



School attendance in Wales: suggestions for support from parents and carers

A report by Parentkind for Welsh Government



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Parentkind

Introduction

With pupil absence currently still much higher than pre-pandemic levels, increasing school attendance remains a key priority for Welsh Government. 29.0% of pupils were absent for at least 10% of sessions for the academic year 2023/24¹ – Welsh Government’s revised threshold for persistent absence.

46.1% of children with identified additional learning needs (ALN) missed more than 10% of school during academic year 2022/23, and for all children identified with ALN the average attendance was 86.1%. Comparable statistics from England suggest that around half of these children will have an identified social, emotional or mental health need.

Research amongst children with ALN in Wales by Professor Ann John in 2021 with a cohort of 437,412 students in Wales aged 7 to 16 between 2009 and 2013 showed that pupils with a neurodevelopmental disorder were twice as likely to be absent from school for more than 10% of lessons, and that pupils with a risk of self-harm were more than three times likely to be absent from school on the same basis.²

The ALN Code contains statutory guidance for public bodies in Wales. It is stated that the Code ‘is aimed at ensuring that children and young people’s ALN are identified early and addressed quickly to enable them to achieve their full potential’ (Welsh Government, 2021).³

Parentkind’s 2023 research report ‘Understanding pupil absence in schools in Wales’ indicated that parents of absent children felt that attendance support received from their child’s school was mixed (36% rated it as good,

whilst 25% rated it as bad) and that there were issues with ease and clarity of communication between home and school, delays in diagnosis and intervention, and parents feeling that they and their child were not being listened to by schools.

Parentkind was commissioned to conduct qualitative research with parents of children with significant levels of absence in Wales to help identify practical actions that Welsh Government could take to help improve attendance in school.

In this research, the majority of parents we spoke to had a child with diagnosed or undiagnosed neurodevelopmental disorders, which had been a key contributing factor to their long-term absence from school. Parents spoke widely about the types of challenges they had faced, ranging from the support available to the culture in place at their child’s school. Though their individual situations often varied substantially, there were a number of common criticisms made and several similar suggestions for improvement raised independently by parents in different focus groups, particularly around the potential for more focused early intervention before problems escalate.

We have summarised the key findings and recommendations from our research in this report, which we hope will be useful to decision-makers in Welsh Government in considering what actions may be particularly effective in helping to improve attendance in schools in the short term, and to help reduce the number of situations where children become absent from school for long periods of time.

¹ <https://www.gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-4-september-2023-28-june-2024>

² John, A. (et al). Association of school absence and exclusion with recorded neurodevelopmental disorders, mental disorders, or self-harm: a nationwide, retrospective, electronic cohort study of children and young people in Wales, UK. *The Lancet Psychiatry* (2021), Vol. 9 Iss. 1

³ Welsh Government. *The additional learning needs code for Wales 2021*. <https://gov.wales/additional-learning-needs-code>

Summary of findings

1. Parents don't feel listened to

A common issue raised by parents was not being believed or trusted by schools when raising concerns, with several describing how this shifted into blaming parents.

2. Delays to assessments and support

Parents reported long delays in getting an assessment of their child's learning needs and an overreliance on a formal medical diagnosis. Once support plans were in place, the situation was often compounded by further delays in receiving the support needed.

3. The school environment

Parents shared positive and negative experiences with schools and noted that a supportive, welcoming environment made a significant difference in resolving attendance issues.

4. Provision for learners

Parents spoke about the impact of a lack of specialist provision and limited support to help their children continue engaging with education and learning while absent from school.

5. Issues with the wider system

Parents were frustrated by a lack of accountability in assessment and support and called for better co-ordination between services, plus less reliance on a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

6. Lack of support for families

Parents would value clearer advice and help on how to support the needs of their child and family at home, as well as how to secure the right support at school.



Summary of recommendations

- 1.** Support schools in providing a more effective and empathetic approach to parents of children with persistent absence issues.
- 2.** Provide timely assessments of additional learning needs for all children who require them.
- 3.** Ensure appropriate access is available to support for children's additional learning and mental health needs, whether outlined in an Individual Development Plan or not.
- 4.** Explore the possibility of making online learning available as an alternative to attending school for children whose needs cannot be met in a school or specialist provision setting.
- 5.** Create a central repository of support and advice for parents of children with low attendance.
- 6.** Review national guidance on attendance to explore the possibility of recording children's engagement with education in addition to specific school attendance measures.
- 7.** Review how schools' performance in delivering against the ALN Code is measured.
- 8.** Conduct further research into effective ways of supporting children and families with poor attendance, building on Community Focused School approaches and utilising family engagement / family support officers.



Methodology

This research took a qualitative approach. We conducted five focus groups covering 35 parents whose children were experiencing significant attendance barriers. Interviews were also conducted with ten practitioners in Education Welfare and Family Liaison from across Wales.

Parents from across Wales were invited to participate in the focus groups and offered a small financial incentive for giving us their time. Focus groups were recruited with support from parent and carer support group Parents Voices in Wales and were conducted online between 4th to 13th March 2024.

As the following table shows, the majority of parents we spoke to had children with a mix of diagnosed and undiagnosed additional learning needs.

Most focus group attendees were from South Wales, with around 10% of attendees from Mid and West Wales. While it was not possible to guarantee a completely representative blend of all parents in focus groups, we heard from parents in a mix of rural and urban settings, from single and two-parent families and from points all across the school journey. Four parents had a child at a Welsh Medium school. The majority of participants were mothers; one was a father. We heard from parents whose children were unlikely to return to school in the short-term and those whose children had returned to school full-time.

Ten online interviews were also conducted with practitioners from across Wales between 4th to 31st January 2024. Invitations were distributed by Welsh Government. The practitioners were a mix of Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) and Community Focused School Managers.

Child characteristics	Number of parents
Primary school age	12
Secondary school age	23
Additional Learning Needs (ALN) - Yes	24
Additional Learning Needs (ALN) - No	5
Additional Learning Needs (ALN) - Awaiting assessment of	6
Low attendance ⁴	23
No attendance ⁵	12

⁴ Children categorised with low attendance were currently attending school with parents reporting attendance rates for 2023/24 to date of between 17% and 92%

⁵ Children categorised with no attendance haven't attended school for between 2 months and 4 years

Findings

Parent feedback and discussion from the focus groups has been analysed and summarised into six main themes:

Theme 1: Parents don't feel listened to

A common issue raised by parents across the focus groups was **not being believed or trusted by teachers and Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinators (ALNCo)** when raising concerns about their children having additional needs. This seemed to be a particularly common experience in the early stages of a child showing neurodivergent traits, especially where the child was masking behaviour while at school.

A number of parents described how this shifted into **blaming parents**, and treating issues like they were the parent's fault. In some examples, this involved treating behavioural responses by the child as 'bad behaviour' and insisting that the parent attend general parenting courses which were not helpful in better understanding their child's needs. Other examples included the threat of fines for non-attendance and warning the child that

their parent could be sent to prison if they didn't attend school. Several parents described getting the support their children needed as being 'a fight'.

In a couple of cases, parents described how teachers and ALNCo were challenging the legitimacy of findings and recommendations from medical professionals regarding their child's needs. This was typically felt to be in response to a lack of resources available to implement recommendations, but in one case a parent described how the ALNCo challenged the diagnosis itself.

We also heard from parents describing success stories. A common feature of these was that they involved being listened to by teachers and having teaching staff treat the parent and child with respect, which were major factors in helping to resolve issues around attendance.

"One of the hardest things was the dismissals from professionals. My daughter deteriorated while on the waiting list of CAMHS, all because we were not listened to. I knew there was something seriously wrong with my child. It's completely heartbreaking to watch it – I feel hopeless for her future, for my future, it's impacting my relationship with my husband. People outside of this situation just can't fathom it. If my daughter's old primary school had actually listened to me, if help had gone in at that early stage, could we have not got to this point where my child is so broken I don't know how she's going to get out of this?"

– A parent with a child of primary school age

“They didn’t believe there was anything wrong with her because she was so bright and therefore could not have any issues. They didn’t believe it when we presented the diagnosis letter. I have in writing where the ALNCo had actually written in that she didn’t believe the autism diagnosis and thought it was fake.”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“The strongest thing that would have helped us, and we wouldn’t be in this mess today – if we were believed when we first went to the primary school with a private diagnosis of a sensory processing disorder. If they’d taken that seriously and put measures in place to support him, I don’t think things would have got as bad as they have.”

— **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“It takes a lot to get me to snap, but eventually I said, “I’ve got over 20 years working in mental health and this is my son, don’t tell me I’m wrong.” The school reacted very differently after that.”

— **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“The school’s additional needs team decided the answer was for me, as an autistic mother, to do a course to understand my child’s autism. Then there were threats of fines.”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“You can’t make your voice heard and you shouldn’t have to fight this hard.”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“We didn’t need to be sent on 8 week parenting courses.”

— **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“My son’s primary school got in touch with his educational psychologist and said they suspected fabricated or induced illness – that’s now on my son’s medical records. I was on the PTA, well-known by school staff, knew the headteacher socially. That had a huge impact on own mental health. The school were happy to take my voluntary services, but when I asked for help they didn’t believe I was telling the truth. It’s the pushback that’s really damaging – these are services that are supposed to help you.”

— **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“If my child was at school crying every day and saying ‘I don’t want to go home’, can you imagine how differently that would be handled?”

— **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“A lot of guidance has focused on parents that are really struggling and need support, but there’s a huge paucity of recognition that our cohort of parents exist, and maybe that’s how we get the parent-blaming as a result of the system.”

— **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“They opened the meeting by saying, “Did you know your mum could go to prison if you don’t go to school?” It felt like they had so much pressure on attendance issues they would do whatever they could to get the figures up, irrespective of the impact on children or family.”

— **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“All they could see was a very intelligent child, she masked incredibly well. They ignored my point of view, they refused to believe something different was happening at home.”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“I want to feel listened to, not like I’m going in there and making it all up.”

– A parent with a child of primary school age

“I had to deal with my daughter’s suicide attempts after having to do multiple parenting classes for my ‘terrible parenting’. I was told she was fine when wasn’t – the school wasn’t listening to parents.”

– A parent with a child of primary school age

“I feel like if schools understood the situation and knew what would help, then they would then be able to put something in place to help rather than a parent trying to fight to get something and not be heard. It’s really hard to have a voice because there’s so much red tape. We can’t do anything more than we’re all doing.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“The school were very supportive that she had anxiety, but weren’t interested in the additional learning needs side until we got her diagnosis, by which time trust with the school between us and our daughter wasn’t there anymore.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“It can feel like you’re outcasts from society; “You’re bad parents, you can’t get your kids into school.””

– A parent with a child of secondary school age



Theme 2: Delays to assessments and support

Parents we spoke to reported **long delays in their children getting an assessment** of their learning needs which impacted significantly on school attendance. Whilst practitioners told us that a formal diagnosis is not always needed to trigger support, this did not appear to be the experience of many parents who said that their child's school did not provide support to their child to enable them to attend school.

As well as **long waiting times for assessments** of additional learning needs being highlighted by parents and practitioners – reports of waiting two to three years were not uncommon – in the eyes of parents this issue was compounded by the fact that referrals for assessments and diagnostics were decided upon by teachers who don't always have specialist knowledge of these conditions. Schools and local authorities **not accepting some private assessments** was another concern raised by several parents.

Once support has been identified, whether through formal assessments or suggested by school, the situation is compounded by **lengthy delays in some children**

receiving that required support. Regarding Individual Development Plans (IDPs) specifically, parents said that teachers were **not always sticking to arrangements** set out in their IDP, that an IDP doesn't pick up related medical needs that can affect learning (e.g. severe allergies, migraines) and that it is bureaucratic to get one accepted or changed.

When modifications were recommended, some parents said their child wasn't comfortable self-identifying as different through such adaptations, nor are they able to engage successfully with external agencies, but rather than trying alternative options it was reported that the **support was closed down.**

Also, there can be too much reliance on **prioritising returning to school as soon as possible**, including before support is in place – parents remarked how their children were expected to attend school when nothing had changed for them.

"It's about unmet needs for us – he's always wanted to go to school and learn, but it just wasn't available to him."
– A parent with a child of secondary school age

"Lack of early diagnosis is a huge problem. It impacts the mental health of the family and siblings; the exhaustion of so many meetings and so much paperwork."
– A parent with a child of primary school age

"If children are helped and recognised and sorted out early, they wouldn't need to go through the trauma of being forced into school. They end up scarred from the experience."
– A parent with a child of primary school age

"[There's a] very slim chance that my child will return to formal education. Early intervention is definitely key ... Just having that support when you need it. Things would be so much different in our situation if our daughter hadn't been let down."
– A parent with a child of primary school age

"Despite the EWO's best efforts, she's not able to get into school. No services she's down for have taken place, including CAMHS – how can you expect her to come in when nothing has changed for her?"
– A parent with a child of secondary school age

"The wait on assessment times – children waiting two to three years for an assessment, it's impacted them so much, they've been lost in the system. That needs to be addressed urgently."
– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“Earlier intervention also seems to be helpful – we’re looking to get an early-years EWO. The sooner the issues are found and hit; we’re trying to prevent things become a bigger issue later on in school.”

– A practitioner

“Increase mental health provision, whether from CAHMS or additional funding to LAs to increase provision. We can currently only accommodate ten children with serious issues, but there are far more in need of that support.”

– A practitioner



Theme 3: The school environment

Parents and practitioners made a number of comments about the school environment. Several parents said they **didn't find the school welcoming**, with teachers and staff lacking kindness and empathy. Some parents highlighted the variation between how their children were viewed by different members of staff, with some teachers aware of an individual child's needs but not others – particularly in secondary schools. A number of parents made reference to one supportive member of staff – a **'trusted friend'** – having a positive impact on their child.

A few parents were able to share both negative and positive experiences with different schools and noted that a more **supportive, welcoming environment made such a difference** to their child attending school. Inviting the **child to be part of meeting** and discussion on their needs – especially older children – was also mentioned.

There would seem to be big differences between schools in terms of **how issues are handled**. For most parents we spoke to this was due, in part, to the ALNCo

and their differing levels of skills and experience: some parents shared positive feedback about very supportive ALNCos, whilst others gave more negative comments, acknowledging that this was a hugely demanding role, especially when they held other roles in the school too. There was a consensus across parents that the ALNCo should ideally be a **full-time role**, not someone who is also a part-time teacher.

There were widespread calls from parents for **mandatory training for all staff on neurodiversity**, whilst some practitioners mentioned the need for staff training on Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and trauma-informed support.

A couple of parents had become school governors in an effort to 'infiltrate the system', to improve their own knowledge of the system as well as to encourage staff to understand how their families have been affected by the situation.

“When it first got really bad, a bit of kindness would have made the biggest difference in the world. If they'd taken on board the things I was saying, I don't think the trauma would have been as bad as it is now.”

– A parent with a child of primary school age

“Comments of, “There's no lunch for you,” or, “Well, you're late today,” can set my child off after all the battle of getting them that far.”

– A parent with a child of primary school age

“I'm at the point where I get anxiety when I've got to go down there, I ask my husband to come down with me because I've had comments like the receptionist saying to my daughter, “This has got to stop, you can't keep doing this.””

– A parent with a child of primary school age

“That willingness to listen and find out what's going on with them rather than talk and be so judgemental all the time.”

– A parent with a child of primary school age

“I was encouraged to take him to school against his will, which I did for quite a while which on reflection I feel guilty about.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“Approach parents with the idea of teamwork and collaboration. I want to work with others to figure things out, there is literally no point in going into battle with parents, the solution has to be about working collaboratively.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“The school has been great – exemption from detention, they understand she comes in late if she’s struggling. No judgement from them at all.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“The SLT in particular couldn’t be any more different. In the old school she was a box to be ticked, a little robot they wanted to churn out. The new school actually treated her like a person, an actual human being, and genuinely cared about her. And it worked, because we didn’t have any absence in the new school. We had one incident where a teacher misread a situation, had a meeting with headteacher and head of department, daughter included in a meeting – head apologised that it had happened, that the teacher misread it, and the meeting was about how they could avoid it and support her going forward. I nearly cried, because it was a genuine apology and explanation.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“Any issues were resolved; the attitude was the complete opposite of the other school. They wanted to work with her and us to make sure everything worked for her.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“Making him feel like he was the problem messed with him for such a long time... One teacher has adapted by saying he knew he needed to talk, gives him five minutes for that to happen, then he’s fine. Other teachers complain he has poor focus and attention.”

– **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“We’ve had a really good experience with the school so far. Bending over backwards to help, looking to amend the timetable, they’ve given him access to the wellbeing room and things like that, and have weekly check-ins with him. I feel they’ve been really supportive.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“I don’t think my son has ever once been asked, “How can we support you in school?” by a teacher, he’s not included.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“Schools shouldn’t be so defensive, it’s not our fault that the school isn’t meeting the child’s needs. They should be listening to the child and parent, but they’re not. They’re expecting my daughter to make all the changes, but when it’s too much she just can’t.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“It’s hard to find the support as the school is only really considering attendance – they’re not looking at the child or family as a whole.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“Making the parents more welcome in the school... If they feel more comfortable with schools and the education system then they’ll get in touch more, and push more for what their children need. Those who don’t have that trust will disengage and be defensive when trying to work on plans.”

– **A practitioner**

“I want to put a halo on the ALNCo: she never, ever makes anything feel like too much trouble, she pre-empts what you need, she talks to our kids like they’re human beings. With every interaction you feel understood and listened to, then goes off and tries to sort whatever magic you’ve asked her to pull that week. Sometimes we feel like we’ve asked the impossible...but the full-time ALNCo is able to implement it...So valuable to have someone who you feel you can trust to act in your child’s best interest.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“The school my children go to has an excellent baseline understanding of ALN, anxiety and related co-morbidities. I have the Head of Year and form tutor talking and emailing me frequently. The form tutor disclosed she’d had a similar experience in her own life.”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“How do we make sure ALNcos aren’t holding all of the cards to themselves – they’re supposed to be upskilling the whole school, whereas before they were co-ordinators. How can we make sure they have the knowledge and are disseminating that and staff are reflecting on how well this is working?”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“The biggest issue for me is the lack of understanding and knowledge around neurodiversity and supporting neurodiverse children.”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“All members of staff who come into contact with children should have comprehensive training about different types of neurodivergence, and they should all be treated as people, not as a tick box or a statistic. Find out what it is that individual needs. And I think that was the difference when we got to our second secondary school. I don’t think all of the teachers knew everything, but they were a lot more understanding and compassionate and wanted to help.”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“I became a school governor, learned the language, was sitting with the LA as they were rolling the new act. It was like infiltrating the system to learn how to navigate it.”

— **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“A trauma-informed schools approach works well. We had about 70% take up amongst EWOs and similar, but ideally need that to be across school leaders and teachers to work at its best.”

— **A practitioner**

“We need comprehensive staff training in schools, around EBSA, or those struggling to attend. Attendance is everyone’s business and concern, it’s for everyone to improve.”

— **A practitioner**

Theme 4: Provision for Learners

During the focus groups we were challenged by some parents on the focus of this research, and that instead of asking what support parents would value in order to encourage their children to improve their school attendance, we should really be asking about **support to help their children re-engage with their education and learning**; there was too much focus on returning to school. **Online learning** was mentioned by a number of parents in this regard. Parents said their children had engaged with online learning and it was an effective way of maintaining their education, but that online provision was time limited and only intended to support a return to school.

For some children unable to attend school, the option of online learning permanently, or flexi-schooling, would appear to be a solution to continuing their education.

A couple of parents had investigated remote schools but found their costs prohibitive.

Parents also spoke about a **lack of specialist provision** for neurodiverse children, with limited facilities for children who struggle with the environment of mainstream schools. One parent said her family had considered relocating to Bristol as she felt there was more availability for children with additional learning needs there.

Another barrier to their children attending school regularly was **the curriculum** itself, with some parents saying it wasn't suitable for their child, especially in secondary. This was echoed by some practitioners too, with some suggesting a more vocational, skills-based offer would make school more attractive and relevant to some young people.

“Receiving an education should be the outcome, and the focus on attendance is misplaced in my opinion. My daughter thrived when they did the online school and it's not beyond the scope and budget of Wales as a whole to provide an online platform for those who can't go to school.”

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“I love the idea of flexi-schooling, and it raises the question of what the school system is trying to achieve – I'm pretty sure it's not about causing them trauma and mental health issues.”

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“There's no real specialist provision where I live – a PRU [pupil referral unit] which isn't suitable, and a special needs school which isn't intended for someone academically bright. So, there's no alternative for her.”

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“There's a massive lack of placement opportunities that sit between the school and the specialist school. Very limited provision for those with autism and anxiety that my daughter can be grouped with.”

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“There's no provision for children with ALN. We even looked at relocating to Bristol where there's much more availability. The curriculum needs revising to support all children in accessing education.”

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“It feels like children with ALN are being failed because they want to learn but there are no provisions for them to learn the way they need to learn - square pegs in round holes.”

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“There's also a move towards bigger schools with smaller schools closing down. The largeness of my son's school is part of the problem, he would definitely do better in a smaller setting, and I think that would help other neurodiverse kids and others on a wider level.”

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“Focus on her interests and motivation – if she could, she’d be there a couple of days a week and motivated to do it. GCSEs don’t suit everybody. I know they’re making changes in 2027, but it should have been in before now – at the moment, it doesn’t suit her at all and it’s failing her.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“The curriculum for Wales is not fit for those children who can’t access education on a 9 to 3 basis, there needs to be more options.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“[We need] More vocational opportunities for older children.”

– **A practitioner**



Theme 5: Issues with the wider system

Observations about the education system more widely were made, by both parents and practitioners. **Funding** was mentioned several times, not only in terms of there not being enough to support every child, but also the late notice of settlements and the negative impact this has on resourcing, recruiting and retaining experienced staff.

Parents were frustrated by the **lack of ownership and accountability** in the system with no one taking responsibility when actions/support were not delivered, and families suffering the consequences.

Whilst there were examples where the various agencies worked well together, including when co-located at Community Focused Schools, there was a call for better **co-ordination between services** from both parents and practitioners, and a more joined-up approach across Welsh government, local authorities and the support networks.

Some parents were critical of the most recent reform of **the ALN code**, saying it's made it even harder to access support for their children.

There were requests to examine the whole school system and the extent to which the system itself is contributing to children's attendance issues. There was a belief that there is too much reliance on a **'one-size-fits-all' approach to attendance**, i.e. you have to be in school 100% when for some children 80% attendance ought to be seen as a good achievement. Parents queried the **use of fines** given their own situations, and were opposed to schools **rewarding 100% attendance** too, giving examples of their children missing out on trips and rewards. They noted an anomaly between how reasons of absence are treated amongst adults and children, with the example given that anxiety and other mental health conditions are not always accepted as a reason for authorised absence amongst children, but are amongst adults. A few parents also mentioned **Estyn** and whether its inspections should provide more context when looking at school attendance.

"I'd love just for Welsh Government in general to have a look at the school system and recognise that sometimes the school system is the cause of the issues and mental health and trauma. There's still a tendency to assume that it must be caused at home, rather than seeing how the whole system is playing into the causes."

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

"We can lose people as the funding deadline approaches. Difficulty in appointing people with the right skills – we can train, but when there's only 12 months (or less), there isn't the availability and capability. And then after being trained, they risk being lost if the funding ends. Really needs a three to five-year funding envelope for finances."

— A practitioner

"Having the roles be permanent rather than just a pilot would be hugely helpful."

— A practitioner

"Honestly, the budget isn't big enough. We have capacity to work with only a limited number of families. Not sure others appreciate the pressure being put onto the job."

— A practitioner

"IDPs aren't necessarily followed, but there's nothing you can actually do about it if they're not followed up."

— A parent with a child of primary school age

"She's been out of school for over two years now, the school threatens me with fines enough times, where's the responsibility on them?"

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“The whole system is just broken from the ground up for children with autism, not just what’s going on in school, but I had my new school literally shout at me that it’s not them that’s preventing him getting an ADHD diagnosis. In other words, it’s the GP – but it isn’t, I’ve been to the GP and CAMHS refused us and made a referral and said it’s the setting of the school that makes the most weight. So there’s this vicious circle.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age (Sec)**

“Having somebody that I can actually speak to within an education department. It’s almost like you can’t get to speak to your education department and get through the school process. But if the school prevents you from escalating, where do you actually go? School say it’s ALN, ALN say it’s the school, neither wants to do anything.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“We made formal complaints about members of staff, we were effectively off-rolled as they took an aggressive stance that meant we had no other choice but to home ed for that period of time to get away from that situation, which resulted in trauma for us as a family. I made several complaints, and the governors literally just steamrolled everything.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“It’s around how we structure the services. We can make strides at individual levels with pupils, but achieving wider progress needs to pick up more of a community-level issue. How do we work more collaboratively together, can we use community buildings in a different way to engage with health and education professionals and children’s services etc. available under one roof for families?”

– **A practitioner**

“A cluster approach with communication across schools works well. Contacting the EWS sooner rather than later before the issues become entrenched. Efficient multi-agency working. The more schools and professionals around the issue know, the easier it is to support.”

– **A practitioner**

“Community Focused Schools have greater adaptability with typically higher staffing levels. Looking at strands of the community and co-ordinating how to get them engaged with the schools. Ensuring young people are getting access to services; better knowledge and affinity of other services, having the time to make connections and understand how those services can benefit the schools and families.”

– **A practitioner**

“A total reform of the ALN code because it’s made an already diabolical system even harder for children to access help in the education system. The graduated response to me just delays support. It might as well be called ‘let’s drag it out a bit more’.”

– **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“The fact that if parents are being fined and the attendance is not improving then look into the reasons why. It’s not the parents, since they’ve paid the fine and nothing improved. £60 is a week’s food shopping for our family, we went without a bit to pay the fine just to show it wasn’t the answer. The government needs to understand that something is going on, not just lazy parenting, when there are things like autism and trauma happening.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**

“There are a number of children that are genuinely medically poorly, e.g. operations, children with cancer. But there’s no code on the register that supports us with that – e.g. genuine and evidenced condition that says they can’t attend school, as they cannot do anything about it.”

– **A practitioner**

Theme 6: Lack of support for families

Parents shared the significant impact that their children not being able to attend school regularly has had on their families. Many have had to **reduce their working hours or give up their jobs completely** to provide educational and mental health support to their children; several parents told us that their child had experienced serious mental health challenges, including self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Parents noted that the **all-consuming nature of trying to get the correct support** for their child, and the expectation that they needed to attend many meetings with professionals also impacted on their ability to continue in their jobs.

Their situations left them feeling **stressed and traumatised**, with the impacts being felt on **relationships with other family members too**, including partners and siblings. Some said their **own mental health** has suffered and say they would have benefitted from mental health support themselves.

Parents would value better and **clearer advice on how they can support their children's specific needs** in the immediate term, so that hopefully they'll be able to re-engage with education in the longer term when they're

able to, as well as support for themselves and their families. They would also welcome better **support in how to navigate the system** and what pathways are available to their children. **Advocacy support** was mentioned too.

A few parents mentioned accessing **support groups**, including on Facebook, but would welcome more opportunities to meet and share experiences with other parents in a similar position to themselves.

Several parents described particular challenges when their child **transitioned from primary to secondary school**, and would have wanted to be more involved in discussions and arrangements concerning their child's move. Practitioners highlighted this as a potential trigger for higher school absence too.

Finally, it was noted that it was far more common for mothers to be taking the lead role in handling these issues on behalf of their child, which led to **women being impacted more significantly** than men in many cases. To illustrate this point, only one father participated in these focus groups compared with 34 mothers.

"I've had to go part-time, and I'm even struggling with that, as you can't leave them on their own and you never know how it will be."

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

"I'm financially ruined. I had to give up my job of 20 years. I just feel broken."

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

"I'm theoretically self-employed, but I can hardly work at the moment except at weekends, which means we don't have much family time together."

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

"It's caused a lot of friction between me and my husband, and between my other children. My two oldest are neurotypical, only 13 months between them, and with my oldest refusing to go then it's impacting on the second oldest – "If he's not going, why should I?""

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

"It's had a knock-on effect on other siblings challenging going to school as well... It gets quite difficult for the younger children to understand what's happening."

— A parent with a child of secondary school age

“For us it’s seeing her so unhappy and just no support. Banging our heads against brick walls, begging people to have any input, and as a family we’re all exhausted, we have other children. You just want to keep your child safe, you want them to be happy. I just feel like I’m one of many who are failing the children. My husband feels helpless.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“There’s a lot of guilt. I feel guilt sending my son in, and he feels guilt feeling like he’s letting us down.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“The amount of stress and tension and the pressure of it. And trying not to show that to your child is really hard. We are a really positive family, and if we’re struggling...I just wonder how other families actually cope. It just feels like it’s taken up every single minute of every day.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“There’s no support for parents at the moment either – when we were going through the difficulties we both needed mental health support, but weren’t offered that.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“Strategies that I can do as a parent to help. I feel at a loss at the minute, I don’t know if my child’s in the right setting – I feel like I’m winging it. There should be training for teachers and parents in how best to support in this position. I don’t know what to do when I have a child self-harming in the morning, what should I be doing for the best?”

– A parent with a child of primary school age

“Stress on me because I’m trying to hold down a full-time job, while looking into home education, emailing this and that support person. I feel I’ve learned a new language with all of the ASDs, EPs and LNs, etc.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“I’ve probably joined every Facebook group going on attendance, I’ve signed up for a national advocacy group – Sunshine Support, signed up for their academy, gone on tens of webinars, I’ve downloaded and printed off the ALN Act in Wales and read that, gone on council websites – it’s all self-directed. When you go out and ask, you can get things. I’ve been sent webinars on anxiety or sleep for autistic children. There are things out there once you make some links, but so much is self-directed. It’s really difficult to navigate.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“Trying to find that support is the issue. You need the time and mental energy to go through the research and paperwork.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“I know every child is different, but there didn’t seem to be a route – why is there no pathway, even if there are branches off it? Why has no one helped to visualise what the options might be, just to help the parents understand?”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“Maybe some kind of support meet-up in the city once a month, because I felt like I was the only person in the world going through this battle. Knowing there are other parents who are going through this, being able to sit and discuss with them, and know you’re not the only one doing this, you’re not on your own.”

– A parent with a child of secondary school age

“Parental booklets [would make a big difference] – currently all LAs do their own thing, but Welsh Government could do the work of creating a single view and rolling it out multiple times.”

– **A practitioner**

“We need more advocacy services – people that know the ALN Code, moral support at meetings; parents who go on their own get fobbed off. It would help to have people who have been through it before, but it’s quite hard to find an advocate to support you to go to a meeting.”

– **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“[Re transition to secondary school] For them to get to know our children from us as parents. For us to be able to have more direct contact, not just from paperwork. Getting views directly from parents as to what their child is going to need going forward.”

– **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“I feel very lucky, my daughter is moving to a school which is good. I have had a lot of contact before my daughter moved via email to understand her before she moved. There was no IDP at the time, so the contact meant they knew the challenges she was facing from the start.”

– **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“I’m losing sleep over it at the moment because I’ve had such little support over Years 5 and 6.”

– **A parent with a child of primary school age**

“I think the burden falls disproportionately on women – this whole issue, struggle, communicating, handling this issue. I haven’t seen any men at support groups either.”

– **A parent with a child of secondary school age**



Recommendations

In light of the themes emerging from the research, below are our recommendations to improve support for parents with children with significant attendance issues:

1. Enable schools to have a more effective and empathetic approach to parents of children with persistent absence issues. Provide training on neurodiversity to all staff working with children to improve understanding of how to support neurodiverse children; avoid appearing to blame parents and specify a single point of contact for parents seeking support for their child to liaise with. Involve the child in any meetings and discussions on their needs and require ALNCoS to be stand-alone roles so that they are able to focus exclusively on their ALN responsibilities.

2. Provide timely assessments of additional learning needs for all children who require them. Early diagnosis of additional learning needs, alongside the support being available, is likely to reduce the incidence of severe absence for some children. Investigate the possibility of introducing a light touch assessment/screening for neurodiversity for all pupils starting school, and provide a directory of approved providers of learning needs assessments which would be accepted by all schools/LAs in Wales for parents that wish to seek a private assessment of their child's needs.

3. Increase additional learning needs and children's mental health support so that all children who require it, whether outlined in an Individual Development Plan or not, have access to the support they need to successfully engage with school. Provide clarity as to what support is available without a formal diagnosis and make sure this is consistent across Wales, and make clear who is responsible/accountable for ensuring support is provided. Encourage practitioners to share success

stories and examples of best practice on attendance so that colleagues from different parts of Wales can learn from others' experiences and try to avoid late notice announcements of funding for support services, such as the Education Welfare Service and Family Engagement Officers to encourage trained and experienced staff not to be forced to leave to seek employment elsewhere.

4. Explore the possibility of making online learning available on a long-term basis as an alternative to attending school for those children whose needs cannot be met in a school or specialist provision setting.

This provision would also be useful for some children on short-term absence to avoid them falling behind in their learning and to maintain a link with formal education.

5. Create and maintain a repository of support and advice for parents with children with poor attendance.

This could include information on pathways and navigating the education system if your child has additional learning needs, support available for other barriers to attendance (e.g. grants available for school costs, such as uniform and transport), advice on how to support your child with neurodiversity and/or mental health challenges, and a list of parent support groups and details of advocacy support services.

6. Review the national guidance on attendance.

Consider whether there is an opportunity for additional measures that record children's engagement with education rather than specifically school attendance: for children with significant absence issues, a target of 90% attendance is not realistic and may not be helping to drive

supportive behaviour and actions, but they may be able to engage with learning at home, subject to the provision being available (see recommendation 4). Evaluate the effectiveness of fines in improving attendance/engagement. Enable better co-ordination of services with a more joined-up approach across Welsh Government, local authorities, and the support networks, and investigate how Community Focused Schools manage absence compared to other schools.

7. Conduct a review of the ALN Code to understand the extent which it is meeting the needs of children, and how schools' performance in delivering against the ALN Code is measured. From what parents in this research told us, the ambitions in the ALN Code are not yet being fully realised, and there is more that can be done for Wales to be a world-leading country in this area.

8. Conduct further research into effective ways of supporting children and families with poor attendance, building on Community Focused School approaches and utilising family engagement / family support officers.



Case study: School Home Support⁶

School-Home Support (SHS) is a charity with a record of success in reducing persistent and severe absence from school. The charity adopts a ‘whole family model’ to address the underlying causes of poor school attendance through a key worker (‘practitioner’) appointed to work alongside a family to build a long term, trusting relationship.

Practitioners work with families over a period of six to eight months, on average, to understand and tackle barriers to good school attendance. Based on their 2022/23 Impact Report SHS has achieved significant results in improving attendance for persistent and severely absent children:

- 70% of the children they work with achieved an average increase of 8.4% in their attendance rate, equivalent to an additional 17 days in school.
- 73% of the children they work with who were persistently absent achieved an average improvement in their attendance of 10%, equivalent to an additional 20 days in school.
- 86% of the children they work with who were severely absent achieved an average improvement in their attendance of 20%, equivalent to an additional 40 days in school.

The work of SHS has been supported by the Centre for Social Justice think tank who have called on the Department for Education to fund “school attendance practitioners” to work with severely absent children using the SHS model⁷. The evidence from the Centre for Social Justice suggests that funding ‘school attendance practitioners’ based on the SHS model could significantly improve school attendance for children who are regularly absent from school.

The Welsh Government should conduct its own assessment of the SHS ‘whole family model’ and the work of practitioners to understand the potential for addressing persistent and severe absence in Wales. The Welsh Government should use this assessment to decide whether a Welsh equivalent to SHS could be established with funding for ‘school absence practitioners’ to provide targeted support to children in Wales with a poor attendance record.

⁶<https://www.schoolhomesupport.org.uk/our-impact-improving-persistent-absence/our-impact-reports>

⁷https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CSJ-Lost_but_not_forgotten-2.pdf