

Senedd Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Absenoldeb Disgyblion

Ymateb gan NASUWT Cymru

Welsh Parliament

Children, Young People and Education  
Committee

Pupil absence

Evidence from NASUWT Cymru

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Record your views against the inquiry's terms of reference, which have been grouped into 5 themes.

### 1. Reasons

1. The NASUWT Big Question survey was conducted between March and May 2022 and asked teachers in Wales who had provided distance learning to pupils over the preceding 12 months to provide the reasons for that remote learning. Each respondent was able to indicate a number of reasons for remote learning and the following list gives the percentage of members who indicated each particular reason:

Pupils who have tested positive for COVID-19	81%
Pupils who are school phobic	34%
Pupils with mental health needs (e.g. anxiety)	43%
Pupils with SEND/ASN/ALN who struggle with the social aspects of school	20%
Pupils who have been suspended	41%
Pupils who are in seclusion/isolation	30%
Pupils who have challenging behaviour	20%
Pupils with SEND/ASN/ALN whose needs are not being met by the school	9%
Other	12%

2. Absence due to COVID was the main reason given (as is to be expected given the period covered by the survey). From school statistical returns it is clear that COVID absences are still an issue. The other reasons given by teachers are indicative of potential reasons for ongoing learner absences. The reasons for persistent absence are complicated and



can mask a multi-faceted situation which may be different for each individual learner affected.

3. 'Non-covid related absenteeism' is a difficult concept to define and isolate. Aside from absences as a direct result of testing positive for COVID and / or diagnosis of Long COVID, other apparently unrelated reasons for absences may have developed or been exacerbated because of the impact of the pandemic and related lockdowns.
4. Potential causal factors for higher rates of such absence now are as follows:
  - Schools and other services which traditionally assist learners in ways that may support attendance (e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, GP Surgeries, Youth Services etc) have been impacted by COVID and therefore may be less able to provide support, thus impacting on their ability to support learners' ability to manage regular school attendance.
  - The mental health impacts of the pandemic on young people have been well evidenced and therefore the number of young people potentially in need of support have increased.<sup>1</sup>

90% of teachers who responded to the NASUWT Big Question Survey considered that rates of adverse emotional, personal or social issues among pupils they taught had increased over the last 12 months and 97% of respondents said that they taught pupils with mental health challenges.

- There is a strong correlation between high rates of school absence and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The pandemic (and the ways this has been managed) and the current economic downturn have meant that more young people are impacted by the effects of economic disadvantage.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/teenagers-mental-health-pandemic>

<sup>2</sup> [Converted document \(suttontrust.com\)](#)



- As a result of lockdowns young people have changed their routines and there has been broader cultural acceptance of non-attendance at school.<sup>3</sup>
  - Public Health Wales indicates that 10% of those who experience a COVID infection are likely to experience Long Covid.<sup>4</sup> Cases of Long-COVID may not have been identified as such and may account for some apparent non-COVID absences.
5. Evidence suggests some groups of pupils were at more risk of poor school attendance prior to the pandemic. Absences rates have been consistently higher for the following groups:
- Pupils with ALN
  - Pupils eligible for free school meals
  - Pupils from Gypsy and Traveller families

Absence rates have increased for these groups, and this has been analysed in some detail in the Education Minister's commissioned report.

6. Potential reasons for the comparatively higher absence rates for the above groups were identified by Estyn and others as:
- Issues with access to IT resources which may have impacted learning in lockdown;
  - Difficulties engaging with online learning as a medium even if they did have access;
  - Parents and carers who were less able to support learning and engagement (this may be for a number of reasons – economic, educational, cultural); and / or
  - Lack of an appropriate environment for study during lockdown which may have impacted on engagement

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<sup>3</sup> [Ofsted: Covid and anxiety driving higher school absence | Tes SoW-Briefing-March-22-How-Covid-Changed-Wales.pdf \(bevanfoundation.org\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Long COVID \(Post COVID-19 Syndrome\) - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](#)



7. The mental health issues and disengagement with school experienced across all learners are also likely to have impacted these distinct groups.
8. The data suggests that the average rate of absences for all learners have risen post pandemic. The groups indicated above have not necessarily been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic but, as their absences were generally higher pre-COVID, their attendance issues do require particular attention.
9. Asian learners also appear to have greater absence levels post pandemic when absence rates in this group were lower than average pre-pandemic. It is unclear what the reasons for this may be and this requires further analysis. Potential trends in absence among other groups with protected characteristics under the Equality Act would benefit from further analysis to determine if other groups have been disproportionately impacted.

## 2. Risks and consequences

10. The Welsh Government *Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being* (269/2021) advises that non-attendance at school can lead to: a lack of contact with teachers and friends who are important attachment figures; changes to routine and anxiety about returning to school.
11. The Education Minister's Commissioned Report also addresses the fact that deteriorating attendance can be a precursor to and a predictor of a range of behavioural and emotional problems for learners which if not addressed may lead to exclusion from schools. This has longer term consequences for the individual learner in terms of educational attainment and socialisation and for their communities.<sup>5</sup>
12. NASUWT members have already reported significant behavioural impacts on all learners following the return to school after the national lockdowns such as the inability to follow simple rules and instructions. It is clearly a risk that such issues will continue to impact

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<sup>5</sup> [Long-Term School Absenteeism – Issues and Implications – The Karyawan](#)



those who continue to be absent.

13. Not only can absences lead to wellbeing issues, it can also mean that mental health and safeguarding issues are not addressed. Schools are a significant filter point for identifying and addressing such issues given the regular contact with professionals who know the learner well. Learner absences from schools therefore risk such issues going unidentified and unaddressed.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Impact

14. The overwhelming majority of respondents to the NASUWT Big Question Survey felt that some their pupils had lost ground academically over the preceding 12 months, as a result of COVID-related disruption to their schooling. 26% felt all of their learners had lost ground whereas only 2% of respondents felt that none of their pupils had lost ground and this is supported by the findings reported by Estyn. It therefore seems likely that continued absences post-pandemic will cause further issues with learning and attainment.
15. The Sutton Trust's recent review of social mobility found that learning losses in the UK due to the pandemic are high when compared with other nations and these deficits are most stark among the least economically advantaged. The review indicates that the reason for the greater learning losses in the UK may be related to the fact that there is greater economic inequality in the UK than in the other countries considered.<sup>7</sup> Irregular attendance patterns were one of the most cited classroom behavioural issues which concern NASUWT member.
16. that pupils with regular absences are likely to cause disruption when they do attend, this is a risk.
17. There has been a substantial increase in elective home education during the pandemic and it therefore seems likely that there is some connection. Lockdown home learning

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<sup>6</sup> [Risks and protective factors : Mentally Healthy Schools](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Converted document \(suttontrust.com\)](#)



may have been a positive experience for some families who may otherwise not have considered it. Following on from compulsory home working, some parents and carers may now have more flexibility in the way they work which may have enabled the home education of their children. It is obviously a concern however that some may have de-registered their children because of perceived barriers to learning at school. The NASUWT considers that school is the best place for learners to engage in education and it is therefore essential to consider the reasons given by parents and carers for de-registering children so that these can be addressed.

The NASUWT has not seen data to support a premise that absenteeism has led to schools de-registering pupils. However, given that teachers report

#### 4. Effectiveness of policies

**18. Maximising full time attendance at School** - The current education structure in Wales is based on the expectation of the vast majority of pupils attending schools. Given that this has not been enforced over the preceding two years, schools, local and national government need to give a clear message to learners and carers that full time school attendance is the expectation. This needs to be done with sensitivity and should be accompanied by sign-posting to appropriate services if parents, carers and learners are struggling to maintain this. Part of this approach must focus on identifying and addressing the causes of absence and the barriers to attendance. To penalise learners and carers without this support would be counter-productive.

19. The evidence from the Minister's commissioned report notes that it is possible that schools have not yet enforced absence management expectations and policies as they would have before the pandemic, and this may be a factor in the increased number of non-covid absences. The report indicates that this was mainly because of staff capacity limitations resulting from workload demands and staff absences as a result of the pandemic. It is imperative that such services are adequately staffed and resourced to manage this reinstatement of expectations. The Minister's report's recommendation to disseminate best practice is insufficient if there is inadequate staffing in place to carry out this practice.



20. During 2020-21 the average amount of school reserves carried forward at the end of the financial year increased exponentially across Wales.<sup>8</sup> This increase in reserves can be attributed to increased COVID-catch up funding from the Welsh Government in addition to savings accumulated from the temporary / partial closure of some schools, savings on exam fees etc. In contrast however, the secondary schools in the case studies of the Minister’s commissioned report all carried deficit reserves in 2020-21. This difference from the average suggests that schools that were pro-active in addressing the causes of absence may have achieved this by ensuring prompt investment to address pupil welfare and learning issues. This would benefit from further analysis. Schools that continue to carry over funds whilst experiencing issues of absenteeism should be encouraged to commit resources to supporting those learners by the engagement of additional staff and / or other targeted resources.

21. The Welsh Government *Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being (269/2021)* outlines the type of actions and responses needed to support learners with mental health and emotional issues:

“Approximately 1 in 10 children between the ages of 5 and 16 have a mental health problem and many more have behavioural issues. Approximately 50 per cent of people with enduring mental health problems will have symptoms by the time they are 14, and many at a much younger age<sup>16</sup>. However, this belies the scale of poor mental well-being among children and young people and most of the emotional issues young people and school staff will encounter are not clinical in nature and do not require specialist interventions. Rather, it is about supporting the young person, building their resilience and fostering a sense that there is someone they can trust.

Developing these trusting relationships is central to the whole-school approach. Developing positive relationships between a teacher and learner is a fundamental aspect of quality learning and teaching. The effects of teacher–learner relationships have been researched extensively and point to how positive relationships can have

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<sup>8</sup> [Level of school reserves carried forward by school \(£ thousand\) \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)  
[CHART: Level of school reserves carried forward \(£ thousand\) \(gov.wales\)](#)



good social and academic outcomes. Being taught by highly trained, highly motivated, trauma-informed teachers who are aware of the impact they have on the young person’s overall development, inside and outside the classroom, is central to promoting emotional and mental well-being.”

22. The NASUWT welcomed the Children, Young People and Education Committee’s recommendation that such a whole-school approach needs to be adequately resourced. In its consultation response to that *Framework* the NASUWT expressed its concerns that the framework was not accompanied by any increased investment or workload impact assessment. Given that the *Framework* recognises that a whole-school approach to well-being requires the well-being of teachers, the lack of such an assessment is inconsistent with the concept of the whole-school approach.

23. Whilst the additional Covid Renew and Reform money allocated is welcome, this is short-term funding, and no financial commitment has yet been made to increase long term capacity in the teaching workforce.<sup>9</sup>

24. **Blended learning** - The Welsh Government *Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being (269/2021)* appears to indicate a policy of at least some pupils in maintained schools continuing with a blended learning approach:

“Some groups of learners will have benefited greatly from a blended learning approach, such as those who fall into the category of ‘frequent school absences’ or those with long term sickness. With appropriate support and protocols in place, developing blended approaches for some learners with specific needs could be useful for the long-term. Support and resources for blended learning are available on Hwb.”

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<sup>9</sup>[Renew and reform: supporting learners’ wellbeing and progression: update for September 2021 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)





25. In his response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee the Minister also proposes a strategic approach to digital teaching and learning for those who cannot be present in schools.
26. It needs to be recognised that schools in Wales are not staffed to provide both classroom teaching to learners and distance learning. If the Welsh Government continues with this policy of blended learning, it needs to review the way in which this provision is managed. Teachers have struggled to maintain blended learning in a time of national emergency, but it is not a sustainable model without a full review of staffing and expectations.
27. The NASUWT Big Question Survey revealed that 27% of respondents were expected to simultaneously provide remote education and traditional classroom teaching whilst other teachers were expected to provide additional resources for those who were learning remotely. 86% of respondents providing remote learning were expected to do this with no adjustment to their pre-existing workload.
28. 87% of respondents said their workload in the previous 12 months had increased, with 58% saying it had increased significantly. 82% of respondents reported that their job adversely affected their mental health, with workload being the most common reason.
29. **Core Staffing Levels** - In its evidence to the Independent Pay Review Body Wales, the NASUWT has highlighted that whilst Pupil numbers have been generally increasing over the past decade teacher numbers have been reducing considerably. The number of full-time equivalent (FTE) qualified teachers working in schools and other educational institutions in 2020/21 was 23,985, a decrease of almost 10% from the 26,363 figure reached in 2006. This trend has had a significantly detrimental impact on pupil-teacher ratios.
30. This combination of increasing pupil numbers and constraints on teacher recruitment and retention requires effective action and policies to secure and sustain adequate rates of teacher recruitment and retention. Dissatisfaction with levels of pay is a key issue but



other barriers to securing adequate numbers of teacher include: unnecessary and excessive workload burdens, inadequate support for teacher and school leader wellbeing, diminished levels of job satisfaction, a lack of an effective entitlement to professional training and development opportunities, and debilitating working environments and cultures. Further detail regarding this can be found in the NASUWT's 2022 submission to the Independent Pay Review Body.

31. The Minister's report on pupil absence identifies that the learning experience whilst in school is an important factor in terms of pupil achievement and attendance. It also highlights that in addition to a long-standing trend of falling teacher numbers, schools' current responses to absence are hampered by high levels of absence among those staff who remain.
32. The Sutton Trust literature review suggest that the most effective ways to raise learner achievement would be one-to-one or small group tutoring, frequent teacher feedback, high expectations, increased instructional time, high dosage tutoring and the use of data to guide instruction. All of these require more teacher input per pupil and more staff-to-staff communication in relation to pupils and therefore more teachers.<sup>10</sup> Currently however inadequate staffing levels pre-Covid have been further impacted by work related stress and other COVID-related health issues. Schools cannot hope to take a strategic approach to this issue unless they have a long-term commitment to resource greater teacher: pupil ratios.
33. **Supply teachers** - Supply teachers are vital members of the teaching workforce in Wales and an important component in educational provision. The NASUWT welcomes the undertakings in the Cooperation Agreement with Plaid Cymru to remove the market approach to supply teacher provision. The Union fully supports the Welsh Government policy of a directly employed supply cluster model in areas of Wales and recommends that this is rolled out across Wales and adopted on a permanent basis in order to enable long term strategic management of this service.

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<sup>10</sup> [Converted document \(suttontrust.com\)](https://www.suttontrust.com)



34. The commercial agency supply model which is currently most prevalent in Wales works against the interests of learner engagement, against the Whole School Well-being Framework, against the ethical supply framework and against the concept of Community Schools. The NASUWT receives regular accounts of commercial teaching supply agencies intentionally fore-shortening placements in schools in order to avoid legal protections for workers under the Agency Worker Regulations. This results in a lack of consistency of staffing in schools which impacts on the strength of learner- teacher relationships and the ability of supply teachers to support the ethos, curriculum and policies of the school.
35. The Minister's report highlights the difficulties experienced by schools in spending the Recruit Recover and Raise Standards money. Given the historic under-valuing of supply teachers many experienced teachers have left the industry to secure fair terms and conditions. However, schools claims require further analysis: are these schools offering supply teachers fair rates of pay and conditions for their skills and experience or are they continuing to try to secure teachers through commercial supply agencies who pay rates of less than £138 a day.
36. **Multi-organisational responsibility** - The research literature outlined in the Education Minister's report suggests that unauthorised absences are not necessarily a direct causal factor for lower achievement. Unauthorised absences are often an indicator of other issues in a learner's life which need to be addressed if their well-being and achievement is to be effectively supported. Whilst schools have a vital role in addressing this it is important that the Welsh Government acknowledges that the role of schools here remains relative to the role that other organisations must play. The NASUWT is concerned that many learners are struggling to access external services that are also impacted by the pandemic. This needs to be addressed in Government policy and expectations.
37. The Welsh Government have made a commitment to the development of the Community Schools Model and the Minister considers that this will also address the issue of absenteeism. If well managed this may provide scope to support the sort of multi-organisational working required to assist young people. The NASUWT awaits



consultation on this issue however. Indications so far suggest that this Community Schools approach will require significant additional resourcing from the Welsh Government and the Union maintains that such a significant change in the way school premises are used will need to be strategically managed via a return to Local Authority control of schools.

38. **New Initiatives** - The Education Minister's report suggests that even though consultees argued for no new initiatives they supported the introduction of the New Curriculum. This attitude is not reflected by the actions of Headteachers across Wales however. Following NASUWT's campaign to highlight that most schools in Wales were simply unequipped to introduce the New Curriculum in 2022, the Education Minister offered secondary schools the opportunity to delay the introduction until 2023. Over half of the secondary schools in Wales seized this opportunity to delay the roll out of the New Curriculum.<sup>11</sup> The Auditor General's findings that the Welsh Government had failed to adequately assess the costs of the development of the New Curriculum provides some explanation for their decision. It is therefore a concern that the Education Minister's plans for improving learning experiences of disaffected pupils rest on the New Curriculum and the introduction of the ALN framework. These will only be effective in this regard if they are rolled out in a well-planned and resourced manner. An exhausted and stressed teaching staff will not be able to do this effectively.

39. The importance of engaging families of learners has been well documented and this is of particular importance with vulnerable groups of learners. It is also a core requirement of the New Curriculum, the ALN guidance and the Welsh Government's *Whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being (269/2021)*.

40. It is important to recognise that there are restrictions on this type of engagement for class teachers as (other than bi-annual parents' evenings), class teachers tend to be fully timetabled to teach or undertake other duties and time is rarely allocated to them for such engagements.

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<sup>11</sup> [Half of secondary schools opt out of teaching Wales' new curriculum from September \(msn.com\)](https://www.msn.com)



41. Support for those struggling to attend school would generally be provided by senior leaders who may not be involved in teaching the pupil or by designated support staff. The extent of engagement however varies between schools and local authorities. The Minister suggests that a Community Schools Model may enhance this engagement. It would be helpful to have more information on the detail of this approach. Teaching staff will only have the time to take on this engagement if the staffing of schools is increased to release them to do so.

## 5. Other

