

Background information about Estyn

Estyn is the Office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. As a Crown body, Estyn is independent of the Welsh Government.

Estyn's principal aim is to raise the standards and quality education and training in Wales. This is primarily set out in the Learning and Skills Act 2000 and the Education Act 2005. In exercising its functions, Estyn must give regard to the:

- Quality of education and training in Wales;
- Extent to which education and training meets the needs of learners;
- Educational standards achieved by education and training providers in Wales;
- Quality of leadership and management of those education and training providers;
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of learners; and,
- Contribution made to the well-being of learners.

Estyn's remit includes (but is not exclusive to) nurseries and non-maintained settings, primary schools, secondary schools, independent schools, pupil referrals units, further education, adult community learning, local government education services, work-based learning, and teacher education and training.

Estyn may give advice to the Welsh Parliament on any matter connected to education and training in Wales. To achieve excellence for learners, Estyn has set three strategic objectives:

- Provide accountability to service users on the quality and standards of education and training in Wales;
- Inform the development of national policy by the Welsh Government;
- Build capacity for improvement of the education and training system in Wales.

This response is not confidential.

Response

Introduction

Although it is difficult to measure precisely the impact of the pandemic on absenteeism, our response highlights some important points that could inform the development of policy and the use of resources.

The pandemic has disproportionately affected the attendance (and, due to known correlations, the well-being, learning and attainment) of specific groups of learners, for example:

- Learners younger than statutory school age
- Learners in older year groups in secondary education
- Learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds
- Learners with additional learning needs

Almost twice as many learners are in elective home education now than prior to the pandemic, and the number of learners electively home educated across Wales is now approximately the size of the total school population in a small local authority. Statutory guidance for local authorities on home education was delayed by the pandemic but is necessary as a matter of urgency to ensure that learners who are home educated receive a suitable education and support for their learning and well-being needs.

Far more learners received U grades for GCSEs in English, Welsh and mathematics in 2021 compared to the previous year, and these learners are at greater risk of becoming NEET in the years ahead.

Learner well-being continues to be a concern and a likely contributing factor behind higher levels of absenteeism than before the pandemic after discounting absence due to Covid-19. While funding for counselling services increased to meet the rising demand, the services actually counselled fewer learners in 2020-2021 than in the year before the pandemic. Furthermore, for learners with significant mental health issues, waiting times for specialist CAMHS have increased over the last two years. Since June 2021, more than half of those referred to CAMHS have been waiting more than the target 4 weeks for their first appointment.

Consultation questions

Reasons

Reasons for and levels of persistent absenteeism.

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

Whether and, if so, reasons why persistent absenteeism is more prevalent among particular groups of pupils

Persistent absenteeism

The attendance of far more pupils meets the definition of persistent absence (less than 80% attendance) this year than is usually the case. This is primarily a direct result of

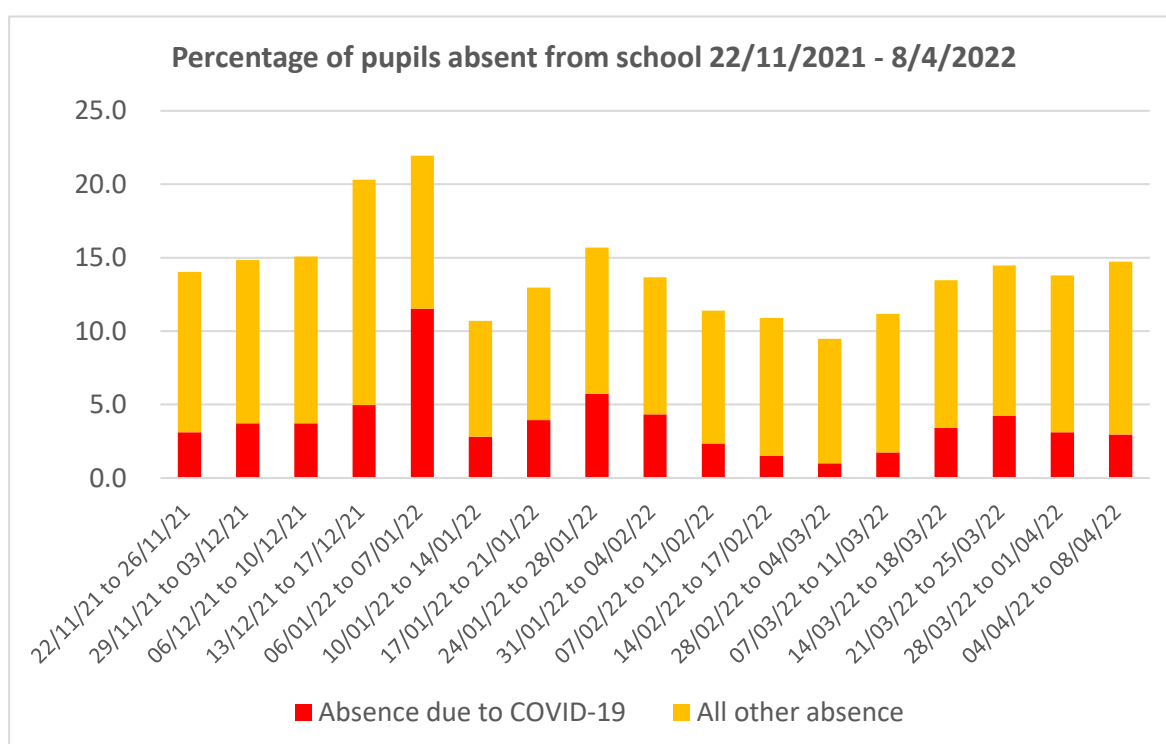
Covid-19 related absence – either because Covid-19 absence itself is enough to take a pupil below 80% attendance or because of Covid-19 absences combined with absences for other reasons (e.g. other illness).

For a small number of pupils, their emotional well-being or mental health has been affected long-term as a result of the pandemic to the extent that it has caused them to be persistently absent. This would include pupils, for example, that struggled to get back into the routine of school and pupils with high levels of anxiety. Such absence is unlikely to be recorded as 'illness due to Covid-19' so will go some way to explaining why non-covid related absenteeism is higher than prior to the pandemic.

We have a growing concern about the number of reduced timetables that are being used with young people. Where used well, reduced timetables, supported by a pastoral support plan, can be an effective tool to support young people, for example during a phased return to school after absence. However, in a few cases recently, we have identified young people on reduced timetables for too long and without appropriate reviews which means that they miss out on valuable time in their school or PRU. Local authorities are not always monitoring the use of reduced timetables closely enough, or challenging inappropriate use of them.

Attendance remains notably lower than pre-pandemic levels, even if you discount absence due to Covid-19

The chart below shows the percentage of pupils absent from school during the period 22/11/2021 - 8/4/2022. Data for absences due to Covid-19 was collected differently prior to 22/11/2021 and is not comparable.



School attendance was below 90% every week during this period, whereas average attendance during the last full year of schooling pre-pandemic, in 2018-2019, was just below 95%.

Nearly 30,000 pupils have missed more than 2 weeks of school this year due to Covid-19

Overall, almost three-quarters of pupils (74.1%) have been absent at some stage this year due to Covid-19. In this academic year to date (6/9/21 to 6/5/22):

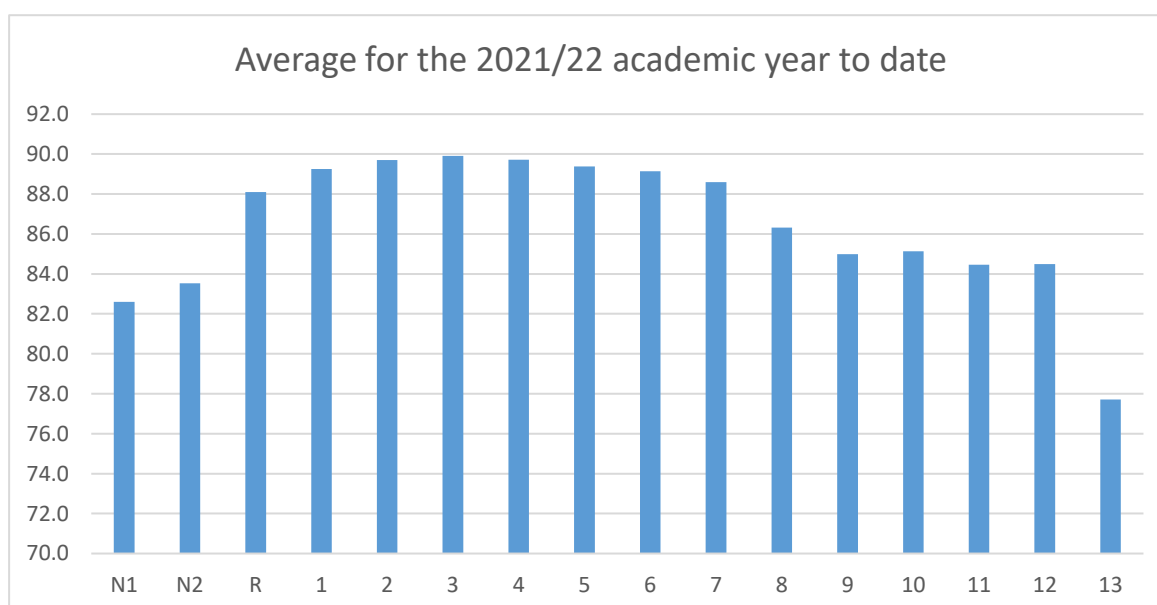
- 203,219 pupils (46.8%) have been absent due to Covid-19 for between 0.5-5 days
- 88,877 pupils (20.5%) have been absent due to Covid-19 for between 5.5-10 days
- 29,516 pupils (6.8%) have been absent due to Covid-19 for more than 10 days

Attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals has been affected more than for pupils not eligible for free school meals

During this academic year to date, the gap between the attendance of those pupils eligible for free school meals (82.5%) and those not entitled (88.9%) is 6.4%pts (compared to a gap of 5.2%pts pre pandemic and 5.8%pts last year).

The average pupil in Year 11 has missed more than 4 weeks of school this year

The chart below shows the average attendance for the year to date. Attendance at non-statutory nursery is low compared to attendance for Reception. Attendance is 88%-90% for primary Year groups through to Year 7, but it then drops off through the secondary Year groups, with attendance for those in the main examination years being lowest.



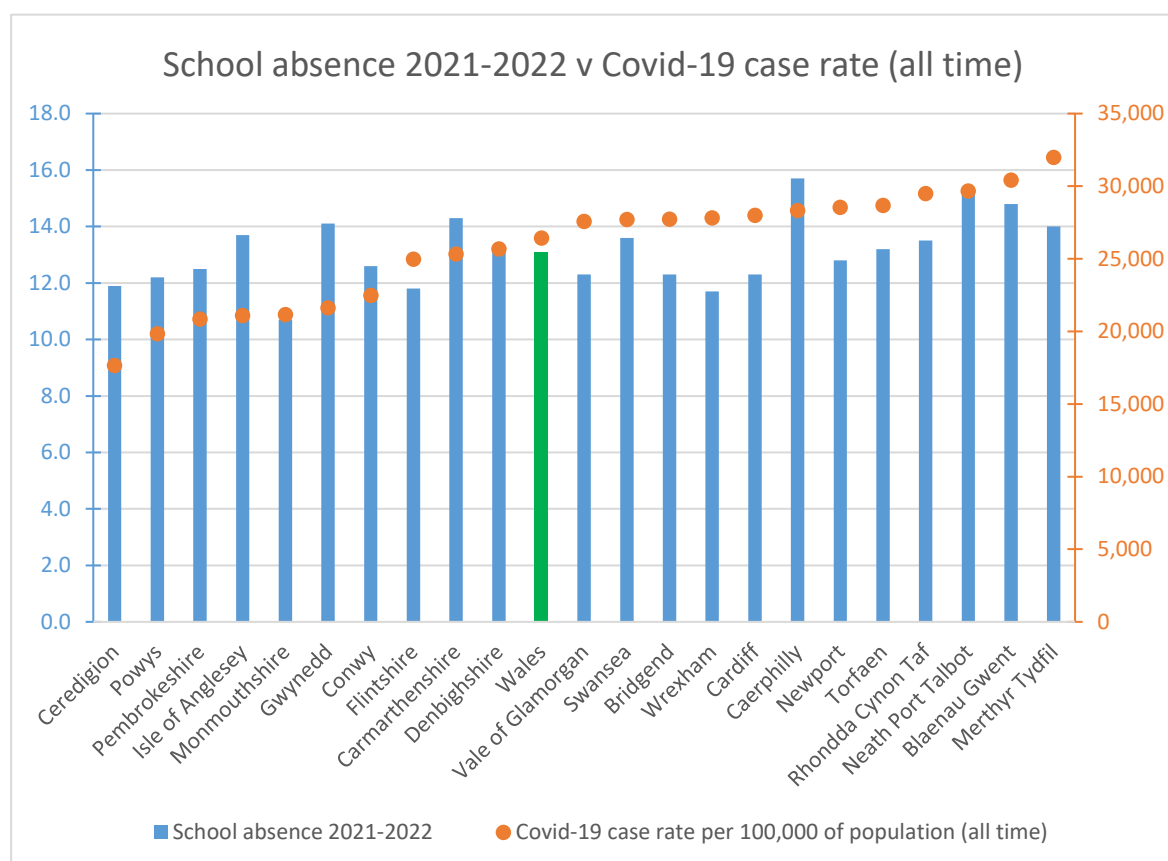
For the last week of the autumn term and the first week of the spring term, average attendance in all Years 10-13 was less than 75%.

The average pupil in Year 11 has missed more than 4 weeks of school this year.

For older pupils working towards qualifications in secondary schools, they may choose not to attend school if they know that a specialist subject teacher is off work and that a non-specialist supply teacher will be standing in. They may decide that they are better placed to work at home with learning resources they have.

School absence broadly correlates with Covid-19 case rates

There is a broad correlation between school absence in 2021-2022 and the Covid-19 case rate in the general population by local authority area, as illustrated in the chart below.



Some local authorities have a notably lower rate of absence (i.e higher attendance) than might be expected given the case rate (e.g. Monmouthshire, Wrexham, Merthyr Tydfil) and some have a notably higher rate of absence than might be expected (e.g. Anglesey, Gwynedd, Carmarthenshire, Caerphilly). ([source](#), [source](#))

Further analysis of attendance may be useful

The way that attendance data is published currently does not allow further analyses that may be useful. For example, analysing the use of attendance codes broken down by local authority or groups of learners such as those eligible for free school meals, or analysing the number of learners who are persistently absent without having had any absence for Covid-19 illness. Cross-analysing more data sources may support Welsh Government and local authorities in identifying where there may be attendance issues that require national or local support. We still see inconsistent use of different attendance codes across individual schools.

Risks and consequences

Short term and longer-term risks and consequences for learners.

Greater consequences for learners with additional learning needs

In HMCI's Annual Report 2020-2021, we reported that the disruption caused by the pandemic led to particular challenges for those learners with additional learning needs. Many were used to receiving support from a teacher or teaching assistant in the classroom, and this was often not available due to a shortage of adult support or was not possible in the same way when learners worked from home. Providers continued to look for different and often innovative ways to help these learners continue with their learning, although learners with ALN often found it difficult to engage in online, remote learning. Disruptions also led to delays in some learners being assessed for their additional learning needs. While nearly all special schools and PRUs remained open throughout the pandemic, continuing support for these vulnerable learners' emotional, physical and education needs will form an important element of addressing the long-term impact of the pandemic on learners in Wales. ([source](#))

Number of learners educated other than at school (EOTAS) remains at pre-pandemic level

The number of learners educated other than at school (EOTAS) in 2020-2021 (2,186) was very similar to the average over the 3 years before the pandemic (2,149) ([source](#)).

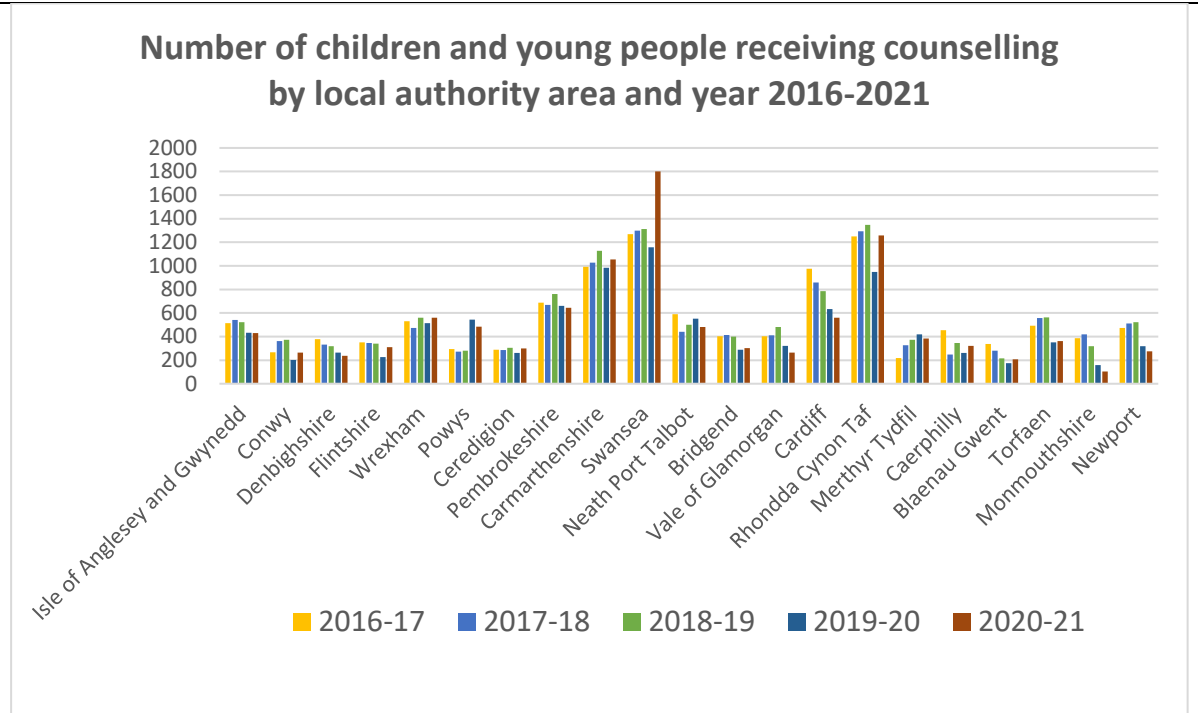
Impact on skills needed to learn

HMCI's annual report also noted that it is difficult to identify the full impact of the disruptions on learners, and to understand the longer-term effects in areas such as learners' communication, independence, and social skills. Continuing to monitor and support these areas will remain a vital element of practitioners' work into the future. ([source](#))

Despite additional funding for services, fewer learners received counselling last year than in the years before the pandemic

Some learners' emotional well-being and mental health has been significantly adversely affected by Covid-19. Face-to-face counselling services to support learners' emotional well-being and mental health are available in all local authority areas through schools for learners in Year 6 upwards, and also through online and telephone services and face-to-face in community locations (these vary by area). During periods of lockdown and, to varying extents, during periods where restrictions were in place due to Covid-19, counselling services were generally only available online or by telephone.

The chart below shows the numbers of learners receiving counselling by local authority area each year over the last 5 years. Despite Welsh Government providing an additional £1.25m funding for services in 2020-2021, services in half of local authority areas (11 out of 22) saw a drop in numbers accessing services that year compared to 2019-2020 (partially disrupted by Covid-19), and services in 17/22 areas counselled fewer learners than in 2018-2019 (pre-pandemic). Services in only 1 local authority (Swansea) worked with a notably higher number of learners in 2020-2021 compared to the year pre-pandemic. ([source](#))

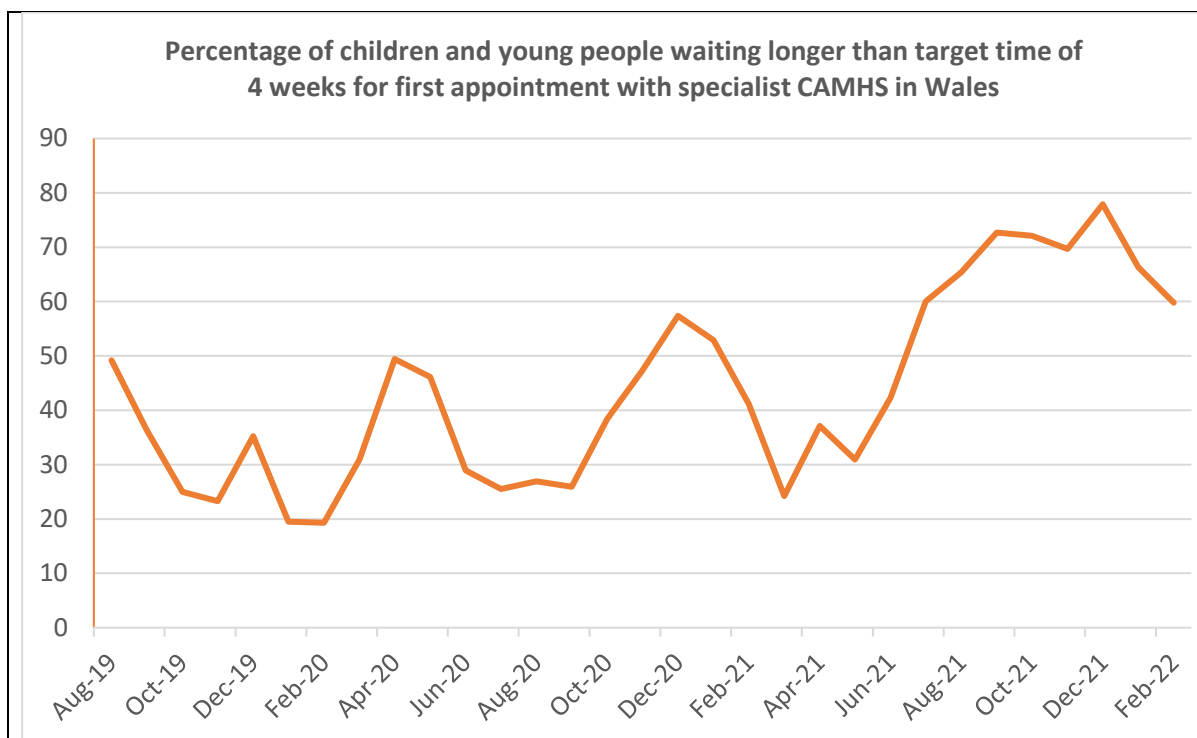


The 2020-2021 figures for the number of learners receiving counselling does not necessarily reflect the demand. Information from services suggests that demand was higher, but services struggled to meet the demand due to the impact of Covid-19 on counsellor availability and operating restrictions.

Children and young people are waiting too long for a first appointment with specialist CAMHS

Waiting times for children and young people referred to specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have increased over the last two years. The chart below shows the percentage on a rolling monthly basis who have waited longer than the target time of 4 weeks for their first appointment. Since June 2021, more than half of those referred to CAMHS have been waiting more than 4 weeks for their first appointment.

[\(source\)](#)



Accessing CAMHS in the Cardiff & Vale University Health Board area is proving particularly challenging. In January 2022, 68% of young people waiting for CAMHS in Wales come under this health board, which only serves 2 of the 22 local authorities, and 91% of young people waiting in Cardiff & Vale UHB have been waiting for more than 4 weeks. ([source](#))

Impact

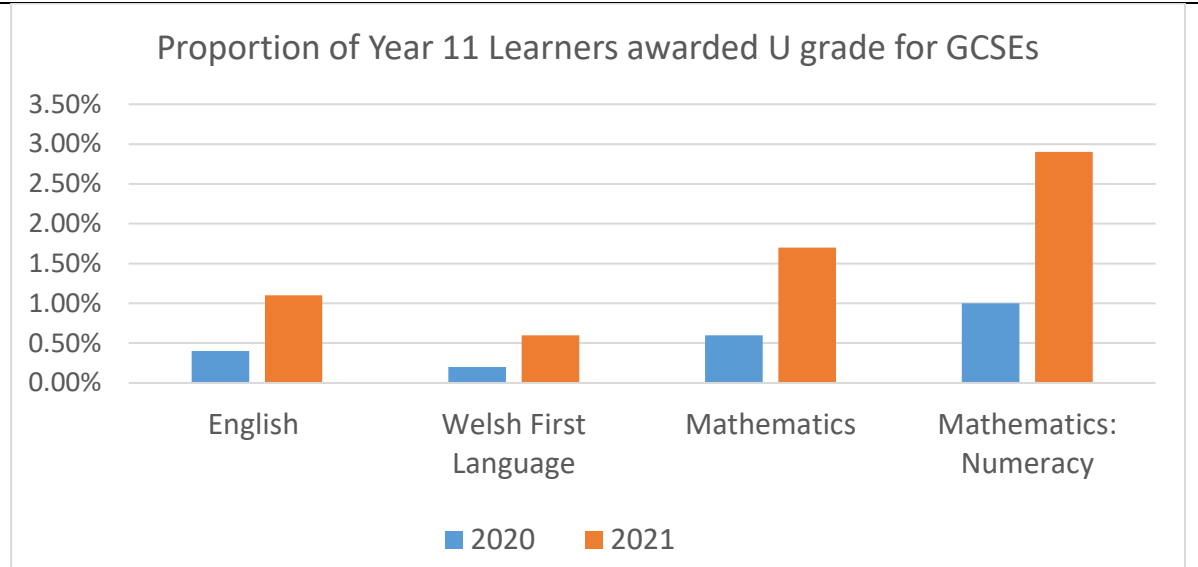
The impact on pupils' learning and attainment.

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

The impact on attainment is difficult to measure

External assessments and examinations continue to be affected by the pandemic and data relating to qualifications awarded is not comparable with pre-pandemic data. It is therefore not possible to measure accurately the impact of the pandemic on attainment. However, the correlation between school attendance and attainment has historically been strong.

In the years prior to the pandemic, Estyn would consider the proportion of learners leaving school in Year 11 without a formal qualification - this data has not been published for 2021. From data that is available, it is worth noting the proportion of U grades awarded for pupils entered for GCSEs in English and Mathematics in Wales in 2021, which increased significantly compared to the previous year as shown in the chart below:



To give a sense of how many learners were affected, just over 800 learners were awarded a U grade for GCSE Mathematics: Numeracy in 2021. ([source](#))

The number of learners in elective home education almost doubled during the pandemic and is the size of the total school population in a small local authority

The number of learners in elective home education in Wales was steadily rising prior to the pandemic. The average number of pupils in elective home education between 2016-2019 was 2,068 (the data for 2019-2020 is not comparable as it only includes 14 out of the 22 local authorities due to problems collecting information during the pandemic). In 2020-2021, there were 4,022 learners in elective home education – almost twice as many as the 3-year average prior to the pandemic. Ceredigion continues to have the highest rate of learners in elective home education, while Carmarthenshire continues to have the highest number of learners, both of which were consistently the case before the pandemic. Anglesey and Torfaen, both with historically low rates, have seen the rate of learners in home education more than double since the year before the pandemic. ([source](#))

Welsh Government does not publish a breakdown of the learners that have moved to elective home education, so it is not possible to cross-analyse the data further, for example by age group, additional learning needs or free school meal eligibility. Such analysis could identify areas for local or national support. Anecdotally, reasons why parents moved their children to home education recently include concerns about their own or their child's physical health as a direct result of Covid-19, concerns about their child's anxiety about returning to school, concerns about their child's needs not being met at school, or a simply a decision that, having been forced to try it during lockdowns, home learning worked well for the family and they wish to continue their education at home.

It is worth highlighting that the total number of pupils in elective home education across Wales is now greater than the number of learners in Blaenau Gwent and nearly as many as in Merthyr Tydfil and Anglesey. ([source](#))

Due to workload pressures caused by the pandemic, Welsh Government delayed its plan to introduce new statutory guidance for local authorities on home education. Currently local authorities have very limited responsibilities and powers with respect to elective home education.

No clear impact currently on the proportion of learners who are NEET

A potential impact of the pandemic is that more learners will end up not in education, employment or training (NEET). However, the proportion of learners who become NEET after Year 11 in 2021 was slightly lower than it was in the previous two years. The percentage of pupils whose destination was unknown rose a little (to 1.1% from 0.9% in 2020). The survey is based on the Careers Wales destinations survey which records pupils' last known activity on 31 October 2021. ([source](#))

Not all learners sustain their initial destination and the actual proportion of young people who are NEET in Wales is estimated to be considerably higher than the destination survey suggests. The annual population survey estimated that 9.4% of 16-18 year olds were NEET at 31 March 2021, and 15.3% of 19-24 year olds. These figures are broadly similar with estimates in the preceding years. ([source](#))

Services for persistent absentees are overstretched

Before the pandemic, local authority support services – through officers often known as education welfare officers – worked with families and schools when a pupil's attendance dropped below 80%. During the pandemic, and to date, there are so many more pupils with attendance below 80% that local authority services have had to change the thresholds for engagement. This means that officers are working with those with the lowest attendance, but they are unable to support in all cases where attendance is below 80%. Schools are not usually able to make up for the lack of capacity in local authority services. Inevitably this means that there are cases not being picked up by local authorities that they historically would have done, or a dilution of the service as a result of taking on considerably more cases than was the case historically. Between local authority and school services, there is less capacity to engage with families with a persistently absent pupils at a time when there needs to be a concerted effort to re-establish good attendance habits with these families.

Effectiveness of policies

Effectiveness of existing Welsh Government policies and guidance.

Level of effectiveness of action and support from schools, local government and the Welsh Government.

How effectively parents are engaged and supported.

Recent inspections highlight schools with current good practice

Some inspection report excerpts from schools inspected since February 2021 that highlight schools with effective support for good attendance:

St Joseph's Cathedral Primary School, Swansea: 'Procedures for monitoring pupils' attendance are comprehensive and rigorous. The school offers pastoral support for vulnerable pupils who miss school, and persistent absenteeism is challenged.' ([source](#))

Pontnewydd Primary School, Torfaen: 'The school keeps good-quality records for attendance and absence from school and addresses persistent absenteeism well. Systems to support and challenge low attendance are effective and applied by leaders and staff consistently. The school works well with outside agencies to address issues of poor attendance.' ([source](#))

Ysgol Gymraeg Ystalyfera - Bro Dur, Neath Port Talbot: 'The school has robust systems to monitor and promote good attendance. The school works effectively with the local

education authority to support pupils to reintegrate successfully after the pandemic.’
([source](#))

Stanwell School, Vale of Glamorgan: ‘The school has strong procedures for promoting pupils’ attendance which include close monitoring, communication with parents and celebrations of success.’ ([source](#))

Additional funding for counselling services failed to increase the number of learners receiving services

As indicated in response to a previous section, despite Welsh Government providing an additional £1.25m funding for counselling services in 2020-2021 to deal with an anticipated increase in demand since the start of the pandemic, services in half of local authority areas (11 out of 22) actually saw a drop in numbers accessing services that year compared to 2019-2020 (partially disrupted by Covid-19), and services in 17/22 areas counselled fewer learners than in 2018-2019 (pre-pandemic). Services in only 1 local authority (Swansea) worked with a notably higher number of learners in 2020-2021 compared to the year pre-pandemic. ([source](#))

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

Statutory guidance for local authorities on home education

As previously covered, the number of learners in elective home education has virtually doubled during the pandemic and is now the size of the total school population in a small local authority. The lack of statutory guidance for local authorities is a matter that the Welsh Government may wish to consider with urgency, to ensure the learners affected are receiving a suitable quality of education and support for any additional learning needs and have access to services to support their wellbeing, in line with the rights of all children and young people in Wales.

Other

Please record any other views you have below.