



Education Welfare Services:

The effectiveness of the support that the Education Welfare Service (EWS) provides to schools and parents/carers to tackle persistent absenteeism

September 2026

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Publications Section

Estyn

Anchor Court

Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.wales

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Executive summary

This thematic report examines how effectively Education Welfare Services (EWSs) support schools, PRUs, and parents and carers to address persistent absenteeism. The report draws on evidence from our inspections and discussions with the EWS and schools (9 local authorities, 21 primary schools, 18 secondary schools, and 6 all-age schools) and identifies key features of effective practice and areas for improvement.

Regular school attendance has a positive impact on learner outcomes, standards and progression, as well as on emotional and physical well-being. Conversely, extended absence may have long-term consequences for a young person's mental health and future life chances (Welsh Government, 2023). This report highlights the valuable support provided by the EWS to schools and how this contributes positively to identifying pupils at risk of persistent absence and co-ordinating support for families. It emphasises that strong professional relationships between education welfare officers (EWOs), schools and partner agencies underpins effective practice in many areas. It also highlights areas where improvements could improve the effectiveness of the system.

Overview of findings

- Although most EWSs provided valuable support to schools and families, variability in practice, limited service capacity and the inconsistent strategic use of evidence constrained their ability to secure system-wide improvements in attendance. To strengthen the effectiveness of the EWS, action is needed at both national and local authority levels as there is currently not a sustainable approach to attendance posts and welfare services, strengthening national data systems and guidance, and improving early intervention and preventative work.
- Across the local authorities reviewed, the EWS provided valued support to schools, pupils and families and contributed positively to addressing barriers to attendance. In most local authorities, effective relationships between EWOs, schools and families supported constructive dialogue and early identification of concerns. Where officers were regularly present in schools and worked closely with pastoral teams, support was particularly effective, often improving attendance for individual pupils and strengthening family engagement. However, the overall impact of the EWS on reducing persistent absence remained too variable. Nearly all local authorities reported significant capacity pressures, which limit preventative work and early intervention.
- In most local authorities, communication between the EWS, schools and families

was effective, particularly where officers were based in schools regularly enabling positive engagement with school staff and families. In these local authorities, well-established professional relationships and authority-wide campaigns helped promote consistent messages about the importance of attendance and supported relationship-based engagement with families. However, in a few local authorities, capacity pressures and differing approaches led to inconsistent communication. In addition, in a majority of local authorities, engaging families whose attitudes to attendance had become more entrenched since the pandemic remained challenging.

- Collaboration with other services formed an important part of attendance support. In most authorities, the EWS maintained appropriate working relationships with social care, health services, educational psychology and youth services. This enabled a holistic understanding of the barriers affecting pupils and helped support co-ordinated responses. In a minority of authorities, well-established multi-agency arrangements supported co-ordinated responses for pupils with complex needs. These arrangements contributed positively to safeguarding and well-being. However, partnership work was not always sufficiently strategic and often relied too heavily on individual working relationships between EWOs and services. Capacity pressures within health and specialist services, alongside underdeveloped early intervention and preventative family support in a few areas, limited the timeliness and overall impact of multi-agency intervention on attendance outcomes.
- Local authorities generally had secure systems for collecting and monitoring attendance data. In nearly all cases, authorities gathered regular attendance information and shared it with schools to identify pupils at risk of persistent absence. Many authorities also analysed attendance patterns for vulnerable groups. In many cases, leaders did not use attendance data strategically enough to evaluate the impact of interventions or identify longer-term trends. In addition, they do not share effective practice between schools well enough.
- Funding arrangements had a considerable influence on the capacity and stability of local authority efforts to tackle persistent absenteeism. In many authorities, grant funding enabled leaders to increase staffing capacity and strengthen early intervention work with families. Additional roles, such as family engagement officers (FEOs) or attendance support officers, often improved communication with families and supported reintegration for pupils at risk of persistent absence. These roles are in addition to the statutory activity that local authorities are expected to carry out as a core function under the Local Authority Revenue

Support Grant (RSG). However, across nearly all authorities, these additional roles are reliant on short-term or annually allocated grants. This created uncertainty, limited workforce stability, and restricted longer-term strategic planning. As a result, although examples of effective practice existed, the overall funding approach lacked the consistency, sustainability and strategic alignment required to secure lasting improvements in attendance.

- Across the local authorities reviewed, compliance with statutory duties relating to school attendance was generally secure. Most EWSs had clear graduated response processes, well-defined escalation pathways and appropriate oversight arrangements that supported proportionate action when attendance concerns escalated. In many areas, statutory measures such as warning letters, fixed penalty notices (FPN) and legal proceedings were applied appropriately in collaboration with schools. However, the impact of statutory enforcement on improving attendance over time was variable and often limited, particularly where absence was linked to complex family circumstances, well-being concerns or entrenched disengagement. In a minority of local authorities, inconsistencies in how statutory processes were applied between schools or officers due to workforce capacity and approaches to addressing persistent absenteeism created challenges for equitable implementation.

Introduction

This thematic report is written in response to a request for advice from the Cabinet Secretary in her remit letter to Estyn 2025-2026. This report examines the role of the EWS in supporting schools, pupil referral units (PRUs) and families to address persistent absenteeism. This thematic report builds upon our report entitled ‘Improving attendance in secondary schools – an update on progress’, published in May 2025.

Welsh Government guidance emphasises the significant benefits of regular school attendance, noting that it has a positive impact on learner outcomes, standards and progression, as well as on emotional and physical well-being. Establishing strong attendance patterns from an early age is also identified as critical for social development. Conversely, extended absence is associated with behavioural and social difficulties, which may have long-term consequences for a young person’s mental health and future life chances (Welsh Government, 2023). Given the central importance of attendance to learners’ well-being, progress and long-term outcomes, this report also highlights and reinforces the crucial role that parents and carers play in supporting consistent school attendance.

Persistent absenteeism continues to present a significant challenge for schools and local authorities, and improving attendance remains a key priority for the education system in Wales. EWSs play an important role in supporting schools and families, providing advice, guidance and intervention to help improve pupils’ attendance and engagement with education. The report evaluates the nature and effectiveness of the support provided by EWSs, including how well they work with schools, parents/carers and partner agencies to tackle persistent absenteeism. It also considers how local authorities monitor and evaluate the work of EWSs, how they use funding to support attendance, and how data is used to identify trends and plan support. Further, the report identifies effective practice and areas where approaches could be strengthened.

The evidence base for the report is outlined in Appendix 1 and included discussions with local authority officers, including education welfare staff, engagement with schools and pupil referral units, and a review of relevant documentation and data. We also considered examples of practice across local authorities to identify approaches that are supporting improvements in attendance.

The intended audience for this report is Welsh Government, local authorities and EWSs, particularly those responsible for planning, delivering and evaluating support to address

persistent absenteeism. It may also be of interest to school leaders and staff in schools and PRUs, and other partner agencies that work with schools and local authorities to support pupils' attendance and well-being. The report may also be relevant to parents and other stakeholders with an interest in improving pupils' attendance. The findings aim to support professional discussion about effective practice and areas for development in addressing persistent absenteeism.

Background

Regular school attendance is a fundamental component of a child's right to education and is underpinned by a clear statutory framework. The 'Education Act' (1996), Section 7 states that:

'The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable—(a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs [(in the case of a child who is in the area of a local authority in England) or additional learning needs (in the case of a child who is in the area of a local authority in Wales)] he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise'.

Local authorities in Wales have clear statutory duties to ensure that children and young people receive a suitable education and to take reasonable steps to promote regular school attendance. These duties are underpinned by the Welsh Government's *Statutory guidance to help prevent children and young people from missing education: A practical toolkit to help identify children and young people missing education* (Welsh Government, 2017), which places a legal expectation on local authorities to establish robust arrangements to identify children living in their area who are not receiving a suitable education. Within this context, EWSs play a central operational role in enabling local authorities to fulfil these legal obligations, including supporting attendance and helping to identify children not receiving a suitable education. Welsh Government provides funding through the equity strand of the Local Authority Education Grant (LAEG), which includes support for attendance-related services such as EWOs, reflecting the important role these services play in supporting learner engagement and attendance. While attendance-related activity is an identified priority within the equity strand, funding is not fully ring-fenced for EWOs. Local authorities retain discretion over how resources are allocated across a range of equity priorities, which can lead to variation in the level of investment directed towards attendance support and EWO provision.

The All Wales Attendance Framework (Welsh Government, 2011) defines the core purpose of an EWS as contributing to the local authority and school's drive for effectiveness; working in partnership with schools, families and communities; and linking with a broader network of agencies including health and social care. Their work encompasses a wide range of activities, including promoting whole-school attendance policies, providing advice on effective practice, undertaking individual and family-centred interventions, and, where necessary, initiating statutory proceedings on behalf of the local authority. This breadth of responsibility positions the EWS as fundamental in supporting local authorities to address attendance issues, particularly persistent absenteeism.

In this report, we use Welsh Government definitions of ‘persistent absenteeism’. Persistent absenteeism has become an increasing concern in Wales in recent years. Welsh Government data indicates that although overall absence rates have begun to decline, they remain substantially higher than pre-pandemic levels. In 2024-2025, 27.0% of pupils were classified as persistently absent, based on the revised threshold of missing 10% or more of school sessions (Welsh Government, 2025). This change in definition, introduced in 2023, reflects a policy shift towards earlier identification and intervention (Welsh Government, 2023). Prior to this revision, persistent absence was defined as missing 20% of the number of required school sessions. The data highlights persistent inequalities. Persistent absence remained considerably higher for pupils with SEN/ALN provision than for their peers without SEN/ALN provision. In 2024/25, 47.0% of secondary-aged pupils and 36.4% of primary-aged pupils with SEN/ALN provision were persistently absent, compared with 31.4% and 20.4% respectively for pupils without SEN/ALN provision. The data also highlights persistent socio-economic inequalities, with over half (50.7%) of pupils eligible for free school meals persistently absent, compared with 21.1% of their peers (Welsh Government, 2025). These disparities underline the strong link between attendance and socio-economically disadvantaged contexts.

Research consistently demonstrates the complexity of factors influencing school attendance. Parentkind, ‘Understanding pupil absence in schools in Wales’ (2023, p. 35), emphasises that absenteeism reflects a “complex mix of different factors amongst families and there is no single solution that will resolve these problems”. Similarly, Bond et al. (2024, p.13) argue that “the multifaceted factors that affect school absence mean that we must find new ways of delivering connected public services with and through schools so that the necessary holistic (‘whole system’) solutions to school absence can be implemented. Public services should work together to co-develop initiatives to improve support for children disengaging from education”. This reinforces the importance of EWSs operating within a multi-agency context, where collaboration and information sharing are essential to addressing the underlying barriers to attendance.

Welsh Government guidance further highlights the importance of building effective relationships with pupils and families. Effective engagement with families depends on building trust, maintaining honest communication and fostering strong partnerships across agencies (Welsh Government, 2025). While statutory measures such as FPNs remain available, they are considered most effective for less entrenched attendance issues and should be used alongside targeted support (Welsh Government, 2013). This reflects a broader policy emphasis on early intervention, prevention and supportive approaches rather than reliance solely on enforcement.

Despite this policy framework, recent evidence from Estyn’s report ‘Improving attendance in secondary schools – an update on progress’ (Estyn, 2025) suggests that the

effectiveness of support for improving attendance remains variable across Wales. The report also finds that although local authorities continue to prioritise attendance, the impact of their work is inconsistent. In a minority of cases, strategies have not led to sufficient improvements, and there is notable variation in the level of support and challenge provided to schools. School leaders also identified inconsistencies in the use of enforcement measures, such as FPN, which in some areas limit their ability to address persistent absence effectively.

The report also identified several systemic barriers to improving attendance. These include parental attitudes towards the importance of attendance, rising costs associated with transport, and the lack of sustained funding to support long-term attendance strategies. Annual funding arrangements can hinder schools' ability to plan strategically, build capacity and provide consistent support for pupils and their families. These challenges highlight the need for a more coherent and consistent approach to attendance support across local authorities.

Given the central role of the EWS within this landscape, there is a clear need to evaluate the nature and effectiveness of the support they provide. This thematic report, seeks to provide a national overview of current practice, examining how EWS support is delivered, the extent to which it meets the needs of schools and families, and its impact on reducing persistent absenteeism.

Recommendations

Welsh Government should:

1. Update and consolidate guidance for local authorities and schools including the '*All Wales Attendance Framework*', '*Belonging, Engaging and Participating*', and '*Inclusion and Pupil Support*' to provide clearer, more comprehensive support and promote greater consistency of practice across Wales in addressing persistent absenteeism
2. Establish a sustainable multi-year funding model and consistent national oversight of attendance and welfare services to support effective practice, address inconsistencies and reduce persistent absenteeism.
3. Strengthen national data systems and guidance to support timely and deeper analysis of attendance patterns ensuring data is robust, comparable and routinely published to support monitoring and improvement.

Local authorities should:

4. Improve the consistency of Education Welfare Services by providing clear guidance, effective monitoring of provision and workforce capacity, and the sharing of effective practice.
5. Strengthen early intervention and preventative support
6. Strengthen the strategic analysis and use of attendance data to support timely decision-making, identify patterns and trends in attendance, including for specific groups of pupils, enable early identification of concerns, and inform targeted interventions to improve pupil engagement and outcomes.
7. Improve communication and engagement with families
8. Strengthen guidance and apply consistently to clarify expectations for statutory escalation and enforcement

The nature and effectiveness of the support

Overall, the EWS across the participating local authorities provided valued support to schools, pupils and families, and played an important role in helping pupils overcome barriers to attendance. In most local authorities, the EWS demonstrated clear strengths in building effective relationships, structured absence monitoring and collaboration with schools. However, the overall impact of these services on reducing persistent absence remained too variable. While many EWSs supported schools and pupils effectively, findings indicated that nearly all local authorities faced capacity pressures, restricting preventative and early intervention work. In addition, in a minority of local authorities, the quality and consistency of support from the EWS varied widely between schools.

In many local authorities, the effectiveness of education welfare service support was underpinned by strong professional relationships between EWOs and schools. These local authorities operated cluster-based models that strengthened continuity between primary and secondary phases. Where these relationships were well-established, schools reported that officers were accessible, responsive and constructive in their approach. School leaders valued the professional dialogue that their EWO provided and the reassurance of having a named officer who understood the context of the school and the needs of its pupils, families and communities. EWOs working across clusters and phases were also well placed to identify and respond to emerging patterns within families, enabling more co-ordinated and consistent support as pupils moved from primary to secondary education. These relationships supported open communication about emerging attendance concerns and enabled schools to seek advice before issues became entrenched.

In nearly all local authorities, the EWS had developed structured systems to guide schools in responding to attendance concerns. In several areas, these included clear graduated response frameworks that outlined stages of monitoring, intervention and escalation. These processes provided clarity for schools and helped to ensure that concerns were identified and addressed in a consistent and proportionate manner. As a result, schools had a clearer understanding of when to seek support from the EWS and how attendance concerns should be managed.

Caerphilly County Borough Council EWS: Authority-wide attendance self-evaluation model driving school improvement

Caerphilly County Borough Council has a robust and structured attendance self-evaluation model in place across all schools. EWOs work alongside school leaders to analyse attendance data, gather pupil and stakeholder views, and identify targeted areas for improvement. This collaborative approach strengthens whole-school ownership of

attendance and promotes reflective practice, rather than compliance alone. Leaders report improved strategic focus and clearer accountability for attendance across settings, contributing to steady improvement in overall attendance rates. This is particularly notable in the attendance data for secondary-aged pupils. In the 2024–2025 academic year, nearly all secondary schools' attendance figures were broadly in line with or above their expected levels, with many schools performing above or well above their targets.

The impact of support was greatest where EWOs were regularly present in schools. In these cases, officers gained a detailed understanding of pupils, families and community contexts, enabling them to tailor their support more effectively. Schools reported that direct engagement with families, including home visits and face-to-face meetings, was particularly valuable in addressing barriers to attendance and in rebuilding trust where relationships between families and schools had become strained. In many cases, schools reported that these approaches led to improved attendance for individual pupils and strengthened collaboration between schools, families and local authority services.

In many local authorities, services were also developing holistic and trauma-informed approaches to supporting pupils with complex attendance challenges. The EWS increasingly recognised the impact of well-being, family circumstances and wider social factors on pupils' ability to attend school regularly. As a result, interventions often combined attendance monitoring with broader well-being support and co-ordinated work with other agencies. These approaches helped officers to understand the underlying causes of absence and to support families more sensitively and effectively.

Isle of Anglesey County Council Education Welfare Services: Strengthening attendance through family engagement and community-linked support:

In Isle of Anglesey County Council, the EWS makes a valuable contribution to promoting good attendance through strong collaborative working with schools and partner agencies. In the majority of cases, EWOs work closely with school leaders and pastoral teams to monitor attendance and respond promptly when concerns arise. This enables schools to identify pupils at risk of persistent absenteeism at an early stage and to plan appropriate support for pupils and their families.

The authority uses Community Focused Schools funding effectively to strengthen this work and support closer engagement with families. For example, at Ysgol Llanfawr, the leaders work with the EWS through the Community Focused Schools initiative. Family engagement officers carry out home visits and provide targeted support for families experiencing financial hardship or well-being difficulties. This preventative, relationship-based approach helps build trust with parents and carers and encourages them to

engage more openly with the school. Leaders report that this support has contributed to improving family engagement and reducing persistent absence among vulnerable pupils.

The authority also works collaboratively with other services to provide targeted support for pupils at risk of disengagement from education. For example, the 'Hwb' provision, based in each secondary school brings together officers from education and children's services to provide intensive well-being support and assist reintegration into mainstream education. This co-ordinated approach helps ensure that attendance concerns are addressed alongside wider safeguarding and well-being needs.

Although these collaborative approaches demonstrate the valuable contribution of the EWS in supporting pupils and families, it is too early to evaluate fully their longer-term impact. Improving attendance, particularly reducing persistent absence, remains a significant challenge for the local authority.

However, despite these strengths, the overall impact of the EWS varied too widely between local authorities and, in some cases, between schools within the same authority. In a minority of local authorities, schools reported that the support provided became overly procedural or reactive, focusing on compliance with processes rather than early intervention and preventative work. In these situations, engagement with EWSs tended to occur only after attendance concerns had escalated substantially, limiting opportunities to address issues before patterns of absence became entrenched.

Capacity pressures presented a significant challenge for many EWSs. Nearly all local authorities reported high caseloads and increased complexity in the needs of families. As a result, EWOs often prioritised the most serious or persistent cases, which reduced the time available for early engagement and preventative work. In many cases, this limited the ability of the EWS to work proactively with schools and families at an earlier stage, when support might have been most effective in preventing long-term absence.

During our meetings, a few schools noted that staffing instability within the EWS affected the continuity and effectiveness of support received. Frequent changes in personnel made it difficult to sustain relationships with schools and families and disrupted ongoing casework. Where officers changed frequently, families needed to re-establish trust with new professionals, slowing progress in addressing attendance barriers. These inconsistencies in the implementation of the EWS model across local authorities are often linked to variations in current local funding arrangements, which can contribute to short-term staffing and limit the ability to provide stable, consistent support.

Despite the challenges, EWSs have implemented a broad range of strategies to address

absenteeism, with individual cases demonstrating improved attendance. These positive outcomes highlight the impact of targeted support and strengthened approaches. The FEO network has also played a role in supporting the work of EWS. However, there is a lack of consistency in how these roles are deployed and integrated across local authorities. In a few local authorities, enhanced processes and closer collaboration between schools, FEOs, and local authority teams contributed to more consistent attendance outcomes, particularly for the most hard-to-reach pupils, even where overall attendance figures had plateaued.

Communication with key partners

Across most local authorities, communication between the EWS, schools and other partners was a notable strength, particularly where officers maintained a visible presence and engaged regularly with school leaders. In many areas, well-established professional relationships supported regular dialogue between EWOs and school staff. Schools frequently reported that officers were accessible and provided timely advice when attendance concerns arose. Where this collaborative approach was embedded, it helped schools feel well supported in addressing complex attendance issues and contributed to a shared understanding of attendance expectations and procedures across the authority. However, in a minority of local authorities, practice remained variable, and capacity pressures and differing approaches of individual EWOs resulted in less consistent communication. In addition, schools reported a lack of consistent authority-wide messaging to strengthen communication with families to promote regular attendance.

In many local authorities, communication between EWOs and schools was well established. Officers maintained regular contact with school leaders, attendance leads and pastoral teams through scheduled meetings and professional discussions. These arrangements supported a shared understanding of attendance processes and clarity of roles and ensured that schools could access timely professional advice when concerns arose. In these local authorities, officers were visible within school communities and developed constructive professional relationships that enabled early identification of attendance concerns and co-ordinated responses.

Isle of Anglesey County Council: Authority-wide well-being champion network supporting early identification and co-ordinated responses

The local authority has established a structured well-being champion network across Anglesey schools, bringing together representatives from the island's secondary and primary sectors on a half-termly basis. Co-ordinated by the senior education welfare officer, these meetings provide an effective forum for schools to identify emerging well-being and attendance-related concerns, such as eating disorders, and to agree appropriate responses collectively. A key strength of the network is its proactive approach, with the welfare officer sourcing external specialists or agencies to provide staff training and targeted support where gaps are identified. This collaborative model strengthens professional relationships, promotes consistency across schools, and helps develop co-ordinated preventative strategies rather than isolated school-level interventions. Although this network is strengthening collaborative working and supporting the earlier identification of emerging issues, it is too soon to evaluate its

impact on attendance outcomes fully. Improving attendance, particularly reducing persistent absence, remains a key priority for the local authority.

Many local authorities had also developed authority-wide communication strategies aimed at promoting the importance of regular school attendance to parents and communities. These strategies commonly included attendance awareness campaigns, promotional materials for schools, and targeted communication through letters, digital messaging and social media. These initiatives, where implemented consistently across schools, helped reinforce shared expectations about attendance and supported schools in communicating a clear message to families about the importance of regular attendance.

Torfaen County Borough Council: Encouraging improved school attendance through a local authority campaign

Torfaen County Borough Council promotes the importance of good school attendance to pupils and families through its 'Not in, Miss out' campaign. Introduced in November 2022, the campaign focuses on reducing unauthorised absence and lateness across the authority. As part of the initiative, pupils from schools across Torfaen were invited to design campaign materials, with the winning designs displayed on banners and posters across all schools. The authority also developed a series of promotional videos in both English and Welsh to reinforce messages about the importance of regular attendance. By actively involving pupils in the campaign and ensuring consistent visibility of the message across schools, the authority has strengthened pupils' and families' understanding of the importance of attending school regularly. Since the campaign was introduced, overall attendance across Torfaen has improved.

Communication with families was also a strength in the majority of areas, particularly where officers prioritised relationship-based approaches. In these local authorities, EWS staff worked closely with schools to engage parents through meetings, home visits and supportive discussions that focused on removing barriers to attendance. This approach helped families understand the importance of regular attendance and built trust between families, schools and the EWS.

Ceredigion County Council: Authority-wide implementation of relational practice to strengthen attendance and well-being

Ceredigion County Council has implemented relational practice throughout the authority to strengthen attendance and well-being. All schools have received training and support

to embed a consistent, relationship-based approach with pupils and families, supported by inclusion officers and well-being co-ordinators. This shared approach underpins attendance procedures, with statutory letters revised to avoid formal, legal language in favour of more explanatory tone. This helps parents better understand the impact of absence while maintaining a supportive and constructive approach. Leaders report improved engagement with families, greater consistency across schools, and early signs of reduced persistent absence. This demonstrates the value of prioritising trust, early intervention and shared practice across the system.

Despite these positive features, communication between the EWS, schools, pupils and families was not always consistent across or within local authorities. In a minority of local authorities, variations in practice and staffing changes reduced the timeliness and equity of communication with schools and families.

Across a majority of local authorities, officers reported that engaging families whose attitudes towards attendance had become more entrenched since the pandemic remained challenging. In these cases, communication strategies alone were not always sufficient to influence parental perceptions about attendance expectations. As a result, local authorities continued to explore ways to strengthen preventative communication and raise awareness of the importance of regular school attendance.

In a minority of local authorities, statutory correspondence and enforcement processes have contributed to some tensions in relationships with families. While these approaches were considered appropriate in a small number of cases, schools continued to balance formal procedures with the development of relationships-based approaches. In these instances, families have at times perceived communication from the local authority as punitive rather than supportive, which has influenced how readily they engage with schools in addressing attendance concerns.

Collaborative work with other agencies

Across the local authorities reviewed, collaboration with other services was an important aspect of the EWSs' work to improve attendance. Overall, partnership working was a strength in a majority of local authorities, with EWSs maintaining appropriate relationships with social care, health, educational psychology, youth services and third-sector organisations. In a minority of local authorities, structured multi-agency arrangements supported co-ordinated responses to pupils with complex needs and contributed positively to safeguarding and well-being. However, the effectiveness of collaboration varied. In a minority of local authorities, strategic leadership of partnership work was not sufficiently embedded, and co-ordination relied too heavily on individual officers or schools. Capacity pressures within health and specialist services, alongside underdeveloped preventative family support limited the timeliness and overall impact of multi-agency intervention on improving absenteeism.

Across the local authorities reviewed, collaboration between the EWS and other agencies was generally recognised as an important component of effective attendance work. In most local authorities, the EWS maintained appropriate working relationships with social services, health professionals, educational psychology services, youth services and a range of third-sector organisations. These partnerships supported a holistic understanding of the barriers affecting pupils and ensured that attendance concerns were considered alongside wider safeguarding, well-being and family circumstances.

Ceredigion County Council: Effective multi-agency collaboration to address barriers to attendance

The education welfare service in Ceredigion County Council demonstrates effective, proactive and collaborative work with schools and other local authority services to address barriers to attendance. Strong partnerships between EWOs, school leaders and wider support services enable the timely identification of attendance concerns and co-ordinated support for pupils and families. Inclusion officers work closely with school leaders to review attendance information and identify pupils whose attendance is beginning to decline. Through regular professional dialogue with school staff, officers develop a clear understanding of the circumstances affecting individual pupils and their families. This shared understanding allows the service to tailor support appropriately and respond quickly when concerns arise.

Where attendance issues are linked to practical barriers, the service works effectively with other local authority teams to secure solutions. For example, when pupils' attendance was

affected by geographic isolation and transport difficulties, transport and inclusion teams collaborated to arrange funded taxi provision. This removed a significant barrier to regular attendance, enabling pupils to arrive at school on time and attend more consistently.

The service also co-ordinates wider multi-agency support when attendance concerns relate to well-being or family circumstances. Leaders report that this relationship-based, solution-focused approach helps build trust with families and supports improved attendance over time.

In a majority of local authorities, EWOs contributed appropriately to multi-agency meetings and panels. These included safeguarding forums, early intervention discussions and 'team around the family' arrangements. Where these processes operated effectively, they enabled professionals to share information, co-ordinate interventions and develop a shared plan of support for pupils and their families. In the strongest examples, officers played a central role in facilitating support between schools and external agencies, helping partners understand the educational implications of complex family circumstances. This collaborative approach helped ensure that attendance issues were not considered in isolation and that support addressed underlying barriers such as anxiety, trauma, bereavement, transport difficulties or wider family hardship.

However, the effectiveness of multi-agency collaboration varied across local authorities. In a minority of cases, strategic leadership of partnership work was not sufficiently developed. In these areas, co-ordination relied too heavily on individual officers or on the initiative of individual schools rather than being driven by clear authority-wide arrangements. As a result, collaboration was not consistently embedded within local authorities, and the extent to which attendance was prioritised within wider multi-agency discussions varied between services. In a few local authorities, schools reported that they continued to carry significant responsibility for co-ordinating support from different agencies, a role that should be undertaken by local authority officers. This created uncertainty about roles and accountability in complex cases.

Capacity constraints within partner services also affected the effectiveness of collaboration in many local authorities. Long waiting times for specialist support, particularly for mental health services and additional learning needs assessments within health services, delayed support for pupils whose attendance difficulties were linked to unmet needs. These delays limited the preventative impact of partnership work and resulted in attendance concerns escalating before appropriate support became available. In a few local authorities, leaders also highlighted that thresholds for intervention between agencies are not always aligned, and attendance can sometimes be viewed primarily as an education-led issue rather than a shared responsibility across services.

Schools and EWSs that were most effective in improving attendance intervened early, using attendance data to identify emerging patterns and respond promptly through regular monitoring, early contact with parents, and targeted pastoral support. Strong practice was characterised by effective multi-agency collaboration with inclusion services and health partners, alongside direct engagement with families to build trust and improve attendance. However, in a few areas, early intervention and preventative family support remained underdeveloped. In these cases, pupils were often referred to statutory services only after issues had escalated, reducing opportunities to address barriers before persistent absence became entrenched. A few local authorities also reported that staffing changes, reliance on short-term funding, and pressures on health and youth services had affected the sustainability of partnership working.

Conwy County Borough Council: Early intervention programme preventing disengagement of pupils

In Conwy County Borough Council, an early intervention programme provides effective preventative support for pupils at risk of disengagement from education. Funded through the local authority, the programme offers flexible, non-clinical intervention focused on problem-solving, well-being and early re-engagement before attendance concerns escalate to crisis point. Pupils typically access regular one-to-one sessions, alongside small-group activities that develop confidence, resilience and positive routines. Where appropriate, the programme also supports carefully planned work-experience or alternative pathways, helping pupils maintain a meaningful connection to learning. Leaders value the programme as a critical bridge between school-based pastoral support and more formal statutory or therapeutic services, and report that it helps sustain attendance, and prevent longer-term disengagement. In addition, they report that it helps reduce the risk of pupils becoming 'NEET' – the term used to refer to young people who are not in education, employment or training. Although leaders value this targeted early intervention in supporting vulnerable pupils, improving the attendance of those with the most complex needs often requires sustained support over time. As a result, it is too early to evaluate fully its longer-term impact on attendance outcomes, and improving attendance, particularly reducing persistent absence, remains a significant challenge for the local authority.

Overall, in most local authorities, partnership working with other agencies contributed positively to safeguarding and wider family support. In many local authorities, this collaborative approach continued to develop, with increasing clarity in roles and

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strengthening co-ordination supporting more consistent contributions to attendance and well-being outcomes for pupils.

Use of data to identify patterns and inform planning

Across the local authorities reviewed, the EWS demonstrated secure and generally effective practice in the collection and monitoring of attendance data. In most local authorities, regular weekly or monthly datasets supported timely monitoring and informed targeted interventions for individual pupils and cohorts. A majority of local authorities also analysed attendance information for vulnerable groups, such as pupils eligible for free school meals or those below a certain threshold, enabling services to target support more precisely. However, the depth, consistency and strategic use of analysis varied too widely across local authorities. In many cases, the analytical use of data was not sufficiently developed to support a deeper understanding of the causes of absence or the long-term impact of interventions.

In most local authorities, education welfare teams worked closely with schools to monitor attendance patterns and identify pupils requiring additional support. Regular meetings between EWOs and school staff helped to ensure that attendance data was interpreted alongside professional knowledge of pupils and their circumstances. In many cases, these discussions supported early identification of concerns and the implementation of staged interventions, enabling services to respond quickly when attendance began to decline.

Ceredigion County Council: Use of data to identify patterns and inform planning

Ceredigion County Council monitors the attendance of all pupils whose attendance falls below 95% systematically. The authority uses a clear, preventative threshold to identify emerging concerns early across primary, secondary and all-age schools. Attendance data is analysed regularly by the inclusion service and reviewed in structured discussions with individual schools, enabling officers to track patterns over time and evaluate the impact of interventions. Pupils below the threshold are prioritised for early interventions, with schools and inclusion officers agreeing proportionate next steps before attendance declines further. Leaders report that this consistent, authority-wide approach has strengthened early identification, supported more timely intervention and contributed to a reduction in persistent absenteeism, while maintaining a strong focus on relational practice and family engagement.

In a majority of local authorities, attendance data was used appropriately to identify broader trends, such as persistent absenteeism, illness patterns, or unauthorised holidays. In these cases, leaders used the information to inform planning at both school and local authority level, including the allocation of support from EWOs and wider

inclusion teams. A few local authorities demonstrated particularly strong practice through the use of real-time dashboards, cohort-level filtering tools and structured benchmarking discussions with schools. These approaches improved transparency and enabled leaders to identify emerging patterns more quickly. As a result, schools in these local authorities reported that attendance data contributed meaningfully to professional dialogue and helped them refine strategies to support pupils whose attendance was declining.

However, the quality and depth of analysis were not consistent across all local authorities. In a minority of cases, monitoring focused mainly on headline attendance figures rather than exploring patterns in detail or examining the underlying causes of absence. This was compounded by inconsistencies in data generated from the different software suppliers used by schools and local authorities, which made accurate reporting and robust comparative analysis more difficult. As a result, analysis did not always consider the progress of specific vulnerable groups or take sufficient account of the contextual factors affecting pupils' attendance. In these instances, data was used primarily for operational monitoring rather than to support deeper evaluation or inform longer-term strategic planning. Consequently, local authorities were less able to identify trends, target interventions effectively, or evaluate the impact of their work to improve attendance.

Across many local authorities, schools reported that access to comparative data was limited. A few local authorities provided benchmarking information or opportunities for schools to compare attendance data with similar schools. Where benchmarking arrangements were in place, there was a shared understanding that they were intended to support self-evaluation rather than to drive competitive behaviours. They provided purposeful opportunities for schools to learn from effective practice elsewhere and to evaluate their own performance within a broader context. However, local authorities did not make effective enough use of modelled outcomes from secondary data sets and too often limited comparisons to schools within their own authority, restricting broader benchmarking and analysis. In a few cases, inconsistencies between data systems or delays in receiving national datasets also reduced the timeliness and usefulness of analysis. In many local authorities, data was used suitably to identify concerns, monitor individual cases, and trigger interventions. However, evaluation of the long-term impact of attendance interventions was less well developed. As a result, leaders did not always have a clear understanding of which strategies had the greatest impact or how resources could be used most effectively to support pupils with persistent absence.

The EWS and schools noted that evaluating impact in this area was challenging. Pupils who were persistently absent often received several interventions simultaneously, making it difficult to determine which approaches were most effective. In addition, most

local authorities reported that improving the attendance of the most persistently absent pupils required sustained effort. As a result, the impact of intervention work was not always reflected in attendance data in the short term. In a few cases, attendance outcomes remained static despite secure operational systems. This reflects wider research evidence, which highlights that many attendance interventions are multi-component and responsive in nature, making it difficult to isolate the impact of individual approaches or identify which elements are most effective (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022).

However, there are opportunities to further strengthen the analytical and strategic use of data to maximise the impact of this work. For example, developing deeper analysis of patterns and underlying causes, achieving greater consistency in benchmarking between schools, and enhancing approaches to evaluating the long-term impact of interventions would support this. Building on these aspects would help ensure that attendance data more consistently informs sustained improvements in pupil engagement and attendance outcomes.

Funding streams

Funding arrangements played a considerable role in determining the capacity and stability of local authority work to address persistent absenteeism. In many local authorities, funding was used purposefully to increase staffing capacity and support preventative work with families. However, across nearly all local authorities, reliance on short-term or annual grant funding created uncertainty, limited workforce stability and constrained long-term planning. Although, in a few local authorities, officers reported that grant funding supported their budgets purposefully as the grants were ringfenced specifically to address attendance. Although there were pockets of effective practice, the overall approach to funding work to support good attendance lacked consistency, sustainability and strategic coherence.

In many local authorities, leaders used grant funding strategically to increase staffing capacity linked to attendance and inclusion. Funding supported the appointment of FEOs, attendance support officers and additional education welfare staff. These local authorities reported that such roles often strengthened early intervention and provided targeted support for pupils and families experiencing barriers to regular attendance. In many cases, schools reported that these roles improved communication with families, supported reintegration and contributed to improved engagement and attendance for targeted groups of learners.

Neath Port Talbot Council: Purposeful use of funding streams to support attendance

Across the authority, there are several strengths in the strategic deployment of grant and core funding to support attendance and welfare services. In many schools, funding has enabled the appointment of attendance support officers, family engagement officers and early intervention staff, contributing to a layered model of support from prevention to statutory intervention. A few schools report positive impact from community focused and post-COVID recovery funding, particularly where family engagement roles strengthen relationships and early intervention arrangements. Leaders evaluate funded initiatives through structured planning and pupil-level review processes.

In a few local authorities, leaders also deployed funding flexibly in response to identified need. For example, some local authorities used grant funding to pilot innovative approaches such as cluster-based engagement projects, alternative provision pathways or well-being-focused programmes designed to support pupils at risk of disengagement. In a minority of cases, these initiatives formed part of a broader graduated model of intervention that linked preventative family support, school-based pastoral provision

and statutory education welfare processes. Where this work was well co-ordinated, leaders were able to demonstrate positive qualitative impact on pupil engagement, relationships with families, and the effectiveness of early intervention arrangements.

Despite these positive features, significant weaknesses remained across nearly all local authorities. Most notably, reliance on short-term or annual grant funding created considerable uncertainty and restricted long-term strategic planning. In nearly all local authorities, a substantial proportion of education welfare staffing and family engagement provision was funded through time-limited grants. This created instability within services. In a few cases, local authorities reported that staff funded through grants had to receive annual notice regarding their employment status, which contributed to staff turnover and reduced continuity of support for schools and families. This in turn hindered a minority of local authorities to fully develop effective relationships with schools, pupils and families.

In most schools, leaders reported limited access to dedicated attendance-specific funding. Instead, they relied on the local authority using additional short-term funding to employ staff to strengthen attendance support, including family engagement and well-being roles that worked closely with schools. However, when this funding ended, schools often had to rely on core budgets or broader grants, such as the Pupil Development Grant, to maintain this support. School leaders reported that this created significant financial pressure and, in a few cases, reduced the capacity to sustain targeted support for vulnerable pupils and families.

In a few local authorities, schools highlighted variations in access to funded support, including family engagement roles and attendance support officers, particularly between primary and secondary phases. In these instances, funding arrangements were evolving, and schools reported differing levels of clarity around allocation criteria and longer-term planning.

Overall, grant funding enabled many local authorities to strengthen attendance, support capacity and introduce innovative approaches to improving pupil engagement. These developments supported a growing focus on attendance. However, the current reliance on short-term funding created significant sustainability risks. Without greater long-term financial stability, clearer strategic planning and stronger evaluation of impact, many local authorities were finding it difficult to embed effective practice and secure sustained reductions in persistent absenteeism over time.

Compliance with statutory duties

Across the local authorities reviewed, compliance with statutory duties relating to school attendance was generally secure. Most EWSs had clear graduated response processes, defined escalation pathways and appropriate oversight arrangements. These frameworks supported schools and officers to take proportionate action when attendance concerns escalated and ensured that statutory responsibilities were met. In many areas, statutory interventions such as FPN, warning letters and legal processes were used appropriately and in collaboration with schools. However, local authority and school leaders indicated that the overall impact of statutory enforcement on sustained attendance improvement was variable and often limited, particularly where absence was linked to complex family circumstances, well-being concerns or entrenched patterns of disengagement. In addition, inconsistencies in the application of statutory processes between schools or officers in a minority of areas created challenges for equitable implementation.

In most local authorities, leaders had established clear policies and guidance to support compliance with statutory duties. These policies were generally aligned with graduated response frameworks that outlined the stages of support, monitoring and escalation prior to formal legal intervention. EWOs typically worked closely with schools to review attendance concerns and determine when cases met the agreed thresholds for statutory action. Many schools reported that they received appropriate advice and guidance from the EWS when considering enforcement measures. This collaborative approach helped ensure that statutory processes were applied proportionately and that decisions were informed by professional dialogue between schools and local authority officers.

Across many local authorities, statutory interventions were used as part of a broader strategy that combined enforcement with relational and preventative approaches. In many examples, warning letters or the threat of FPN provided a clear signal to families about the seriousness of persistent absence and reinforced expectations around regular attendance. Where used appropriately, these measures could lead to short-term improvements in attendance for a minority of pupils. In addition, the presence of clear statutory pathways provided reassurance to school leaders that there were formal mechanisms available when earlier support strategies had been exhausted.

However, evidence across the local authorities reviewed suggested that statutory enforcement alone rarely led to sustained improvements in attendance. In many local authorities, leaders reported that while FPN might prompt temporary changes in behaviour, these improvements were often short lived. Attendance frequently declined again once the immediate enforcement period had passed. In addition, the impact of

statutory enforcement was limited, particularly where absence was associated with more complex factors such as anxiety, mental health difficulties, family crisis or entrenched patterns of disengagement from education.

In around half of the local authorities reviewed, schools noted that inconsistencies in implementation of statutory processes between officers and local authorities reduced equity and clarity, particularly around holiday absences. In these cases, it led to perceived inequities in the application of statutory measures such as FPN and reduced consistency of messaging.

Administrative demands associated with statutory enforcement also presented challenges for the EWS. Preparing documentation, legal proceedings or other statutory interventions required significant time and resources. In a few cases, officers reported that the administrative workload associated with enforcement limited the time available for preventative work with schools and families. This pressure could reduce the capacity of services to intervene earlier and address underlying barriers to attendance before cases reached statutory thresholds.

In addition, a few local authorities reported unintended consequences linked to enforcement activity. In particular, there was some evidence that increased use of statutory action might contribute to a rise in elective home education in certain circumstances, as families sought to avoid formal penalties or legal processes. While this remained a relatively limited issue overall, it highlighted the need for careful consideration of how enforcement measures are used alongside supportive engagement with families.

Overall, most local authorities fulfilled their statutory responsibilities in relation to attendance appropriately. The evidence indicated that enforcement measures formed part of a broader range of approaches to addressing persistent absence, alongside preventative and relationship-based work. Across most local authorities, these approaches were continuing to develop, with increasing attention to consistency and the evaluation of their contribution to attendance outcomes.

Methods and evidence base

The report draws on evidence from discussions with 9 local authorities' EWS, 21 primary schools, 18 secondary schools and 6 all age schools and an analysis of inspection reports. Local authorities and schools were selected to form part of the sample where they were not in follow-up, had not been inspected in the last six months and were not due to be inspected in the next six months. These providers were selected to represent a wide geographical and socio-economic spread, and included English-medium, Welsh-medium and bilingual settings. All discussions took place online during the spring term 2026.

During the preparation of this thematic report, the author used ChatGPT to support aspects of the writing process. This included assistance with synthesising information gathered from school visits, structuring sections of the report, refining language for clarity and accessibility and summarising key messages. At all stages, the author reviewed, edited, and adapted the AI-generated content to ensure accuracy, relevance, and alignment with the report's aims.

Estyn would like to thank the following for their participation in this thematic review:

School	Local Authority	Phase
Blackwood Comprehensive School	Caerphilly	Secondary
Brynmawr Foundation School	Blaenau Gwent	Secondary
Coedffranc Primary School	Neath Port Talbot	Primary
Croesyceiliog Primary School	Torfaen	Primary
Croesyceiliog Secondary School	Torfaen	Secondary
Cwmnedd Primary School	Neath Port Talbot	Primary
Garnteg Primary	Torfaen	Primary
Islwyn High School	Caerphilly	Secondary
Llangatwg Comprehensive School	Neath Port Talbot	Secondary
New Inn Primary School	Torfaen	Primary
Pembroke Dock Community School	Pembrokeshire	Primary
Risca Primary School	Caerphilly	Primary
St Cenydd Community School	Caerphilly	Secondary
Tredegar Comprehensive School	Blaenau Gwent	Secondary
Ysgol Bae Baglan	Neath Port Talbot	All Age
Ysgol Bod Alaw	Conwy	Primary
Ysgol Bro Lleu	Gwynedd	Primary
Ysgol Bro Pedr	Ceredigion	All Age
Ysgol Brynrefail	Gwynedd	Secondary

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Ysgol Caer Elen	Pembrokeshire	All Age
Ysgol David Hughes	Ynys Môn	Secondary
Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen	Gwynedd	Secondary
Ysgol Glancegin	Gwynedd	Primary
Ysgol Glannau Gwaun	Pembrokeshire	Primary
Ysgol Greenhill School	Pembrokeshire	Secondary
Ysgol Gyfun Llangefni	Ynys Môn	Secondary
Ysgol Gymraeg Caerffili	Caerphilly	Primary
Ysgol Gymraeg Gwynllyw	Torfaen	All Age
Ysgol Gymraeg Ystalyfera Bro Dur	Neath Port Talbot	All Age
Ysgol Gynradd Aberteifi	Ceredigion	Primary
Ysgol Gynradd Bodedern	Ynys Môn	Primary
Ysgol Gynradd Corn Hir	Ynys Môn	Primary
Ysgol Gynradd T Llew Jones	Ceredigion	Primary
Ysgol Hafan y Môr	Pembrokeshire	Primary
Ysgol John Bright	Conwy	Secondary
Ysgol Llandrillo yn Rhos	Conwy	Primary
Ysgol Llanfawr	Ynys Môn	Primary
Ysgol Panteg	Torfaen	Primary
Ysgol Penglais	Ceredigion	Secondary
Ysgol Penrhyn Dewi	Pembrokeshire	All Age
Ysgol Treferthyr	Gwynedd	Primary
Ysgol Tryfan	Gwynedd	Secondary
Ysgol Uwchradd Aberteifi	Ceredigion	Secondary
Ysgol Wirfoddol Myfenydd	Ceredigion	Primary
Ysgol y Creuddyn	Conwy	Secondary

Glossary

**Community
focused
schools**

Schools that build a strong partnership with families, respond to the needs of their community and collaborate effectively with other services.

**Early
intervention**

Early support to prevent attendance concerns escalating

**Education
Welfare
Officer (EWO)**

Local authority officer whose primary role is to support schools, pupils and families in relation to attendance (also known locally as an attendance or inclusion officer)

**Education
Welfare
Service (EWS)**

Local authority service supporting school attendance and addressing absence

**Fixed Penalty
Notice (FPN)**

A legal fine issued to a parent for failing to ensure their child's regular school attendance

**Family
Engagement
Officer (FEO)**

Dedicated staff supporting relationships between families, schools and communities to improve learning, well-being and attendance

**Multi-agency
working**

Joint working between services to support pupils and families

**Persistent
absence**

Missing 10% or more of school sessions

**Pupil
Development
Grant**

Additional funding provided by the Welsh Government to schools and educational settings to improve the educational attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

**Relational
practice**

Approach prioritising positive relationships with pupils and families

**Statutory
duties**

Legal responsibilities of schools and local
authorities

**Statutory
intervention**

Formal legal action to address poor attendance

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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