Pupil absence
Engagement findings

June 2022

As part of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into pupil absence, the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a series of focus groups and interviews to gather the views of parents and young people on the reasons behind pupil absence and the support available to them.

1.   Engagement

1.   The Citizen Engagement Team held 5 focus groups and 7 interviews between 24th May and 9th June with a range of parents, young people and some staff in different areas of Wales. One individual and one group also provided comments via email.

2.   Given the subject matter could be sensitive for some, interviews were offered to those who preferred to speak about their situation outside of a group environment, or to those who were unable to attend the focus groups due to timings.

Participants

3.   Participants were sourced through organisations supporting families with school attendance.

4.   34 people took part in total. The majority were parents, covering a range of ages from infant to secondary. A group of 7 young people also participated, along with two members of staff from a school.

5.   Participants contributed from 7 local authority areas across north and south Wales.

6.   The Citizen Engagement Team would like to thank all those who contributed to the programme of engagement.

Methodology

7. The Citizen Engagement Team's work touched on the following terms of reference for the inquiry:

- *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*

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

- *The impact on pupils' learning and attainment*

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

- *How effectively parents are engaged and supported*

Parent participants were asked the following questions:

1. Has your child's school attendance changed since before the pandemic and if so why do you think this is?

2. Are anxieties around school work or catching Covid contributing to the change in attendance?

3. Do you have any concerns about the impact that absenteeism is having on your child, in terms of mental health and well-being and attainment?

4. How do you feel the school and local authority has supported or helped you and what more could they have done?

5. What are your views on the reintroduction of a fixed penalty notice as a last resort?

   For the young people who participated, we asked the following questions:

6. How did you feel about going to school/college before the pandemic and how do you feel about it now? If you feel differently, why is that?

7. How did you feel about going back into school/college when they opened again for everyone? Were you anxious, and if so, what were you anxious about (about school- work or about catching and passing on COVID)? How did the school/college help with any anxieties you had?

8. Why do you think that some children and young people may not be attending school regularly?

9. Do you think that some children and young people have a different attitude to going to school after all the disruption?

10. What impact do you think that not attending school/college regularly has, on learning and on health and well-being?

11. Is there anything that the school/college could do to help you attend (those who aren't attending regularly)?

12. In the most serious cases of regular non-attendance, what do you think about parents being fined?

8. The format of engagement was largely comparable across the interviews and focus groups, but varied slightly to respond to the views, experiences and ideas shared by contributors.

2. Engagement findings: impact of Covid-19 pandemic on absenteeism

Participants were asked if school attendance had changed since before the pandemic and if so, why they thought this was.

The majority of participants felt there had been a significant change and the reasons discussed are detailed below. However, there were a number of participants who explained attendance had already been poor before the pandemic. In these cases, the closure of schools had not helped circumstances, and for the majority, had made things worse.

Disruption

9. A number of the participants talked about the disruption experienced with the closure of schools as one of the reasons attendance had changed since before the pandemic. Many felt that learners had struggled to settle back into school following the periods of lockdown, which had caused increased levels of absenteeism.

10. Many of the participants talked about problems with **online learning** and falling behind as a trigger and the start of their child disengaging from learning, which had then continued once the schools opened again.

11. Others talked about **missed transitions** between primary and secondary schools and the difficulty many learners had experienced in adapting to a new environment.

"He's been in school maybe twice since September, He's transitioned to a secondary school. It's a really big school. And he just can't manage it. He can't even get into the school transport. He's so anxious. He's crying. He's having meltdowns. Some days he can't leave his bedroom."

12. Changes to **friendship groups** also caused problems for many learners, following the periods of lockdown and young people not being able to socialise. This had resulted in increased anxiety in returning to social settings or a change in behaviour amongst friends and an increase in bullying.

"The Covid break was hard. He really didn't want to go back. He didn't feel his friends were his friends."

Bullying

13. Bullying was one of the main factors raised by the group of young people who participated. One participant said they had no friends when they were in school so they were being bullied. Another had been bullied and felt they were being punished by the school for being the victim, and one member of the group said she would skip as many classes as she could as she *"hated the people, the teachers, everything."*

"Before lockdown, she was in primary school, and afterwards she had to go to secondary. Her friends changed and she has struggled with bullying. She now doesn't want to go to school and suffers with anxiety, panic attacks and feelings that she isn't good enough."

Sickness

14. A number of the parents of younger children talked about an increase in illnesses and the need to keep their children at home as a result. The majority felt this was due to the extended periods of younger children not mixing and picking up routine illnesses. Parents were frustrated by this but difficulties accessing GP appointments and school policies around sickness meant they had no choice but to keep their children at home during these periods of sickness.

Caring responsibilities

15. The young people who participated talked about the number of learners they knew who were also young carers, which was having an impact on their attendance. They said much of the time they were too tired to attend school.

16. Staff members also mentioned an increase in the number of young carers following the pandemic, as a result of an increase in parental mental health concerns. They had also found this was having an impact on attendance in some cases.

Dislike of school

17. One group felt there hadn't been much difference since before the pandemic. They felt that those who didn't like going to school still didn't like going.

18. One parent said that if the children don't like a certain teacher, that would be the main reason they didn't want to go into school. She said with her own daughter, if she was

worked up about going in, it was easier to keep her at home and calm her down, than deal with the stress of sending her in to a teacher she doesn't like.

"If the teacher has got a bit of an attitude with you, it's easier just to let them have a day off, it's less stress."

"Lots of parents give up if it's a fight to get them in."

19. Another group also talked about those children who hadn't liked school anyway and so following the time off, they had found it more difficult to go back.

"Some children don't want to go in now, they just want to be home with their parents."

Complacency

20. One group of participants felt that taking children out of school for different reasons had increased massively since the pandemic, with many not as concerned since Covid as they felt they'd already had so much time off anyway.

21. They felt there was more complacency since the pandemic where parents were happier to take children out of school for day trips or holidays.

"It's easier for them not to bring them in. They may have given up their car, it's a long walk in bad weather on a busy road."

"They're doing it for an easy life in a lot of cases."

22. However, other parents viewed the time off during Covid as a reason to make sure their children attended as much as possible now, to ensure they were given the opportunity to catch up on what they had missed.

"Lots of families are worried they need to catch up, but others feel like it's an excuse they can use."

Additional learning needs

23. Parents of children with additional learning needs felt strongly that the pandemic had resulted in lower attendance for their children. Although some said there were problems

with support beforehand, the majority felt that online learning, returning to the school setting and a disruption in teaching and support staff had further contributed to their child's attendance levels.

24. One parent said her child disengaged from online learning and wasn't offered the support needed during lockdown. She said there were problems before the pandemic but these were sub-threshold at the time, so assessments were refused. The changes during the pandemic meant that these problems worsened given the lack of support.

Anxieties and mental health

25. One of the main points raised by participants was anxiety around returning to school following the lockdowns. Although some talked about problems before the pandemic, the majority of participants felt the extended period of being away from school had affected their children negatively, and when expected to return, they had struggled with anxiety.

26. A number of parents of younger children talked about separation anxiety and that this was affecting both the child and the parent in some cases following such a long period of being at home together.

27. Social anxiety was also affecting many of the older learners, with a number of parents talking about their child not wanting to leave their room, let alone the house, and the prospect of going into school being '*terrifying*' and '*traumatic*' for some.

> *"She lost her social skills while she was not in school and now she doesn't like spending time with her friends."*
>
> *"She feels she has missed out on chunks of work while her friends are all ok so she now feels isolated. She will have panic attacks in the car outside of the school and says she is scared of the older pupils."*

28. For a number of participants, this anxiety had escalated into more severe problems with their mental health and parents had sought support for assessments, diagnoses and temporary arrangements for learning.

29. This will be discussed further in the next section.

3. Engagement findings: impact of absenteeism on mental health, well-being and attainment

Mental health and well-being

30. For a number of participants, mental health was a primary reason for the absenteeism, however, most felt that the lack of support available and the waiting times since the pandemic meant that this was making the situation worse.

"The missing middle learners who would normally have been in school surfaced during lockdown and their issues exacerbated due to isolation, no school support, no positive interaction with key people in education and mental health symptoms is the tip of the iceberg."

31. For those who talked about poor mental health, accessing support through CAMHS or the GP was not straight-forward and waiting lists were suggesting no support would be offered until next year for many. This was leaving many parents feeling hopeless and that their children were likely to miss a lot more school before anything was resolved or improved for them.

"I have never felt as desperate as I do now, I feel hopeless."

32. For those where mental health concerns were not the primary cause of absence, there were still concerns about the emotional distress their children were experiencing as a result of absences and the efforts of getting back to school.

"The constant pressure felt by parents of ASC children to attend only makes it worse/intensifies everything and only adds to the anxiety and stress between the parent and child. You then add to their emotional distress and anxiety."

Attainment

33. The majority of the parents were worried about their child's attainment as a result of absenteeism. Some were happy with the support offered to maintain a level of learning despite being absent, but others were frustrated that their schools were not engaging.

34. As mentioned above, many had struggled with online learning and found they had fallen behind with schoolwork during the pandemic. This had contributed to concerns about returning to the classroom.

"I feel like her future is being taken away from her."

"I'm worried about his future. How is he going to do in school? It's going to be such a shame if a boy like him can't get an education. It's really hard to see him struggling and not getting what he's entitled to."

"If you don't get any support from the school, how are you going to support them to keep learning and to make sure that they don't get to a certain point where you just think…they're really so far behind now, how on earth can they expect to catch up?"

Home educating

35. Two of the participants were now home educating their children. One parent had ultimately made this decision based on her children's medical conditions and a concern about the spread of Covid. However, she explained this had been a consideration before the pandemic already as she was finding the school were not meeting the needs of her son.

36. Although no other participants were currently home educating, the option was mentioned by a number of participants struggling with absences and feeling unsupported by the school or local authority. Increased anxieties or deteriorating mental health were the main reasons for this consideration, and a feeling that nothing was changing for their child. These participants were therefore feeling they needed to take control of their child's learning, before more education was missed.

"My daughter is doing no formal learning at the moment and if she isn't able to go back to school in September, I feel I will have to do something at home with her."

37. The group of young participants also mentioned an increase in home educating amongst their peers, suggesting learners preferred to be at home. They thought these students preferred not having to wear a uniform, maybe had a better bond with their parents and were more comfortable at home rather than in school.

4. Engagement findings: school and local authority support

Participants were asked about the support they received from the school and local authority, and whether there was more that could be done.

Mixed experiences

38. Participants described very mixed experiences when it came to the support received from their schools and local authorities.

39. Some were really happy with the involvement and communication they had experienced from their school. For example, one participants talked about her daughter's school putting a reduced timetable in place, referrals to different wellbeing programmes and additional suggestions such as working with her daughter's primary school in case she felt more comfortable attending a smaller, more familiar setting.

40. However, other participants were frustrated with the lack of support put in place for their children, despite numerous requests on their part. One parent talked to the school about getting some resources to help her daughter continue her learning at home during a period of anxiety, but was given nothing. She felt they wouldn't engage in supporting this.

"When parents have to manage their child's mental health and keep them at home it's a reflection of the lack of support and knowledge in education."

41. Participants also described mixed views of their experience with the **local authority**. Some were pleased with the support received from their Inclusion Officer for example, and felt some progress was being made to build a positive relationship with their child. Another parent mentioned other options had been suggested such as a youth wellbeing officer / mentor who would take her daughter out to build her social skills. This participant felt this would be really beneficial for her daughter but with a 4 month waiting list she felt this clearly needs more resources and needs to be accessed in a more timely way.

42. However, others felt they didn't know how to approach the local authority, or had received no response when they had tried to escalate issues.

43. One participant said her experience with the local authority had been *'disastrous'*. She said she felt the people she was speaking with weren't as informed as her on neurodivergence

and mental health but dismissed everything she said. She said they were *'speaking over me and treating me like I was an absolute idiot….they weren't hearing anything I was saying about the children."*

"I don't think they (the LEA) exist. I think they're just these people up in the clouds. They didn't even answer me. They just pinged it back to the school."

Referrals

44. Depending on the reason for absences, some participants were frustrated with the referral process for assessments. Many of the participants felt absences were related to additional learning needs or mental health concerns, however, were unable to get timely referrals to services which led to prolonged periods of absences regardless of the support on offer from the school or local authority.

45. A lack of diagnosis also meant they were reliant on the school's understanding and patience as they could provide no medical evidence for the absences.

"There is a clear gap once you are out of the school and getting the support you need, in terms of both medical and educational support. The low level interventions were really good but once my daughter was unable to go to school at all, there is nothing happening until she can be seen by the other services. The waiting lists for everything are just huge and in the meantime she is spiralling."

"Everything seems very fragmented at the moment. I've been left feeling that I have to try and work out what the problem is, ask for an assessment but am then refused. I received 3 rejections in one day from CAMHS, Educational psychology and the paediatrician. I had built my hopes up to get answers but was then turned down."

"It just feels like a constant fight."

46. There were particular frustrations amongst parents of children with additional learning needs, where many felt their school had not listened to their concerns about neurodivergence and had not supported assessments or referrals. Similar to the waiting lists for mental health services, parents felt this was causing unnecessary, prolonged periods of absence as the problems were not being addressed.

"Schools are the gatekeepers of referring to neurodivergent services, neurodevelopmental services, but how can someone look for something when they don't know what they're looking for?"

"You just feel really disempowered going into a lot of things with the schools."

Communication

47. A number of the groups talked about wanting better communication between either the school and parents or the local authority and parents. Some felt there was less understanding for absences since the pandemic from schools in particular and the usual answer machine process of reporting absences did not encourage a dialogue between the parent and the school when there were concerns.

"They are constantly ringing me to see where my daughter is, but when I call back, I have to talk to an answering machine. I'm still waiting for a response on an issue from last year."

Additional expectations

48. The staff members who participated in the focus groups said they had seen a huge increase in both the number of families needing support since the pandemic, and the type of support they were in need of.

49. The Family Liaison Officer's role had been supporting two families when she started the job before the pandemic. She was now supporting 49 families.

50. The support on offer ranged from referrals to a nearby family centre who can provide guidance on anything from finances to domestic abuse, to in-school programmes such as breakfast clubs, vulnerable children groups and a newly set up father's group. These were all being put in place to support families with getting the children into school.

51. However, although the school was able to refer families for support, they were finding that all agencies were oversubscribed. They also found they relied heavily on the parents engaging with what was on offer.

"The education offer has widened to family support. Not just for the children, for the parents too."

5. Engagement findings: views on the use of fixed penalties

Unfair

52. The majority of participants felt that the use of fines for parents was unfair. Many felt they were trying to work with the school and the child to improve attendance, and that a fine would not help.

53. None of the participants had been fined, and in many cases, the threat of a fine had not been discussed either. Participants felt this was due to a recognition that their child was absent for reasons needing further support, rather than simple lack of engagement.

54. However, those who had been threatened with fines, felt it had been unnecessary given that their children were under ALN or CAMHS services at the time, or parents were requesting assessments for support to be put in place. They had found the experience very stressful, and felt it was unjust given the efforts made to either get their children into school, or find solutions themselves to the support needed.

"So it was the stress of thinking 'I'm going to be fined. Am I going to jail? Who's going to have my children when I go to jail?'"

"We're already under so much pressure trying to get our children into school. It's not that we don't want them in school, we do. And they want to be there."

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

"It is certainly not the case that I or other parents of ASC children just cannot be bothered to send our children to school but when they are in such emotional distress every morning, despair and anxiety through the roof because a school environment is traumatic to them, what can we do…!? We cannot literally drag them there by their hair…that would then be abuse….I cannot emphasise enough us parents of ASC children absolutely do care and are absolutely aware of the amount of school they miss and worried sick about their future."

In some cases

55. In certain cases, participants felt that a fine could be effective. For example, for those families who persistently took their children out of school for holidays. However, they also recognised that the fine was likely to be worrying the wrong people, especially as the fine was often less than the increased cost of a holiday out of term-time.

Cost of living

56. A number of the groups discussed the cost of living and the expense of school for most parents already, as a reason not to use fixed penalties.

"Fines tend to impact poorer families more and they are a blunt tool."

"School is already expensive for families with the uniforms and the schools trips. And parents are already struggling with the cost of food and bills, not to have to worry about fines too."

Not the answer

57. A number of participants said financial penalties were not the answer to the problem. They would prefer to see better communication between schools and parents and better understanding of the support needed to improve attendance.

"You can't have a seat at the table and have a constructive co- produced plan while receiving warning letters, threatening letters and fines."

58. There was some discussion in a few of the groups about awarding attendance in general and a feeling that this is discriminatory against children with disabilities or medical conditions that impacts their attendance. Additionally, they felt that it encourages sick children to attend which is unfair on the sick child and puts others at risk.

Annex 1

The Citizen Engagement Team would like to thank the following organisations for their support with this inquiry:

Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion Team, Swansea Council

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Parents Voices in Wales CIC

Save the Children

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