take, the impact this behaviour can have, how to deal with it and get further support. We continue to explore opportunities to further enhance the confidence of education practitioners in this critical area.

Youth work settings provide young people with the opportunity to speak to trusted adults about issues that affect them. The Interim Youth Work Board are aware of the Estyn report and are keen to help address issues going forward. Youth work has clear safeguarding procedures in place. It can also provide young people with opportunities to have discussions about issues in a safe environment, challenge unacceptable behaviour and understand their rights in dealing with them.

Currently we do not know enough about the prevalence or nature of peer on peer sexual harassment in further education institutions, and Estyn’s upcoming thematic review will provide valuable information to help understand the scale of the issues.

The impact on pupils’ learning, mental health and well-being.

VAWDASV can have a huge impact on children and young people. It can affect their wellbeing, their educational attainment, family and peer relationships, and their ability to enjoy healthy, happy, respectful relationships now and in the future.

We recognise the damaging impact of peer on peer sexual harassment on learners; the impact of the incident of sexual harassment itself, but also how the education setting responds to such incidents. Our priority is to ensure learners have access to a safe learning environment which promotes their wellbeing and protects them from harm.

It is positive that Estyn found that in the most effective schools, leaders promote a strong ethos of respect in all areas of their work, prioritise wellbeing and adopt a whole-school, proactive approach to promoting and celebrating diversity; with policies, procedures and guidance for staff and pupils which links clearly to aims and objectives which ensure that wellbeing is at the forefront of the school's work.

The whole-school approach seeks to support good emotional and mental well-being by promoting a positive cultural environment in schools, where children and young people form positive relationships with staff and other learners. The Whole-School Approach and the statutory framework guidance published in March 2021 highlights that there are certain risk factors that make some children and young people more likely to experience problems than other children. These factors do not occur in isolation and an individual may experience several at any given time; they carry varying degrees of risk, can be short- or long-term, and some are more common than others. They include being bullied and abused (including sexually) and being subject to trauma. Schools are expected to consider the individual needs of learners and we are supporting them in introducing both universal and targeted wellbeing interventions. The Welsh Government is investing over £43m over the course of the next three years (2022-23 to 2024-25) to support implementation of the whole-school approach and improve wellbeing in schools.

The impact of peer on peer sexual harassment may manifest in attendance and behaviour issues.

Estyn found that despite the fact that schools generally record behaviour and bullying incidents, they do not make productive use of the data and information available to them to categorise and analyse incidences of peer on peer bullying and harassment well enough or identify trends, which hinders schools from having an accurate picture of the extent of different types of bullying and harassment, such as sexual harassment. This makes it difficult to link incidences of poor attendance or behaviour as the consequence of peer on peer sexual harassment. However, we recognise the likely link with attendance and behaviour.

Our All Wales Attendance Framework sets out the important role that the Education Welfare Service plays in managing safeguarding concerns.

It is the role of all Education Welfare Service team members to:

- Help identify welfare concerns and indicators of possible abuse or neglect of all pupils at an early stage, referring those concerns to the appropriate agency; (categories of abuse are physical, emotional, sexual and neglect).
- In conjunction with the LA ensure that all school staff are familiar with safeguarding procedures and understand their responsibilities.

- In conjunction with the LA provide advice and training when required.
- When requested, assist child protection agencies in the investigation of abuse and in the protection of pupils “at risk”.
- Represent Education at Child Protection case conferences, core groups and reviews.
- When appropriate, act as an advocate for the child.
- Be aware of the issue of forced marriage, child trafficking, safeguarding children in whom illness is fabricated and safeguarding children from abuse.

They also have a role to work closely with Police, Safeguarding and Support, Probation, LA and the schools to prevent and reduce offending behaviour.

There is a growing recognition of the long-term impact of exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on children’s life outcomes, including on their health and wellbeing, relationships with others, educational attainment and prosperity.

In 2016 the Welsh Government made a commitment to support the development of ACE aware public services. As part of delivering this commitment, we made available £300,000, between 2017 and 2020, to the ACE Support Hub to develop and deliver ACE awareness and trauma informed training for schools. The training was offered to all schools and the courses and support materials have now been made available on the Hwb. More generally, the Welsh Government has confirmed a further three years of funding for the ACE Support Hub, at £500k for each year from 2022-23 to 2024-25, to continue to raise awareness and understanding of ACEs and the adoption of trauma-informed practices.

In January 2022 the Deputy Minister for Social Services published a written statement setting out plans for the continuing development of the Welsh Government’s ACEs policy. This included a commitment to develop an ACEs Plan. Work has begun on the plan, which will be published this summer, alongside a new trauma informed practice framework developed jointly by the ACE Support Hub and Traumatic Stress Wales. The framework, which is currently out to consultation, will support services to understand the effect of trauma on individuals and what they can do help them. Schools will be able to use the framework to support learners who may have experienced sexual harassment and reduce its impact on their learning and educational attainment.

On 7 June 2021 we published the final evaluation of our CAMHS school in-reach pilots, which see specialist mental health practitioners providing consultation, liaison, advice and training in schools. We provided funding of £3.9m of the whole school budget for 2021-22 available to support national rollout of the pilots in line with the final evaluation findings and recommendations and are providing over £5m further funding to support activity in 2022-23. Health boards have told us the new funding will enable the recruitment of over 100 full time equivalent staff to work with schools. An important role of the service will be to support school staff in identifying issues and ensuring children and young people in distress are directed to the most appropriate support in a timely manner.

Behavioural issues often go hand-in-hand with poor mental health and emotional well-being and addressing this in schools has long been a priority of the Welsh Government. Counselling is a key part of ensuring children and young people with emotional and mental health issues have access to the support they need. The Welsh Government proposes investing over £10m over the next three years (2022-23 to 2024-25) to enhance counselling provision across Wales.

The impact on education settings and staff, for example in terms of discipline and the extent to which harassment among learners has become 'normalised'.

Welsh Government guidance 'Practical Approaches to Behaviour Management in the Classroom', highlights that where teachers have good preventative and responsive skills the likelihood of difficulties emerging or developing into incidents will be markedly reduced. Developing and implementing such skills in teachers should be supported, whether they are highly skilled and experienced teachers with responsibility for supporting others, teachers who want to extend their classroom behaviour management skills or newly qualified teachers (NQTs).

Estyn found that, generally, pupils do not tell teachers when they experience sexual harassment. This is because it happens so regularly, they often either only tell a friend or keep it to themselves. They feel that it has become normalised behaviour and say that teachers are not aware of the extent of the problem. In addition, pupils say teachers often dismiss incidences as trivial or encourage pupils to ignore them. Nearly half of pupils who said they had experienced sexual harassment from their peers report that they kept sexual harassment to themselves.

This was particularly felt by LGBTQ+ pupils who have substantial personal experiences of verbal homophobic harassment, with many saying that homophobic bullying is happening all the time and that this is the most common type of harassment in their school.

Recent feedback to the Welsh Government from teachers, senior leaders and young people themselves, shows that there is a real lack of confidence among practitioners in having – sometimes difficult – discussions around homophobia, sexual harassment, gender and race. Anecdotal evidence shows that many practitioners are worried about the impact of having these types of discussions, and there is fear about possible repercussions – this is often illustrated via examples of discussions regarding gender identity and transphobia, for example.

The impact of this lack of confidence is that these types of discussions are avoided or dismissed, this is in line with the findings of Estyn's report, which leads to a lack of confidence among pupils to share or report their own concerns and/or experiences.

It is vital, therefore, that the Welsh Government's work to deliver a whole school approach to Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and robust updated anti-bullying guidance is developed and completed alongside the professional learning and continuous development for our teaching staff and practitioners. Updated anti-bullying guidance will be published in July 2022.

VAWDASV, including all forms of harassment, is not inevitable. It is more than 'behaviours' of individuals that enable VAWDASV. It is societal norms, attitudes and beliefs that must be challenged as these are what perpetuate, excuse, legitimise and 'normalise' VAWDASV. Our revised Strategy aims to challenge the public attitude to VAWDASV across the Welsh population through awareness raising and space for public discussion with the aim to decrease its occurrence.

The specific impacts on particular groups of learners, for example older pupils, girls and LGBTQ+ pupils.

We know from the Estyn report that peer on peer sexual harassment disproportionately affects particular groups of learners, including older pupils, girls and LGBTQ+ learners.

Teaching our children and young people how to safely challenge all forms of harassment is essential, but preventative action through education is also crucial. Our new Curriculum for Wales Framework, which comes into effect from September, has been developed to be inclusive of all learners and includes a mandatory RSE Code. The RSE Code has equality and inclusivity at its heart and has been designed to equip learners with skills for life which includes developmentally-appropriate understanding of behaviours, including all bullying, and LGBTQ+ based bullying, sexual violence and gender-based violence in a range of contexts, including online.

We have commissioned training for school leaders to embed our anti-bullying guidance and to provide them with the tools to tackle all forms of bullying in schools, including homophobic bullying. We are making professional learning a key priority over the coming months to support schools and settings ahead of the implementation of RSE, and are currently working with practitioners and partners to develop a National Plan of Professional Learning for RSE. Informed by advice from Estyn, we will be working closely with the further education sector to ensure that appropriate professional learning, guidance and support are in place to tackle sexual harassment and bullying.

We will also consider how future training for schools and school leaders can go further to embed the knowledge and tools needed to tackle specific forms of bullying, such as homophobic and transphobic bullying, and racial harassment.

Under the Public Sector Equality Duty (a legal obligation under the Equalities Act 2010 for all schools, colleges and local authorities), schools and colleges are under an obligation to ensure appropriate and effective action is taken to remove or minimise disadvantages encountered by learners due to their having protected characteristics, such as, sex, sexuality and gender assignment.

Our VAWDASV National Strategy is informed by the global and national evidence that women and girls are disproportionately affected by all forms of abuse. However, we also recognise that the impact of VAWDASV is not uniform, affecting different people in different ways and so understanding the equality impact of VAWDASV on an intersectional basis will be vital if we are to address the problem for everyone in Wales.

Cultural differences can affect issues like honour based abuse and violence. Sexuality and gender identity can shape the experience of VAWDASV and data shows that disabled people experience significantly higher rates of domestic abuse.

It is essential therefore that our VAWDASV Strategy links with work on the Strategic Equality Plan, the draft Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, the draft LGBTQ+ Action Plan and the Disability Rights action Plan as it is developed. This will ensure our response understands and reflects issues of equality and our response is tailored accordingly.

The effectiveness of existing policies and guidance, and the identification of potential solutions and improvements.

All education settings in Wales have a legal duty to ensure that children have access to a safe learning environment; we expect these safeguarding responsibilities to be taken seriously.

The Welsh Government has issued statutory guidance [Keeping Learners Safe](#) (KLS) to support schools in creating and maintaining a safe learning environment for children. This guidance must be read and followed by local authorities and governing bodies of maintained schools (including maintained nursery schools), voluntary-aided and foundation schools, and further education institutions, under section 175 of the Education Act 2002.

The Keeping Learners Safe chapter *Safeguarding responsibilities in specific circumstances*, includes a section peer on peer abuse and harmful sexual behaviour. It also includes guidance on the appropriate response from education setting staff with safeguarding concerns.

We reviewed this guidance to ensure that it reflected changes to legislation and strengthens safeguarding arrangements. We consulted on the revised KLS from 18 July to 7 November 2019. The purpose of the consultation was to establish whether the revised draft guidance met the needs of key audiences. The updated consultation version of the guidance was welcomed but respondents offered suggestions for how it could be improved, which we used to inform revisions made to the final version of the guidance published October 2020.

The Welsh Government has developed a safeguarding audit tool to provide support to schools (and all other education settings) to ensure that there are effective systems in place to meet their legal safeguarding obligations in line with the KLS guidance. The audit tool is included in the revised KLS guidance as a matter of effective practice for all education settings.

The Hwb hosts a series of e-learning modules, which have been developed by the Welsh Government. The [Keeping Learners Safe Modules](#) support all staff in education settings to understand their safeguarding responsibilities as set out in the KLS guidance. There are five separate modules available on Hwb. The designated safeguarding person (DSP) or a head teacher can assign the modules to other members of staff to help them to monitor the progress and attainment of staff. The [Keeping Learners Safe Module Guidance](#) provides advice to DSPs and head

teachers on how to use and assign these modules. The modules have been updated in line with the revised Keeping Learners Safe guidance.

The KLS modules are available to the independent sector enabling them to carry out their safeguarding duties effectively and the learning available will be the same as in maintained schools.

Through the [Keeping safe online](#) area of Hwb, we have developed resources to equip practitioners to educate and support learners with the prevalent issue of sharing nude images. In recognition that responding to incidents involving peers can be complex, as there can be many different motives or reasons behind the behaviour, we published [guidance](#) for education settings to support them to effectively respond to incidents of sharing nude and semi-nude images in December 2020. An accompanying [training module](#) was developed and published in October 2021 to support schools to embed this guidance. This module can support with developing procedures for handling incidents to ensure an appropriate and proportionate response.

The [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#) are for children and adults at risk of abuse and neglect. They detail the essential roles and responsibilities for practitioners to ensure that they safeguard children and adults who are at risk of abuse and neglect.

These procedures are intended to guide safeguarding practice for all those employed in the statutory, third (voluntary) and private sectors in health, social care, education, police, justice and other services. They promote consistent, evidence based safeguarding practice across agencies and across Wales.

This includes an *All Wales Practice Guide- safeguarding children where there are concerns about harmful sexual behaviour*. The guide includes advice on responding to peer on peer abuse in a way that safeguards children and young people and in line with the 'children first' principle provides appropriate support and intervention to children who have harmful sexual behaviour to prevent harm.

The [National Action Plan](#) on preventing and responding to child sexual abuse was published in July 2019 and includes actions to prevent and respond to harmful sexual behaviour. This has included the development of a multi-agency open access online learning session, advice for practitioners across agencies and advice for parent/carers of children and young people where there are concerns about harmful sexual behaviour. The Plan also includes an action for regional Safeguarding Boards to review arrangements for early intervention pathways for children where there are concerns about inappropriate sexualised behaviour or harmful sexual behaviour.

We have several Welsh Government funded helplines already established, specifically Childline Cymru, Live Fear Free and the MEIC service. In addition there is extensive guidance available on preventing and responding to child sexual harassment and abuse, including our statutory guidance [Keeping Learners Safe](#).

We have accepted Estyn's recommendation to *ensure schools receive regular and informative updates on best practice and suitable resources that are available to support them in the delivery of relationships and sexuality education*.

This is a priority area for the Welsh Government and a national plan of professional learning for RSE is currently being developed with practitioners and partners. Officials are in dialogue with wider Welsh Government and key stakeholders to identify gaps, and to commission new high quality resources where required to support implementation. National Network conversations will also provide an opportunity to discuss RSE resources, which resources are considered high-quality and to address any gaps where new resources may need to be commissioned.

The previous VAWDASV National Strategy committed to increasing awareness amongst children, young people and adults of the importance of safe, equal and healthy relationships and empowering them to positive personal choices. This objective has been carried over to the next iteration of the Strategy. We must give young people the opportunity to grow up free from damaging and limiting ideas around gender roles, power and control and give them the tools to call out unacceptable behaviours.

The Welsh Government continues to fund Hafan Cymru's Spectrum project, which promotes the importance of healthy relationships and raises awareness of VAWDASV. Spectrum also delivers training for school staff and governors about understanding the impact of domestic abuse on a child and promotes a whole-school approach to tackling domestic abuse.

Higher Education

This term, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) will be publishing a circular on safeguarding to secure safe and inclusive higher education. The circular will require institutions to provide HEFCW with further assurance on both policies and processes to ensure the safety of students, relating to violence, abuse and harassment.

HEFCW meet regularly with officials from the VAWDASV team to ensure their work continues to align with Welsh Government priorities. HEFCW submitted a [consultation response](#) on the VAWDASV National Strategy in February 2022.

HEFCW have discussed with FE officials alignment of their review of safeguarding in HE (scheduled for 2022/23) with the Welsh Government review of peer on peer harassment in FE colleges. The FE review, led by Estyn, will be a parallel review to the completed schools' review, therefore, HEFCW will have a system-wide set of reviews to inform their understanding of tackling violence against women in education and tackling misogynist cultures where they exist.

HEFCW held a HE event on 17 February to discuss: violence against women; the implications for HE of the Welsh Government forthcoming Strategy on VAWDASV; spiking; collaboration with third sector agencies supporting women and tackling violence and harassment; issues arising from the Covid-operating context and adoption of Bystander training. The event was attended by all Welsh universities and a number of further education colleges and third sector partners. Speakers included the Welsh Government VAWDASV team, Public Health Wales and Welsh Women's Aid. HEFCW have arranged to meet the CEO of Welsh Women's Aid, Sara

Kirkpatrick, to discuss how they might work more closely in partnership with universities, to tackle VAWDASV.

VAWDASV guidance for Higher Education Institutions was published in partnership with HEFCW in March 2020 as planned, this was revised in November 2020 to account for the impact of the COVID pandemic.

HEFCW has committed £2m annually to universities to support the implementation of well-being and health strategies and HEFCW expect these strategies and implementation plans to address issues affecting well-being and health in all its forms.

The effectiveness of the roles of a wide range of statutory bodies in respect of this issue, including the police, social services, local authority education departments, pupil referral units and schools themselves, and the extent to which a multi-agency approach is being taken where appropriate.

Recognising that a multi-agency approach is key to tackling the issue of peer on peer sexual harassment; from the outset we have engaged with Policing in Wales. Both Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) and Police Forces are committed to working with the Welsh Government to address the issue of peer on peer sexual harassment in education settings.

The Minister for Social Justice and the Minister for Education and Welsh Language met with representatives of the Offices of PCCs and Police Forces to address the findings of the Estyn Report.

The Minister for Social Justice meets regularly with the current chair of the All Wales Policing Group, PCC Dafydd Llywelyn, where a range of issues are discussed, including peer on peer sexual harassment and the wider issue of misogyny.

It was pleasing to see the positive references in the Estyn report to the work of the Wales Police Schools Programme (WPSP). The programme has been supported by Welsh Government since 2004 and we invest £1.98m in it each year. This is match funded by the four Welsh Police Forces.

Over the years, the Programme has evolved by broadening its scope to cover wider community and personal safety issues at all key stages of the curriculum. The core programme includes substance misuse, anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse, bullying, online safety, sexting, child sexual exploitation and consent, delivering a balanced programme within primary and secondary schools.

Officials are working closely with the Police on implementing the recommendations from a review of the programme which took place in 2019.

We know that to date in the academic year 21/22 the programme has delivered 8,180 Crime Prevention lessons with 70% of schools in Wales accessed. Also, there have been 289,029 pupil contacts so far this school year (including Assemblies).

4,544 Supportive School Policing Activities have been carried out including 2,636 incidents dealt with in schools using the School Crime Beat Protocol.

As part of the Community Focussed Schools work, on 22 March we announced £3.84m of funding to support Family Engagement Officers in schools. These roles will be focused on working with children and young people experiencing difficulties and working with them and their families to address any issues. These roles will contribute to our work in tackling issues such as peer to peer sexual harassment by identifying the problem at an early stage and working with others to provide support.

The effectiveness of the Welsh Government's joint response across all its relevant departments with a focus on education, social services and community safety and its inclusion of non-devolved services such as the police and the criminal justice system.

It remains a cross-government priority to ensure that every child and young person is supported and that they are able to report any concerns they may have. In recognition that there are broader cultural challenges in dealing with this issue we continue to work together cross-government in relation to our ongoing response.

We will use the findings of Estyn's report to inform our ongoing cross government response and work with stakeholders to deal with this important issue; including developing a multi-agency action plan. The action plan is intended for children and young people, and all those working with children and young people in an education setting who would benefit from understanding the actions taken by the Welsh Government and partners to tackle peer on peer sexual harassment in education settings.

The action plan will set out the current and proposed future actions to tackle the issue of peer on peer sexual harassment in education settings against identified key themes. Importantly this action plan will link to sister plans: National Action Plan for Preventing Child Abuse; Digital Resilience in Education Action Plan and the VAWDASV Strategy, in order to aid understanding of the work and support available to empower children and young people.

Following his written statement of 16 June, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language wrote to all of the schools listed in the Everyone's Invited report to seek assurances of their safeguarding measures and to offer support and advice. A letter also went to all schools from the Director of Education and Welsh Language.

Joint working is essential to delivering our aim to tackle VAWDASV and make Wales the safest place in Europe to be a woman. We have worked with a wide range of key partners including teams across the Welsh Government, the police, specialist sector, survivors to develop our next five-year VAWDASV Strategy. Collaboration and co-production with partners has been essential in developing the draft Strategy and it will also be key for its delivery.

The Strategy will be delivered through a blueprint approach, which brings together devolved and non-devolved organisations, as well as strengthening the partnership between public private and specialist sectors.

Overseeing the delivery of the Strategy will be a new National Partnership Board – a Ministerial-led board co-chaired by Dafydd Llewelyn, the lead PCC for Wales.

Welsh Government Social Services leads on the implementation of Part 7 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014, related statutory guidance and the Wales Safeguarding Procedures. Safeguarding responsibilities are shared across devolved and non-devolved agencies. All of the work developed by the Welsh Government on safeguarding children involves cross-government working and is informed by engagement with external bodies and organisations on a multi-agency basis. A cross-government Safeguarding, VAWDASV and ACEs Group is in place to ensure information sharing and awareness of cross-cutting work to support a joined up approach.

Schools, colleges and local authorities' collection and use of bullying and harassment data, as relevant to this issue.

It is clear from the Estyn report that there is a clear need for more robust reporting of instances of sexual harassment in education settings, with children and young people lacking the confidence to report instances to their teachers. This in turn can lead to a lack of knowledge of the true scale of the issue in schools, as well as a lack of consistency in reporting systems and data collection. This is reflected across various types of harassment and bullying, including racial harassment and homophobic bullying.

We have accepted Estyn's recommendation to *work with local authorities to improve the way they collect bullying and harassment information from schools and ensure that local authorities identify and respond to patterns and trends in behaviour*. This is in order to plan suitable guidance, training and support for schools. We know, too, that colleges' approaches to collecting and reporting this information varies, so work on improving reporting systems needs to extend across education settings.

We are already considering the changes we need to make to our anti-bullying guidance, [Rights, Respect, Equality](#) in relation to racial harassment and bullying in schools, in line with the Race Equality Action Plan – An Anti-racist Wales. We will also consider how this work can be effectively widened to include robust reporting, recording and data collection of peer on peer sexual harassment, and homophobic harassment and bullying.

Robust and consistent reporting will:

- increase the confidence of children and young people that their concerns are taken seriously;
- embed the culture in our education settings that harassment or bullying of any kind is totally unacceptable; and
- lead to an increase in longer term data collection and trends which will help inform our policy making and create change.

The role of families, parents, and carers, as relevant to this issue.

Tackling negative attitudes towards gender roles and relationships is everyone's business and a whole society approach is a fundamental part of the new VAWDASV National Strategy. Harassment, abuse and violence are daily occurrences for women and have conditioned their lives for far too long.

We will continue to work in partnership with specialist services to raise awareness of the inequality and safety issues faced by women and girls, and to end all forms of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, and will continue to work with Welsh Police Forces, PCCs, public safety boards and the Crown Prosecution Service to instil confidence in victims to report incidents of abuse and violence when they occur and to hold those who abuse to account.

Tackling male violence, and the misogyny and gender inequality that lie behind it, are how we will break the cycle and address the root causes of VAWDASV

VAWDASV is committed primarily but not exclusively by men against women. It is important to recognise therefore that not all victims of VAWDASV are women and it can also affect men and those with a non-binary identity. All perpetrators, regardless of their gender, will be held to account for their actions, however male violence defines VAWDASV and properly addressing the power and control dynamic created by gender inequality is key.

This must start with boys and young men if future generations are to be offered an opportunity to break this cycle and to develop healthy relationships based on respect and consent.

As part of our work to develop Community Focussed Schools we will build positive relationships with parents/ carers. Community Focused Schools are better able to identify issues at an early stage and work with others on providing support.

The role of the new Curriculum for Wales in developing healthier attitudes towards relationships and sexuality issues.

The new curriculum from September 2022 will include a Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience which will enhance the new curriculum's focus on the health and wellbeing of learners. This is an innovative part of the new curriculum and aims to ensure that learning and support around issues such as physical, emotional and mental well-being are provided to all young people in Wales.

RSE is a statutory requirement in the Curriculum for Wales Framework and is mandatory for all learners. Schools and settings have an important role to play in creating safe and empowering environments in supporting learners' rights to enjoy fulfilling, healthy and safe relationships throughout their lives.

RSE will be implemented in primary schools, maintained nursery schools, and non-maintained nursery settings from September 2022.

Within the new RSE statutory guidance, it is clear that the approach to RSE should be positive, protective and preventative, considering how learners might need to be supported to 'have the knowledge to recognise all forms of discrimination, violence, abuse and neglect, including violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence and a link is included to a toolkit of resources to support schools and settings on this important issue.

Raising children and young people's awareness of equality, respect and consent is crucial if we are to stop VAWDASV. We want to ensure all children and young people have access to developmentally appropriate, high quality learning that responds to their needs and experiences. The VAWDASV National Strategy 2022-2026 will run alongside the new RSE Code and guidance. Furthering our aim to ensure all children and young people have the ability to enjoy healthy, happy, respectful relationships now and in the future.

Safeguarding all our young people and supporting them to navigate the complex area of RSE is vital. Parents, of course, have a central role to play in this, but there is a crucial role for schools and a role which is now more important than it has ever been.

A National Network has been established to bring together teaching professionals, experts, stakeholders, policy makers and enabling partners to identify and address the barriers to, and opportunities for, the implementation of Curriculum for Wales. The conversations will provide a key opportunity to discuss a national approach on resources, supporting materials and professional learning needs. This will include any additional support and resources to support learners with additional learning needs.

Jeremy Miles MS
Minister for Education and Welsh Language

Jane Hutt MS
Minister for Social Justice

Agenda Item 3.1

CYPE(6)-10-22 - Paper to note 1

Jeremy Miles AS/MS
Gweinidog y Gymraeg ac Addysg
Minister for Education and Welsh Language



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref MA/JMEWL/1466/22

Jayne Bryant MS, Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Senedd Cymru
Ty Hywel
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1SN
SeneddChildren@senedd.wales

25 April 2022

Dear Jayne,

Thank you for your letter of 7 April regarding your proposed inquiry into pupil absence. As your letter notes we conducted some work in this area and the comprehensive review of attendance patterns concluded in February after engagement with a wide range of stakeholders including local authorities and school leaders. The aim was to understand more about what lies behind absences and seek views on ways to re-engage and support learners.

The result is a report that provides wide ranging, stakeholder informed recommendations that will inform development of future policy interventions in this space. This will include the development of a strategic approach to digital teaching and learning to address the needs of those who are not or cannot be present in schools; and the development of community schools models, with a strong focus on family engagement. The report is attached at Doc 1.

My officials have had numerous discussions with local authorities and school leaders' regarding school attendance and maintain a regular dialogue with local authorities. In December I announced an additional £7m funding to provide enhanced attendance support, targeting those learners with high levels of non- attendance and particularly those Year 11 learners who are not attending school, and not likely to complete GCSEs.

Our work in this space will also align with the Programme for Government commitment to reduce educational inequalities and raise attainment for all.

I will be giving an oral statement on 3rd May to update on the approach to implement the recommendations highlighted in the report.

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

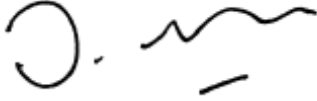
Gohebiaeth.Jeremy.Miles@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Jeremy.Miles@gov.wales

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

We hope that the Committee finds this update helpful and assists with your inquiry over the summer term.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large 'J' followed by a series of wavy lines and a short horizontal stroke at the end.

Jeremy Miles AS/MS

Gweinidog y Gymraeg ac Addysg

Minister for Education and Welsh Language

Attendance review - implications of the pandemic for school attendance

Contents

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Attendance data
- 3) Underlying reasons for increased learner absence
 - Pre-existing reasons for absence exacerbated by COVID
 - New COVID-related reasons for absence
- 4) Strategies for improving attendance
 - Re-establishing and extending pre-existing best practice
 - Strategies for addressing new COVID-related absence
- 5) Workload pressures and staff capacity
- 6) Conclusions and recommendations

Appendices

- A) Terms of reference
- B) Consultations contributing to the review and methodology
- C) Case studies
- D) Literature review
- E) References

1) Introduction

The COVID pandemic has had a hugely significant effect on all our lives and on all aspects of education in Wales. Some of this impact has been obvious and direct, for example the results of the illness itself and the subsequent loss of study time at school. Other effects have been more subtle and not necessarily easily assessed, for example the impact on the wellbeing and mental health of both learnersⁱ and staff is more difficult to gauge but may be even more significant in the long term. These effects are still ongoing at the time of writing with the emergence of the omicron variant and a further peak of infection. The resulting uncertainty is unsettling for learners and staff and is making policy planning at all levels even more challenging.

I was asked by Welsh Government 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 or interventions that could help to support and re-engage learners in their education, especially those whose absence increased during this period (see appendix for the terms of reference of the review). I am very grateful to everyone that gave freely of their time to help me with the review (see appendix for a list of consultations), including the learners and professionals who took time to do so during a difficult and busy time for them. Everyone contributed helpfully and frankly.

During the review, those consulted touched on a wide range of reasons for non-attendance and suggested many different educational interventions that could contribute to improving learner attendance. The breadth of responses is unsurprising as the various elements of the education system are interrelated and improvement to one aspect often requires a 'whole system' response to ensure success. This review has therefore attempted to survey the main features of this broad and complex policy landscape and has noted at various points where further research could be usefully undertaken. While many

of the suggestions made relate to long term strategies, the review also identifies recommendations for actions that should have a shorter or medium term effect.

The overriding impression left by the discussions held during the review is of a hard-working, resilient and constructive education system, but one that is under considerable strain. There is a lot of further work remaining to be done to overcome the effects of the pandemic, including ensuring that all learners gain the skills and conceptual understanding they need for further study or work, as well as addressing a range of personal wellbeing and mental health issues that have arisen during this period. It is not easy to estimate how long this process will take. Improving attendance, as with any other aspect of this process, depends on the breadth and cohesiveness of the response from the education system as a whole.

However, there are now often fewer professionals available to do this additional work due to illness or other effects of the pandemic. For example, I spoke to one headteacher who was teaching four lessons that day because there was no-one else to cover the classes. Clearly such arrangements are unsustainable in the longer term and senior leaders need time to plan, manage and lead if the education system is to respond in a coordinated and effective way to increased demands. It is in this context of increased workload pressures and capacity challenges that the suggestions, recommendations for Welsh Government and broader considerations raised by this report are made. They are intended to be helpful and result in greater systemic capacity, both in the shorter and longer term. The broader policy context is set out in the Welsh Government's document 'Renew and reform: supporting learners' wellbeing and progression'ⁱⁱ.

The review assumes that there are a range of reasons or underlying causes for learner absence, including complex and multiple causes. It also assumes that learner attendance lies on a broad continuum, though the attendance of individual learners is often categorised using various terms such as permanent absence, frequent and occasional absence. There is also a group of anxious learners whose attendance may not have been necessarily affected by the pandemic but whose progress and motivation have nevertheless been badly effected by the disruption to their education over the last couple of years. On the other end of the spectrum, there will be learners who are not technically absent because they are no longer on the school roll, including those who have elected for home education and those excluded. Although the focus of the review is on improving attendance, the underlying causes of absence also affects these other groups of learners and it is hoped that the review findings will be helpful for these cases too.

2) Attendance data

The way in which Welsh Government collects, analyses and publishes maintained school attendance data has changed during the pandemic. Because of the differences in how attendance is recorded, analysed and published before, during and after the pandemic it is difficult to fully identify trends or draw detailed conclusions about attendance rates now compared to before the pandemic, although the broad trends are clear enough to provide a basis for policy development.

Prior to the pandemic, maintained school attendance data was published annually and in a form that was summarised for a whole academic year. The most recent published data for the period before the pandemic is for the 2018-2019 academic year. This data shows a pattern that is broadly similar to that of preceding years. For example, there are higher rates of absence in secondary schools compared with primary schools, and greater

absence rates for disadvantaged learners (those eligible for free school meals) and for pupils with additional learning needs (those with an SEN statement or on School Action plus), as shown in the table below.

Table 1 - Pre-COVID absencesⁱⁱⁱ

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%

Certain groups of learners such as Roma, Traveller and Gypsy learners also had poor attendance historically. Overall attendance had been improving gradually over the preceding decade, although it had plateaued during the last few years of that period. As can be seen from Table 1, learner attendance at school before the pandemic typically would have been around 94% on average.

Since September 2020, attendance data has been collected and published weekly at a higher level of detail, and now includes daily national attendance rates that had not been available previously. Welsh Government downloads school attendance data directly from the school's usual attendance accounts so that schools do not have the additional administrative task of submitting this data to Welsh Government. This process provides a nearly 'real time' picture of overall attendance in schools in Wales.

Table 2 - Attendance in autumn 2021^{iv}

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

We can see from Table 2 that attendance (total for all maintained schools) during the autumn term 2021 has consistently been well below that of previous years, such as 2018-2019, and has also varied a lot from week to week. In line with these figures, individual schools have reported to us that their attendance has been down, typically by 5% and usually within a range of 2% and 10%.

The 'coding' system used by schools to record pupil attendance or absence has also been adapted since COVID. For example, new codes were introduced to denote absences related to COVID (eg 'Y' meaning 'School directed absence due to COVID-19' and '[' meaning 'Remote learning due to COVID-19 (where a learner is shielding or self-isolating)'). Refinements to this system are ongoing. For example, since 22 November 2021, illness due to COVID (coded by schools with an additional ';') has been usefully included within 'COVID-related reasons' for absences (i.e. including the ; Y and [codes) in Table 7 of the weekly published data. Currently, attendance data is published and presented in a weekly format and is not summarised further, though it is understood that year group attendance data will include a rolling summary figure in the near future, with further figures summarising overall attendance for primary age years and for secondary age years. Note also that Welsh Government attendance data is published of each year cohort and not separately for primary, all-age, special or secondary schools. Hence, for example Year 7 data includes all pupils in Year 7 in maintained schools including in this case secondary, all-age and special schools.

Provisional data for the week beginning 17 January 2022 show an overall maintained school attendance of 88% and absences due to COVID-related reasons of 3.8%. These figures are fairly typical of recent weeks and suggests that even after disaggregating COVID-related reasons that attendance generally has not returned to pre-COVID levels yet^v. It is not possible to compare directly attendance data from different countries because of the variation in how the data is defined, collected and analysed. For example, attendance data in England is based on a self-selecting sample of schools that submit their figures. The most recently available data for England, published 11 January 2022, is 88.6% of state-funded pupils attended school with COVID-related absence being 3.9%^{vi}.

Wales Government also publishes learner attendance data at local authority level^{vii}. However, comparisons of learner attendance made between different local authorities in Wales should be treated with caution because of the relatively small number of pupils involved, the variable incidence of COVID in different areas, and the way in which local policies varied across the phases of the pandemic (various lockdowns and firebreaks, reopening schools, tackling local 'waves' of infection). At best, analyses (for example Education Policy Institute, November 2020^{viii}) take into account differing local rates of infection, but not the age distribution of cases. Comparisons, whether at local or national levels, would be most meaningful made after the last phases of the pandemic have been concluded, so that early strategies such as discouraging learners with COVID from attending or phased return programmes that may have lowered attendance in the short term but increased it in the longer term, can be taken into account.

This review considers the data available at the time of writing, including unpublished Welsh Government data. For example, unpublished sources include rolling data on the proportion of pupils with no absences, 10.5 days or more absence, and 30.5 days or more absence (and for the equivalent period in the 2018-2019 academic year) for pupils with a range of characteristics. The rationale for having this 10.5 day analysis is that the self-isolation period is up to 10 days and one would expect absences of around this number of

days to be a feature of the data. The analysis confirms that the most common period of absence, for Year 11 pupils for example, is between 5.5 and 20 days^x.

This data is also helpful more generally in being able to identify trends in the length of absences. For example, it has been suggested that increased overall school absence may be more due to learners with poor attendance records being absent for longer rather than more learners being absent. However, the data shows that increased school absence is due to both more learners being absent and learners being absent for longer. A selection of this data is shown in the table below.

Table 3 - Proportion of pupils with significant absences^x

Proportion of pupils with	10.5+ absences Sept - Dec 2018	10.5+ absences Sept - 01 Dec 2021	10.5+ absences Sept - 26 Jan 2022
All pupils	8.2	20.1	35.9
Traveller	39.0	50.8	67.5
Gypsy	35.3	51.5	67.1
Asian	5.9	14.5	29.0
fsm	17.3	33.3	51.5
non fsm	6.1	15.8	30.5
SEN	13.4	27.5	42.0
non SEN	6.6	17.8	32.2
fsm and SEN	21.2	36.3	50.9

The table shows that overall absence rates have increased for all groups of pupils this autumn term compared to the autumn before the pandemic and is continuing to increase. In particular, absences for Gypsy and Traveller learners, learners eligible for free school meals, and pupils with special educational needs have all increased substantially, though not disproportionately more than for other learners. The increased absence for these groups of pupils remains a considerable concern however because of their high absolute level both before and after the pandemic.

It is also probable that other historic patterns persist in broad terms. There are still higher absence rates in secondary school year groups rather than in primary on a daily and weekly basis and therefore overall. The currently weekly published attendance data consistently shows that attendance declines as statutory aged pupils get older, with attendance for learners in Year 10 and Year 11 (at key stage 4) and for those in Year 12 and Year 13 (in the sixth form) being particularly worrying^{xi}.

There has been debate in the past regarding the relative significance of overall absence or unauthorised absence when analysing attendance data. Overall absence is easier to define as the borderline between authorised and unauthorised absence is subject to interpretation, discussion and change. In general, the impact of absence on learning is however similar whether the absence is authorised or not and this report will focus mainly on overall attendance and absence data. It is interesting to note that many schools

increasingly find that analysing their attendance data by COVID-related and non-COVID related absence is most useful for them.

While learner attendance has decreased overall compared to before the pandemic, it can be argued that to some extent this is to be expected. What we do not know is how much attendance could reasonably have been improved under these circumstances or the relative impact of various initiatives on attendance. Discussions with similar countries such as the home countries and the Republic of Ireland could provide useful comparisons for this purpose. All the home countries report increased learner absences following the pandemic, but differences in recording and reporting make detailed comparisons difficult. While recognising the considerable challenges of achieving agreement between countries around data collection, further joint consideration of attendance recording and coding practice could be usefully undertaken now, especially since there has been considerable changes in the codes used for recording attendance in other administrations recently, for example codes have been changed in Scotland and Northern Ireland^{xii} and proposals for changes have also been made in England.

- * **Recommendation - Discuss the definition, recording and analysis of attendance data with similar countries in order to learn from the latest practice and to consider how comparison of data and policy can be further facilitated**

There has also been a debate around the definition of 'persistent' absence, which is currently generally taken as being less than 80% attendance (or more than 20% absence) in Wales. This is significant as it is often set as the trigger for certain kinds of intervention such as the involvement of Education welfare service. Strong arguments were made during the consultation that a definition of worse than 85% attendance as in Northern Ireland (and in many Welsh local authorities in practice) or 90% as in England, could lead to earlier intervention and better outcomes.

- * **Recommendation - Review the definition of persistent absence and the related trigger points for interventions**

In practice, it is unlikely that support services in Wales, such as local authority education welfare services, youth services or social services, would be able to cope under the present circumstances with an increase in workload^{xiii} and so implementing this suggestion would not make an appreciable difference in the short term without increasing the capacity of these services.

Careers Wales destinations data

Every year, Careers Wales surveys the destinations of all Year 11 leavers to see whether they remain in education or training or have entered employment. Staying on rates at full-time education for 2020 Year 11 leavers (90.4%) appears to have increased by around 2 percentage points from that of 2019 (88.2%)^{xiv}. Discussions around initial feedback is indicating that this trend broadly remains for 2021 leavers, and finalised data will be published by Careers Wales in spring 2022. It also appears that the proportion of school leavers that are not in education, employment or training (NEET) remain low overall, at least in the short term, and has not increased substantially. Possible reasons for the increase in full-time education were offered during the consultations, including that improved GCSE and other qualification grades have meant that more students have progressed to the next level courses than in the past.

There are concerns however that this trend may not be sustainable. For example, if GCSE and other qualification grades remain higher than in the past then progression course leaders may increase their acceptance grades. There is also a concern that although grades have increased, the current student cohorts have had their education disrupted and it may be that they have skills and knowledge gaps that, if not addressed, will make it more difficult for them to continue on their selected courses. Work is ongoing in Welsh Government on analysing the progression of Year 11 students into post-16 learning for 2021-2022, which will also look at data on students dropping out from or switching post-16 programmes.

Data for Education other than at school (EOTAS) and Elective Home Education (EHE)^{xv}

The number of learners educated other than in school (including learners in pupil referral units or being home tutored for example) does not seem to have increased substantially in 2020-21 compared with previous years. The number for 2020-21 is similar to that for 2018-19, through the number for 2019-20 was substantially lower. Although no explanation for this pattern has been suggested, it may be that there is a maximum capacity for EOTAS provision that cannot be exceeded, even when demand increases.

However, the number of learners whose parents have elected to educate them at home has increased significantly to just over 4,000 in 2020-21, while in previous years the number was never been greater than around 2,500 (in 2018-19). Similar increases in EHE have been seen in England^{xvi}. It was suggested by those consulted that possible reasons for this increase may be that some families are choosing home education because they fear the ongoing effects of COVID, while for others the experience of home education during lockdown may have given them the confidence to elect for home education in the longer term. Further research into the reasons given by families about why they are increasingly electing to home educate could be usefully undertaken.

Other research into attendance data

Recently, the Welsh Government has asked WISERD to analyse longitudinal attendance data at an individual learner level so as to identify patterns of attendance by learners over their 11-year school career. Initial analysis has identified four possible groups of pupils, those with:

- Consistently good attendance: 41% of the sample had levels of attendance that were consistently high across the 11-year period, with the proportion experiencing up to 2 weeks' absence not dipping below 70% in a year for the 11-year period.
- High levels of non-attendance: A group of young people, accounting for 9% of the sample, exhibited persistent levels of non-attendance over the 11-years, with those missing more than 6 weeks of school reaching a peak of 46% within an academic year.
- Improving in secondary school: The pattern of improving attendance up to Year 6 with a step change in Year 7, seen in the cohort as a whole, may be driven partly by a single group of individuals, who accounted for 32% of the sample.
- Problematic attendance: A last group of students had levels of non-attendance that could be considered problematic but falling short of prevalent persistent non-attendance, accounting for 19% of the sample.^{xvii}

Further research could provide insights into individual learner absence patterns that may help policy making in future. In particular, it would be useful to develop a typology of attendance patterns and identify pre-patterns that could indicate possible deteriorating attendance. The categories of such a typology could then be linked to suggested differential support responses.

It is also known that deteriorating attendance can be a precursor to and predictor of a range of behavioural and emotional problems for learners that if not addressed may lead to exclusion of these learners from school^{xviii}. It would be useful if further research into attendance patterns could also focus on how best to identify and support learners who could be heading for exclusion.

- * **Recommendation - Undertake further research into attendance patterns that would help to identify learners who may be in danger of being excluded**

School staff attendance data

We were told that school staff absence (including for senior school staff, teachers, and teacher assistants and in addition staff across a range of local authority support services) is higher currently than usual due to a range of COVID-related reasons, including absence due to illness, self-isolation or anxiety. However, there is little official data available in Wales on school staff attendance or sickness patterns for before or after the onset of the pandemic. A snapshot of teacher absence during the first week in January 2022 (based on a sample of local authority returns) suggested that teacher absence that week was around 10%^{xix} which is roughly twice higher than would normally be expected.

Other published data suggests that the average number of days lost for illness for full-time teachers reduced to 6 days in 2020 from 7 days in 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016 and 2015^{xx}. This counter-intuitive finding may be related to a possible reduction of illnesses being reported during the lockdown period. See Effective management of school workforce attendance in primary schools (Estyn, 2017)^{xxi} and Covering Teachers 'Absence: Follow-up (Wales Audit, 2020)^{xxii} for good practice and further detail on the management of the school workforce.

The lack of school staff attendance data makes assessing the impact of the pandemic on learners' educational experience difficult, since their learning experience depends not only on the learner's own attendance but also on whether they were taught by their usual teacher or a subject specialist, when they did attend. Other home countries have also identified this gap in their education data, and Northern Ireland for example have recently introduced a daily collection at national level of teacher attendance.

- * **Recommendation - Consider how best to collect, analyse and publish education staff attendance in more detail**
- * **Recommendation - Explore developing and publishing a set of metrics for learners' experience that include data on teacher absence, the use of supply cover, and the availability of subject specialists**

3) Underlying reasons for increased learner absence

Learners emphasised the sheer shock they experienced when re-integrating back rapidly into school after a long period of lockdown and disruption. While the transition had been especially difficult for a minority, and led to serious wellbeing and mental health concerns in a few cases, all learners reported that they had experienced a certain amount of disorientation and many felt more vulnerable. Learners reported that many learners had lost some of their basic social and study skills, including the ability to focus on study for an extended time. All this added to the stress and pressure they felt on returning to school and coping with academic work and a suddenly unfamiliar social environment.

The findings from the analysis of attendance data presented in section 2 were supported by the education professionals interviewed. Those consulted reported that learner absence had increased for all groups of learners and that there were two broad reasons for the increase: there were a range of new COVID-related reasons for absence, and long-standing pre-COVID attendance problems remained which had been exacerbated by the pandemic. The general sense was that attendance has got significantly worse for learners of all characteristics (see Table 3) and that this was a worry.

Before COVID, it was well-established that vulnerable learners (defined in the literature as those eligible for free school meals, with additional learning needs, or having English as an additional language) were more likely to have poorer attendance records. Correlations exist between increased absence and deprivation (measured by eligibility for free school meals), and additional learning needs (statement of SEN and school action plus), as mentioned previously. The increased absence for disadvantaged and other vulnerable groups of learners was a particular concern because of the high absolute absence levels and because it was felt that these learners had found lockdown a more difficult period to learn than more advantaged learners and so needed to be back regularly in school now in order for support arrangements to have an effect.

It was also stressed by consultees that the attendance picture is a complex one and not easily generalised. Attendance patterns and trends in individual schools can change a lot over time and were said to be highly variable. This variability is due to COVID affecting schools in waves - COVID 'running hot and cold' at different times in various localities. Some schools have experienced more COVID 'waves' than others. It was noted also difficult to predict attendance patterns for individual learners, including when their attendance had been good before COVID. A further potential complication is that various factors may affect different groups of learners in varied ways. Overall, whether a learner attends or absents themselves from compulsory education depends on a complex range of underlying factors, and for any particular learner, the reasons for absence could be a combination of generic and specific reasons. The various factors and reasons that featured most prominently in the consultation responses are discussed below for learners of different characteristics and home circumstances, and academic research findings are discussed in Appendix D.

Pre-existing reasons for absence exacerbated by COVID

Poverty, disadvantage and learners eligible for free school meals

A range of possible reasons why absence for learners in this group could have been exacerbated by the pandemic were suggested during the review consultations. For example, almost by definition disadvantaged families will have fewer resources (financial and physical, and often also emotional and cultural) to draw on to cope with difficult situations. They may for example have poorer physical resources such as computer and internet facilities, smaller or no spaces for quiet study, fewer books and so on, so they may have found the education challenges of home educating during lockdown more difficult than more advantaged families. As a result of this negative lockdown experience, these learners may find returning to school more challenging than for more advantaged learners, who had not experienced these difficulties during lockdown.

Special and additional learning needs

The focus of this review is mainly on learners in primary, secondary and all-age schools. Many learners attending special schools and pupil referral units continued their education at school during lockdown. It has also been reported that the schools with the lowest attendance rates during the pandemic and its aftermath have been special schools^{xxiii}. Some of this absence will reflect rational decisions made by families for their children not to attend school, given that pupils at special schools have particular health care needs and are more likely to suffer from medical conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus. They could also have found the pandemic stressful and challenging as the coronavirus posed a dangerous additional health threat. As a result, it is difficult to generalise regarding attendance in special schools beyond the above.

In terms of learners with additional learning needs in mainstream schools, the data discussed above shows that as with other learners the attendance of learners with additional learning needs has decreased overall. A range of possible reasons why their absence could have been exacerbated by the pandemic were suggested during consultation. We also heard evidence in particular about learners on the autistic spectrum. Some of these pupils may have preferred aspects of home and distance learning, such as the opportunity for learning at their own pace and at the time of their choosing, and believed that the learning environment at home was quieter, calmer or less distracting than at school. However, specialists cautioned against assuming that autistic learners necessarily preferred home study. These learners also valued and missed human relationships, particularly with friends and trusted school or college staff who understood them and their needs. They may have also experienced difficulties with using technology during lockdown and preferred human contact, and it was also reported that many of these learners have enjoyed re-engaging with college and school and have attended well after lockdown. Overall, school absence in autism spectrum learners and other learners with additional learning needs has received little attention by researchers and the little that exists predates the pandemic^{xxiv}.

Cultural issues - Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners had the poorest attendance levels of any minority ethnic group before the pandemic. The reasons for this and the various mitigating strategies used by schools and local authorities are described in several reports including those by Estyn^{xxv}. Support officers working with these learners report that most Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families withdrew their children from schools on the onset of the pandemic and that it has been particularly difficult, especially for secondary age pupils, to persuade these families that schools are now safe. The pandemic seems to have strengthened cultural predispositions against secondary education. No other cultural issues or other minority ethnic group were raised in the consultations as having been particularly affected by the pandemic in terms of attendance, although research from the US suggests that non-White parents were more concerned about adherence to mitigation strategies, schools reopening safely, their child contracting COVID-19, and their child bringing home COVID-19 compared with White parents^{xxvi}.

Parental influence and families with complex and multiple needs

A consistent theme in the consultation discussions was the key role played by parents and families of learners in all attendance issues. For younger learners in primary schools

particularly, their attendance is strongly dependant on parental and family attitudes, not least as they often depend on them to get them physically to school. Some learners have established a pattern of not attending school during lockdown that they and their families find difficult or unnecessary to change. In some cases the exact underlying reasons for these absences may be unknown because the learner and family have multiple, complex needs that are long standing and even 'inter-generational'. Many of these challenges existed before lockdown, but some have been reported as deepening since, and as a result these families have become 'harder to reach' after the pandemic. For all learners, parents and families are well placed, in addition to the learners themselves, to provide important insights into the specific reasons for absence, especially in the case of untypical absence patterns.

Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing and disengagement issues

It is well established that poor attendance patterns for students prior to the pandemic was often related to a range of anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues. Poor mental health in particular has previously been linked to poor school attendance, with anxiety often described as a key risk factor. There are many aspects of the school setting that may cause anxiety, such as separation from parents/carers, social interaction with peers and school staff, and academic stress. This may lead children to avoid school in an attempt to reduce their anxiety.

These pre-existing issues, from school phobia to bullying, may have been exacerbated by the circumstances of the pandemic - see the literature review in Appendix C for detail on the relevant research. The main focus of the consultation discussions was around new causes of anxiety relating to the pandemic and the extent to which pre-existing causes of anxiety may have been exacerbated, and these are considered in more detail in the next sub-section. Addressing both pre-existing and new causes of anxiety and discussed together in section 4 of the report.

New COVID-related reasons for absence

There are also new factors affecting attendance that relate more or less directly to the pandemic.

COVID as an illness, self-isolation and school-directed absence

The most obvious reason is illness due to COVID itself. It was consistently said during the review consultations that many children have lost substantial amounts of schooling due to COVID illness. In addition, 'Long COVID' is said to be an increasing feature of learner absence.

There are also a range of COVID-related reasons for absence not involving being ill or being 'symptomatic'. For example, being non-symptomatic and isolating following positive testing (LFD or PCR), or having been in contact with someone who has tested positively (themselves or others in the home or in school groups or bubbles).

These absences are coded by a 'Y' (school-directed absence) and '[' for 'Remote learning'. Learner absence that schools think may be due to illness is coded 'I' with an additional ';' if the illness is thought to be due to COVID. Since 22 November 2021, all three 'COVID-related' codes are grouped together and published weekly. As discussed in the data section above, the data suggests that current attendance reductions are not entirely due to these direct COVID-related absences.

Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues

As mentioned above, there is general consensus that many of the causes underlying increased absence are related to learner wellbeing, resilience or mental health. For example, some students with previously good attendance record may have developed mental health issues during lockdown. In some cases, pupils are reported to have developed a general anxiety about returning to a large, busy institution after a period of relative quiet and isolation during lockdown.

Although it is not always easy to distinguish the sources of such anxieties and differentiate between pre-existing anxieties that may have been exacerbated during lockdown (such as the examples given above) and new anxieties specifically related to COVID, the main focus of the consultation discussions was around the new causes of anxiety relating to the pandemic. These include the fear of the learner (or of their family) about returning to school for a variety of reasons, such as anxiety regarding safety in terms of health (including worries about the possibility of catching COVID and affecting one's own health or transmitting the virus to vulnerable family members), as well as the fear of not being able to cope with the school's educational demands.

A fear of not being able to cope with school work could arise from a perceived loss of skills or knowledge (real or imagined) during lockdown, or from a fear of the requirements of studying for qualifications (examinations or course work). A specific manifestation of this fear for some learners is the development of a preference for continuing to study digitally from home. The implications of these forms of anxiety are explored further in the following sections.

Disengagement and more casual attitudes to learning

It was reported that a more lax attitude, from both learners and parents, towards regular attendance at school was increasingly evident, including from learners that previously had exhibited good attendance. A specific manifestation of this attitude is an increase in 'tactical' absence prior to holidays or family events, the purpose of which is to avoid potential contact with the virus that would endanger holiday arrangements.

Part of the reason for this general casual attitude towards learning and schooling in particular may lie in an element of disenchantment with schooling that started during lockdown and has been subsequently aggravated by impatience with ongoing COVID-related disruption to school life, such as staff absences or new hygiene arrangements, and a belief that missed school time can be caught up through other means, including school catch up and blended learning arrangements.

Summary of learner characteristics and home circumstances that may be behind increased absence

Pre-existing reasons exacerbated by COVID

- poverty - disadvantaged learners
- additional learning needs
- cultural issues - Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners
- parental influence and hard to reach families
- anxiety, mental health and wellbeing and disengagement issues

New COVID-related reasons

- COVID 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 relaxed attitudes to learning and attendance

4) Strategies for improving attendance

Learners emphasised the central importance for them of schools taking their wellbeing and mental health issues 'seriously'. They welcomed the general wellbeing-focused approach taken by most schools. They appreciated in particular any additional pastoral support provided to help them make the difficult transition back to 'normal' schooling as easy as possible. They particularly highlighted the importance to them of schools ensuring a positive, forward-looking and friendly ethos - of teachers and other pastoral staff asking them individually how they were - and for the provision of specialist support and nurture groups if required. They felt that asking learners about their views on how this could be achieved, for example through consulting with school councils, would be valuable, as would giving learners, especially older ones, some control over how and when they learn.

Re-establishing and extending pre-existing best practice

The attendance of learners in school, in addition to being directly related to physical health, is also affected by wellbeing and mental health, and by attitudes towards learning and schooling (also called school engagement or connectivity in the literature). 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^{xxvii}.

Because of this well-established link between attendance and attainment, improving learner attendance has long been an important policy aim for successive Welsh Governments^{xxviii}^{xxix}, as well as for local authorities and individual schools. The explicit focus on attendance in government policies, including its inclusion as a measure in categorisation and in inspection arrangements, led to a steady improvement in attendance rates over the last decade.

Prior to the pandemic, there was a broad consensus around what constituted best practice for improving attendance. A succession of reviews, reports and toolkits were made available, including by the inspectorate^{xxx} ^{xxxi}. There was a general agreement among the education professionals consulted that these pre-pandemic strategies for improving attendance remained valid, and need to be re-established, adapted and extended where needed in light of the pandemic experience.

The case study schools in this review were selected by their local authority as demonstrating good practice, typically during the pandemic built on their pre-existing practice for improving attendance. They had already recognised the importance of establishing trusting relationships with parents, family and the local community generally. They preferred an approach that was supportive of families rather than relying on formal and punitive methods. They had set high expectations in terms of attendance with

learners, families and staff. They identified attendance issues early and had a graduated response and a range of interventions to help to support learners who were absent or in danger of absenting. They worked well and closely with local support services and agencies. Their experience during the pandemic served to confirm to them the importance of parental engagement and early intervention. They consulted widely and effectively with families and adapted their policies and approaches where necessary (see Appendix C for details).

Good practice in tackling poor attendance

A strong feature of previous best practice was the need for a consistent, rigorous but graduated approach to applying agreed procedures to tackling poor attendance. Basic good practice includes careful record keeping and analysis, early identification, prompt contacting and engagement of families in discussions, offering support to help with any underlying problems, and continued close monitoring of ongoing attendance. It was however felt that implementation of this good attendance practice had weakened recently and was less prevalent than it had been before the pandemic, mainly because of staff capacity limitations resulting from the cumulative effect of general increased workload demands and staff absences.

- * **Recommendation - Share and disseminate best practice for improving attendance, including how schools can best engage with learners and their families, by adapting, re-packaging and re-issuing relevant guidance and promoting them through targeted professional development**

A key element of the best practice was the support offered to learners and their families to address any identified problems they faced. This required partnership working with a wide range of services, such as social services, youth services, behaviour management, educational psychology, counselling and mental health, national health service, housing and police, for example. However, as with teacher capacity, it was reported that all these services were also currently experiencing capacity limitations that made it challenging to address these needs in a timely way.

One of the most contentious issues regarding pre-existing attendance practice raised during the review was that of the use of fixed penalty notices (FPNs) and divergent opinions were expressed around this matter. On the one hand, fixed penalty notices were felt, particularly by Education Welfare Officers and some secondary schools, to be an important and well-established 'tool' for persuading families to take school attendance seriously when other methods had failed. On the other, it was felt that it would be inappropriate to use fixed penalty notices now in the same way as before the pandemic. Despite these differing opinions, there was also considerable common ground. All agreed that there was a place for formal procedures in extreme circumstances (and this is still possible legally), as part of a full range of options. There was agreement that formal letters should be used as a warning in the first instance and as a way of encouraging families to engage with officials in constructive discussion, and no-one suggested that formal procedures should be used until all other options had been fully explored.

It is clearly important that the impression of insensitivity is avoided during the current pandemic period and its aftermath (for example, consider the handling of school meal payments in a North Wales school recently^{xxxii}) and this sensitive approach is also that taken currently in other home countries. An 'Evaluation of Fixed Penalty Notices issued for regular non-attendance at school' was carried out by ICF Consulting and Arad on behalf of

Welsh Government in 2018^{xxxiii} which includes a review of literature on the best practice for improving attendance. The review found that there are mixed views among survey respondents on the efficacy of fixed penalty notices with 56 per cent believing they are effective but 37 per cent believing they are not. Also, it found that the research literature does not provide strong evidence that financial sanctions by themselves always have a positive effect on the behaviour of adults in social policies. As there is still a question mark over the effectiveness of fixed penalty notices in changing behaviours in the long term (it is argued that they do not tackle the underlying issues for non-attendance), it is worth considering undertaking further research into the long term effectiveness of fixed term penalties in the light of the experience of the pandemic.

*** Recommendation - Review and undertake further research into the use of fixed penalty notices and their impact on learner attendance patterns**

Improving learner experiences

A major strategy prior to the pandemic for improving attendance was based on an acknowledgement that attendance will improve if learners want to come to school and if they find what is offered engaging, interesting and relevant to them. Schools that had successfully improved attendance in the past have given particular attention to their curriculum offer and to improving pedagogy through professional development and research-informed practice. At a national level, this understanding formed a major part of the rationale behind curriculum reform and the development of the new Curriculum for Wales. All those consulted recognised the continuing importance of such curriculum reform and the related need for improving pedagogy. Even when consultees argued for 'no new initiatives' so that school staff could maximise the time they have for addressing the immediate post-pandemic needs of learners, they exempted curriculum reform from this request. They saw the new Curriculum for Wales, and the strong emphasis it gives to health and wellbeing, as 'part of the answer' rather than as an additional burden.

There was also a general feeling that aspects of the ALN reforms should help improve the attendance of these learners as the intention of the reforms is to place learners at the centre of the process of identifying needs and provision. Person-centred planning should lead to better understanding of what's important to the learner and help identify issues before they escalate and should also help with early intervention. Extended professional development opportunities^{xxxiv} should also increase awareness of staff of the needs of these learners, for example resources for supporting learners with autism are available on the Autism Wales website^{xxxv}. Additional funding for supporting the reforms and learners with ALN were announced recently^{xxxvi}.

Supporting learners in key stage 4: Vocational curriculum and transition to post-compulsory education and training (PCET)

The need to make the learning experience worthwhile and relevant is particularly important for older learners in key stage 4 whose attendance tends to be worse and who are more likely to become disengaged. This was the case before the pandemic, but the issue is reported to have become sharper since. The consensus about re-engaging these learners, especially those that are particularly 'hard to reach', is to ensure that once they and their families are contacted and engaged, then the learning experience on offer must be bespoke to the learner's needs and aspirations, and should include interesting and relevant vocational options. These vocational routes for learning should lead to worthwhile progression and career development.

Both the representatives of schools and colleges were of the view that vocational routes and taster courses, and work experience, were the kind of provision that would re-engage a significant group of learners. However, such provision, because of its practical and experiential nature, tends to be more expensive than traditional classroom-based school provision. The availability of these curriculum arrangements was said to have decreased since specific funding for the 14-19 learning pathways initiative was discontinued around 2015, and currently is funded from a school's general budget.

Developing and funding a suite of well-understood, vocational options was one of the main suggestions raised during the review consultation to address short-term attendance challenges for the most disengaged key stage 4 students, but also as an important long-term strategy supporting the planned curriculum reforms and the associated reforms to qualification and examination practices. These vocational curriculum options should be made available to pupils of all aptitudes and abilities but would be likely to appeal particularly to those learners who need to re-engage following the experiences of the pandemic.

- * **Recommendation - Explore resourcing further education institutions and work-based training providers to increase the availability of vocational routes and taster courses, and work experience, for key stage 4 students**

Also, there is a potentially larger group of learners whose attendance may not be particularly poor but whose progress and motivation had been adversely affected. Although these learners are likely to progress to the next level of courses, they may struggle to complete them or to achieve as well as they might. Further education college representatives already report that more students entering college have skill shortfalls in basic study skills such as numeracy and essay writing for example. One suggestion is to explore providing these learners with the option to have more time to complete or re-sit their GCSE, vocational or A level courses. The availability of this option would reduce the worry of failure experienced by these students.

- * **Recommendation - Explore further the provision of funding, flexibility and time scales for school, sixth form and college students to be able to complete their qualification courses**

Family engagement and community schools

A key strategy mentioned during the consultation, and features strongly in the research and inspection literature, is communicating, engaging and building strong relationships with the families of learners. This is especially important with all groups of vulnerable learners (disadvantaged and eligible for free school meals, with additional learning needs, or with English as an additional language) and underpins and strengthens other strategies mentioned already.

One way that successful schools achieve better engagement with families is through adopting a 'community school' approach. The aims of a community school have been described as being to:

- 'strengthen family and community engagement
- expand the use of their assets for the benefit of the community served by the school

- provide a range of services, including health and social services, through co-location or the provision of service hubs within the community^{xxxvii}

An important characteristic of community schools is therefore improving family engagement, particularly through being seen to be supporting learner wellbeing, both internally within the school but also by facilitating better access to external support services, and also by involving families more in the life of the school. To help them do this, most community schools employ ‘family engagement officers’ or similar staff. This was a recommendation of the recent Estyn report for schools to ‘Employ family and community engagement staff to work with families, the community and wider partners.’ The expansion of the community school model and the use of family engagement officers was also strongly supported by those consulted, who saw it in a wider context as contributing to the broad policy agenda of reducing educational inequalities. We will discuss in the concluding section 6 how the community schools model could also provide a basis for a unifying vision for improving learner engagement in the longer term. The use of such additional ‘pastoral’ staff is also a feature of best practice in Northern Ireland where they are called Family Liaison Officers, and in academies in England where there is a proposal to further roll out Attendance Mentors as they are called there^{xxxviii}.

- * **Recommendation - Consider how best to support and provide funding to enable all schools to employ family engagement staff to work with families and wider partners**

In the short term, the focus should be on providing additional funding that would ensure all schools can undertake the key task of family engagement during this difficult and busy period for schools. Without extra resource, those consulted believed that implementation of agreed best practice for tackling absence would continue to be limited by workload issues and staff absences. We will return to the challenges of reduced staff capacity in section 5. Further research should also be undertaken and consideration given to the optimal arrangements for employing such staff in schools, for example whether family engagement officers are best employed by individual primary schools or deployed on a cluster basis.

Youth work and the Youth engagement and progression framework

Youth work plays an important part in supporting young people^{xxxix}. In particular, some youth workers act as lead workers for young people who are identified under the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework as being at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training, or who are ‘not in education, employment or training’, (‘NEET’). For example they may help them and their families access a network of services, initiatives and provisions designed to help them not to become NEET. The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework^{xl} was introduced in 2013 to reduce the number of young people who are NEET or are at risk of becoming NEET and the Framework guidance is currently being updated, as part of an overall strengthening of the Framework. The framework provides a useful staged structure to identify young people in need of support, establish what support available to them, and monitor their progress. The framework clarifies which service is responsible for coordinating the support available for each stage.

- * **Recommendation - Consider how the Youth engagement and progression framework could be used in the context of community schools and universal family engagement officers**

Strategies for addressing COVID-related absence

COVID as an illness, self-isolation and school-directed absence

The health, safety and wellbeing of learners and staff are top priorities for all those consulted during this review. Much of the current extra workload for school leaders, teaching and support staff, and for local authority and central government officers, is associated with devising and implementing measures to reduce the transmission of COVID in schools and to keep everyone safe. As the pandemic changes, policy advice and practice are constantly revised to meet new circumstances. Developing and evolving new approaches in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders is challenging and time consuming. Communicating the agreed approaches to learners and their families also takes extra time and effort. As the pandemic develops this work will continue to the best of everybody's ability and in the most effective way possible. In doing this it is essential to build on the collaborative approach that has characterised this effort to date. Effective partnership working and communication are key to ensuring this process is carried out as efficiently as possible.

Rules for isolating when a learner has been in contact with someone with COVID or has tested positive are complex and have changed over time. They have also been interpreted slightly differently in different local authorities and schools. These arrangements need to be kept under review and communicated clearly and consistently to learners, parents and families. It would be helpful to provide local authorities and schools with templates to help them do this, whenever the rules are changed.

- * **Recommendation - Provide local authorities and schools with templates for communicating national policies including those relating to arrangements for self-isolation**

Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues

Welsh Government has funded several programmes that include a wide range of activities designed to help re-engage learners, overcome a sense of isolation, and to make the transition from lockdown back into schooling easier, for example the 'Summer of Fun'^{xli}. See the Welsh Government policy 'Renew and Reform' for a summary of these funded initiatives.^{xlii}

Most of those consulted reported an increase in problems associated with learner wellbeing, mental health and behaviour when pupils returned to school after the lockdown period. Where necessary, they arrange for specialist intervention from support agencies such as CAMHS, local authority counselling or behaviour teams. In some cases, schools may also negotiate a 'phased return' to school with learners and their families.

There was again however a general agreement that these services did not have the capacity to address the increased levels of demand in the system currently. Even where these services have been allocated extra resources, it was reported that it has been difficult for them to recruit extra staff, as these staff often require specialist skills and qualifications, and years of training. There are no obvious mechanisms (and no data) for supplying staff to 'cover' for absences or in response for increased demand in these services, although local authorities can to some extent re-structure their services and move staff to where they are most needed. It would therefore be useful as part of the

broad context of the work around this review that Welsh Government engage in discussions with local authorities about the strategic capacity needs of their services as highlighted by the challenges of meeting current increased demands.

Health-related anxieties

Some learner and staff absences are reported to be directly related to anxieties around catching COVID in school. All school, local authority and government policies are designed to make schools safe places to be, but there is a tension between making sure that operational arrangements in school are such that they minimise transmission of the virus on the one hand and the desire on the other hand to 'return to normal' and avoid arrangements that may have negative educational and other wellbeing effects. There are tensions too between offering reassurance that everything is being done to minimise transmission (which would help those anxious about returning) and ensuring a normal smooth running of the school (which would reassure those who are fed up with the inconveniences of overly stringent arrangements). In practice, schools have relatively limited room to manoeuvre in terms of policy and practice in that they must follow the current scientific advice. Clear communication and constant engagement with those that are anxious are the main strategies adopted, and these too take additional time and energy.

Education-related anxiety

Another major reported source of anxiety for learners is related to schoolwork. Learners may be anxious about not being able to cope with school work any more, or not being able to 'catch up', possibly due to loss of skills or knowledge (real or imagined) during lockdown. In the short term, in order to address this issue, schools are offering a range of extra support for learners. Welsh Government has provided extra resources for employing additional staff to provide this support (the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS) programme^{xliii}) though there is anecdotal evidence that employing suitable teachers, teacher assistants or tutors to undertake this work has been difficult. There has been an evaluation of the effectiveness of the RRRS programme which is due to be published in summer 2022. Additional resources to support and provide career advice for exam year learners and for improving attendance specifically was announced in December 2021^{xliv}. In the longer term, improving the learning experience for pupils including re-looking at the curriculum and pedagogy to encourage learners to want to attend school is the key strategy. There was full support during the review for continuing with curriculum and ALN reforms, as it was believed that these reforms would support the re-engagement of learners.

Most schools leaders and teachers are particularly worried about Year 10 and Year 11 pupils and those in the sixth form. Anxieties exist around returning to school work is reported to be a particular issue for some learners in these cohorts and is believed to be an important factor in the disengagement from school of these cohorts. In some cases this anxiety is due to fearing the requirements of qualifications (examinations or course work). In order to address this concern, extensive modularised learning materials to support examination revision has been made available on HWB and particularly on the WJEC website. There was some concern expressed during the consultation that these materials were not easy to find and it is now intended to rationalise and better organise and signpost these materials soon.

*** Recommendation - Ensure plans for rationalising and signposting GCSE revision materials on the WJEC website are implemented**

Although a decision has been made and clearly communicated that there will be examinations in the summer 2022, there remains in practice a perceived uncertainty over the arrangements among teachers. Quite properly, contingency arrangements involving centre determined grades (CDGs) have also been made in case examinations have to be cancelled for health and safety reasons, such as a significant increase in the virus during the summer 2022. It was reported that as a result of this unintentional uncertainty, schools were preparing learners for both eventualities that is for examinations (for example arranging mock exams) and for CDG (for example ensuring detailed marking of course work). The effect of this is to increase the pressure on both learners and teachers.

Many teaching professionals and educational commentators hope that there will be, in both the short and long term, a more balanced and varied approach to assessment which includes both teacher assessment and examinations, in particular recognising that different learners prefer different types of assessment. There is already a range of views about exams in 2022, with some in support and others preferring more teacher-based assessment. The experience of 2021 highlights that the CDG process introduces a range of different inequities (eg increasing the attainment gap, variation across centres, between schools and colleges, and so on), and create additional teacher burden at a time when the focus should be supporting their learners. Qualifications Wales are looking to introduce more types of assessment in the new qualifications being developed for the Curriculum for Wales.

Blended learning

Despite the overall negative effect of the pandemic on many learners, home and distance learning has been successful for some groups of pupils, particularly those who have a predisposition for learning remotely and digitally, and had the resources and home support. Also, blended learning is an appropriate means for students to continue to learn during illness or phased return to school irrespective of the pandemic, although this possibility has become more of a practical option following the experience gained of managing blended learning during lockdown.

Many of those consulted wanted to take this line of thinking further, and while they believed that school was the best place for learners to be to learn and to be well and safe, they also acknowledged that for some (mainly older) learners, it would be appropriate for schools to find a way for them to learn through a managed blended learning approach. For example, on request and through negotiation and agreement by the school, a learner could attend school for part of the week, during which they could discuss progress face to face with a teacher and have further work set, attend a certain number of lessons and practical sessions, and benefit from wellbeing and pastoral sessions and from general socialising with peers, but the learner would also work digitally from home. It was felt that older learners especially should have a greater say in deciding when, where and how they learn, though a minimum of face-to-face contact was considered essential, not least for safeguarding reasons.

*** Explore the need for a strategic approach to digital teaching and learning to address the needs of those who are not or cannot be present in schools**

As many teachers now have the skills required to organise blended learning, the barrier to this approach would be its resource and workload implications. Another barrier is that often such home study is not recorded as attendance in school, but as authorised absence, (although attendance code B could possibly be used in this context). It is therefore suggested that a review of attendance policy and the use of registration codes, as included in the All Wales Attendance Framework^{xlv}, be undertaken in this context, and by considering the evolving attendance policy landscape in the home countries and the research literature findings (see Appendix D). For example, agreed blended learning is coded as present in Northern Ireland and similar changes have been proposed but not agreed in England (the legislative frameworks for attendance in England and Wales are parallel and more prescriptive than for the other home countries). Such a change in coding would also mean that attendance records and analysis would be more meaningful during periods of school lockdown.

*** Recommendation - Consider how attendance policy and records could be best adapted for use with blended learning**

Digital learning was generally considered more successful in the second school lockdown period than the first. There is research which found that more advantaged learners and their families had established more effective habits by the second lockdown, but disadvantaged learners had not done so, thus widening the gap in remote learning impacts. Other research notes that there are still learners with no access to devices, no internet and no home space to study.

By the second lockdown, most schools had developed effective digital learning arrangements. The extent to which elements of blended learning have continued after the return to on-site schooling varies considerably between schools^{xlvi}. Schools understand that continuing with blended learning helps in supporting learners who are absent from school for whatever reason. However, while the majority of learners are in school, most schools have found it difficult for teachers to teach full classrooms and also prepare digital lessons and materials for remote learning for a minority of learners.

In a minority of cases, lessons are being recorded as a matter of course and can then be used by absent learners or for revision, though this approach still requires time from teachers to discuss with and set work for the absent learners. The schools that are most familiar with using digital and blended learning are those with previous experience of using digital materials on HWB and e-sgo^{xlvii} for example or have a track record of professional development for staff on using digital technology. Those consulted thought it would be useful to establish a 'national digital school for Wales' or similar arrangement that would contain resources that all schools and learners could use as appropriate.

*** Recommendation - As part of the wider development of a strategic digital and blended learning policy, explore establishing a national repository of teaching and learning materials for all school years as soon as possible**

5) Workload pressures and staffing capacity

The suggestions made above on how schools and local authority support services can help learners re-engage with education and improve their attendance (by helping pupils progress academically as well as tackling their wellbeing and mental health issues) all involve the input of staff time and effort, especially if they are to be implemented rigorously and fully. They therefore constitute an increase in workload for staff. However, it was

consistently reported that undertaking this extra workload has been particularly difficult during this period because of the effect of staff absences, which has resulted in limited staff capacity for schools as well as for local authority support services. In addition to ongoing teacher and staff absences (often because of contracting COVID or needing to self-isolate), another difficulty has been sourcing enough supply staff to cover for the increased level of absences.

The exact extent of teacher absence is unknown, but is generally believed to have increased relative to pre-COVID levels following the general return to school after the lockdown period. The reasons given for this increased teacher absence are similar to many of the reasons for learner absence and include illness from COVID itself, long-COVID, self-isolation, COVID-related issues with their children or other dependent relatives, anxiety about catching COVID in school, and various mental health issues. Cases of unvaccinated teachers not attending school during COVID outbreaks were cited, although this did not appear to be a widespread issue.

The impact of more teacher absence is threefold. First, it has a negative effect on learner progress as the learners attending school are taught by non-specialists or by supply teachers they do not know. Second, regular teacher absences and the resulting routine changes may also disincentivise or demotivate learners. And thirdly, arranging cover further increases the administrative burdens on senior management teams and who may have to undertake some of the cover themselves.

Schools have found it particularly difficult to replace absent teachers for certain subjects such as Science, especially in Welsh-medium or rural schools. Appointing teachers in these specialist area was challenging prior to COVID, but is said to be even harder now. It was reported that these challenges varied considerably in extent between schools across the country. The workload challenge was felt to be particularly acute for smaller schools.

Those consulted much appreciated and approved of the scheme for employing newly qualified teachers (NQTs) who have not secured permanent employment on paid placements. This scheme has been extended from the autumn term to now cover the spring term. There was a belief that this scheme could usefully be further extended to the summer term and into the next academic year for the next cohort of newly qualified teachers (that is for those who are training this year). There are two rationales given for this suggestion. First, the student teachers who are training currently have had their initial teacher education disrupted and would benefit from additional experience and support in their induction year, if they do not secure full employment (this is was the original rationale for the current scheme for the present cohort of NQTs). Second, extending the scheme would also help schools with their ongoing capacity challenges which are likely to continue into the next academic year (although this was not part of the original rationale for the scheme).

*** Recommendation - Consider extending the scheme for employing NQTs who have not secured permanent employment to include the next cohort**

Senior school managers reported that recruiting teachers, and teaching assistants, to posts was particularly difficult currently. To ease this situation, it was suggested that schools would welcome greater flexibility in employment-based routes into qualified teacher status including encouraging a broader range of providers (there is currently one provider, the Open University, and the other accredited Welsh University-based partnership providers do not offer employment-based routes, though schools are involved

with them for other routes) and a wider range of allowed subject specialisms (currently restricted to shortage areas). Consultees felt that this would help alleviate the current capacity challenges, though policy officers warned that commissioning new courses was expensive and time consuming under current accreditation arrangements.

*** Recommendation - Explore the possibility of introducing more flexibility and more providers into employment-based and part-time routes to initial teacher training**

Specific challenges are reported for finding supply cover for teachers and teaching assistants. The main reason for the difficulty in finding supply teachers seems to be the steep increase in demand. Currently, there are some 4,200 supply teachers registered by the EWC^{xlviii} and some 40 private agencies and a few local authority still have their own schemes. Some 25 of the agencies have voluntarily joined the Welsh Government's NPS framework which guarantees better pay, terms and conditions for supply teachers. A recently announced cooperation agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru includes a commitment to removing a market approach to the supply teacher system^{xlix} though policy officers highlighted difficulties in achieving this as both agencies as providers and schools as consumers had rights set out in primary legislation.

Overall, the school leaders consulted did not see an easy way to address the current short-term teacher supply challenge but rather see the solution to the system's capacity problem in increasing the capacity of support services (such as social, youth, careers, counselling, education welfare or similar services), so that these services could better support schools' efforts to re-engage learners in education or training. However, as mentioned earlier, these support services have their own capacity challenges, for similar reasons to the school and teacher supply issue. Broadly speaking, they too have increased workload, ongoing uncertainties because of COVID-related reductions in workforce, and generally no quick mechanisms for increasing supply of suitably trained workers. For example, we heard that the capacity of the youth service was 'stretched'.

Despite these serious concerns about the system's capacity, most of the professionals consulted thought that now is the time to re-evaluate past practices and to introduce or accelerate the introduction of new practices, rather than returning to previous ways of working that may not have been the best or have now been overtaken because of the changed circumstances following the pandemic. Many thought that we should build on these successes in a strategic way, while also doing as much as possible to alleviate the most pressing capacity and workload issues.

The Welsh Government Managing Workload and Reducing Bureaucracy working group has a wide diversity of representation and has continued to meet regularly during the pandemic period. The working group has identified around 15 action points as part of its work in developing a workload charter. A few of these actions are related to the COVID pandemic and are in line with the findings of this review, though most of the issues being addressed are ongoing concerns that existed prior to the pandemic, including issues such as the importance of avoiding duplication in data collection and multiple teacher surveys.

In summary, there are staffing capacity challenges at teacher, teacher assistant and local authority support staff levels. More qualified teachers are required to cover for absent teachers and to staff various 'catch up' initiatives for tutoring learners. More teaching assistants are needed for supporting the wide range of wellbeing, mental health and family engagement initiatives that schools would like to undertake. More local authority support staff are needed to help schools address a backlog of acute and persistent learner

wellbeing and mental health issues. The capacity challenges are inter-related, so action to address shortages for one category would relieve the pressure on the others. Teachers and support staff require specialist qualifications and there are few quick solutions to addressing these capacity limitations, though we suggest that the initiative of using unemployed newly qualified teachers could be usefully extended. Funding the employment of more teacher assistants, particularly to carry out family engagement work, seems the most practical suggestion for the short term.

6) Conclusions and recommendations

There is little doubt among those consulted that the education system as a whole, including schools, local authority support services and central government, is working hard to improve attendance by tackling the underlying reasons for absence, both those that are new to COVID and those that existed before but have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This was also the finding of the inspectorate¹. There is much good will, better cooperation and interagency relationships, and additional funding and guidance.

The review has not found any major gaps at a strategic policy level, and the main answers to improving attendance seem therefore to lie in the re-establishment, extension and better coordination of existing best practice and policies. A few adjustments to policy at an operational level have been suggested as indicated by the recommendations made throughout the report.

Nevertheless, the extra workload issues and capacity challenges identified in this report mean that there are no easy or quick solutions to improving attendance. Hence, addressing workload pressure and increasing staff capacity is the major theme emerging from the review. As this applies to support services as well as for schools, tackling this central concern also requires discussion with local authorities on their strategic capacity needs and that of their services. Addressing the workload and staff capacity issues requires a strategic approach, more efficient partnership working between services and agencies, effective communication, and more professional development and sharing of best practice.

Common themes around what strategies would further help the system work more coherently emerged from the review. The importance of following these strategic principles was consistently stressed by a wide range of those consulted. Most of these common themes represent continuities or natural developments of current policy, including continuing with the current curriculum and ALN reform agendas, taking a whole system approach, focusing on learner and staff wellbeing, with a particular focus on taking a more learner-centred or personalised approach to learning, including introducing more 'blended' or distance learning opportunities, particularly for older learners where appropriate. Introducing and developing these various ways of working together represent developing an educational culture along a direction of travel broadly agreed to before and during the pandemic.

In addition, this report suggests that family engagement, and a 'community school' approach to achieving this engagement, has the potential of becoming an important unifying policy and a key part of a long term vision for tackling the underlying causes of educational underperformance that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This community focus for schools explicitly addresses the coordination and partnership working between services and agencies at a local level. In the best cases, such schools know their learners and their families well and have family engagement officers who can help to orchestrate the support available, and ensure that local knowledge of specific learner needs are met.

In conclusion, the review found that there is a growing consensus among learners, educational practitioners and policy makers around the most important underlying reasons for learner absence, though there is more to learn through further research and analysis about this understanding and the resulting practice. The reasons for absence are complex and multi-faceted as discussed in this review, but the most fundamental causes are

believed to be related to learner wellbeing and mental health, and to their attitude to learning and to school (a concept variously described in the literature as school engagement or connectivity). In practice, the ways in which schools try to improve this connectivity is by building trusting relationships, by engagement and communication, consulting actively, seeking and acting on feedback, providing responsive and relevant learning opportunities, and crucially, understanding and trying to help families overcome the socioeconomic and other barriers to learning, by working in liaison with a range of external support services and agencies. Improving school engagement requires a personalised, empathetic and flexible approach tailored to each learner and family and that recognises their individual circumstances. This grouping of understandings and activities is often characterised as a community school approach, which sees improving attendance not in isolation but as part of a broader strategy for helping learners to achieve their best. Though existing before COVID, the experiences of the pandemic has strengthened this group of beliefs. In policy terms, it seems sensible to build on this growing understanding that aligns in broad terms both with current policy direction and literature findings.

Summary of recommendations for Welsh Government

Family engagement and community schools

- * Consider how best to support and provide funding to enable all schools to employ family engagement staff to work with families and wider partners
- * Consider how the Youth engagement and progression framework could be used in the context of community schools and universal family engagement officers

Supporting learners in key stage 4

- * Explore resourcing further education institutions and work-based training providers to increase the availability of vocational routes and taster courses, and work experience, for key stage 4 students
- * Explore further the provision of funding, flexibility and time scales for school, sixth form and college students to be able to complete their qualification courses
- * Ensure plans for rationalising and signposting GCSE revision materials on the WJEC website are implemented

Blended learning

- * Explore the need for a strategic approach to digital teaching and learning to address the needs of those who are not or cannot be present in schools
- * As part of the wider development of a strategic digital and blended learning policy, explore establishing a national repository of teaching and learning materials for all school years as soon as possible
- * Consider how attendance policy and records could be best adapted for use with blended learning

Workload and staffing

- * Consider extending the scheme for employing NQTs who have not secured permanent employment to include the next cohort
- * Explore the possibility of introducing more flexibility and more providers into employment-based and part-time routes to initial teacher training

Communication and sharing best practice

- * Share and disseminate best practice for improving attendance, including how schools can best engage with learners and their families, by adapting, re-packaging and re-

issuing relevant guidance and promoting them through targeted professional development

- * Provide local authorities and schools with templates for communicating national policies including those relating to arrangements for self-isolation

Data and research

- * Undertake further research into attendance patterns that would help to identify learners who may be in danger of being excluded
- * Discuss the definition, recording and analysis of attendance data with similar countries in order to learn from the latest practice and to consider how comparison of data and policy can be further facilitated
- * Review the definition of persistent absence and the related trigger points for interventions
- * Consider how best to collect, analyse and publish education staff attendance in more detail
- * Explore developing and publishing a set of metrics for learner experience that include data on teacher absence, the use of supply cover, and the availability of subject specialists for example
- * Review and undertake further research into the use of fixed penalty notices and their impact on learner attendance patterns

Appendices

A) Terms of reference

1. To analyse and interpret data sources on current attendance/non-attendance rates in Welsh schools.
2. To make contact with key organisations and individuals within the education system and to collect intelligence on the emerging situation and what measures/interventions are needed to better re-engage learners to avoid them becoming NEET in future.
3. The organisations/individuals to include Local Authorities/Regional Education Consortia/Estyn/ NAEL/ the Further Education Sector/Work-Based Learning Providers, the Youth Service, the Careers Service and the Equity and Inclusion Higher Education Collaborative Research Network.
4. To hold focus groups with learners.
5. To undertake some 'deep dives' in one local authority area in each of the four regions of Wales to gather information from head-teachers, Family Engagement Officers and Education Welfare Officers.
6. To consider UK/international evidence in this area.
7. To work with colleagues in the Education Directorate/SHELL to consider the evidence gathered and to agree recommendations to be brought to the Welsh Government.
8. These recommendations to include consideration of how additional support could be offered to pupils whose poor attendance and lack of engagement may have resulted in lower than expected examination outcomes. This additional support

should seek to support their progression as learners and avoid them becoming NEET.

B) Consultations contributing to the review and methodology

To meet the review aims, a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches were undertaken. The following research activities were completed:

- Analysis of available Welsh Government and other data on learner attendance in Wales
- A review of academic and grey literature - see appendix D
- Semi structured Teams consultation interviews using interview questions agreed with Welsh Government officers - see below for full list of consultees
- Case study Teams discussions with staff from 8 schools - see below for list of schools

The consultations were carried out mainly in November and December 2021 as follows:

Focus group discussions with:

Learners (two meetings facilitated by Children in Wales)
 National Academy for Educational Leadership associates
 Secondary headteachers
 Local authority Directors of Education (three meetings)
 Regional consortia CEOs
 Education Welfare Officers
 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller local authority support officers
 Home nations attendance policy officers

Discussions with representatives of national education organisations:

Estyn
 Qualifications Wales
 Children's Commissioner for Wales
 Colegau Cymru
 Teacher unions and associations

Individual interviews with the following:

Tegwen Ellis - Director of the National Academy for Educational Leadership
 Robin Hughes - Education consultant
 Dr Carmel Conn - Collaborative research network lead
 Dr Jennifer Hampton - Welsh Education Data Laboratory, WISERD Education Data Lab
 Shirley Rogers - CEO of Careers Wales
 Jonathan Angell, Headteacher, Eastern High School, Cardiff

Interviews with Welsh Government policy officials on:

Education statistics
 Youth engagement
 Young person's guarantee
 Community schools
 Knowledge and Analytical Services
 Education Other Than At School and Elective Home Education
 Additional Learning Needs
 Blended learning
 Assessment
 Teacher education

Teacher supply and workload

Case study discussions were carried out in January 2022 with the following schools:

Ysgol Bontnewydd, Gwynedd
 Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn, Gwynedd
 Ysgol Llys Hywel, Carmarthenshire
 St John Lloyd Catholic Secondary School, Carmarthenshire
 Parc Primary School, Rhondda Cynon Taff
 Pontypridd High School, Rhondda Cynon Taff
 Usk Church in Wales Primary School, Monmouthshire
 Chepstow High, Monmouthshire

C) Case studies

Case study discussions were carried out in January 2022 with the following schools identified by their local authority as showing good practice in improving attendance during this period. The local authorities were chosen to provide a regional, socioeconomic and linguistic spread, and contained two authorities (Monmouthshire and Rhondda Cynon Taff) that have demonstrated consistently high learner attendance rates across the pandemic period including when taking local infection rates into account.

Ysgol Bontnewydd, Gwynedd - 200 pupils, primary school

Ysgol Bontnewydd's approach to improving pupil attendance is to be consciously constructive and non-punitive in all its dealings with learners and parents. Senior learners aim to make the school a welcoming place for learners, to avoid any possible negativity attaching to attendance, and to establish a close and trusting relationships with families. For example, children are encouraged to contribute ideas actively about what they should study and how they could learn about topics. Parents are also contacted for their suggestions, for example on the nature of school trips. As another example of this constructive approach, the school does not publish class attendance rates or offer certificates for good attendance anymore, as it feels that this can be a disincentive for some learners.

During the pandemic, the school built on its good relationships with parents, supported them and kept them fully informed. In particular, the school successfully encouraged parents to keep their children at home and to test them for the virus when they first showed early symptoms of the illness. By helping to keep the circulation of the virus as low as possible in school in this way, and by reinforcing high expectations for hygiene, they have been able to achieve consistently excellent attendance rates of over 90%, often in the high 90s%, even when the pandemic was at its most virulent in the local area. This approach has also contributed to the attendance of teachers being high during the pandemic.

The school has prioritised learners' wellbeing when they returned to school after lockdown or after any significant absences. They understand the challenges and anxieties that the pandemic has caused learners and their families, and have established nurture groups to support individual learners. 'Lego therapy' sessions have proved particularly helpful for some children and gives them an opportunity to talk informally with teachers about their worries.

Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn, Gwynedd - 560 pupils, all-age school

The school gave examples of pupils whose daily routines had changed to such extent during lockdown - mainly staying up late at night talking with friends or gaming or using the internet and getting up late in the morning - which they found returning to a 'normal' school attendance routine very difficult. These learners found that their communication and social skills had also been negatively affected during this period. The greatest challenge in these respects has been presented by the older students in key stage 4.

The school believed that its approach to lockdown helped to make the transition back to face-to-face schooling as smooth as possible for all learners. The school organised 'live' lessons for learners from the start of lockdown. Senior managers sought feedback from learners and their families on how the arrangements were working through regular questionnaires. They listened carefully to this feedback and adapted the provision to make sure that it was not too overwhelming. Form teachers took a 'register' daily based on engagement with the digital provision and immediately contacted parents of those learners who were causing concern.

Teachers were helped in this engagement work by two 'cymorthyddion cynhwysiant' (inclusion assistants) who previously had been employed by the school as part of its inclusion unit. These teaching assistants contacted parents regularly, especially of vulnerable learners, and helped them with practical issues including delivering meals in some cases. The relationships established during this difficult time helped to keep the number of learners who had a traumatic lockdown to a minimum. It is estimated that around 80% of pupils had benefitted from the work of the inclusion unit at some point or other. As a result of these strategies, attendance is now improving and is around 89% compared with around 95% before COVID, despite the high levels of COVID-related illnesses in the locality.

Ysgol Llys Hywel, Carmarthenshire 160 pupils, primary school

Ysgol Llys Hywel is a small, rural primary school that has maintained an attendance rate of 94% after lockdown, which compares well with the school's pre-COVID target of 96%. Frequent communications with parents emphasise the importance of attendance and positive engagement with families is a core feature of the school's approach to improving pupil attendance.

Accurate and consistent recording of attendance is considered a high priority at Ysgol Llys Hywel. It is the first step in a rigorous approach to attendance which includes early follow up of non-attendance. A phone call is made to the home from the first day of absence. Good attendance is rewarded during assembly periods, but this initiative has been adapted during the pandemic so that absence due directly to illness is discounted from the calculations.

School procedures include a rigorous fortnightly whole-school review of attendance. A graduated approach to non-attendance is employed and the school works closely with the local authority support services. Pupils with attendance lower than an 85% cut off figure or are suspected to be in any danger are referred to the School Safeguarding and Attendance Team and to Education welfare officers. The school is proactive in referring to the Team Around the Family for additional support. Support plans for pupils and families are implemented quickly. A flexible approach is taken that takes into account the needs of

each individual learner and family, for example, arrangements can be made for blended learning and school work could be delivered through Teams where necessary.

St John Lloyd Catholic School, Carmarthenshire - 480 pupils, secondary school

Key features of St John Lloyd Catholic School's approach to improving attendance are establishing a culture that promotes pupils' wellbeing, creating excellent relationships with parents and families, and working closely with local authority support services. There is a graduated approach to tackling absence. Pupils with attendance between 95%-90% are mentored individually by teachers, attendance between 85%-90% triggers support from the school's attendance lead officer, and attendance under 85% means that referrals are made to the local authority School Safeguarding and Attendance Team and Education welfare officers are involved.

The school actively reviews its quality of teaching and curriculum offer in order to engage pupils and make them want to attend school. Option blocks in key stage 4 are adapted annually to tailor them to learners' wishes and the choices include Prince's Trust courses. Vocational options are available in collaboration with the local further education college, and as a result of all these measures no Year 11 leavers have been identified recently as not in education employment or training (NEET).

During the first lockdown period, the school developed an extensively used 'pupil online support team' (POST) which provided a way for pupils who wished to do so to maintain a regular contact with an adult they trusted. POST evolved during the second lockdown period, so that in addition form tutors made weekly contact with all pupils. POST has continued to be in use and is used as a support mechanism for learners with a range of anxieties that have continued after learners have returned to school.

The low rate of referrals to external services indicates that the school makes extensive efforts to improve attendance prior to referral. The school's attendance lead officer uses a range of supportive and flexible strategies to re-engage pupils. For example, pupils may be offered a later start to the day. These learners would be met at registration and taken to the school's pastoral hub. A purposely designed new room - the 'cwtch lles' - has been recently added to the school's resources available for facilitating this type of work. These pupils are also offered a 'phased curriculum' of a limited number of lessons or a modified curriculum if required.

Parc School, Rhondda Cynon Taff - 220 pupils, primary school, 39% free school meals

Prior to the pandemic, Parc School had developed a vision that centred around ensuring that the school environment and culture encouraged pupils to want to attend school and learn. The staff wanted to 'get learners wellbeing right' and felt that the key to this was to get to know and understand each family well, and offer them help to overcome barriers to learning where necessary. A Family engagement officer (FEO) has been in post for four years and has been central to this process.

The role of the FEO is wide ranging and includes, meeting and greeting each child and family as they arrive at school every day. Each new family is visited at home when a pupil first attends school, and school approaches and policies, including the attendance policy, are explained clearly from the outset. Each day, the parents of absent pupils are texted and asked for an explanation, and rung individually if there is no adequate response. If necessary, families are visited at home and offered support to improve attendance, such

as adapting morning routines temporarily. Nurture groups are used to help pupils re-integrate back into school where needed.

Since the pandemic, the school has built on its close relationships with families and has continued to try to help them during this difficult time. For example, the school has delivered food parcels, Christmas presents and wellbeing packs where needed, and has run parent workshops and book clubs. The school is seen by families as a trusted source of information regarding the pandemic, and parents often ask the school for help and advice. A parent council is supported and the views of families on school procedures are sought through regular questionnaires.

As a result of the above measures, pupil attendance, though not as high as before the pandemic (around 95%), has been consistently over 90%. It is now unusual for the school to need to contact families because they proactively contact the school to explain absences. The school feels that this demonstrates the effectiveness of its supportive approach and its emphasis on building trusting relationships with families rather than using more heavy-handed approaches, such as sending formal letters. Pupils are rewarded for improved attendance rather than for the absolute level of their attendance.

Pontypridd High School, Rhondda Cynon Taff

Before the pandemic, the school had been working hard to improve attendance and felt it had been making progress. Attendance had been steadily increasing towards a target of 94%. However, the effect of the pandemic on attendance at Pontypridd High has been to slow this progress and reduce attendance. The greatest effect has been seen in Year 11, with many of these students suffering from anxiety and stress, while in contrast there have been no long term absenteeism in Year 7.

The school undertakes detailed analysis of its attendance data, which shows that there attendance for learners eligible for free school meals has been significantly worse than for other pupils. Another pattern has been identified that shows that pupils who did not engage well with school work during lockdown are those who are finding it most difficult to return to full attendance now. Overall, attendance has dropped to around 91%, once absence due directly to COVID has been disaggregated from the figures.

Senior leaders' central approach for dealing with the pandemic, is to build on and extend the good relationships established with families and support agencies prior to the pandemic. This included regular and detailed communication with parents. A wide range of ancillary workers from the school and from external support agencies were used to support learners and their families that were experiencing difficulties, including counsellors, youth workers and emotional literacy support assistants (ELSA). This work continued when it was time to help pupils in readjusting to physical school attendance. As before the pandemic, making the school an attractive place to attend also continues to be a key school strategy for improving pupil attendance. For example, the option choices at key stage 4 are designed to be as relevant as possible and include vocational and Prince's Trust options.

Pre-COVID attendance improvement practices have continued to be important for the school, including carrying out detailed analyses of attendance spreadsheets for early identification of attendance issues and intervention with individual pupils. There is a graduated response, coded red, amber and green. Access to Teams sessions and packs of teaching materials are prepared for learners who miss a lot of school, such as those

refusing to attend because of raised anxiety. Previous practices have been adapted where this is considered necessary. For example, prize giving for attendance has continued but has been adapted so that pupils are now entered into a good attendance Christmas prize draw after discounting direct COVID-related absences.

Usk Church in Wales school, Monmouthshire - 275 pupils, primary school

Usk School has found that implementing pre-COVID good practice during the current period is important. Administrative staff and wellbeing practitioners are key to identifying and following up any absences immediately (additional Welsh Government funding has enabled some of these previously part-time staff to be made full-time). Pupils are contacted if absences persist and staff emphasise how much the school community misses them and would like to see them. This approach usually works and pupils are keen to return when they are better. Senior managers appreciate monthly meetings with the local authority Education welfare service. The meetings help to keep attendance high on the school's agenda and to structure and organise decisions. Individual cases are discussed and actions for the school and for the welfare service are agreed and recorded.

The school has evolved its approach and now employs a more supportive way of dealing with absence than before the pandemic. For example, they do not have an 'attendance cup' anymore as they do not want to encourage children who are genuinely ill to come to school or feel guilty if they do not. They appreciate that in a rural catchment that some children cannot get to school if their parents are unable to take them. The school strongly emphasises the importance of good attendance in all its communications with parents, and try hard to build an ethos that is welcoming. Engaging with parents and regular communication with them are high priorities.

The governing body also takes an active role in encouraging good attendance and the senior management team meet fortnightly with parent governors. To help governors understand the attendance data, senior managers have disaggregated COVID-related absences from the overall attendance data to show what attendance would have been without the pandemic. This allows comparisons to be made more straight-forwardly with attendance data from before to the pandemic. Attendance currently is around 93% compared with just over 96% before the pandemic, and the disaggregated data is now steadily increasing towards the previous value.

Chepstow High School, Monmouthshire 850 pupils, secondary school

A Family liaison officer has been at the heart of Chepstow High's approach to improving family engagement and pupil attendance before, during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Two members of the senior management team had previously worked together at another school and had seen the advantages of this approach. Getting 'the right person for the job' was considered a key factor in the success of this approach - they had learned that the family liaison officer needs to have credibility in the local community and to know it well.

Senior leaders believe passionately in the importance of the school staff understanding the needs of the families in their catchment so that they can gain their trust and help them to overcome any barriers to their children's learning and the family liaison officer is central to this process. As a result of identifying the individual needs of the families in this way, the school has been able to help with supporting mental health issues and also helping with

practical and financial problems such as providing uniform for pupils, and even buying a bed for a family in one case with the support of local businessmen.

Some of other factors that the school feels that are essential in improving attendance are: strong leadership and a relentless focus on attendance improvement; clear processes that are well understood by both parents and school staff; a whole-team approach involving all aspects of the school's pastoral team, including the ALNCo and the learning coaches; good relationships with external agencies including the police, and other schools as well as with local authority services and the town council; and improving the quality of teaching and the extra-curricular provision.

As a result of these approaches, attendance at Chepstow is now at around 92%, down only a little from pre-COVID levels of around 95%. The decrease in attendance levels is greater for those learners who are eligible for free school meals and for Year 11 students in particular.

D) Literature review

The COVID pandemic has changed the context of education research in general and for research into learner attendance in particular. The experiences of learners, families and staff during and in the aftermath of the pandemic has affected many aspects of learners' education, often in new ways, and has exacerbated existing challenges. Patterns of learner attendance have changed in the short term, and we do not know yet whether these changes will have a lasting effect, or if they do persist what are the underlying reasons for them, and to what extent previously identified best practice are still valid. Hence, it is unsurprising that the impact of the pandemic on learner attendance and on strategies for improving attendance are issues that the research and grey literature are only beginning to address and evaluate.

In this context, I am thankful to the Welsh Government Information, Library and Archive service for undertaking a search of literature on pupil attendance during the return to school following COVID lockdowns. This was a high level search covering the last two years. The results included full text reports, government documents, papers, journal articles, news, blogs and web pages, which were categorised by priority and by date published. The full search results are in the form of a matrix available here - <https://documents.hf.wales.gov.uk/id:A38113140/document/versions/published>

Much of the literature found relates to the impact of COVID in general rather than on attendance in particular, although attendance is often referred to in passing. For example, in Wales, the Senedd research briefing 'Back to school: education in the time of COVID'^{li} lists the following potential impacts:

- 'lost learning' meaning pupils could underperform academically and have their long term prospects affected
- a loss of confidence in the examination and assessment system
- long term reductions in school attendance, a factor which we know is key to educational outcomes
- difficult transitions between school years and from primary to secondary
- challenges in re-engaging learners and addressing low motivation
- an unhelpful 'catch up' narrative about lost learning placing unnecessary psychological pressure on children and young people
- a negative effect on learners' ability and confidence to communicate in Welsh where they haven't been able to do so at home

Much of the research relates to the early stages of the pandemic, for example to the impact of lockdown and to initial efforts to encourage learners to return to school, including guidance on practical matters such as how best to reopen schools, see for example the NFER publication 'Returning pupils to school'^{lii}. In 'A multi-tiered systems of support blueprint for re-opening schools following COVID-19 shutdown' Christopher A Kearney and Joshua Childs^{liii} discuss multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) model that may serve to balance student educational progress with health and safety concerns. The article identifies four main domains of functioning (adjustment, traumatic stress, academic status, health and safety) across three tiers of support (universal, targeted, intensive).

Any analysis of attendance data that goes beyond simple summary also related to the early stages of the pandemic, see for example the Education Policy Institute report, 'School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening'^{liv} which shows how school attendance rates varied over a brief time after reopening in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and analyses the extent to which attendance varied across local authorities in Wales and Scotland. The report identifies variation across local authorities and countries, partly explained by a generally lower attendance in areas with high infection, but also identifies that the relationship between overall case numbers and school attendance is imperfect and may be a function of the age distribution of cases.

Some of the general reviews of the impact of the pandemic mention reasons for non-attendance. For example, Ofsted note in their report 'Education recovery in schools: autumn 2021'^{lv} that schools say that much school absence is for reasons related to COVID-19, including:

- pupils testing positive for COVID-19
- COVID-19-related anxiety among both parents and pupils
- poorer mental health among pupils as a result of the pandemic
- parents rescheduling or rearranging term-time holidays
- children having low resilience due to setbacks or illness

They also said that there was more COVID-related absences among disadvantaged pupils, pupils with SEND and specific year groups and that leaders are tackling this through family support, designated staff members, follow-up phone calls or home visits, and clubs for those whose attendance is particularly low.

In 'Impact of COVID-2019 on school attendance problems' Gina Nathwani Adeel Shoaib et al.^{lvi} identify that there are currently no studies directly addressing the effect of COVID-19 and school attendance problems (SAPs) on academic performance, or child mental health and functioning. However, they say children with SAPs seem to be more at risk of mental health issues, which may increase during the pandemic. They distinguish between four types of SAPs: school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal and school exclusion.

The two most common themes in this research on the impact of the pandemic is the negative effect on learner wellbeing and mental health, and a concern that vulnerable groups have been disproportionately affected. For example, the evidence surveyed in the House of Commons Research Briefing Paper 'Coronavirus and schools'^{lvii} identified disparities in young people's home learning experiences during lockdown, and raises particular concerns about the impact on disadvantaged children. In England, the Education Endowment Foundation publishes a rolling summary of domestic and international research on the impact of the pandemic, 'Best evidence on impact of COVID-19 on pupil attainment'^{lviii}, which finds that the research examined consistently shows that the current

cohort of pupils have made less academic progress compared with previous year groups, and that there is a large and growing attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils.

Anxiety and mental health issues were widely reported to have increased during the pandemic. For example, the Mental Health Foundation reported that 'teenagers' mental health under severe pressure as pandemic continues'^{lix}. Professor Ann John, Professor of Public Health and Psychiatry at Swansea University, is quoted as saying that 'the pandemic has exposed the deep inequalities in our society'. Many studies have shown the greater impact and widening gaps in mental health difficulties, educational attainment and more severe financial consequences for the young and those in living in poverty. In particular in Wales, the School Health Research Network (SHRN) carried out its two-yearly Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey in 2021^{lx}. The findings show large increases in clinically significant emotional difficulties and a clear increase in 'average scores' for emotional difficulties when compared with the similar 2019 survey^{lxi} (while recognising the methodological changes made to enable the 2021 survey to be carried out in line with COVID-19 social distancing measures).

The association between anxiety and poor school attendance is explored by the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health^{lxii}. Their findings from a systematic review of the literature suggest that anxiety may be associated with absence from school, including overall absenteeism, unexcused absence/truancy, and school refusal. However, they also identify a lack of high quality research in this field as well as little longitudinal evidence. This means that although anxiety and school absence may be related, we do not know whether anxiety comes before school absence, or vice versa. Nor do we know whether there is a causal relationship between them. They also note that there is little research that focused on associations between anxiety and overall absenteeism, or excused/medical absences, despite the latter being the most common type of absence in the UK and internationally.

The international research has similar findings regarding wellbeing and mental health. For example, the US Department of Education^{lxiii} found that many learners struggle with mental health challenges that impact on their access to and participation in learning, and that these challenges are often misunderstood and can lead to behaviours that are inconsistent with school or program expectations. The COVID pandemic intensified these challenges, accelerating the need to provide school-based mental health support. They concluded that their top priority is to prioritise Wellbeing for Each and Every Child, Student, Educator, and Provider.

Where the research on wellbeing and mental health comes to conclusions regarding ways forward it is emphasised that promoting inclusion was key. For example, the Institute of Education^{lxiv} discusses the danger in the aftermath of the pandemic of focusing on 'catch up' learning for the relatively advantaged and neglecting the long-term health, wellbeing, and competency benefits of inclusive education for all students, especially those who are poor and 'near poor'. The blog refers to the Institute's *Wellbeing and Behaviour: Identifying interventions for positive participation for young people at risk of exclusion in school* study that analysed the relative importance of a range of factors concerning the social and economic backgrounds of children, as well as individual characteristics. While many of the factors were found to be important, 'school connectedness' was identified as a highly significant protective factor. School connectedness is a composite measure of items addressing whether children like school, think it worthwhile, are happy or unhappy at school, and whether they find school interesting. The study concluded that there is an

urgent need to support schools in helping shape the child's perception of school and how it matches their needs and interests.

Some of the international research challenged fundamental assumptions. In 'Absenteeism Is the Wrong Student Engagement Metric to Use Right Now'^{ixv} Sara Johnson, Annette Anderson & Ruth R. Faden consider whether we need a better measure for school accountability to promote educational equity. They suggest that we need to supplement absence-based school accountability measures with those that capture meaningful participation in learning, regardless of where and when it happens. Many students are still learning outside physical classrooms. As a result, they say, accountability metrics must evolve to capture students' participation, not just their presence, in school. By refocusing school accountability metrics to capture not just barriers to attendance but barriers to meaningful participation in learning, it is possible to reimagine ways to engage those typically called 'at risk' to become active agents in their own learning.

Jaymes Pyne, Elizabeth Vaade and Eric Grodsky in 'Why student absences aren't the real problem in America's 'attendance crisis''^{ixvi} suggest that the attendance crisis in the US is about more than students missing class, but rather is a reflection of family and community crises students face – such as being evicted from the family apartment, fearing for their safety in their neighborhood or suffering an illness. They say that their evidence suggests unexcused absences are problematic, but for a different reason than people often think. Absence from school, and especially unexcused absence, matters mainly as a signal of many crises children and their families may be facing. It matters less as a cause of lower student achievement due to missed instruction. How researchers and the public choose to think of school absences matters for educational policy. National, state and school district attendance policies typically hold schools and families accountable for all of the days children miss, regardless of whether they were excused or unexcused absences. These policies assume that missing school for any reason harms children academically because they are missing classroom instruction. They also assume that schools will be able to effectively intervene to increase academic achievement by reducing student absences. The researchers find neither to be the case. As a result, these attendance policies end up disproportionately punishing families dealing with out-of-school crises in their lives and pressuring schools who serve them to get students to school more often. The research concludes by suggesting using unexcused absence from school as a signal to channel resources to the children and families who need them most.

E) References

ⁱ See the literature review in Appendix C for detail, for example:

Teenagers' mental health under severe pressure as pandemic continues (Mental Health Foundation, 2021)

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/teenagers-mental-health-pandemic>

ⁱⁱ Renew and reform: supporting learners' wellbeing and progression (Welsh Government 2022) <https://gov.wales/renew-and-reform-supporting-learners-wellbeing-and-progression.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Absenteeism from schools by pupil characteristics: September 2018 to August 2019 (Welsh Government, 2021) Tables 5 and 7

<https://gov.wales/absenteeism-schools-pupil-characteristics-september-2018-august-2019>

^{iv} Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 6 September 2021 to 28 January 2022 (Welsh Government, 2022) Table 2 <https://gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-6-september-2021-28-january-2022>

- v Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 6 September 2021 to 21 January 2022 (Welsh Government, 2022) <https://gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-6-september-2021-21-january-2022> Table 2
- vi Department for Education, Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, 11 January 2022, table 1b <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-COVID-19-outbreak>
- vii Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 6 September 2021 to 28 January 2022 (Welsh Government, 2022) Table 3 <https://gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-6-september-2021-28-january-2022>
- viii School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening (Education Policy Institute, Luke Sibieta, November 2020) <https://core.ac.uk/reader/356660535> Figure 2
- ix Unpublished Welsh Government data: 220126_DistributionofAbsence Table B6
- x Unpublished Welsh Government data: 211201_DistributionofAbsence and 220126_DistributionofAbsence Tables B1, B2 and B9
- xi Attendance of pupils in maintained schools (Welsh Government, 2022) <https://gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools>
- xii Attendance Guidance & Absence Recording By Schools (Department for Education, 2021) <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/DE%20Circular%202021%2016%20-%20Attendance%20Guidance%20and%20Absence%20Recording%20by%20Schools%20-%202021%2022.pdf>
- xiii For example, in the autumn term of 2021-22, the proportion of pupils absent from more than 10% of half day sessions is 43.2% in primary and 55.2% in secondary school, compared with 13.4% and 17.4% respectively in 2018-19. In 2021-22, the proportion absent for more than 20% is 15.3% in primary and 24.8% in secondary school, compared with 2.1% and 17.4% in 2018-19.
Unpublished Welsh Government data 211201_DistributionofAbsence
- xiv Pupil destinations (Careers Wales, 2021) <https://careerswales.gov.wales/careers-professionals/pupil-destinations>
- xv Pupils educated other than at school: September 2020 to August 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021) <https://gov.wales/pupils-educated-other-school-september-2020-august-2021>
- xvi Elective Home Education Survey 2021 (ADCS, November 2021) https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_EHE_Survey_2021_Report_FINAL.pdf
- xvii Patterns of school non-attendance over the educational lifecourse (Wiserd, 2020) <https://wiserd.ac.uk/news/patterns-school-non-attendance-over-educational-lifecourse>
- xviii School absence and exclusion in young people with diagnosed neurodiversity, mental health conditions, or who self-harm in Wales (Ann John, 2021) [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(21\)00367-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(21)00367-9/fulltext)
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(21\)00367-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(21)00367-9/fulltext)
- xix <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-59945062>
- xx Teacher Sickness Absence Duration (Welsh Government, 2021) <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/teachers-and-support-staff/pupil-Level-annual-school-census/Teacher-Sickness-Absence/averagenumberofdayslost-by-year-area>
- xxi Effective management of school workforce attendance in primary schools (Estyn, 2017)

<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2020-07/Effective%2520management%2520of%2520school%2520workforce%2520attendance%2520in%2520primary%2520schools.pdf>

^{xxii} Covering Teachers 'Absence: Follow-up (Audit Wales, 2020)

[https://www.audit.wales/sites/default/files/publications/Covering teachers absence eng.pdf](https://www.audit.wales/sites/default/files/publications/Covering%20teachers%20absence%20eng.pdf)

^{xxiii} See page 7. 'School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening' (Education Policy Institute, Luke Sibieta, November 2020) <https://core.ac.uk/reader/356660535>

^{xxiv} See for example 'Types and correlates of school non-attendance in students with autism spectrum disorders' (Totsika, Vasiliki Hastings, Richard Dutton, Yoko Worsley, Alison et al.) the field work for which was done in March 2017

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7545649/>

^{xxv} Provision for secondary school-aged Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils (Estyn, 2019) <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-08/Provision%2520for%2520secondary%2520aged%2520Gypsy%2520Roma%2520and%2520Traveller%2520pupils%2520en.pdf>

^{xxvi} Racial and Ethnic Differences in Parental Attitudes and Concerns About School Reopening During the COVID-19 Pandemic (United States Department of Health & Human Services, July 2020)

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6949a2.htm>

^{xxvii} The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4 2013/14 academic year (Department for Education, 2016)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/509679/The-link-between-absence-and-attainment-at-KS2-and-KS4-2013-to-2014-academic-year.pdf(link is external)

^{xxviii} National Behaviour and Attendance Review (Welsh Government, 2008)

<http://wales.gov.uk/dcells/publications/publications/reports/3773934/nbarreport?lang=en>

^{xxix} Inquiry in Behaviour and Attendance (Welsh Government, 2013)

<https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s19651/Report%20-%20August%202013.pdf>

^{xxx} Attendance in secondary schools (Estyn 2014)

<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2020-07/Attendance%2520in%2520secondary%2520schools%2520-%2520September%25202014.pdf>

^{xxxi} Effective practice in improving attendance in primary schools (Estyn 2015)

<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-report/effective-practice-improving-attendance-primary-schools-june-2015>

^{xxxii} <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-59265837>

^{xxxiii} Evaluation of Fixed Penalty Notices issued for regular non-attendance at school' (Welsh Government, 2018) <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-06/180508-evaluation-fixed-penalty-notices-issued-regular-non-attendance-school-en.pdf>

^{xxxiv} National Professional Learning Pathway for Additional Learning Needs

<https://hwb.gov.wales/search?query=ALN&strict=true&popupUri=%2FResource%2Fe6e97dda-57b8-4d28-8311-7f2f35e001e8>

^{xxxv} Autism Wales

<https://autismwales.org/en/education/>

^{xxxvi} Welsh Government press release 6 January 2022

<https://gov.wales/18-million-strengthen-support-children-and-young-people-additional-learning-needs>

^{xxxvii} Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life (Estyn 2020)

<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-08/Community%2520Schools%2520en.pdf>

- ^{xxxviii} Kids can't catch up if they don't show up (The Centre for Social Justice, 2021)
<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/kids-cant-catch-up-if-they-dont-show-up>
- ^{xxxix} Youth Support Services in Wales - The Value of Youth Work (Estyn, 2018)
<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-08/Youth%2520Support%2520Services%2520in%2520Wales.pdf>
- ^{xl} Youth engagement and progression framework (Welsh Government, 2013)
<https://gov.wales/youth-engagement-and-progression-framework-implementation-plan>
- ^{xli} Summer of Fun to support children and young people recover from the pandemic
<https://gov.wales/summer-fun-support-children-and-young-people-recover-pandemic>
- ^{xlii} Renew and reform: supporting learners' wellbeing and progression (Welsh Government, 2021)
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2021/10/1/1635151075/renew-and-reform-supporting-learners-wellbeing-and-progression.pdf>
- ^{xliii} Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards <https://gov.wales/recruit-recover-raise-standards-accelerating-learning-programme-frequently-asked-questions-html>
- ^{xliv} Written Statement: Additional Package of Support for Learners. 16 December 2021
<https://gov.wales/written-statement-additional-package-support-learners>
- ^{xlv} All Wales Attendance Framework (Welsh Government, 2011)
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/all-wales-attendance-framework.pdf>
- ^{xlvi} See for example the series of Engagement work updates reports from Estyn, for example https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-08/Engagement%20work%20Secondary%20sector%20update%20-%20autumn%202020%20en_0.pdf
- ^{xlvii} E-sgol website
<https://hwb.gov.wales/blended-learning/e-sgol>
- ^{xlviii} 4,222 on 1 March 2021
 Annual Education Workforce Statistics for Wales 2021 (EWC, 2021)
<https://www.ewc.wales/site/index.php/en/documents/research-and-statistics/annual-statistics-digest/762-ewc-statistics-digest/file.html>
- ^{xlix} Supply teaching and looked after children – We believe these two vital services should not be run for private profit. We will work with partners to develop options for a more sustainable model of supply teaching with fair work at its heart, which will include local authority-led and school-led alternatives and put in place a framework to remove profit from the care of looked after children.
 The Co-operation Agreement 2021
<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-11/cooperation-agreement-2021.pdf>
- ^l See for example the foreword to HMCI's Annual Report for 2020-2021
<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/annual-report/2020-2021>
- ^{li} Senedd research briefing: Back to school: education in the time of COVID (Senedd, 25 April 2021)
<https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/back-to-school-education-in-the-time-of-COVID/>
- ^{lii} Returning pupils to school (Caroline Sharp, David Sims and Simon Rutt, NFER, 2020)
https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4060/schools_responses_to_COVID_19_early_report_final.pdf
- ^{liii} 'A multi-tiered systems of support blueprint for re-opening schools following COVID-19 shutdown' (Christopher A Kearney and Joshua Childs, Children and Youth Services Review, March 2021, 105919)
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740920323410>
- ^{liv} School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening (Education Policy Institute, Luke Sibietta, November 2020) <https://core.ac.uk/reader/356660535>

-
- ^{lv} Education recovery in schools: autumn 2021 (Ofsted, 16 December 2021)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-recovery-in-schools-autumn-2021/education-recovery-in-schools-autumn-2021>
- ^{lvi} Impact of COVID-2019 on school attendance problems (Gina Nathwani Adeel Shoaib et al. J Glob Health. 2021; 11: 03084, 2021)
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8325878/>
- ^{lvii} Coronavirus and schools (House of Commons Research Briefing Paper Number 08915, 13 January 2022)
<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8915/CBP-8915.pdf>
- ^{lviii} Best evidence on impact of COVID-19 on pupil attainment (Education Endowment Foundation)
<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/guidance-for-teachers/COVID-19-resources/best-evidence-on-impact-of-COVID-19-on-pupil-attainment>
- ^{lix} Teenagers' mental health under severe pressure as pandemic continues (Mental Health Foundation, 2021)
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/teenagers-mental-health-pandemic>
- ^{lx} Student Health and Wellbeing in Wales: Key findings from the 2021 School Health Research Network Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey
<https://www.shrn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/PriSHRN-Key-Findings-Summary-1.pdf>
- ^{lxi} Moore G, Angel L, Brown R, van Godwin J, Hallingberg B, Rice F. Socio-Economic Status, Mental Health Difficulties and Feelings about Transition to Secondary School among 10–11 Year Olds in Wales: Multi-Level Analysis of a Cross Sectional Survey. Child Indicators Research. 2021.
- ^{lxii} The association between anxiety and poor school attendance (The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 2020) <https://www.acamh.org/research-digest/the-association-between-anxiety-and-poor-school-attendance/>
- ^{lxiii} Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs U.S. Department of Education <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/students/supporting-child-student-social-emotional-behavioral-mental-health.pdf>
- ^{lxiv} Who is included, who is excluded and what can we do to promote inclusion for all children? (Institute of Education Blog Editor, 10 June 2021)
<https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2021/06/10/who-is-included-who-is-excluded-and-what-can-we-do-to-promote-inclusion-for-all-children/>
- ^{lxv} Absenteeism Is the Wrong Student Engagement Metric to Use Right Now (Sara Johnson, Annette Anderson & Ruth R. Faden, April 09, 2021)
<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/opinion-absenteeism-is-the-wrong-student-engagement-metric-to-use-right-now/2021/04>
- ^{lxvi} Why student absences aren't the real problem in America's 'attendance crisis'
<https://theconversation.com/why-student-absences-arent-the-real-problem-in-americas-attendance-crisis-170063>

Agenda Item 3.2

CYPE(6)-10-22 - Paper to note 2



Mark Isherwood MS/AS
Chair, Cross Party Autism Group/
Cadeirydd, Grŵp Trawsbleidiol Awtistiaeth
Welsh Parliament/Senedd Cymru
Cardiff Bay/Bae Caerdydd
CF99 1SN
Mark.Isherwood@senedd.cymru

Jayne Bryant MS/AS, Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee
(SeneddChildren@senedd.wales)

25 April 2022

Dear Jayne,

I write to bring the Children, Young People and Education Committee's attention to the enclosed research about the education of Autistic pupils in Wales.

The preliminary report, by Steffan Davies, of Swansea University's School of Education, paints a valuable yet concerning picture of the experiences of Autistic children and young people.

One of the key findings of the study was around teachers' understanding of Autism.

While 77% of educators felt they had a good understanding, only 50% of parents and 28% of pupils felt their teachers understood Autism.

Mr Davies presented his findings to the Senedd's Cross-party Group on Autism, with speakers stressing the importance of involving Autistic people in the design and delivery of training.

The study also found that among Autistic pupils:

- three in four had been bullied at school
- one in four did not feel safe in school
- nearly 50% felt excluded
- and more than half felt they didn't receive enough support.

Another key theme was a disparity between mainstream and specialist provision. Only 46% of parents felt satisfied with mainstream compared to 81% for specialist settings. Among pupils, 71% enjoyed going to a specialist school which fell to 57% for those in mainstream provision.

We hope Swansea University's important research will provide an evidence base to inform policy development, and improve the experiences of Autistic children and young people.

I look forward to receiving your response accordingly.

Thank you.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Mark Isherwood MS/AS

Chair, Cross Party Autism Group
Cadeirydd, Grŵp Trawsbleidiol Awtistiaeth

Enclosed: The Education of Autistic Pupils in Wales, Preliminary Report

The Education of Autistic Pupils in Wales

Preliminary Report 2021



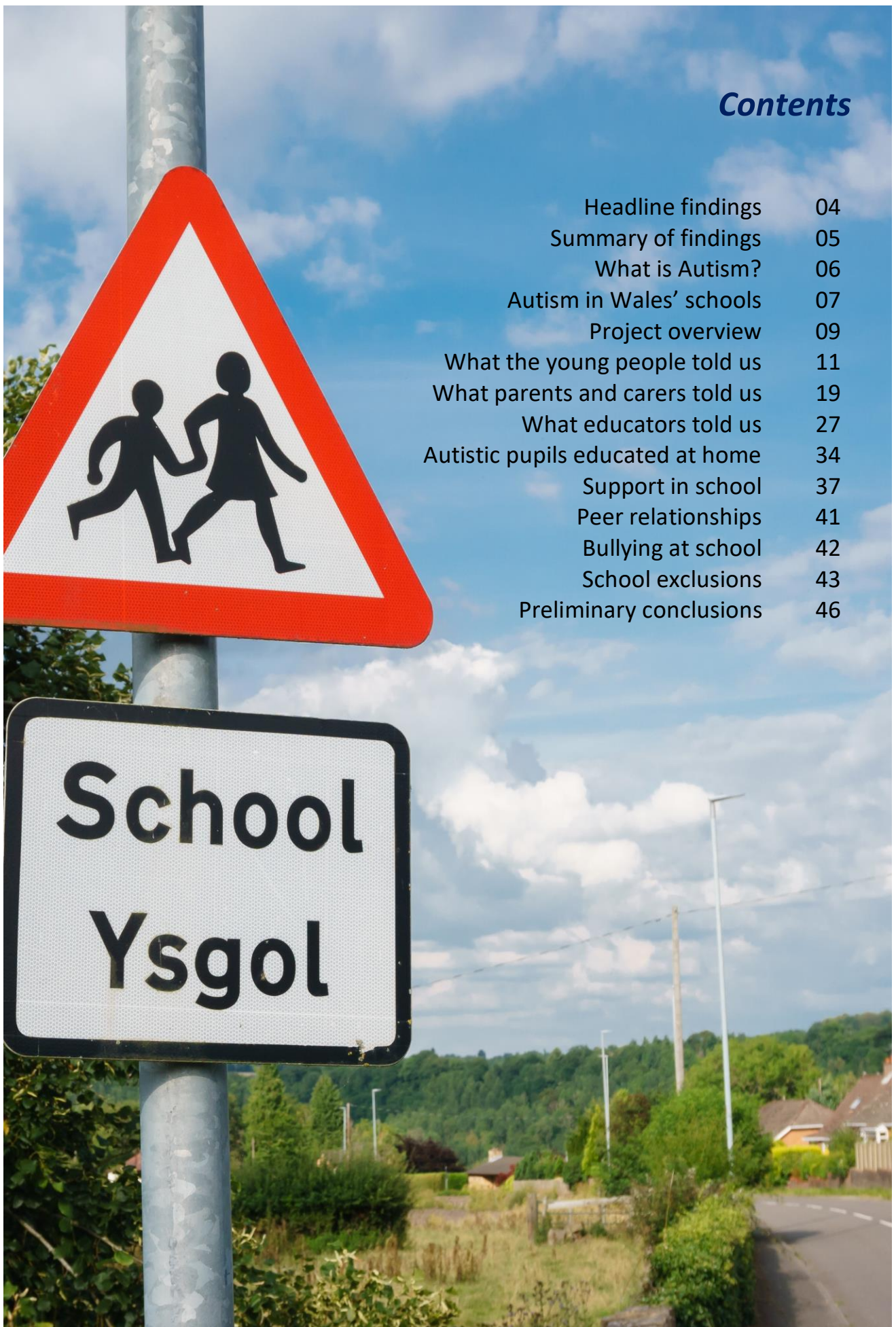
The Education of Autistic Pupils in Wales
Preliminary Report 2021

Steffan Davies MSc
Swansea University School of Education
856614@swansea.ac.uk

School of Education. Keir Hardie Building, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP

Contents

Headline findings	04
Summary of findings	05
What is Autism?	06
Autism in Wales' schools	07
Project overview	09
What the young people told us	11
What parents and carers told us	19
What educators told us	27
Autistic pupils educated at home	34
Support in school	37
Peer relationships	41
Bullying at school	42
School exclusions	43
Preliminary conclusions	46



This report is part of a study being conducted by Steffan Davies MSc, who is working towards obtaining a PhD at Swansea University's School of Education, considering the education of Autistic pupils in Wales.

Steffan is a parent of an Autistic daughter and worked for ten years in a mainstream primary school setting in west Wales, supporting children with additional needs, specialising in Autism. He was also seconded to the Local Authority for two years working as part of their communication support service, setting up and rolling out a unique programme enabling schools to screen and assess communication and language development in the early years, promoting early intervention and access to specialist and diagnostic services.

Steffan has a keen interest in inclusion within education and achieved a First-Class BA Honours in Social Inclusion (Inclusive Education) at University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Carmarthen. He then graduated from Swansea University Medical School with an MSc distinction in Autism and Related Conditions in 2019, taking the award for best dissertation.

The project is supervised by Dr Cathryn Knight, a lecturer of Education at Swansea University, who specialises in Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion and Dr Helen Lewis who is Swansea University's Programme Director for the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).

This preliminary report shares the results of the first phase of the project and reflects upon the perspectives of educators, parents, and most importantly Autistic pupils themselves.

If you would like more information, or to discuss the project, please contact:

Steffan Davies MSc
PhD Candidate
856614@swansea.ac.uk

Project Supervisors

Dr Cathryn Knight: cathryn.knight@swansea.ac.uk

Dr Helen Lewis: helen.e.lewis@swansea.ac.uk

The images used within this document are licenced to the author through Shutterstock.

The Education of Autistic Pupils in Wales

Responses were received from:

378 Educators

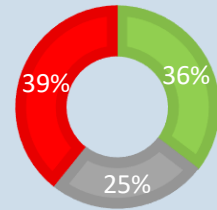
371 Parents/Carers

92 Autistic Children and Young People

39%

of educators felt unsupported by their Local Authority whilst working with an Autistic pupil.

36% felt they were receiving enough support, whilst 25% were unsure if the support from the Local Authority



1/4

More than **1-in-4** Autistic pupils said they do not feel safe in school.



More than **3-in-4** pupils said they have been the victim of bullying in school.

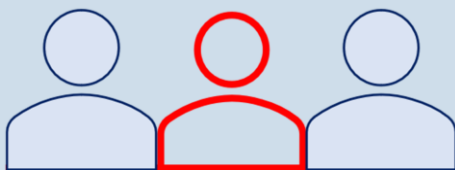
3/4

Less than half of all parents feel their child is currently in the best setting to meet their individual needs.



More than **1-in-4** consider their child's current setting is not meeting their needs.

Parents of children and young people with a Statement of Educational Need told us **1-in-3** were not receiving all the support detailed within the Statement.



More than half of Autistic young people feel they **don't receive enough** help in school.



More than **2-in-5** said they **couldn't cope with the work they were given** in school.



RESOURCES

41%

of educators said they were **unsure of where to access suitable resources** to support them when working with Autistic pupils.

If you would like more information, or to discuss the project, please contact:

Steffan Davies MSc
PhD Candidate
856614@swansea.ac.uk

Project Supervisors

Dr Cathryn Knight: cathryn.knight@swansea.ac.uk
Dr Helen Lewis: helen.e.lewis@swansea.ac.uk



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe



Summary of preliminary findings

- In general, Autistic pupils told us they were happy in and enjoyed going to school, however a significant proportion said they did not feel safe in school and over three quarters feel heightened anxiety and worries when attending school.
- Autistic girls tell us they feel a lot less understood than their male peers in school, this led to comparable gender differences in how supported they felt.
- Three quarters of Autistic pupils reported being the victim of bullying in school, with their parents feeling that schools were not taking sufficient steps in response to their reports of such incidents.
- Both pupils and their parents report a significantly greater level of satisfaction when attending specialist provisions compared to mainstream in several key areas.
- Parents and carers feel unsupported by their Local Authority when searching for a suitable education placement for their child.
- A small majority of parents were unsure whether their child's current school was the best placement to meet their individual needs.
- Parents reported that despite having a Statement of Educational Need in place, many Autistic pupils are not receiving all of the support that they are legally entitled to.
- Despite educators' confidence in their knowledge and understanding of Autism, pupils told us that in general, they do not feel their teachers understand about Autism or how best to support them.
- Educators felt supported by their school when working with Autistic pupils, however generally they feel unsupported by outside agencies and their Local Authority.
- Whilst many educators felt their employers provided them with sufficient Autism related training, a quarter told us they had not received any.
- A third of education staff who have worked as a 1-2-1 support with Autistic pupils have no prior experience of Autism and received no training before taking on the role.

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurological developmental condition, recognised in the UK as a disability under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. The condition is known for its wide-ranging variance of presentation and severity of symptoms, meaning that whilst all Autistic individuals may have difficulties in the same core areas, the level to which each person is affected can vary significantly. The *National Autistic Society suggest that approximately 1 in every 100 people are Autistic, with around 700,000 Autistic adults, children, and young people in the UK.

At its core Autism impacts the way a person communicates and interacts with the environment that surrounds them, affecting their processing of sensory and social information. Many Autistic people also have a range of restricted interests and repetitive behaviour patterns.

With these key difficulties in processing and understanding social situations and sensory input from their surrounding environment, it is unsurprising that many Autistic children and young people struggle in their education and find navigating the education system and school environment overwhelming.



A brief note about terminology within this report.

For the purposes of this report the authors will use the umbrella term Autism to encompass all diagnostic terms relating to Autism Spectrum Disorder, unless more specific terminology is required, or participant specified data dictates otherwise.

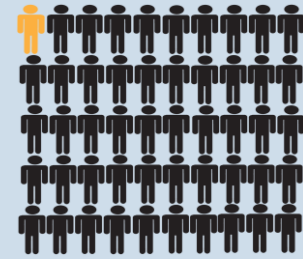
The Autism community has regularly made clear their preference for identity first language, therefore throughout this report the author will endeavour to employ such terms unless data presented by participants is directly quoted using person first terminology.

Autistic pupils in maintained education settings in Wales

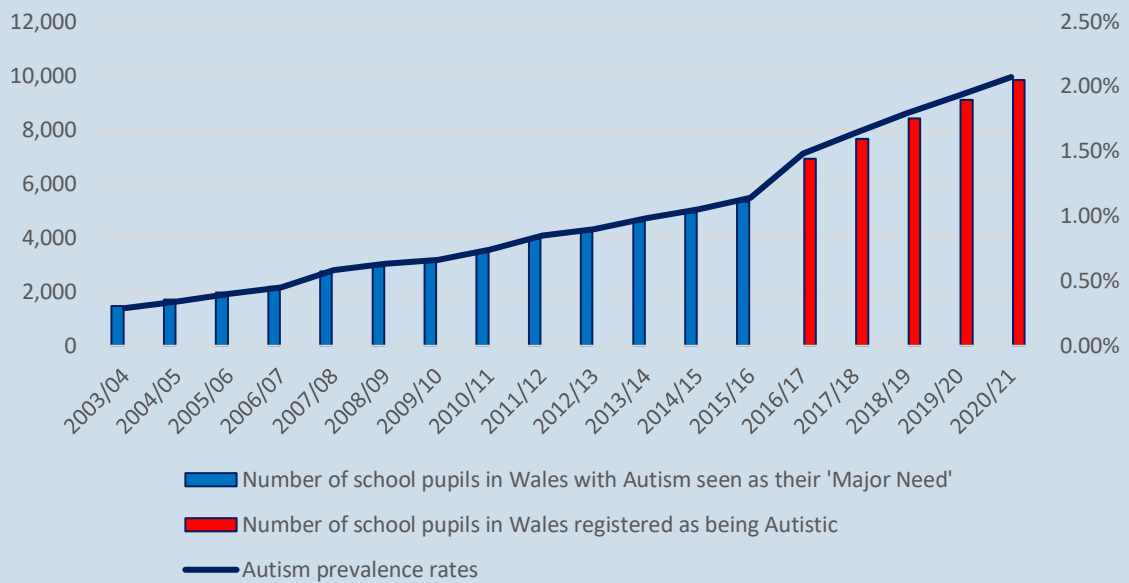
Analysis on Welsh Government Pupil Level Annual School Census data for the school year 2020-21 available from Stats Wales.

<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census>

1-in-50
pupils educated in
maintained schools
in Wales is Autistic

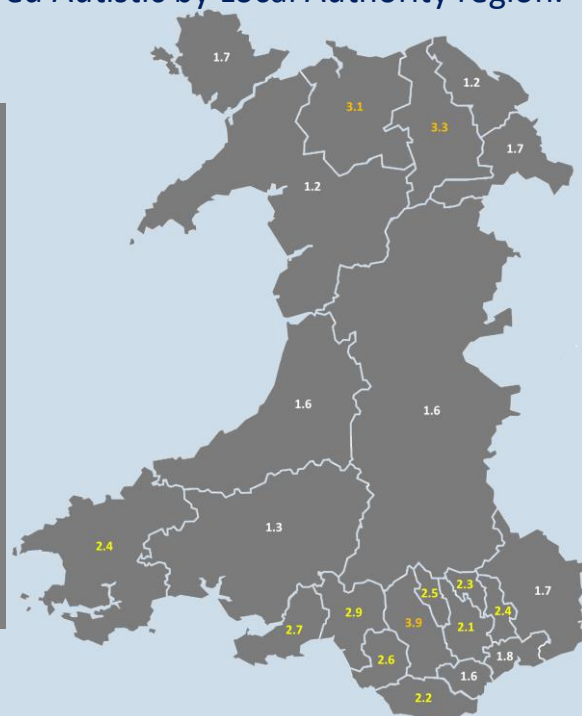


Combined number of Autistic pupils and prevalence rate 2003/4 to present.



Percentage of pupil population registered Autistic by Local Authority region.

Authority	Pupil population	Autistic pupils	Percentage
Rhondda Cynon Taf	39,161	910	3.87
Denbighshire	15,994	520	3.25
Conwy	15,857	490	3.09
Neath Port Talbot	21,585	625	2.90
Swansea	36,154	975	2.70
Bridgend	23,368	600	2.57
Merthyr Tydfil	9,172	230	2.51
Pembrokeshire	17,504	420	2.40
Torfaen	14,415	345	2.39
Blaenau Gwent	9,499	220	2.31
Vale of Glamorgan	23,497	510	2.17
Caerphilly	28,226	580	2.05
Newport	27,170	495	1.82
Isle of Anglesey	9,804	170	1.73
Wrexham	19,398	330	1.70
Monmouthshire	11,586	195	1.68
Cardiff	56,943	910	1.60
Powys	17,255	275	1.59
Ceredigion	9,700	150	1.55
Carmarthenshire	27,999	375	1.34
Flintshire	23,378	285	1.22
Gwynedd	17,059	205	1.20



Autism in Wales' schools

Data from the Welsh Government's 2021 school census* shows there are currently **9,818** Autistic pupils enrolled in maintained schools in Wales, who make up **2%** of the pupil population. There were **723** more Autistic pupils being educated in Wales in 2020/21 than the previous year. This increase of almost **8%** comes after a year where diagnostic services were virtually non-existent for many months due to the pandemic. In the four years since current reporting methods were introduced in 2017, there has been a **42%** increase in the number of Autistic pupils.

Autistic pupils account for:

- 1.4%** of primary school pupils
- 1.9%** of middle school pupils
- 2%** of secondary school pupils
- 1.6%** of all mainstream pupils
- 43%** of special school pupils

54% of Autistic pupils have a Statement of Educational Need, accounting for **22%** of all Statements in circulation. Autism is the most common type of need recorded in issued Statements for the fourth consecutive year.

Rhondda Cynon Taf has the highest prevalence rate, almost **1-in-25** pupils educated within the authority registered as Autistic. Swansea has the highest incidence with **975** Autistic children and young people educated in their schools. Carmarthenshire recorded a **17%** increase (+55), whilst Flintshire (-2%) and Wrexham (-7%) saw a decrease. Cardiff reported **105** additional Autistic pupils (+13%), whilst Denbighshire which had the highest prevalence in 2020 recorded the same number of Autistic pupils in 2021.

86% are educated in English medium settings
14% in Welsh medium settings.

Education in Wales

Education in Wales is going through a significant period of change with the introduction of a new 'Curriculum for Wales', replacing the old National Curriculum, which was first introduced in 1988, more than ten years before the formation of the Welsh Assembly following devolution. This new way of teaching and learning is being introduced from September 2022.

Provision for learners with Additional Needs

The way children with additional needs are supported is also being overhauled, through the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill 2018 and introduction of the new ALN Code 2021. The new approach replaces the Special Educational Needs Code, which has been in use since 2004, and separate guidance for post-16 education to create a unified system of support for learners up to the age of 25.

The most significant changes include the replacing of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Statements of Educational Need with one statutory document known as an Individual Development Plan (IDP). The idea being that the document will be easier to create and revise when necessary and give the children and young people a greater say on the provision made available to them.

The implementation of the new code was delayed by the Coronavirus pandemic; however, the first phase of the roll out began in September 2021, with selected year groups being transferred onto the new IDP system along with all learners newly identified as having additional needs.

Responses to our Parent Survey showed that **82%** of parents said their child's school or the Local Authority had not informed them of the upcoming changes in provision for learners with additional needs.

Whilst **73%** of parents whose children currently have a Statement of Educational Need said their child's school or the Local Authority had not informed them of the upcoming changes in the provision of Statements.

Project overview

There are approaching 10,000 Autistic pupils enrolled in maintained schools across Wales making up 2% of the school population, meaning roughly 1 pupil in 50 are Autistic*. However, to date there have been no specific studies looking in depth, at the education experiences of Autistic pupils in Wales, whilst studies from other nations have shown there are some real issues that need to be addressed in order to improve service provision for these children and young people, who make up a sizeable proportion of the school community.

This study set out to listen to the voices of Autistic pupils, their parents, and their educators to try and build a clear picture of what challenges are being faced in the education of Autistic children and young people in Wales. Working together it is hoped that this project will help guide and inform future policies and practices, to develop a more knowledgeable, understanding, and supportive education system for all Autistic pupils, throughout Wales.

Bilingual online survey questionnaires were developed to gain insights from the three key stakeholders which were all reviewed and approved by the Swansea University School of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Sub-Committee. The timings and release of the surveys was slightly delayed and adjusted due to the new year Coronavirus lockdown which again saw schools across the UK closed to most

pupils throughout January, February and March, with not all pupils making a full return to in school learning until mid-April 2021.

The first questionnaire to go 'live' was the educator's survey which was launched in April, with details of the project together with links to the survey emailed to all maintained education settings in Wales, including post-16 provisions and further and higher education institutions. Questions within the survey were focused on gaining an overview of education professionals' experiences, knowledge and understanding of Autism; access to training and resources; support; and confidence. The educator survey was active through April and May and attracted 549 responses at a completion rate of 52%, with 378 unique responses (89% in English & 11% completed in Welsh) having entered sufficient information to be taken forward for analysis.

Swansea University College of Arts and Humanities
School of Education Research Point
The Education of Autistic Pupils in Wales

Do you work in education, in Wales?

Could you spare 15 minutes to complete our online survey?
Educator Survey - Research Participants Needed

We are looking for educational professionals to share their experiences, knowledge and understanding of Autism, in Wales' schools.

To participate, it does not matter if you have not yet worked with Autistic pupils, the input of those who haven't is equally as important as those who have.

This survey is open to

- Teachers - NQTS - Student Teachers - Teaching Assistants - 1-2-1s
- Learning Support Assistants - HLTAs - Agency/Supply Staff
- Any other professional working in Education

Working in any of the following settings

- Mainstream - Special Schools - Specialist Settings
- Pre-school - Primary - Secondary - Post-16 (ages 16-18yrs)
- Home Tutoring - Local Authorities - Private/Independent Settings

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Swansea University College of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Sub-Committee
290321/5814

The link to the survey is in the information above.

For more information contact
Steffan Davies MSc
PhD Candidate
856614@swansea.ac.uk

Project Supervisors for Swansea University
Dr Cathryn Knight: cathryn.knight@swansea.ac.uk
Dr Helen Lewis: helen.e.lewis@swansea.ac.uk

* See information on pages 4 and 5 (data from Welsh Government Pupil Level Annual School Census – Stats Wales)

The parent/carer survey sought parental perspectives on many areas of interest relating to the education of their Autistic children and young people, including Statements of Educational Need; educational support, inclusion, exclusions, peer relationships, bullying and parental satisfaction. The survey was released in May and remained active until mid-June. 511 responses were recorded with a 43% completion rate. 371 individual participants were entered into the analysis having completed appropriate number of critical questions, 98% chose to complete the survey in English with 2% using the Welsh language.

The final and most critical element, the survey of Autistic pupils was launched in mid-June, allowing participants the time to have settled back into the day-to-day school routines. The questions were made available in advance through a downloadable question preview document. This gave the children and young people and their parents an opportunity to know what to expect and prepare themselves before entering the online questionnaire and was viewed over 280 times. To try and ensure the survey was accessible to Autistic pupils of all abilities, three ability levels of questions were devised, with each level expanding on the questions posed in the level before. Questions in the first two levels were mainly of a straightforward Yes/No response variety using visual cues to aid understanding for all, with Level 3 having the addition of a selection of multiple choice questions offering agree, neither agree nor disagree or disagree answer options. The pupil survey remained active until early August and attracted 163 responses with a 43% completion rate, 92 unique responses were entered into analysis which included 1 Welsh language participant.

These survey responses translate into almost **4%** of Autistic pupils currently educated in Wales being represented by the input of 371 of their parents and carers in the parent survey.

Just short of **1%** of the Autistic pupil population in Wales are having their voices heard through participation in the pupil survey.

Swansea University College of Arts and Humanities: School of Education Research Study

Are you the parent/carer of an Autistic child or young person aged 18 or under? Are they currently, or were they until recently educated in Wales?

We need your input to help us learn more about the current situation relating to:

The Education of Autistic Pupils in Wales

Parent/Carer Survey
Research Participants Required

How can you help?
You can participate by completing the initial on-line survey questionnaire, which should take no more than half an hour to complete.

The link to the survey is in the accompanying information.

Take the parent survey now and contribute to the field of Autism research in Wales

If you would like more information, or to discuss the project, please contact:

Steffan Davies MSc
PhD Candidate
856614@swansea.ac.uk

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Swansea University College of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Sub-Committee (2020)0204

Project Supervisors
Dr Cathryn Knight: cathryn.knight@swansea.ac.uk
Dr Helen Lewis: helen.a.lewis@swansea.ac.uk

Swansea University College of Arts and Humanities
School of Education Research Study
The Education of Autistic Pupils in Wales

Survey of Autistic Pupils

Open to all Autistic children and young people, aged 18 years and younger, living and currently or until recently educated in Wales.

Giving Autistic pupils a voice and a chance to help develop an education system that works for Autistic pupils across Wales.

Pupils under 16 years will require parental consent and support to complete the short survey.
Pupils aged 16-18 can participate independently or with support if required.

Questions are available to download in advance by following the link above
The survey should take no longer than 10-15 minutes to complete
The link to the survey is in the information above

If you would like more information, or to discuss the project, please contact:

Steffan Davies MSc
PhD Candidate
856614@swansea.ac.uk

Project Supervisors
Dr Cathryn Knight: cathryn.knight@swansea.ac.uk
Dr Helen Lewis: helen.a.lewis@swansea.ac.uk

To view the survey in a booklet or find more details, follow the information provided.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Swansea University College of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Sub-Committee (2020)0204

This preliminary report brings together the findings resulting from the input of all participants in the three surveys and has been produced to present the results of the study to date.

It is the culmination of the first phase of this PhD project and will guide further research and analysis as the project progresses through to completion in summer 2023.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything within the report with the author, the contact information appears throughout the document.

What the young people told us...

58% of Autistic young people told us they enjoy going to school.

43% of Autistic pupils said they were not happy in school.

28% say they did not feel safe in school.

77% told us that being in school makes them feel anxious or worried.

28% of Autistic children and young people told us they had no friends in school.

48% of pupils said they did not enjoy play, break and unstructured times at school.

76% of respondents say they have been the victim of bullying at school.

83% of Autistic students say they feel different from the other children and young people at school.

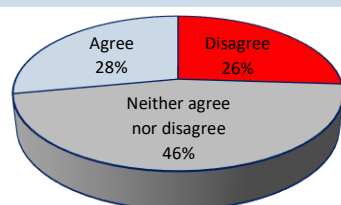
49% told us that they feel excluded at school.

41% said that there was no quiet space available for them to go and relax in their setting.

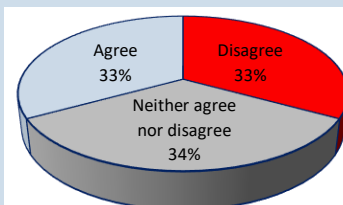
58% feel they are coping well with the schoolwork.

53% felt they were not getting enough help in school.

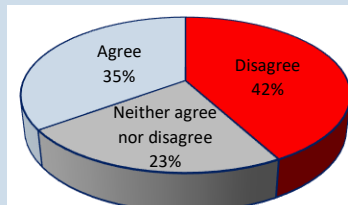
My teachers understand about Autism.



My teachers understand me.



My teachers know how to support me.



74% said school was often too noisy.

40% say they wish they were in a smaller school with less pupils.

Gender differences in what the young people told us.

There were many areas where gender can be clearly identified as having a role to play in shaping the educational experiences of Autistic students in Wales.

62% of male pupils told us they enjoyed going to school compared to just over half of the female participants (53%). 38% of boys and exactly half of Autistic girls said they were unhappy in school whilst 80% of those identifying as non-binary told us they were happy at school.

27% of Autistic boys, 31% of girls and 40% of non-binary pupils said they felt unsafe in school and 73% of males, 81% of females and 83% of non-binary students said being in school made them feel anxious and worried.

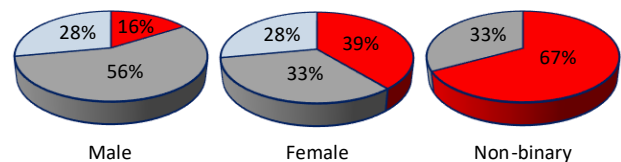
Across all three groups around 3-in-5 say they cope well with the work in school, although girls (61%) and those identifying as non-binary (60%) felt they didn't get enough help, whereas 55% of boys say they were getting enough help in class.

Non-binary pupils (60%) and boys (57%) were more likely to feel included than girls, with more than half (53%) of female responses saying they felt excluded at school. All non-binary participants told us they felt different to their peers whilst girls (93%) and 3-in-4 boys were also highly aware of their differences.

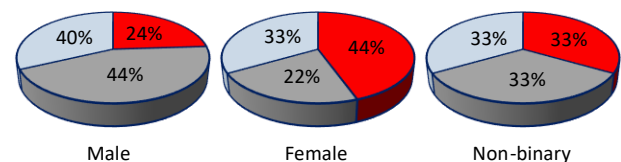
28% of male responses agreed that their teachers understood about Autism, whilst 16% disagreed. The same percentage of girls agreed, however 39% disagreed. None of the non-binary respondents agreed and 73% disagreed.

As a group it is clear from responses that females feel they are less understood and supported than both other gender cohorts.

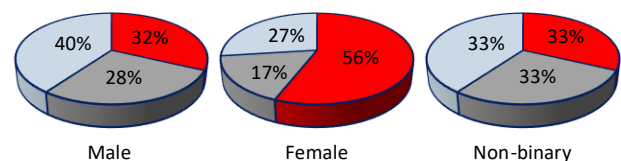
My teachers understand about Autism.



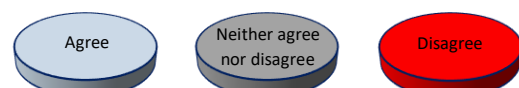
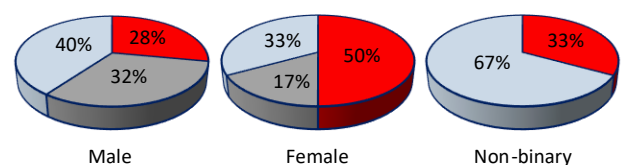
My teachers understand me.



My teachers know how to support me.



I get enough support in school.



44% of female participants felt their teachers did not understand them, compared to a third of those identifying as non-binary and less than a quarter of boys. Half the girls thought they were not getting enough support in school with 56% feeling their teachers did not know how to support them. 28% of boys say they don't get enough support in school and 32% suggested their teachers did not know how best to support them. A third of non-binary pupils told us that their teachers didn't know how to support them and that they considered they were not getting enough support in school.

40% of the males, 28% of females and none of the non-binary participants thought that their teachers understood how sensory difficulties made certain situations in school difficult to cope with. Over half of the girls and 67% of non-binary pupils told us they thought their teachers didn't understand these difficulties.

76% of boys, 72% of girls and all non-binary respondents said that the school environment was often too noisy.

A third of those who identify as non-binary said they wished they were in a different school compared to 20% of males and 17% of females. However, 45% of female participants, 36% of males and a third of non-binary young people felt that they would prefer to be in a smaller school, with less pupils.

The final question asked within Level 3 of the pupil survey asked whether participants would prefer to be in a school specifically for Autistic pupils, none of the non-binary cohort said they would whilst 16% of males and 17% of the female participants told us they would prefer to attend a school specifically for Autistic pupils.



Setting differences in what the young people told us.

78% of the children and young people who responded to the pupil survey were educated in mainstream settings, whilst 15% received their educations in specialist provision.

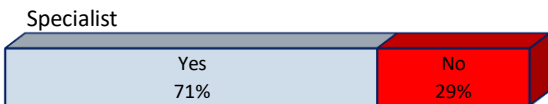
71% of pupils educated in specialist settings told us they enjoyed going to school, compared to 57% of those in mainstream, whilst 56% of mainstream Autistic pupils and 69% of pupils attending specialist provision told us they were happy in school.

All participants from specialist education said they felt safe in school, but a third of those in mainstream say they do not feel safe. 82% of mainstream students felt anxious or worried going to school, in comparison to 45% of those in specialist settings.

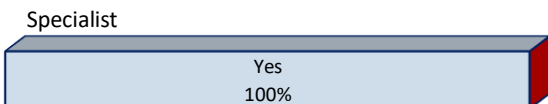
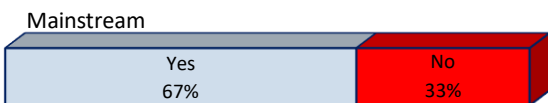
Less than half (48%) of Autistic pupils educated in mainstream feel included in school, whilst 78% of pupils in specialist settings felt included. A similar number in each setting told us they had friends in school, although whilst 77% of pupils from specialist provisions said they enjoyed play and break times, 54% of mainstream pupils told us they did not enjoy those unstructured times.

87% of those educated in mainstream say they feel different from their peers compared to 50% of those in special education.

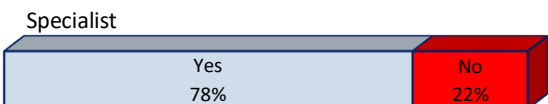
Do you enjoy going to school?



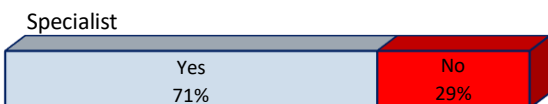
Do you feel safe in school?



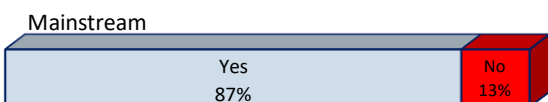
Do you feel included in school?



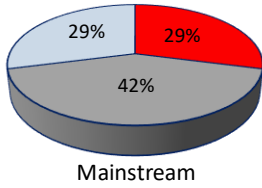
Do you enjoy play and break times in school?



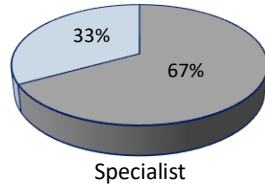
Do you feel different from the other pupils at school?



My teachers understand about Autism.

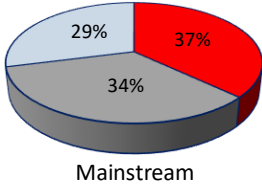


Mainstream

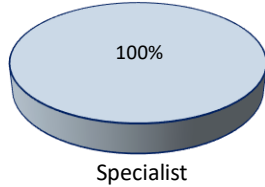


Specialist

My teachers understand me.

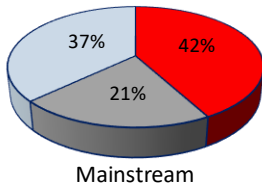


Mainstream

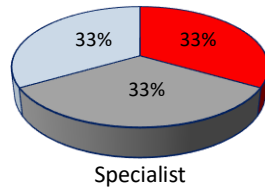


Specialist

My teachers know how to support me.



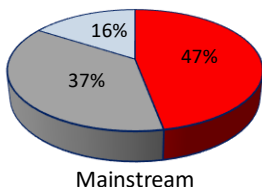
Mainstream



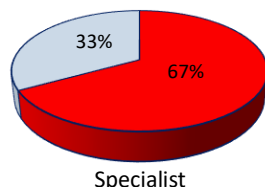
Specialist



I wish I were in a different school.

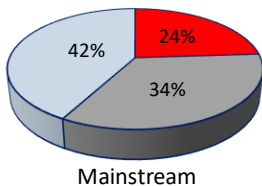


Mainstream

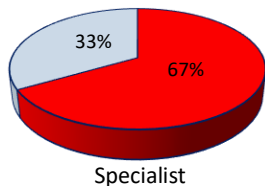


Specialist

I wish I were in a smaller school with less pupils.

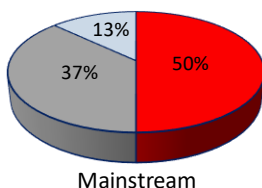


Mainstream

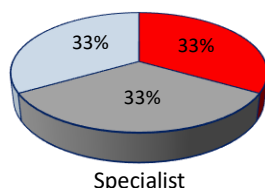


Specialist

I wish I were in a school specifically for Autistic pupils.



Mainstream



Specialist

90% of children and young people attending specialist provisions told us they had a safe and quiet space available to them, whereas 45% of mainstream pupils said there was no safe space for them at their school.

When asked if they coped well with the work in school 46% of those in mainstream told us they didn't in comparison to 80% of those in specialist education who said they did cope well. 44% of mainstream pupils felt they were getting enough help in school in contrast to 70% of those in specialist settings.

29% of mainstream students felt their teachers had a good understanding about Autism and the same percentage thought their teachers understood them whilst 37% say teachers knew how to support them. A third of young people educated in specialist settings felt their teachers understood Autism whilst all felt their teachers understood them and a third said their teachers knew how to support them.

Two thirds of young people attending specialist provision and 41% of those enrolled in mainstream schools felt that their teachers understood how sensory differences made some situations hard to cope with at school. Whilst 79% of mainstream pupils told us that they often found school too noisy, none of the participants receiving their education in specialist settings felt this way with 67% disagreeing with the statement.

16% of mainstream pupils wished they were in a different school, 42% wished to be in a smaller school with fewer pupils and 13% wanted to be in a school specifically for Autistic pupils, whilst a third of those educated in specialist settings agreed to all three of these statements.

Age and sector differences in what the young people told us.

22% of participants in the pupil survey were of primary school age (4-11 years), 58% attend secondary school (aged 12-18 years) and 16% were aged 16-18 years in post-16 education. 58% were 15 years or younger, needing parental consent to partake and 42% were aged 16-18 (74% partaking independently, 26% with support).

70% of Autistic primary pupils, 53% of those in secondary and two thirds of students in post-16 education told us they enjoyed going to school. Three quarters of those in primary school said they were happy in school compared to 51% of secondary school pupils and a third of those in post-16 provision.

Pupils attending primary settings reported feeling safe in school (85%) as did 77% of those in post-16 education, whilst a third of secondary school learners told us they didn't feel safe in school. More than three quarters of students in secondary and post-16 settings and 71% of those in primary told us going to school makes them feel anxious or worried.

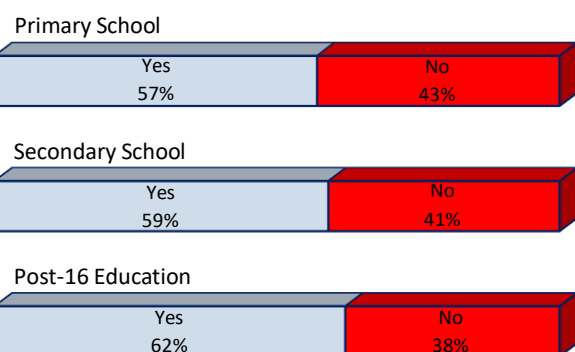
69% of those in primary school told us they are coping with their schoolwork as did 75% of those in post-16 education, however just half of Autistic pupils in secondary education said they could cope with the work. When asked whether they receive enough help in school 57% of primary pupils and 52% of secondary pupils felt they didn't whilst 54% of those in post-16 education say

they were.

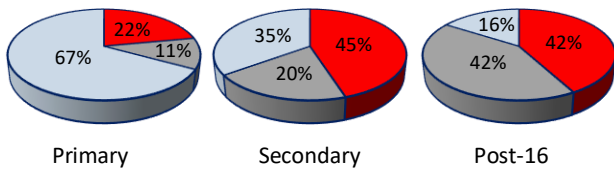
57% of primary school children, 55% of secondary pupils and just 50% of those educated in post-16 settings told us they felt included in school. Those in post-16 education were more aware of feeling different to their peers (92%) than Autistic pupils in secondary settings (80%) and primary aged pupils (79%).

Unstructured times, including play and break times were enjoyed by 60% of pupils in primary school, although 52% of secondary pupils told us they did not enjoy these times of day and they were slightly less problematic for those in post-16 education with 53% telling us they were ok. The majority of young people educated across the sectors told us they had access to a safe and quiet space during the school day although roughly two in five say they do not.

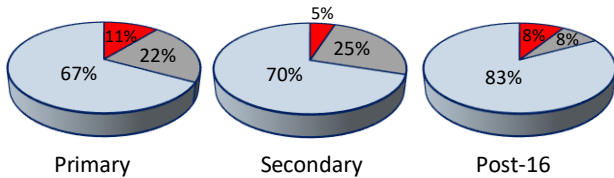
Do you have a safe, quiet space where you can go and relax at school?



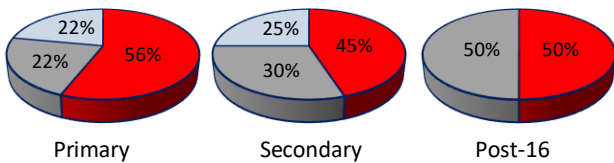
My teachers understand that sensory differences can make some situations in school difficult to cope with.



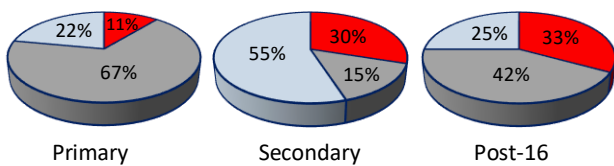
School is often too noisy.



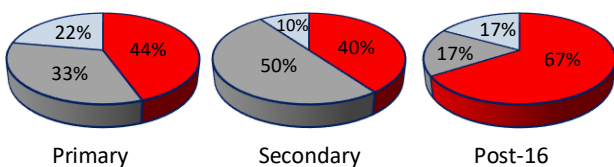
I wish I were in a different school.



I wish I were in a smaller school with less pupils.



I wish I were in a school specifically for Autistic pupils.



Two thirds of Autistic primary school pupils and a quarter of those in secondary felt that their teachers had a good understanding of Autism, whereas just 8% of students in post-16 education say their teachers understood about Autism.

Half of those in post-16 education and a third of primary children feel their teachers understood them, whilst 50% of participants educated in secondary settings tell us their teachers did not understand them.

A third of primary aged pupils feel they get enough support whilst in school, with 44% saying that their teachers knew how best to support them. 45% of Autistic young people at secondary school say they don't get enough support and only 30% suggest their teachers knew how to support them. For those students in post-16 provision, half felt they were getting sufficient support and whilst 42% felt their teachers understood how to support them the same though that they didn't.

Participants in primary schools felt their teachers had a good grasp of how sensory differences could make some situations difficult for them to cope with (67%) this appreciation of sensory difficulties was not so recognised in secondary schools (35%) or post-16 settings (17%). 83% of those attending post-16 settings were most disturbed by the noisy environment compared to 70% of pupils in secondary and 67% in primary schools.

22% of primary school children and a quarter of those in secondary schools told us they wished they were in a different school, whilst none of the students in post-16 education wished to change placement.

When asked if they would rather attend a smaller school with less pupils, half of all participants from secondary schools, 22% of primary school pupils, and a quarter of those in post-16 education said they would. 22% of children in primary settings told us they would like to attend a school specifically for Autistic pupils, 40% of those in secondary schools told us they wouldn't and whilst 17% of young people in post-16 education said they would, three quarters say they would not.

What parents and carers told us...

80%

of parents say that Autism was the primary condition that impacts their child's education

48% feel that their child is currently attending the best setting to meet their individual needs.

1-in-3 with children attending mainstream told us they were unhappy with the setting their child currently attends.

81% of parents with children being educated in specialist settings said they were happy with the school.

70% said they felt unsupported in finding a suitable school placement for their child.

18% told us their Local Authority had discussed suitable placements available in the area.

35% say their child was receiving no additional support in school.

34% of parents whose children had a Statement of Educational Need say their child did not receive all the support detailed in the document.

71% felt their child needed more support if they were to reach their full potential.

26% thought their child had no friends at school.

71% of parents say their child really wants to make friends but struggles to connect with their peers.

23% told us their child had faced exclusion at school.

63% of parents were happy with how educators interact with their children.

31% of parents were unhappy with their interactions with school management.

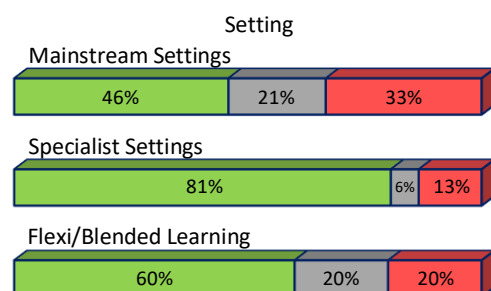
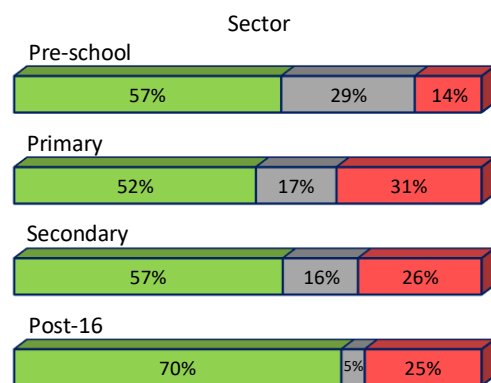
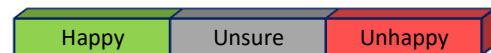
What parents told us about their satisfaction with their child's current placement.

56% of parents told us they were happy with the school their child currently attends, however 28% said they were not, and 1-in-10 reported being very unhappy. Whilst parents of boys were equally as happy as those with daughters (55%) a higher proportion of girls' parents reported being unhappy (33%:27%).

For the youngest Autistic learners, 57% of their parents were happy with the pre-school provision they were attending, with only 14% reporting they were unhappy. 52% of parents of primary school pupils were happy, however 31% told us they were not. For those with children attending secondary education 57% were happy but 26% were unhappy, the sector parents were most happy with was post-16 provision with 70% telling us they were happy, however a quarter said they were unhappy.

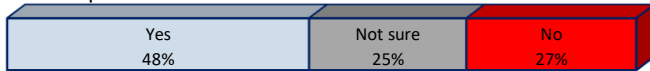
Less than half (46%) of parents with children in mainstream education reported being happy with their school and a third said they were unhappy. 81% of those with children educated in specialist settings were happy, with 60% being very happy, just 13% reported being unhappy. Parents whose children were being educated through a flexi/blended pathway were generally happy with the provision (60%), whilst 20% say they were not happy with the provision for their children.

I am happy with the school my child currently attends.



Do you think your child is currently in the best setting to suit their individual needs?

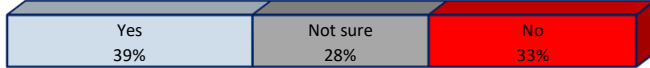
All responses



Boys



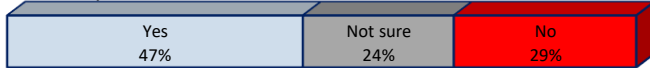
Girls



Pre-school



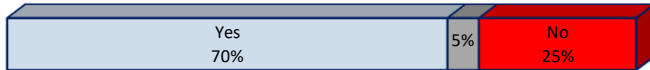
Primary



Secondary



Post-16



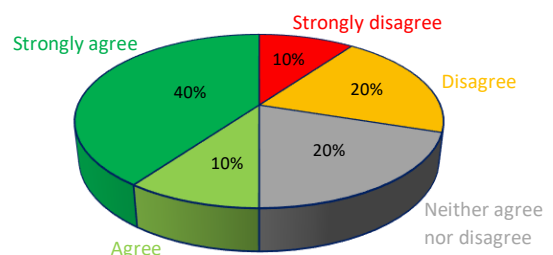
48% of parents felt that the school their child currently attends was the best placement to suit their individual needs, with more than 1-in-4 telling us that their child's current school was not the best setting to meet their needs. 28% strongly agreed that their child's school was meeting their needs, yet 13% strongly disagreed.

Parents of Autistic boys were almost twice as likely to be satisfied that their child's needs were being met than those with daughters. 51% of boys' parents felt their current placement was suitably meeting their needs however 39% of Autistic girls' parents feel the current school was meeting their daughters' needs and 1-in-3 telling us that their needs were not being met satisfactorily.

57% of parents with Autistic infants attending pre-school settings told us they were not satisfied that the settings were meeting their children's needs. Whilst 47% of those with children in primary settings and 49% with secondary school children felt the current placement was suitable for their child's individual needs. 70% of parents whose children were attending post-16 education provision agreed that their child was in the best setting to meet their needs.

64% of participants with children currently being educated through a flexi/blended learning pathway generally felt this approach was the most appropriate way to meet their child's individual needs. 40% were strongly in favour of the mixed methods style of education, however 30% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that this educational delivery was the most suitable approach for their child.

My child's current flexi/blended learning pathway is the best approach to meet their needs.



69% of all parents said they did not feel they received enough support in finding a suitable placement for their child, 77% of those with children in mainstream education and 51% whose children were in specialist provision.

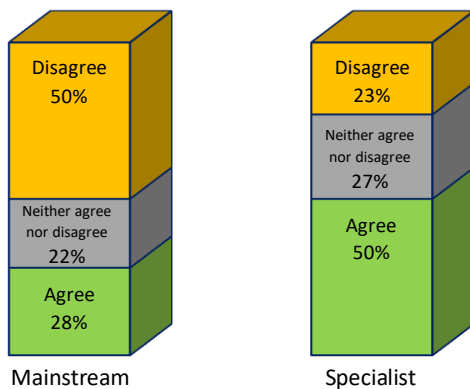
82% say their Local Authority did not discuss the different school placements available, this was as high as 89% for those with children in mainstream but was as low as 65% when children attend specialist settings.

Mainstream or Special Education?

Just over 1-in-4 (28%) of all the participating parents and carers felt mainstream was the best place for their child's education, whilst just under a half disagreed that their child would be best placed in mainstream settings.

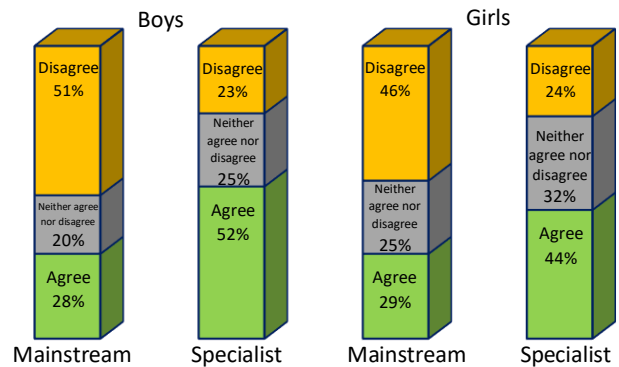
By comparison a half of all parents of Autistic learners felt education within a specialist setting would be the most suitable provision for their child, with just 23% disagreeing that their child would be better placed in a specialist education setting.

I think that mainstream education/specialist provision is best for my child.



52% of the parents of Autistic boys feel that specialist education provision would be best for their sons, whilst 28% shared a preference towards a mainstream education.

I think that mainstream education/specialist provision is best for my child.



29% of girls' parents agreed that mainstream education was best for their daughter, whereas 44% told us that they felt specialist education would be a better option.

Only 18% of parents with young children attending pre-school settings felt mainstream was the best place for their child, whilst 55% preferred the idea of a specialist placement. For those whose children were in primary school 62% felt specialist provision was preferable to mainstream (28%). 30% of secondary pupils' parents considered mainstream more suitable and 53% favoured specialist provision. 46% of participants with children in post-16 provision feel specialist settings would suit their child best, whilst 1-in-4 considered mainstream more appropriate.



Children currently in mainstream education.

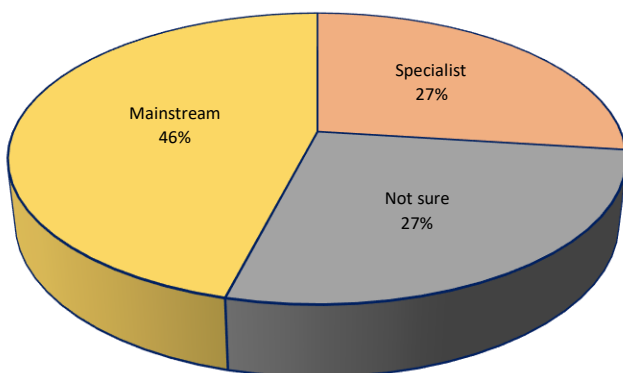
56% of participating parents and carers were representing Autistic children and young people being educated in mainstream settings. 37% of these parents told us that they felt the mainstream school their child was currently attending was the best setting to meet their individual needs, however 30% considered that current placement was not best meeting the individual needs of their child.

Less than half (46%) of all parents with children attending mainstream schools considered mainstream to be the best suitable setting for their child whilst more than 1-in-4 (27%) felt that specialist settings would offer their child a more appropriate environment for learning.

52% of the parents were satisfied with their interactions with mainstream setting staff, yet 32% told us they were dissatisfied. Participants were slightly more satisfied with staff's interactions with their children (54%), however 28% still reported being dissatisfied with how mainstream staff interacted with their children.

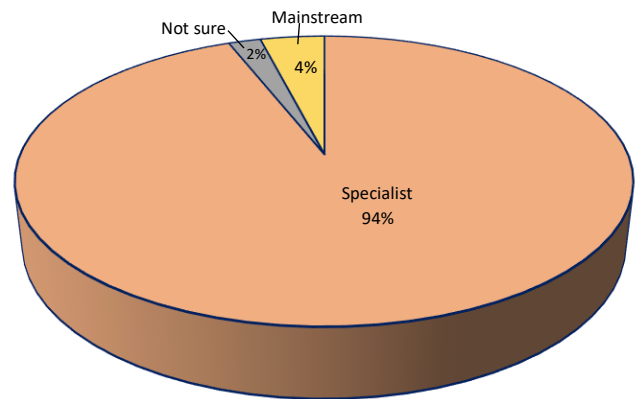
Which type of education provision do you think would best suit your child and their individual needs?

Children currently educated in mainstream settings



Which type of education provision do you think would best suit your child and their individual needs?

Children currently attending specialist provisions



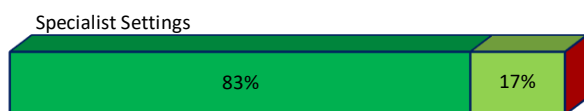
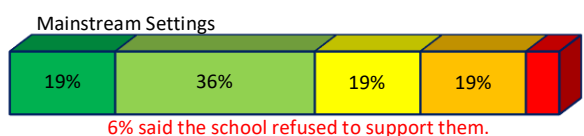
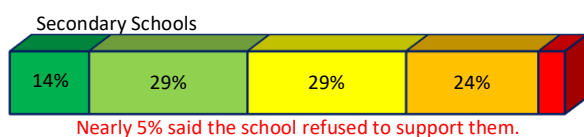
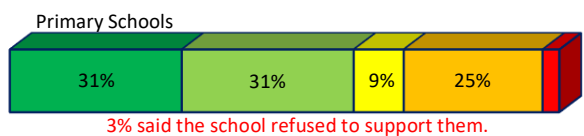
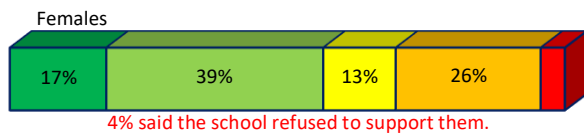
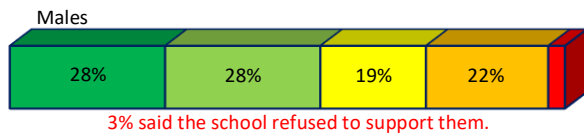
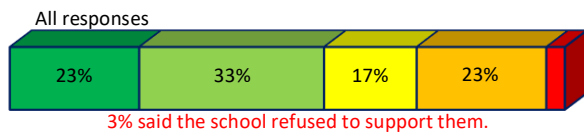
Children currently attending specialist provisions.






30% of all participants in the parent survey told us their children were receiving their education in specialist provision settings. Nearly three quarters (72%) of these parents felt that the current specialist setting was the best place to ensure their child's individual needs were being met and just 14% feel their children's needs were not being best met in their present school placement.

94% of parents and carers of Autistic children and young people currently being educated within specialist provisions felt a specialist setting was the most suitable placement for their children, with only 4% telling us they thought their child would be more suited to a mainstream education.

Overall, 86% of the parents of pupils attending specialist settings were satisfied with their contact with the staff, just 6% told us they were not satisfied with these interactions. 88% say they were content with how the staff at their child's specialist setting interacted with their child, 4% of respondents felt dissatisfied with how setting staff interacted with their children.

How supportive do you feel your child's school has been in opening the gateway to access diagnostic services?



-  Fully supportive
-  Somewhat supportive
-  Somewhat unsupportive
-  Totally unsupportive
-  The school refused to support

Accessing diagnostic pathways

Parents who told us that their child was currently on the diagnostic pathway were asked how supportive their child's school had been in initiating diagnostic processes and opening the gateway to the diagnostic pathways.

98% of the parents responded with 57% suggesting their child's school had been supportive of the referral onto the diagnostic pathway, however 43% felt unsupported with 3% saying the school refused to support a referral.

Parents of boys found schools more willing to fully support the initiation of the diagnostic process (28%) than those with daughters (17%), although overall support was more aligned (56%:57%) however just over 4% of girls' parents told us the school had refused their support compared to slightly under 3% in parents of boys.

Parental reports suggest there are significant differences in the likelihood of gaining support depending on the age of the child, especially in which sector they are educated. Pupils in primary schools whose parents wish to embark on the diagnostic journey are twice as likely to gain the support of the school than those who start the process whilst in secondary school. For those in primary settings 57% had the support of the school whilst 3% were refused any support, meanwhile 57% of the parents of secondary school pupils felt the school to be unsupportive and almost 5% were refused support.

All parents with children already attending specialist settings said their schools had been supportive, with 83% saying they felt the school was fully supportive of their child being entered onto the Autism diagnostic pathway. Mainstream settings were generally supporting of the process, 19% of parents saying they had the full support of their child's school. However, 44% felt the school had not supported them with nearly 6% telling us that they had been refused support from their child's school.

What educators told us...

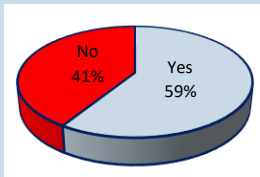
51% of educators told us they have experience of Autism outside of their professional role.

92% of education professionals have experienced working with Autistic children and young people.

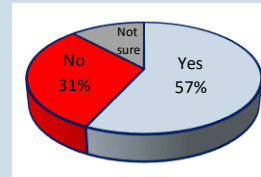
68% told us they were currently working with Autistic pupils.

Information sharing

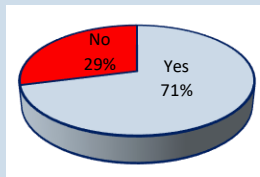
Did you have the opportunity to meet the pupil before working with them?



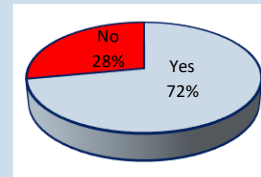
Do you feel you were given enough information about the pupil?



Were appropriate strategies known to be effective with the pupil shared in advance?



Were you made aware of specific triggers known to upset the pupil, in advance?



79% of education professionals told us they felt well supported by their school/employer, whilst working with Autistic pupils.

11% felt unsupported

39% of educators said they felt unsupported by their Local Authority whilst working with Autistic children and young people.

35% felt supported

42% told us they were satisfied with the support received from outside agencies when they were working with Autistic pupils.

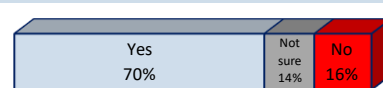
39% were not satisfied

Autism related training

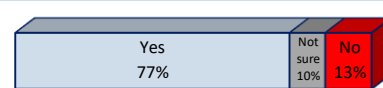
1-in-4 educators say they have not received any Autism related training provided by their employers. **65%** said they feel their employer provides enough Autism related training. **57%** told us they have independently undertaken their own Autism related training.

Knowledge and understanding

Do you feel you have enough knowledge about Autism?



Do you feel you have enough understanding about Autism?



Access to resources

59% told us they have enough access to resources to support them whilst working with Autistic pupils, but **41%** said they were not sure or did not know where to access resources.

Teachers

Almost 2% of teachers who took part in the educator survey told us they were Autistic, closely mirroring the percentage of pupils reported as being Autistic across Wales.

51% say they have experience of Autism outside their professional role and 94% said they have taught an Autistic pupil, with 68% of those currently working with an Autistic student.

64% said they had been given an opportunity to meet and get to know the pupil before they started working with them, 31% felt they hadn't received enough information about the student in advance. Three quarters told us that they were informed of appropriate strategies known to be effective with the Autistic young person whilst just over a quarter say they weren't made aware of specific triggers known to upset the child.

85% of teachers felt supported by their school, when working with Autistic students, 43% feel they were not supported sufficiently by their Local Authority and 46% thought they had been adequately supported by outside agencies.

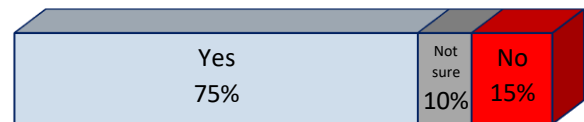
More than 20% told us they had not received any Autism related training provided by their employer, however 85% of those who had said their training had occurred within the past 5 years. 72% feel their employer provided sufficient training and 57% had independently undertaken training to improve their knowledge and understanding of Autism.

28% suggested they didn't have enough resources available to them to support Autistic pupils effectively. 88% said they would like to access more resources however 36% said they were unsure or did not know where they could access more resources to support them in their current role, whilst teaching Autistic students.

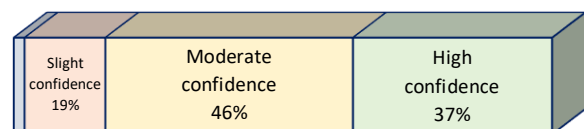
Do you feel you have enough general knowledge about Autism?



Do you feel you have enough general understanding about Autism?

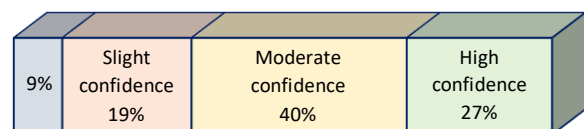


How confident are you that you would have the knowledge and understanding to support an Autistic pupil?



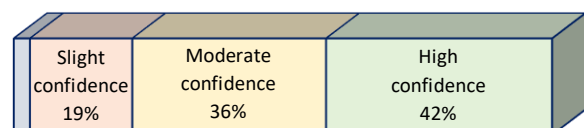
2% of respondents indicated they have NO confidence

How confident are you that you would have the knowledge and understanding to support the family of an Autistic pupil?



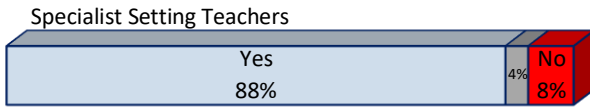
9% of respondents indicated they have NO confidence

How confident are you that you would be able to identify if a pupil was displaying Autistic related traits and behaviours?



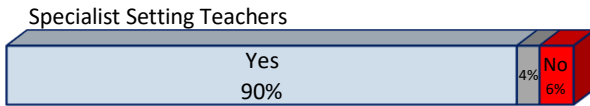
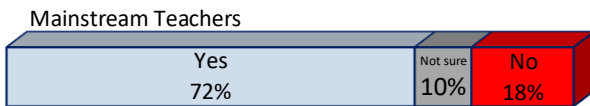
3% of respondents indicated they have NO confidence

Do you feel you have enough general knowledge about Autism?



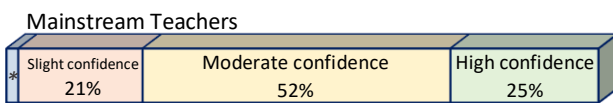
**8% of teachers working in specialist Autism education settings felt they didn't have enough detailed knowledge of Autism*

Do you feel you have enough general understanding about Autism?

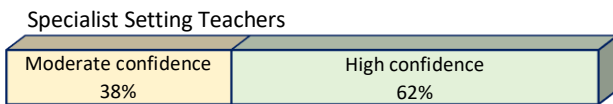


**4% of teachers working in specialist Autism education settings felt they didn't have enough detailed understanding of Autism*

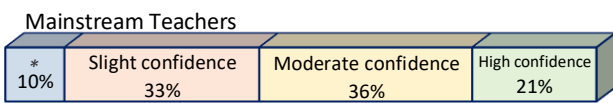
How confident are you that you would have the knowledge and understanding to support an Autistic pupil?



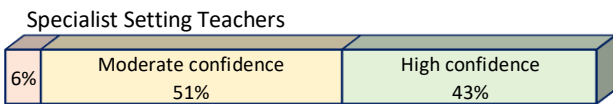
**2% of respondents indicated they have NO confidence*



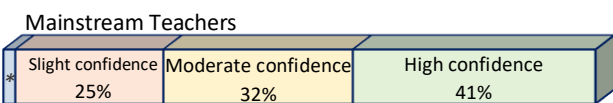
How confident are you that you would have the knowledge and understanding to support the family of an Autistic pupil?



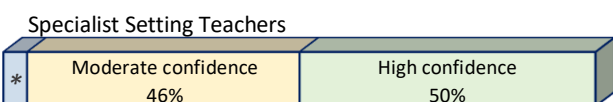
**10% of respondents indicated they have NO confidence*



How confident are you that you would be able to identify if a pupil was displaying Autistic related traits and behaviours?



**2% of respondents indicated they have NO confidence*



**4% of respondents indicated they have NO confidence*

Teachers in mainstream and specialist settings

63% of teachers who responded to the survey worked in mainstream settings, 33% were working in specialist settings.

83% of mainstream teachers told us they felt supported by their school when they were working with Autistic pupils compared to 94% of teachers in specialist settings.

49% of teachers in specialist settings feel their Local Authority provided enough support, whilst 36% felt unsupported by the Authority.

In mainstream schools 45% of teachers felt unsupported by the Local Authority compared to 35% that said their Authority provided sufficient support.

Outside agencies were thought to provide enough support by 39% of mainstream teachers and 62% of teachers employed in specialist settings.

74% of teachers working in specialist Autism settings told us they received no Autism related training from their employers before starting in the role, however, 74% also said their employers provided them with regular updated Autism related training.

85% of teachers working in specialist settings and 77% of those in mainstream said their employers had provided them Autism related training.

73% of mainstream teachers felt their schools provided them with enough Autism related training, whilst 19% of teachers in specialist settings thought their employers could provide them with more Autism related training.

76% of teaching staff from specialist settings and 48% in mainstream have independently undertaken training to help improve their knowledge and understanding of Autism.

Support staff

46% of education support staff told us they have experience of Autism outside of their professional role, and 91% say they have worked with Autistic children and young people.

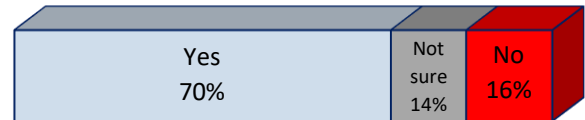
52% of those who have worked with Autistic learners say they had an opportunity to meet and get to know the individual before starting to work with them. Less than half felt they were given enough information about the pupil in advance, 61% said effective strategies were shared and two thirds were informed of triggers that were known to upset the child.

77% told us they have received Autism related training, with 85% saying this training was within the last five years. 31% felt their schools were not offering enough Autism related training and 57% said they have independently taken courses to improve their knowledge and understanding of Autism.

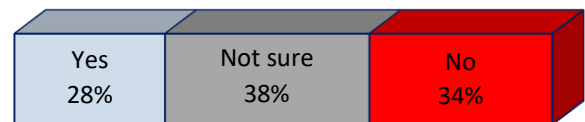
71% of school support staff feel they have enough general knowledge about Autism, whilst 78% think they have sufficient understanding of Autism.

1-in-4 respondents suggest they don't have enough resources available to them, 91% would like to access more resources and 45% did not know or were unsure where they could access additional resources to support them, whilst working with Autistic pupils.

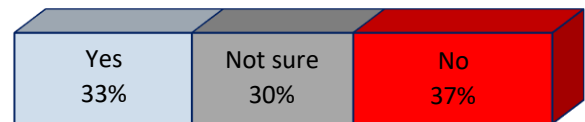
Do you feel you are/were getting enough support from your school whilst working with Autistic pupils?



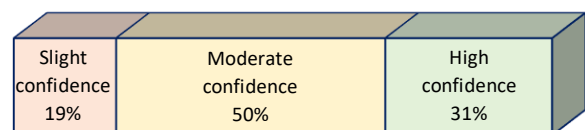
Do you feel you are/were getting enough support from the Local Authority whilst working with Autistic pupils?



Do you feel you are/were getting enough support from outside agencies whilst working with Autistic pupils?

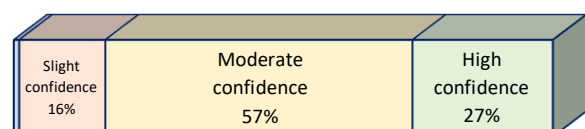


How confident are you that you would have the knowledge and understanding to support an Autistic pupil?



None of the respondents indicated they have NO confidence

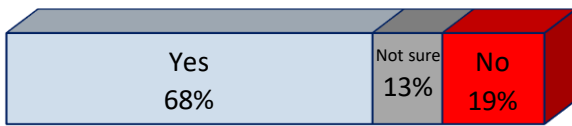
How confident are you that you would be able to identify if a pupil was displaying Autistic related traits and behaviours?



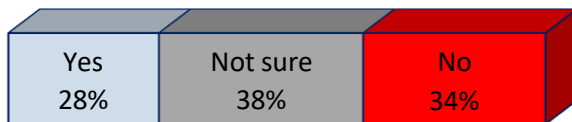
One respondent indicated they have NO confidence



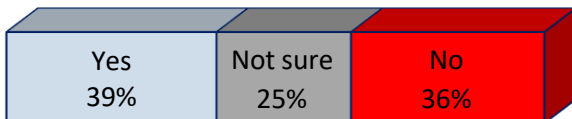
Do you feel you are/were getting enough support from your school whilst working with Autistic pupils?



Do you feel you are/were getting enough support from the Local Authority whilst working with Autistic pupils?



Do you feel you are/were getting enough support from outside agencies whilst working with Autistic pupils?



1-2-1 support staff

78% of education support staff say they have at some point in their career provided 1-2-1 support to an Autistic pupil.

44% of those who have said they had no detailed knowledge of Autism before they took on the role of supporting an Autistic pupil 1-2-1.

61% told us they did not receive any Autism related training in advance of them working 1-2-1 with an Autistic child or young person.



1-in-3 support staff who have worked as a 1-2-1 support for an Autistic pupil had no prior knowledge of Autism and received no Autism related training before starting in the role.

72% said they did have some form of Autism related training whilst they were working 1-2-1 with an Autistic student.

56% felt their employer provided them with sufficient training although 32% feel their employer could provide them with more Autism related training.

63% of staff who have provided 1-2-1 support to Autistic pupils told us that they have independently undertaken their own training to improve their knowledge and understanding of Autism.

Agency and supply staff

92% of education agency and supply staff have experience of working with Autistic pupils, and 67% told us they have worked as a 1-2-1 support with an Autistic pupil whilst on supply.

50% say they have had times where they were not made aware that they would be working with Autistic pupils before arriving at a school, although all participating agency and supply staff said they have experienced occasions where they were given this information in advance.

1-in-3 felt they were not given enough information about the young person they would be working with in advance, however, 42% suggested that they were given sufficient information upon arrival at the setting.

75% told us that they were made aware of appropriate strategies known to be effective with the individual pupil and all had been given information relating to specific triggers known to upset the young person.

1-in-4 said there were occasions where they felt unsupported by the school in which they were working, whilst working with Autistic pupils.

83% of agency education staff said they had received Autism related training provided by their employers within the last 5 years. Half felt their employer provided them with sufficient Autism related training, whilst $\frac{3}{4}$ say they have independently undertaken their own training to improve their knowledge and understanding of Autism.

One education agency supply staff member said...

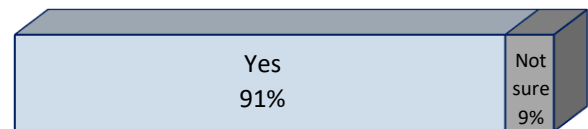
"I wish to share that all school staff should have compulsory ASD awareness training. It is very difficult treading the line of doing the very best I can for the autistic child in a mainstream class when other staff in the class do not get provided with appropriate Autism understanding training."

Do you feel you have enough general knowledge about Autism?



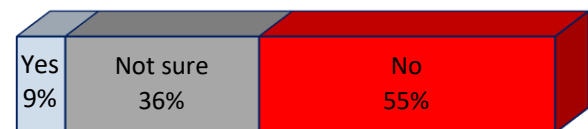
None of the respondents selected the NO option

Do you feel you have enough general understanding about Autism?

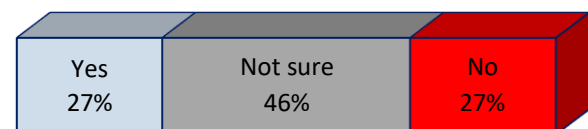


None of the respondents selected the NO option

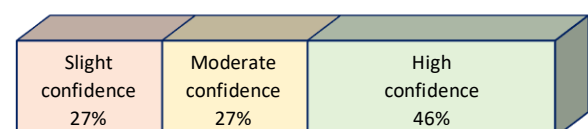
Do you feel you have enough access to resources to improve your knowledge and understanding about Autism, and support you in your current role?



Do you know where to access resources to improve your knowledge and understanding about Autism, and support you in your current role?



How confident are you that you have the knowledge and understanding to support an Autistic pupil?



None of the respondents indicated they have NO confidence

Educated at home – what parents told us...

4% of parents who took part in the survey say their children were being educated at home.

86% felt educating their child at home was the best approach to meet their individual needs.

79% told us the decision to educate their child at home was their preference.

86% of young people educated at home had previously been educated in a mainstream setting, **36%** had attended a specialist setting.

36% of parents whose children are educated at home felt their child might be better placed in a specialist setting.

50% told us they expected their child to continue being educated at home for the remainder of their education.

93% said their Local Authority had not discussed the different placements available to their children.

79% of parents who decided to educate their children at home felt unsupported in making the decision by their Local Authority.

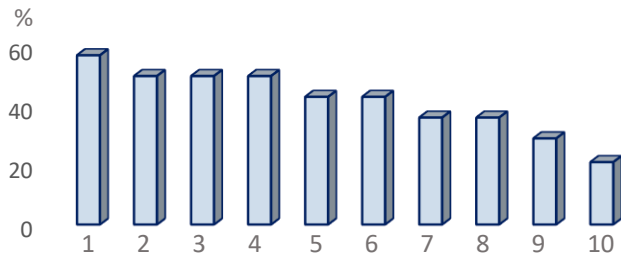
50% told us their Local Authority had supported the transition from setting to education at home.

57% of young people educated at home have a Statement of Educational Need.

38% have provision within their Statement for being educated at home.

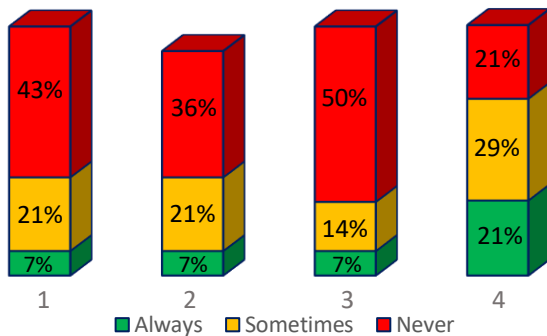
63% do not receive all the support prescribed within their Statement.

Areas of support that parents feel their child needs but does not currently have access to.

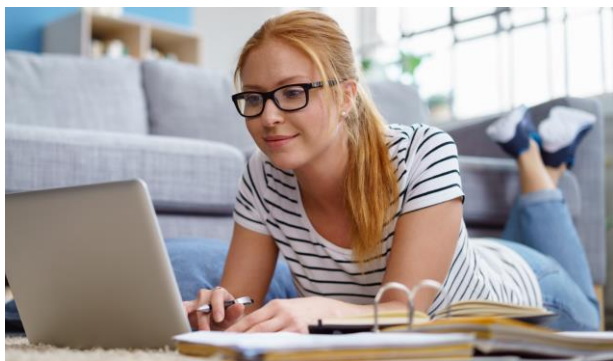


- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 Mental Health Support - 57% | 6 Counselling - 43% |
| 2 Specialist Support Staff - 50% | 7 Access to Sensory Room - 36% |
| 3 Social Skills Interventions - 50% | 8 Travel Training - 36% |
| 4 Music Therapy - 50% | 9 Occupational Therapy - 29% |
| 5 Positive Play/Play Therapy - 43% | 10 Speech and Language Therapy - 21% |

Communication between home and Local Authority



- 1 When discussing your child's education with the Local Authority, do you feel they listen to your point-of-view?
- 2 When discussing your child's education with the Local Authority, do you feel they understand your point-of-view?
- 3 When discussing your child's education with the Local Authority, do you feel they respect your point-of-view?
- 4 When discussing your child's education with the Local Authority, do you they communicate using language and vocabulary that you understand?



What led you to make the decision to educate your child at home?

"He spent more time suspended because of his behaviour, so wasn't having an education"

"The placement 'broke down', the school did not implement any of the strategies needed for my child to thrive"

"Child heard teachers laughing about her exclusion and since then has refused to attend school"

"Unhappiness, mental wellbeing and bullying"

"My child was bullied, and the school isolated him, not the bullies. They told us there was nowhere in the school for him"

"His anxiety was at a level where he was close to breakdown, nobody in the school listened to me because he sat under his desk all day and didn't cause any trouble. He was having panic attacks and started talking about killing himself when he was only 7"

Pack Page 141

Educated at home

71% of parents said their child was happy being educated at home.

50% of parents whose children are educated at home feel their child receives the right level of support to help them succeed, however 71% told us that they felt they didn't get enough support to help their child.

58% said their child needed some form of mental health support that they were not currently accessing.

36% told us they are in regular communication with the Local Authority regarding their child's education, yet 93% felt there was not enough communication with their LA.

36% of children being educated at home have experienced school exclusion through internal 'isolation' and fixed term external exclusion. 7% have been permanently excluded from an education setting.

90% of those who attended a school prior to being educated at home had been the victim of bullying, with 66% of parents considering their child was bullied for being Autistic.

Statement of Educational Need

51% of the participants in the survey of parents and carers said their child has a Statement issued by the Local Authority, closely matching the 54% of Autistic pupils with a Statement across Wales.

Parental reports suggest Statements were issued to 41% of Autistic pupils in mainstream education, 87% of pupils attending specialist provisions, 64% of those accessing a flexi/blended learning pathway and 57% of those being educated at home. 56% of young people educated through a flexi/blended pathway and 38% of children educated at home have these approaches prescribed within their Statement.

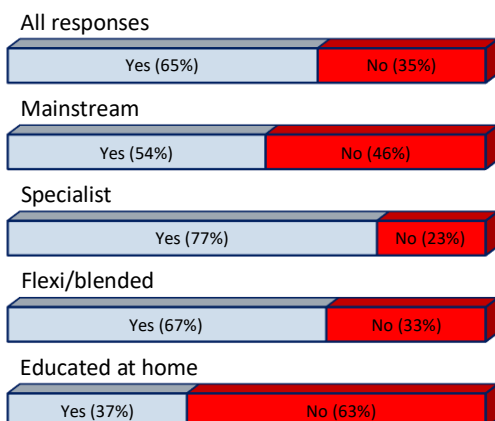
74% of respondents told us that Autism was the primary need recorded in their child's Statement.

A Statement of Educational Need is a document issued by a Local Authority, following a Statutory Assessment process. The 'Statement' is legally binding, setting out the individual needs of a child and how they should be met within their education. The document will set out long-term targets and indicate appropriate strategies for achieving short-term incremented steps towards reaching them. An annual review involving a multi-agency approach is held to assess the effectiveness of the document and identify where any changes are required. In Wales, under the implementation of the new ALN code, Statements are gradually being phased out, to be replaced by Individual Development Plans (IDPs).

More than a third (35%) of parents told us that their child was not receiving all of the support detailed within their Statement.

In mainstream settings 54% reported their child to be receiving all the specified support. 20% of parents with Autistic children in pre-school settings, 37% in primary, 59% in secondary and 57% in post-16 reported their child was not in receipt of all the support as detailed within their Statement. Data suggests that mainstream primary school pupils are 2½ times more likely to get all the support they are entitled to than those in mainstream secondary education. Two thirds of pupils attending specialist provisions are reportedly receiving all the support as set out within their Statement. Parents of pupils attending both specialist primary (80%) and secondary (81%) report a high percentage of pupils accessing the prescribed support, however there was a 50-50 split for those young people attending specialist post-16 provisions.

Does your child receive all the support detailed within their Statement of Educational Need.



73% of parents with children who currently have a Statement of Educational Need said they have not yet been informed of the upcoming changes in the provision of ALN support.

Individual Education Plans

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a formal, structured document to help teaching staff plan and prepare a child's education. The IEP should be unique to the child, reflecting their individual needs and must help guide what is taught, exactly how it should be delivered and how often. It should set out short-term achievable targets and strategies for reaching them particular to the child, over and above what may be available to the whole class, which are kept under regular review. In Wales, under the implementation of the new ALN code, IEPs are gradually being phased out, to be replaced by Individual Development Plans (IDPs).

65% of respondents to the parent survey told us their child had an IEP, just under a quarter said they didn't and 11% were not sure if they had an IEP or not.

36% of Autistic children attending pre-school settings, 58% in primary and secondary schools, and 42% of young people in post-16 education settings have an IEP.

In mainstream education settings 52% had an IEP whilst a quarter did not. 76% of Autistic pupils in specialist provisions were said to have an IEP, with only 6% being without. Parents of 64% of those currently on a flexi/blended learning pathway told us their child had an IEP, a third said the document covers the various settings they attend. 21% of young people being educated at home have an IEP, two thirds of them say the Local Authority help them to maintain the document.

60% of parents said they thought their child's IEP was reviewed on a regular basis, however 1-in-5 felt that it was not. Less than half (47%) of parents with children attending mainstream education compared to 80% of those

in specialist provisions say there is a regular review of the document, whilst 22% of those educated through a flexi/blended approach and a third of those educated at home felt the IEP is not reviewed regularly enough.

55% told us that their child is involved in the reviewing of their IEP, less than half of those in primary settings (48%), nearly 60% of those in secondary and three quarters of those attending post-16 placements.

65% said that they were often involved in the review of their child's IEP, 59% in mainstream in comparison to 76% in specialist education.

54% of parents felt the targets set within their child's IEP were realistic and achievable, whilst 18% disagreed. The level to which parents agreed reduced slightly as their child moved through the sectors, 100% in pre-school, 54% in primary, 51% in secondary and 50% of those with children educated in post-16 settings. Nearly three quarters of those with children in specialist settings feel their IEP targets were achievable compared to 41% of those whose children were in mainstream.

Areas of support

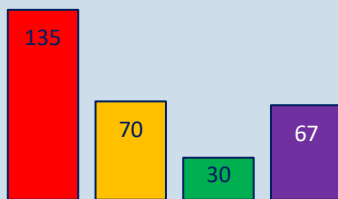
Parents were asked about different types of support to find out what their children were currently receiving or what they thought their children should be receiving, whilst in school.

Participants were given 4 response options:

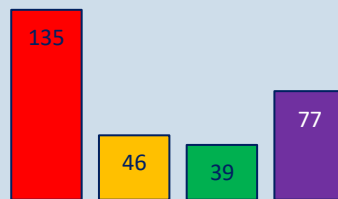
No access currently, but it is needed - **Limited Access but more is needed** - **Sufficient Access** - **No access needed**

No access currently, but it is needed - The five areas where most parents felt their child needed support that currently was not made available to them were:

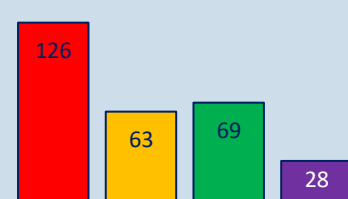
Mental Health Support (45%)



Travel Training (45%)



Peer Mentoring/Buddying (44%)



Access to Sensory Room (41%)



Occupational Therapy (41%)

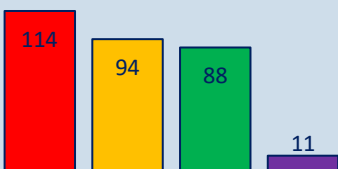


The next five areas were:

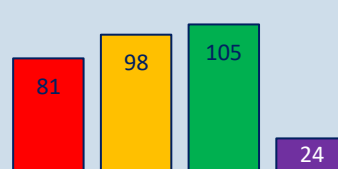
- General Life Skill Development 123 (41%)
- Road Safety Guidance 119 (40%)
- Social Skills Interventions 114 (37%)
- Counselling 112 (37%)
- Positive Play/Play Therapy 100 (33%)

Limited Access but more is needed - The five most common areas where parents felt their child needed more support than they were currently receiving were:

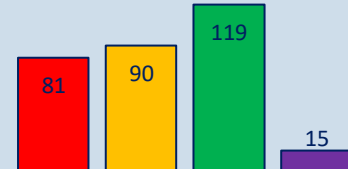
Social Skills Interventions (31%)



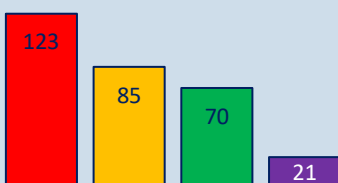
Specialist Support Staff (30%)



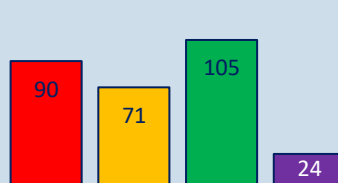
Access to quiet room or safe space (30%)



General life skill development (28%)



Support during unstructured times (24%)



The next five areas were:

- Mental Health Support 70 (23%)
- Peer Mentoring/Buddying 63 (22%)
- Counselling 61 (20%)
- Road Safety Guidance 60 (20%)
- Occupational Therapy 58 (19%)

Educational Support

52% of children and young people felt they did not get enough help in school.
56% for those educated in mainstream compared to 30% of those in specialist settings.

42% suggested they were unable to cope with the work given to them in school.
45% of pupils in mainstream, and just 20% of those in specialist settings.

42% of Autistic pupils felt their teachers did not know how to support them.

35% of parents told us their child received no additional support in school, girls (61% access additional support) are less likely to have support than boys (66%).

Almost 2-in-5 primary school pupils and a third of those in secondary and post-16 education receive no additional support.

According to parental reports 27% of pupils attending mainstream settings currently do not have any additional provision in place.

"There is a huge lack of support for children who are academically able and non-disruptive, like girls with ASD"

"...he gets forgotten, just because my child has no learning difficulties, it doesn't mean he doesn't struggle"

"I was told that secondary schools don't get funding for support staff"

"Neurodiverse children deserve input from trained support staff...there should be a minimal level of training"

"It is heart-breaking to be told there isn't enough funding to implement all the support identified in your child's IDP"

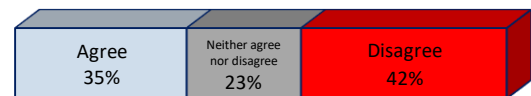
"I don't like asking for help I'm quiet, so they leave me to it"

"I felt like I sometimes got a lot of help but sometimes I didn't"

"My helper is great he knows me well and can see when I need help"

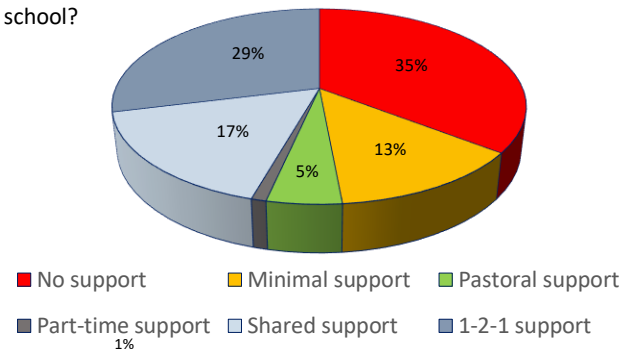
"It's hard, my teachers don't see I am struggling"

My teachers know how to support me.

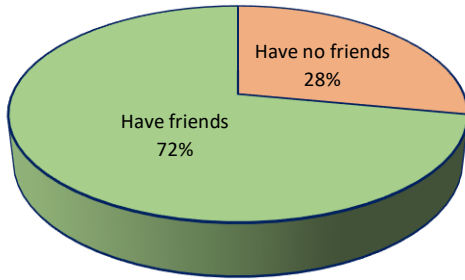


"Work can be a struggle to get my head around I find it hard to concentrate, some subjects were ok, but in others I struggled and wasn't really getting the help I needed"

What level of additional support does your child receive in school?



Do you have friends in school?



"I found it hard to make friends"

"I have one close friend, sometimes when they are not in school it is lonely"

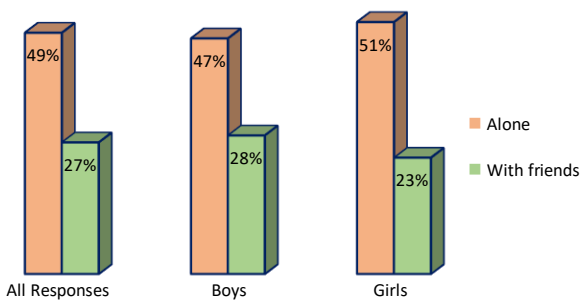
"I only had friends for the last two years of my school life"

"I have a very small group of friends but am often side-lined by them so they can talk to their other friends instead of me"

"I only felt happy with my friends in school...I constantly felt threatened by other pupils"

"I wish I had more friends"

Generally, my child is happiest when alone/with friends.



Peer Relationships in School

28% of young people who responded to the survey told us they have no friends in school.

Parent responses indicate that boys are marginally less likely to have friends than girls with 68% of boys compared to 64% of girls having either no friends or just one close friend.

Age also played a role in determining whether their children made friends with ¼ of primary school aged children having no friends compared to 2-in-5 of those in post-16 education.

Parents told us that 1-in-3 children and young people educated in specialist settings had a good group of friends, slightly higher than the 31% of those attending mainstream settings.

71% of parents felt their child wanted to make friends but struggled to connect with their peers, with girls (78%) being more inclined to yearn for positive relationships with their peers than boys (69%).

Just over a quarter of parents said their child was happiest when with friends, and just below half said their child was happiest when alone.



Bullying

76% of Autistic children and young people told us that they have been bullied in school.

36% of Autistic pupils currently in primary school settings told us they have experienced being bullied, by the time they are educated in secondary settings 87% report being the victim of bullying at school.

Gender differences appear to have little impact on the possibility of encountering bullying with 77% of boys and 74% of girls reporting being bullied at school, whilst 80% of participants who identify as non-binary said they had been bullied.

The type of setting in which a child is educated plays a role on the chances of experiencing bullying, 76% of pupils in mainstream education compared to 70% in specialist settings reported being bullied.

Half of the parents think their child was considered an easy target for bullies, whilst 62% felt their child was targeted by bullies for being Autistic.

98% of parents who were aware of their child being bullied reported this to the school.

56% felt the school did not take their concerns seriously, 60% felt the school did not take appropriate action in response and 62% said the bullying continued despite the school being made aware.

Responses suggest that parents consider schools do not take complaints of bullying seriously or act accordingly in response to concerns, with specialist settings performing worse than mainstream.

"I was told my child needed to be more resilient and ignore or stay away from the bullies"

"The school blamed my son; said he was too sensitive and literal to take jokes and rough play"

"...concerns get ignored so a school can look good on paper without considering the effect on a child's mental health"

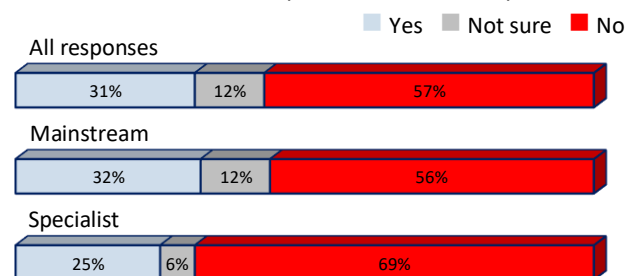
"Other children don't want to talk to me, sometimes they say I am fat and call me names"

"Me and another Autistic student I knew faced a lot of ableism in school from both teachers and students"

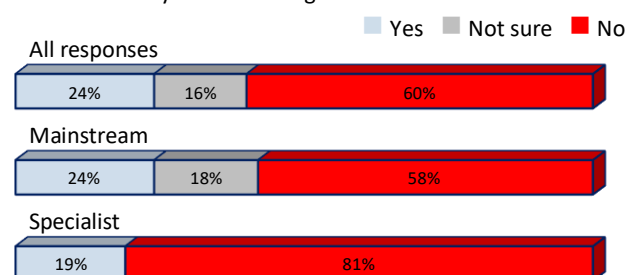
"I was bullied in primary school and most of secondary. I didn't enjoy playing because kids never accommodated for me"



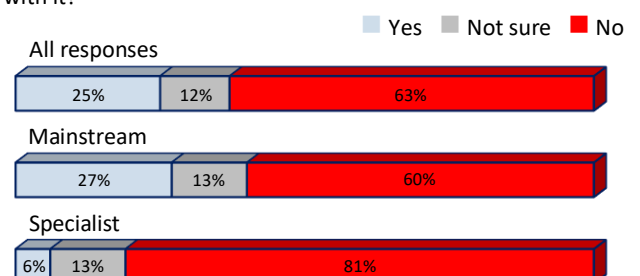
Where you reported bullying issues to the school, do you think the school listened and took your concerns seriously?



Do you think the school acted appropriately in response to your concerns about your child being bullied?



Did the bullying stop, as a result of you asking the school to deal with it?



School exclusions

23% of parents told us that their child had faced a school exclusion, either internally by isolation or through external fixed-term or permanent exclusions.

98% of those represented children who were excluded at mainstream settings, 14% from specialist settings, with 12% having experienced exclusion in both.

78% of those excluded were male (1-in-4 of all boys) and 20% female (18% of all girls). 24% of Autistic pupils who have been suspended or excluded from school, either internally or externally, temporarily, or permanently were aged 10 or younger, with the youngest being 6 years old. 31% were of primary school age (14% of all primary pupil parent responses).

According to parental reports Autistic pupils with comorbid ADHD are 2½ times more likely to be excluded than those without.

Internal exclusions

78% of parents who told us their child had been excluded reported their child being internally excluded by being placed in isolation (18% of all respondents).

95% of the pupils isolated faced this in mainstream schools and 19% in specialist provision (11% were isolated in both type of setting). 65% reported their child had been placed in isolation on more than 5 occasions and 37% said

their child endured isolation periods of two whole school days, or longer.

The youngest participant's child placed in isolation was 6 years, with 20% of those having experienced isolation being aged 10 or younger (7% of all pupils aged 6-10 years). 24% of the pupils were isolated in primary school (9% of all Autistic primary pupils). 64% of primary pupils experienced isolation on more than 5 occasions and 27% for periods of two days or longer. The most common reason given by schools for placing primary pupils in isolation was staff being unable to manage the child's behaviours.

78% of those placed in isolation were male (61% of all represented males). 36% experienced periods of isolation lasting two days or longer and 61% had been isolated on 5 or more occasions. Disruptive behaviour and staff being unable to manage behaviour were the reasons most used by school by way of explanation.

Female participants accounted for 20% of those who had experienced being placed in isolation (14% of all girls). 78% were isolated five or more times and 36% had endured isolation periods lasting two whole school days or longer. 89% of parents told us that their daughter's school had used isolation as a result of them not listening to school staff, whilst unacceptable and disruptive behaviours were also commonly given explanations.

Most common reasons schools have given parents for exclusion of their children.

Internal exclusions

Internal exclusions (All cases)

Disruptive behaviour - 57%
 Aggressive behaviour towards school staff - 50%
 Staff unable to manage child's behaviours - 50%
 Unacceptable behaviour - 48%
 Not listening to the school staff - 48%

20% of all Autistic pupils' internal exclusions were blamed on staff shortage or lack of available support.

Internal exclusions (Primary school)

Staff unable to manage child's behaviours - 73%
 Violent behaviour towards school staff - 55%
 Aggressive behaviours towards school staff - 55%
 Disruptive behaviour - 55%
 Violent behaviour towards other pupils - 46%

36% of Autistic primary school pupils' internal exclusions were blamed on staff shortage or lack of available support.

Internal exclusions (Boys)

Disruptive behaviour - 50%
 Staff unable to manage child's behaviour - 50%
 Aggressive behaviour towards school staff - 44%
 Unacceptable behaviour - 39%
 Not listening to the school staff - 39%

19% of Autistic boys' internal exclusions were blamed on staff shortage or lack of available support.

Internal exclusions (Girls)

Not listening to the school staff - 89%
 Unacceptable behaviour - 78%
 Disruptive behaviour - 78%
 Disobeying school rules - 78%
 Aggressive behaviours towards school staff - 67%

11% of Autistic girls' internal exclusions were blamed on staff shortage or lack of available support.

Fixed term external exclusions

Fixed term exclusions (All cases)

Staff unable to manage child's behaviours - 52%
 Aggressive behaviours towards school staff - 46%
 Unacceptable behaviour - 46%
 Disruptive behaviour - 42%
 Violent behaviour towards other pupils - 38%

23% of all reported fixed term exclusions were blamed on staff shortage or lack of available support.

Fixed term exclusions (Primary school)

Aggressive behaviours towards school staff - 65%
 Staff unable to manage child's behaviours - 65%
 Violent behaviour towards school staff - 53%
 Violent behaviour towards other pupils - 53%
 Aggressive behaviours towards other pupils - 47%

47% of Autistic primary school pupils' fixed term exclusions were blamed on staff shortage or lack of available support.

Fixed term exclusions (Boys)

Staff unable to manage child's behaviours - 50%
 Disruptive behaviour - 45%
 Aggressive behaviours towards school staff - 43%
 Unacceptable behaviour - 40%
 Violent behaviour towards other pupils - 38%

26% of boys' fixed term exclusions were blamed on staff shortage or lack of available support.

Fixed term exclusions (Girls)

Unacceptable behaviour - 78%
 Aggressive behaviours towards school staff - 67%
 Staff unable to manage child's behaviours - 67%
 Aggressive behaviours towards other pupils - 56%
 Not listening to the school staff - 56%

11% of Autistic girls' fixed term exclusions were blamed on staff shortage or lack of available support.

Permanent exclusions

Permanent exclusions (All cases)

Violent behaviour towards school staff
 Violent behaviour towards other pupils
 Aggressive behaviours towards school staff
 Aggressive behaviours towards other pupils
 Use of bad language directed at staff
 Unacceptable behaviour
 Not listening to the school staff
 Staff unable to manage child's behaviours

Were all referenced as reasons in 60% of permanent exclusions

Permanent exclusions (Boys and girls)

Violent behaviour towards school staff
 Violent behaviour towards other pupils
 Aggressive behaviours towards school staff
 Aggressive behaviours towards other pupils
 Use of bad language directed at staff

The 5 most common reasons given by school for the permanent exclusion of Autistic boys and girls were the same, with each referenced in 67% of boys' and 50% of girls' exclusions.

Permanent exclusions (Primary school)

Violent and aggressive behaviour towards school staff and other pupils was the most common reason for the permanent exclusion of Autistic primary school children, being cited as explanation in 100% of the reported exclusions.

Fixed term/temporary external exclusions

20% of parents told us their child had been temporarily externally excluded by being sent home or asked to stay at home, known as a fixed term exclusion.

15% of those pupils had been given a fixed term exclusion from both mainstream and specialist settings, 98% from mainstream and 19% at specialist provision. 42% of pupils temporarily excluded faced fixed term exclusions on five or more occasions, whilst a third had been excluded for periods of a whole school week or longer. 4% of them were aged just 6 years old, and a quarter were aged 10 years or younger (10% of all participants' children aged between 6 and 10 years). 13% of all respondents whose children were in primary education said their child had been temporarily excluded, 41% on more than five occasions and 35% for periods of a week or more.

81% were boys (22% of all males) with 43% temporarily excluded on five or more occasions and a third for a week or longer. Half of the parents of boys who had experienced fixed term exclusions say the school had given the reason that they were unable to manage their child's behaviours with disruptive behaviour being the second most common reason. 14% of all females represented in this study had been temporarily excluded. A third were removed from school for a week or more, whilst 42% had faced fixed term exclusions five or more times. Schools referenced unacceptable behaviour in 78% of cases whilst 2-in-3 were for aggressive behaviours towards school staff.

52% of parents said they did not receive a written account of the exclusion from the school.



Permanent exclusion

10% of parents who reported that their child had been excluded at school told us they had been permanently excluded (2% of all parental responses).

80% of those were permanently excluded from mainstream schools (2% of those participants educated in mainstream) with 20% being permanently excluded from specialist settings (1% of those educated in specialist provision). The youngest child of a participant to be permanently excluded was 9 years old, with 40% of permanent exclusions happening in primary settings, due to violent and aggressive behaviour towards staff and other pupils.

80% were permanently excluded from one setting, whilst 20% were excluded from two.

2% of all parents of boys said their son had been permanently excluded, two thirds from one school and a third from two. 40% of all those who had faced permanent exclusion were female (3% of all girls who were represented).

80% of parents whose children had been permanently excluded told us they felt supported by their Local Authority in finding suitable alternative provision for their child.

About this report

This report presents the first phase of findings from a study conducted by Swansea University School of Education. The data was collected between April and August 2021 through three online survey questionnaires. In total, responses from 841 individuals were entered into the analysis, 92 Autistic children and young people, 371 of their parents and carers and 378 education professionals, all resident and learning or working in Wales. Both quantitative data (responses to yes/no and multiple-choice questions) and qualitative data (responses to the optional free-text requests for further information) were included within this initial analysis.

Following publication of this preliminary report, further, more detailed analysis will continue and the conclusions of this will direct the remainder of the project, which is scheduled for completion in the summer of 2023.



Preliminary conclusions

For many Autistic children and young people in Wales, negotiating the day-to-day challenges of the education system is an overwhelming experience. Both the students themselves, and their parents have shared their frustrations about many areas that present significant issues in their responses to the surveys.

Whilst educators who took part in the study, largely considered themselves to have a good knowledge and understanding of Autism and the particular difficulties Autistic pupils face, it is clear that parents and pupils share a different viewpoint and feel there to be room for improvement in these areas.

Whilst the majority of Autistic young people told us they enjoyed going to, and were happy when at school, a large proportion told of the heightened anxiety a school day can generate. Those attending specialist settings were notably more content than those in mainstream, and there were also clear gender differences to be found in the experiences discussed. Parental reports also pointed to a significant difference in the experiences of those attending mainstream and specialist settings, with most indicating a greater overall satisfaction with the specialist provision experience.

The author of this report will continue detailed analysis of all responses and endeavour to set out a comprehensive set of conclusions to support any recommendations for moving forward upon completion of this project.





The Swansea University School of Education (SUSE) is determined to be an internationally recognised, but also Welsh, centre for high quality educational research. SUSE is already engaged in a wide range of research activities, including collaborative projects at national and international level.

SUSE aspires to be a leading research centre with a strong focus on policy and practice. It is internationally connected and is establishing itself to be a centre of excellence nationally and internationally.

All SUSE academic staff hold doctorates and are research active. The research profile of the department represents both a breadth and depth of interests within the field of education and those holding more senior posts have an international research profile.

Acknowledgements and thanks

The author would like to acknowledge the fantastic support of Ms Delyth Williams and her ongoing efforts in ensuring translations of all materials relating to this project are available in the Welsh language.

The author would also like to thank the following:

Dr Gareth Noble and Ms Rachel Church for the encouragement to embark upon this project and the conviction in its validity.

Drs Cathryn Knight and Helen Lewis, the project supervisors for their continued support and invaluable advice to get the project to this stage.

The parents and their children who tried out the layout and questions within the surveys and gave valuable feedback.

All the participants who took part in the surveys, your responses have been truly amazing, and those who took the time to share the details of each survey to ensure the project attracted responses from every Local Authority area in Wales.



The Education of Autistic Pupils in Wales
Preliminary Report 2021

Steffan Davies MSc
Swansea University School of Education
856614@swansea.ac.uk

Document is Restricted

Agenda Item 6

By virtue of paragraph(s) vi of Standing Order 17.42

Document is Restricted