



Understanding pupil absence in schools in Wales

A report by Parentkind for Welsh Government



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Parentkind
Bringing together home & school

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1. Executive summary

Ahead of publishing new attendance guidance later this year, Welsh Government commissioned Parentkind to undertake research amongst parents and carers in Wales with a child with attendance issues, to understand more about the reasons for their absences, the support offered, and what help their family would find useful. An online survey, promoted via Welsh Government, invited parents and carers with a child with issues with poor attendance to complete the online questionnaire.¹

2,616 parents completed the survey in total, 654 of which were from parents with a child who has had more than 20 days' absence in a school year (excluding when schools were closed due to the pandemic) – our definition of poor attendance. Given the focus of this report on parents who have children with attendance issues some of the data shows the results for this group only.

Key findings from all parents

- 59% of all parents told us their child's school has a written policy on attendance whilst 7% said their child's school doesn't. One third (34%) of parents don't know whether their child's school has a written attendance policy, despite this being a requirement.
- The vast majority (84%) of parents said they are aware of their child's school's expectations about attendance. Just over one in ten (11%) parents said their child's school hasn't communicated their expectations about attendance, with 5% of parents unsure.
- 97% of parents are comfortable talking to someone at school about its attendance policy. Their child's class teacher or the head teacher were most popular, followed by school reception staff.
- When it comes to following up on non-attendance, 38% of all parents said they are always contacted by the school that morning if their child is absent from school, with another 16% saying they are usually contacted the same morning.
- 27% of all parents said their child has barriers to attending school regularly, with 19% saying they have worsened since the pandemic, 6% saying they are as they were before the pandemic and 2% saying the situation has improved since the pandemic. 64% of parents said their child hasn't had barriers whilst 6% of parents said their child doesn't have any barriers currently but had previously.
- Parents described a range of barriers that influenced their child attending school, with just over half of respondents citing illness as a key factor, one in three that their child refuses to go to school and around one in five citing unmet needs.
- 25% of all parents said their child has been absent for at least 20 days in a school year whilst 62% of parents said their child hasn't. 13% of parents weren't sure if their child had been absent for more than 20 days.

¹We chose not to define poor attendance in the introductory text as we wanted to hear from parents who considered that their child had poor attendance based on their own definition.

Key findings from parents with a child with poor attendance

- Secondary school parents make up a higher percentage of respondents with a child with attendance issues than primary school parents (53% vs. 43%). Similarly, parents with a child with attendance issues are more likely to say their child has Additional Learning Needs (ALN) compared with all respondents (29% vs. 17%) and more likely to have a child eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) (38% vs. 23%).
- Parents with a child with an attendance issues are more likely to be contacted by school straight away if their child is absent (62% saying always or mostly vs. 54% of all parents).
- 59% of parents with a child with poor attendance said their child has barriers to attending school compared with 27% of all parents. Of those identifying barriers, 77% said that the situation has deteriorated since the pandemic, 19% said that things have stayed broadly the same whilst 4% said their child's situation has improved since the pandemic.
- Interestingly, more than a quarter (27%) of parents said their child does not have any barriers to attending school regularly, despite having more than 20 days' absence in a school year.
- Parents with a child with attendance issues were most likely to report facing barriers relating to health issues (57% of parents reporting barriers), a refusal to go to school (44%) and/or having unmet needs (27%).
- Almost half (46%) of parents said their child's 20+ days of absence were made up of shorter periods of absence across the year compared with 14% who said their child's absence was consecutive periods of time (e.g. 10 days or more). 38% told us it was a combination of the two.
- Half of parents (50%) have been asked for details of issues which may be impacting on their child being at school whilst 47% said their child's school hasn't enquired. Secondary school parents are more likely to be asked than primary school parents, as are parents with a child with ALN and parents with a child eligible for FSM compared to parents without a child with ALN or without FSM.
- Many parents said their child's school has offered some support, with 'time out' cards from lessons and other adaptations in class/school, counselling sessions, supportive teachers, and wellbeing support some of the most common responses.
- A different timetable was the most popular form of support mentioned - a fifth of parents (21%) said the school suggested a different timetable to support their child to return to school, rising to 36% of parents with a child with ALN and 28% of secondary school parents.
- 29% of parents said their child's school has a Family Engagement Officer (FEO) or similar member of staff: of these 45% said they have supported them to help their child attend school compared with 55% who said the FEO hasn't been supportive. Parents with a child on FSM are more likely to say their child's school has a Family Engagement Officer who supported them to help their child attend school than non FSM parents.
- Almost one in five (19%) parents said their child's school has suggested referring them to other agencies who could provide them with support to help their child attend school. Parents with a child with ALN, at secondary school or from an urban location are more likely to be referred than other parents. The most frequently mentioned referral was to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
- 22% of parents with a child with attendance issues have had some contact with their Local Authority Welfare Service. Parents with a child with ALN and secondary school parents are more likely to than other parents. Feedback on the support offered was mixed.
- Similarly, parents' rating of the attendance support received from school is also mixed. Just over one third (36%) of parents rate the support received from their child's school on attendance as good compared to a quarter of parents (25%) rating the support received as bad. A third of parents (34%) said the support was neither good nor bad.

- Primary school parents rate the support they have received from their child's school more highly than secondary school parents (46% of primary parents said good vs. 33% of secondary parents), as do parents with a child without ALN (41% vs. 35% of parents with a child with ALN) and parents for an urban location (41% vs. 36% of parents in a rural location).
- When asked what support their family have found most useful, the most popular theme by some margin was supportive/understanding staff followed by good communications/easily contactable, a different timetable, and having access to a mental health/wellbeing team.
- Reflecting on other ways the school could support families to improve attendance, parents' responses fall into similar themes to those above. Staff being more understanding and better communications/easier to contact were the most popular responses, followed by earlier diagnosis and/or intervention, for school staff to listen to the child directly, the ability to do school work at home, for concerns to be listened to and better support, including ALN support.
- Finally, only 3% of parents with a child with poor attendance said they had ever received any fixed penalty notices/fines due to their child not attending school, with 96% of parents telling us they hadn't.



2. Introduction

“The most obvious consequence of school absence would appear to be the impact on a learner’s academic attainment. The Welsh Government said that “attendance has a strong impact on learner outcomes, standards and progression and that examination outcomes strongly correlate to attendance rates”. This ultimately impacts on a young person’s longer-term education, training and employment opportunities.

“Missing school may also have an impact on pupils’ wellbeing. This includes mixing with friendship groups, building resilience and accessing the mental health support that schools can offer to its learners.”²

Reducing school absence remains a key priority for Welsh Government. Whilst the information collected and published on how school attendance data changed during the pandemic makes it difficult to fully identify trends about current school attendance compared to pre-Covid, attendance has worsened. Welsh Government data shows that overall absence was between 3.5 and 5 percentage points higher, almost double the level before the pandemic³.

Welsh Government is due to publish new attendance guidance in September 2023, and to ensure it is informed by parental voice, Welsh Government commissioned Parentkind to undertake research amongst parents and carers in Wales with a child with attendance issues, to understand more about the reasons for their absences, the support offered, and what help their family would find useful.

Details of the survey were shared by Welsh Government with the supporting text inviting parents and carers with a child who currently has, or has previously had, issues with poor attendance to complete the online questionnaire⁴.

As section 3 details, there was a big response to the survey, with 2,616 responses in total, 654 of which were from parents with a child who has had more than 20 days’ absence in a school year (excluding when schools were closed due to the pandemic). Whilst we do not know if the results are representative of all parents in Wales as it was positioned as a survey for parents with a child with attendance issues (and therefore we anticipate parents of children without poor attendance are less likely to have completed it) we received a large enough number of responses from parents whose child has had more than 20 days’ absence to give us confidence in those results for this target group of parents and carers.

²<https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/increased-school-absence-how-did-the-pandemic-affect-school-attendance/>

³<https://www.gov.wales/summary-absenteeism-school-and-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-september-2014-august-2022-html> cited in <https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/increased-school-absence-how-did-the-pandemic-affect-school-attendance/>

⁴We chose not to define poor attendance in the introductory text as we wanted to hear from parents who considered that their child had poor attendance based on their own definition.

3. Methodology

An online survey, promoted to parents of school age children with issues with low attendance⁵ via schools and other Welsh Government contacts, was active between 24th November 2022 and 24th January 2023. A total of 2,616 parents completed the survey, with 2,584 parents completing the English language version and 32 parents completing the Welsh language version. Where parents had more than one child with attendance issues, they were asked to answer the questions with one of these children specifically in mind.

It should be noted that the report prioritises the responses from parents who said their child had been absent from school for at least 20 days in a school year. As mentioned previously, this is because the focus of this report is on parents with a child with attendance issues. Results are distinguishable by the number of responses on each chart (N=) and chart colourings (figures 1-12 in blue show all parents' results and figures 13-36 in purple show the results of parents with a child with at least 20 days' absence).

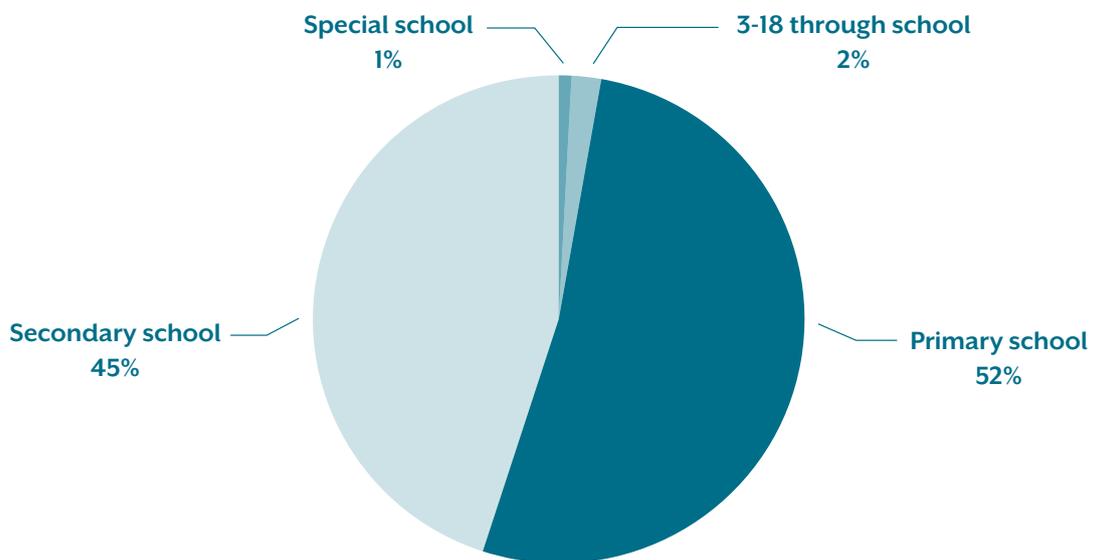
Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number for simplicity of interpretation and so may not add up to 100%.



⁵Defined in this survey as more than 20 days' absence in a school year

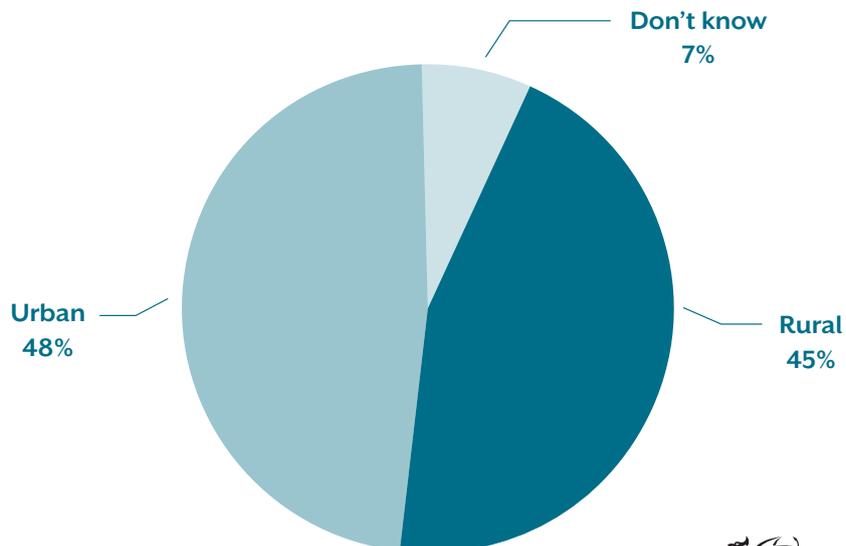
4. Respondent demographics

FIGURE 1 *What type of school does your child attend?*



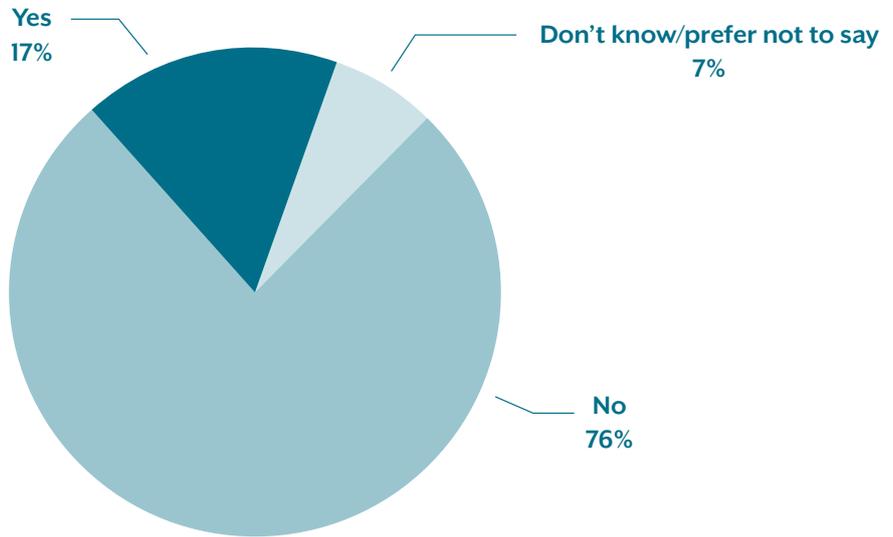
N = 2,616

FIGURE 2 *Do you consider yourself to live in an urban (i.e. town, city) or a rural (i.e. village) location?*



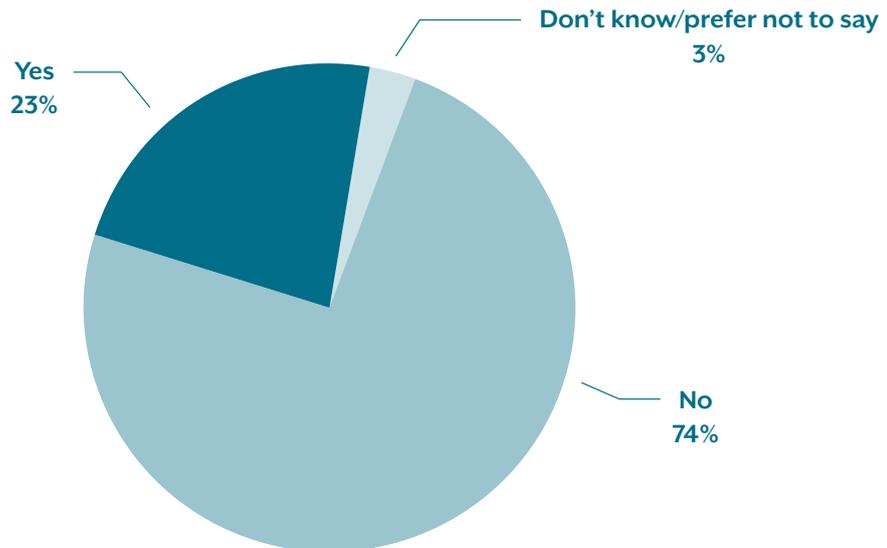
N = 2,616

FIGURE 3 Does your child have Additional Learning Needs (ALN)?



N = 2,616

FIGURE 4 Are you claiming any benefits which mean that your child is eligible for free school meals?



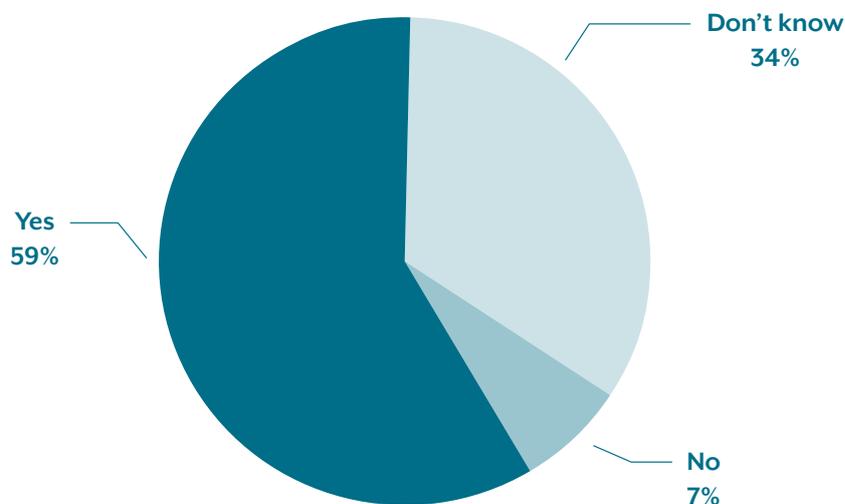
N = 2,616

5. Results

5.1. Attendance expectations and policies

Parents were asked whether their child's school has a written policy on attendance. As Figure 5 shows, 59% of all parents told us their child's school does whilst 7% said their child's school doesn't. Interestingly, one third (34%) of parents don't know whether their child's school has a written attendance policy, despite this being a requirement.

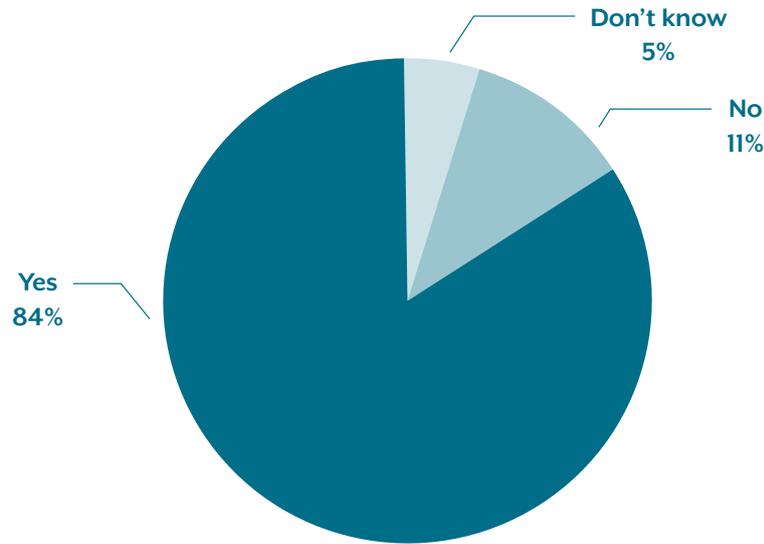
FIGURE 5 *Does your child's school have a written policy on attendance?*



N = 2,610

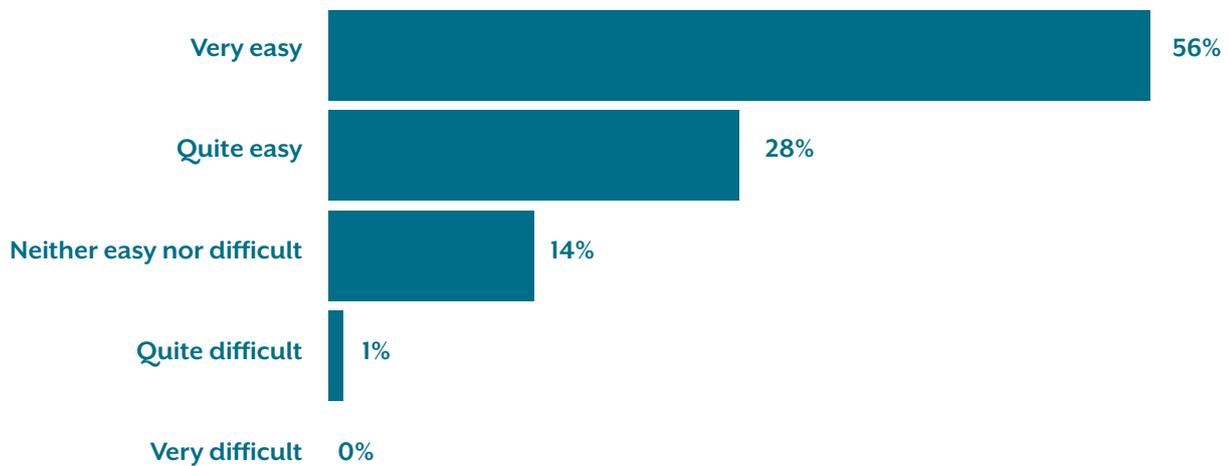
The vast majority (84%) of parents said they are aware of their child's school's expectations about attendance (Figure 6). Just over one in ten (11%) parents said their child's school hasn't communicated their expectations about attendance, with 5% of parents unsure. Most parents who knew about attendance expectations said this information was clear and easy to understand (56% very easy, 28% quite easy – Figure 7).

FIGURE 6 *Has the school communicated with you their expectations about attendance?*



N = 2,616

FIGURE 7 *Was this information clear and easy to understand?*

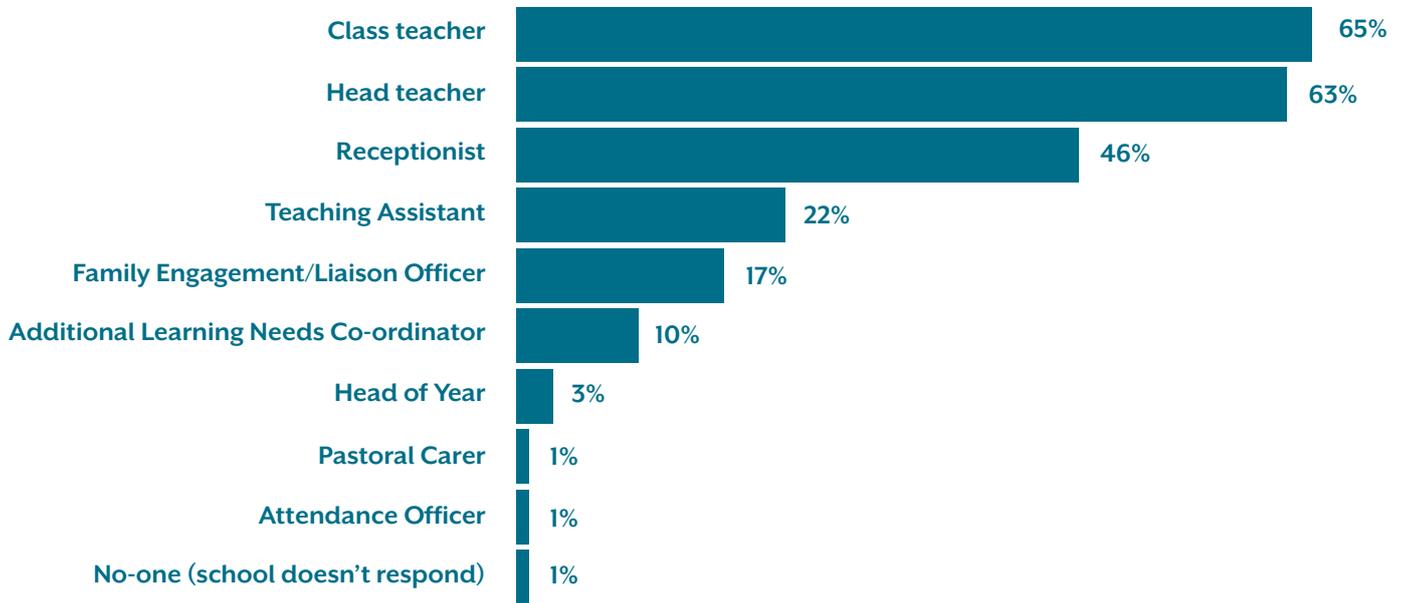


N = 2,333

97% of parents listed at least one contact at the school that they would be comfortable talking to about the school's attendance policy. Around two thirds of parents indicated that they would feel comfortable discussing the school's attendance policy with their child's class teacher or the head teacher at the school, with almost half saying they would be happy to engage with school reception staff with questions (Figure 8).

More specific roles such as Family Engagement Officers or Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinators were mentioned by a much smaller proportion of parents, although this likely reflects that not all schools would have them available as an option.

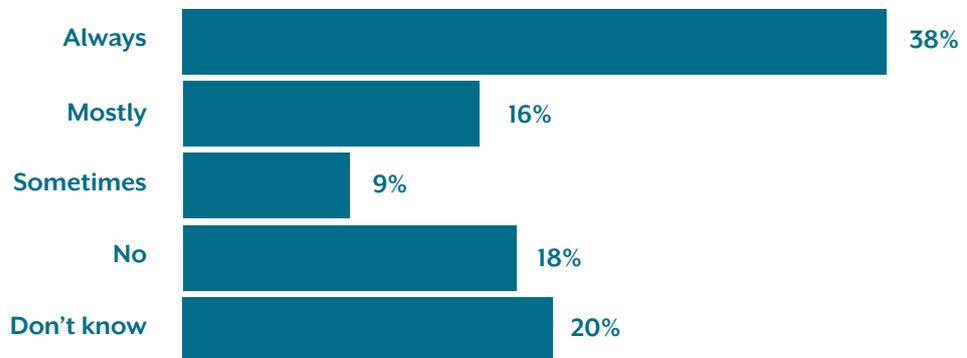
FIGURE 8 *If you had questions about the school's attendance policy, who would you feel comfortable talking to about those questions?*



N = 2,333

When it comes to following up on non attendance, 38% of all parents told us they are always contacted by the school that morning if their child is absent from school, with another 16% saying they are usually contacted the same morning (Figure 9). 9% of parents said they are only contacted straight away on some occasions whilst nearly a fifth (18%) said that if their child is absent they aren't contacted the same morning. A fifth of all parents didn't know if their child's school contacts them straight away if their child is absent.

FIGURE 9 *If your child is absent from school, does the school contact you straight away i.e. the same morning?*

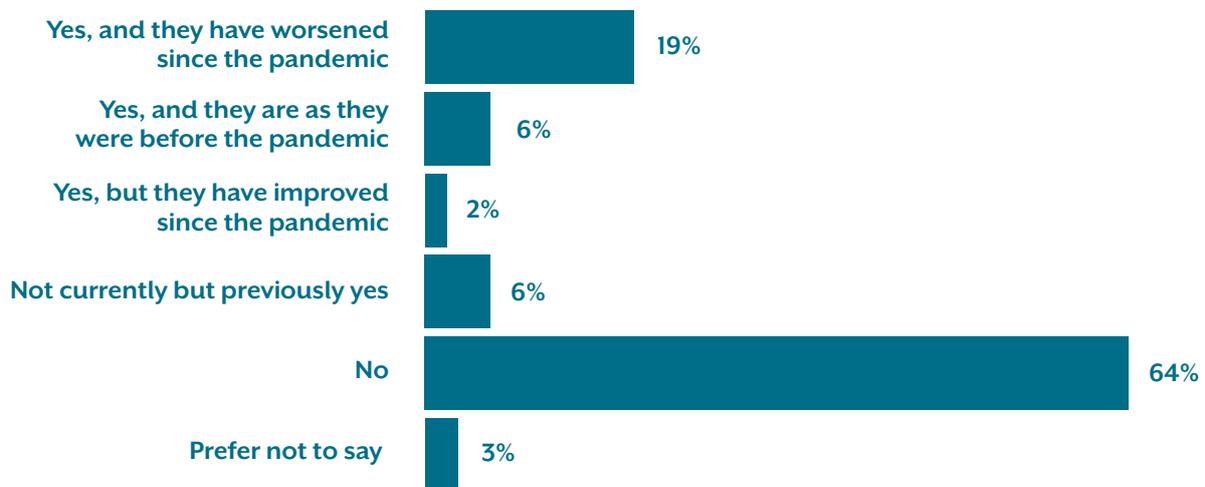


N = 2,610

5.2. Barriers to attending school

Parents were asked whether or not their child has any barriers to attending school regularly. As Figure 10 shows, whilst 64% of parents said no, more than a quarter (27%) of parents said that they do, with 19% saying they have worsened since the pandemic, 6% saying they are as they were before the pandemic and 2% saying the situation has improved since the pandemic. Another 6% of parents said their child didn't have any barriers currently but had done previously.

FIGURE 10 *Does your child have any barriers to attending school regularly?*



N = 2,604

Parents described a range of barriers that influenced their child attending school, with just over half of respondents citing illness as a key factor, one in three that their child refuses to go to school and around one in five whose children have unmet needs (Figure 11).

This question also received an unusually high number of 'Other' responses, with around a third of parents providing some kind of additional comment. Some of these picked up on factors not in the list, but in a number of cases they picked up on factors that were included, but went into more detail about what that meant in practice and why it was an issue.

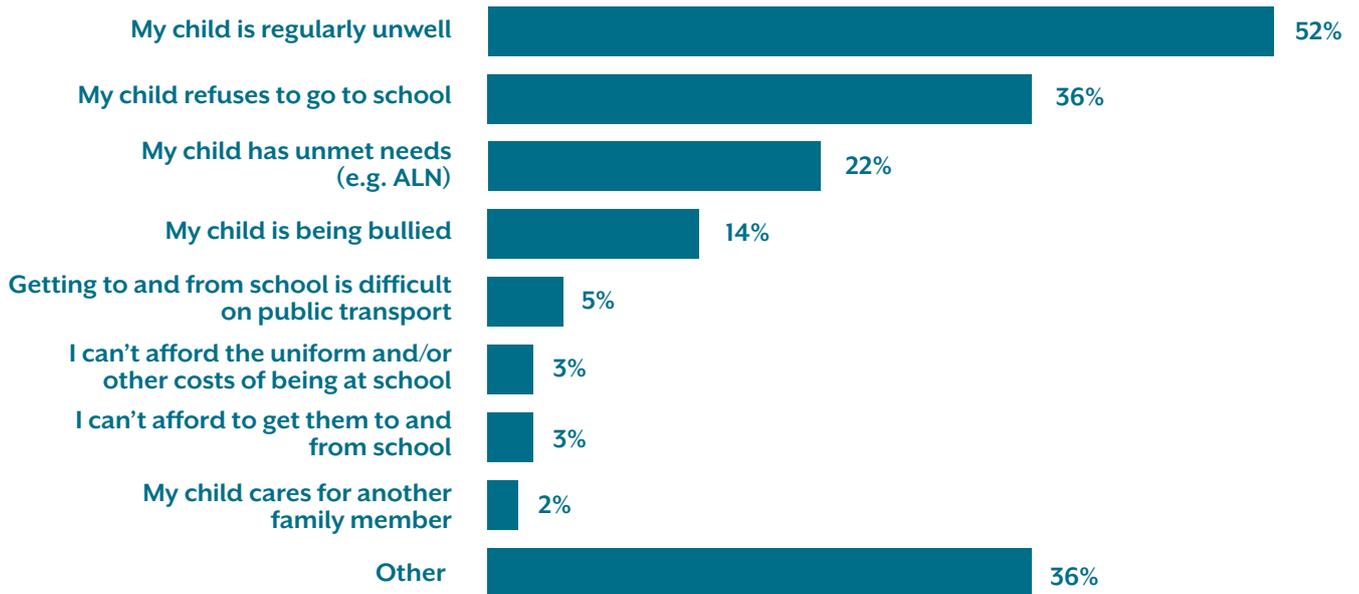
The most common issues raised under the 'Other' category could be broadly grouped into the child experiencing problems related to mental health (125 responses) or medical issues (95 responses), a significant number of which related to chronic conditions that would not be expected to get better and might well be classified as disabilities under the Equalities Act.

Around 44 'Other' responses related to issues around the child being unhappy at the school or with the school environment. While bullying by other pupils was mentioned, some of this also related to the behaviour of teachers and broader issues, including some related to school policies that were ultimately having a negative impact on attendance, such as restricting toilet breaks during lessons leading to difficult situations with pupils going through menstruation.

39 ‘Other’ responses raised issues related to getting to and from school, with about two thirds directly related to issues around transportation and the remaining third around difficulties experienced by the parent (typically disabilities or illness) that impacted their ability to get their children to school.

21 parents specifically mentioned Covid and the general impact of the pandemic as having affected their child’s attendance.

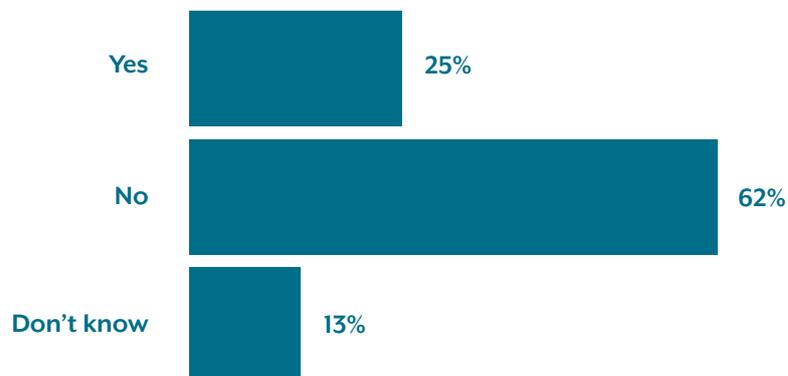
FIGURE 11 *What sort of barriers do you face supporting your child to attend school?*



N = 915

Parents were asked whether their child has been absent from school for more than 20 days in the last full school year (2021-22), or in previous school years (but not including when schools were closed due to Covid). 25% of parents said yes, their child had been absent for at least 20 days in a school year whilst 62% of parents said their child hadn't (Figure 12). 13% of parents weren't sure if their child had been absent for more than 20 days.

FIGURE 12 *Has your child been absent from school for more than 20 days in the last full school year (2021-22), or in previous school years (excluding when schools were closed due to Covid)?*



N = 2,605

The next section of findings in this report are based on responses from the 654 parents with a child with attendance issues, which we define as those with a child absent from school for at least 20 days in a school year (excluding school closures due to the pandemic).

Before exploring the results of the remaining survey questions, it is worth noting that there are some differences in the demographic breakdown of the parents with a child with attendance issues compared with the demographics of all the parents who responded covered in Section 4. As Table 1 shows, secondary school parents make up a higher percentage of respondents with a child with attendance issues than primary school parents (53% vs. 43%) in contrast to the breakdown for all parents completing this survey. Similarly, parents with a child with attendance issues are more likely to say their child has Additional Learning Needs (ALN) compared with all respondents (29% vs. 17%) and more likely to have a child eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) (38% vs. 23%).

Looking at the results of previous questions specifically for those parents with a child with attendance issues,

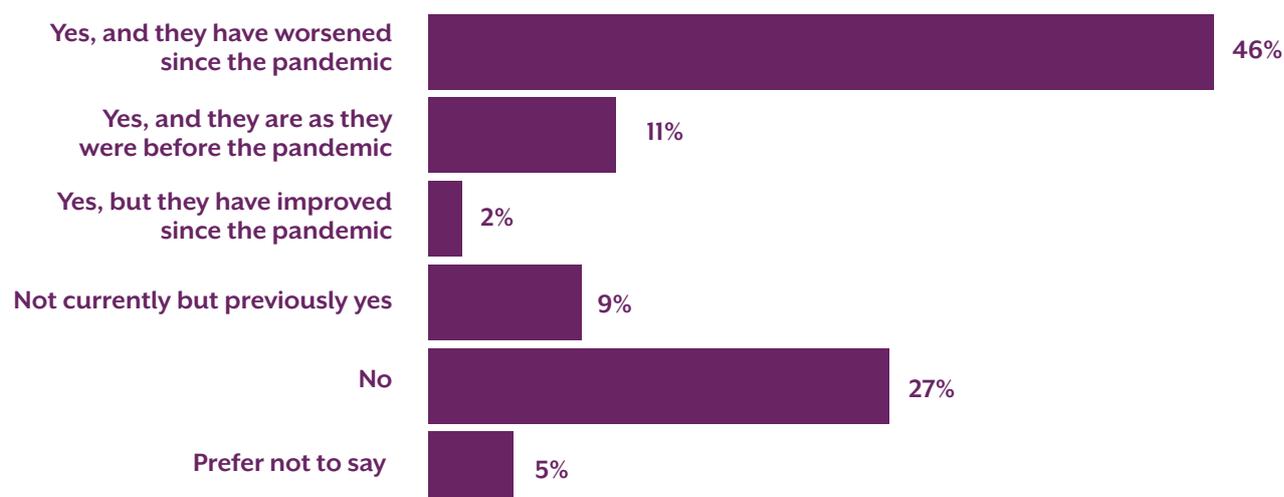
generally the results are similar to those reported earlier for all parents (see Appendix for data). One difference is that parents with a child with an attendance issue are more likely to be contacted by school straight away if their child is absent (62% saying always or mostly vs. 54% of all parents).

The other big difference, unsurprisingly, is in the percentage of parents telling us their child has barriers to attending school regularly. As Figure 13 shows, almost six in ten (59%) of these parents said yes, their child does have barriers to attending school compared with 27% of all parents (Figure 10). Interestingly, more than a quarter (27%) of parents with a child with attendance issues said their child does not have any barriers to attending school regularly, despite having more than 20 days' absence in the school year.



TABLE 1 Demographic breakdown of cohort of parents with a child with attendance issues:

	% of parents with a child with attendance issues (N=654)	% of all parents (N=2,616)
SCHOOL TYPE:		
Primary	43%	52%
Secondary	53% ↑	45%
Special	2%	1%
3-18 through school	2%	2%
LOCATION:		
Rural	45%	45%
Urban	45%	48%
Don't know	10%	7%
ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS (ALN):		
Yes	29% ↑	17%
No	59%	76%
Don't know/prefer not to say	12%	7%
ELIGIBLE FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS (FSM):		
Yes	38% ↑	23%
No	58%	74%
Don't know/prefer not to say	4%	3%

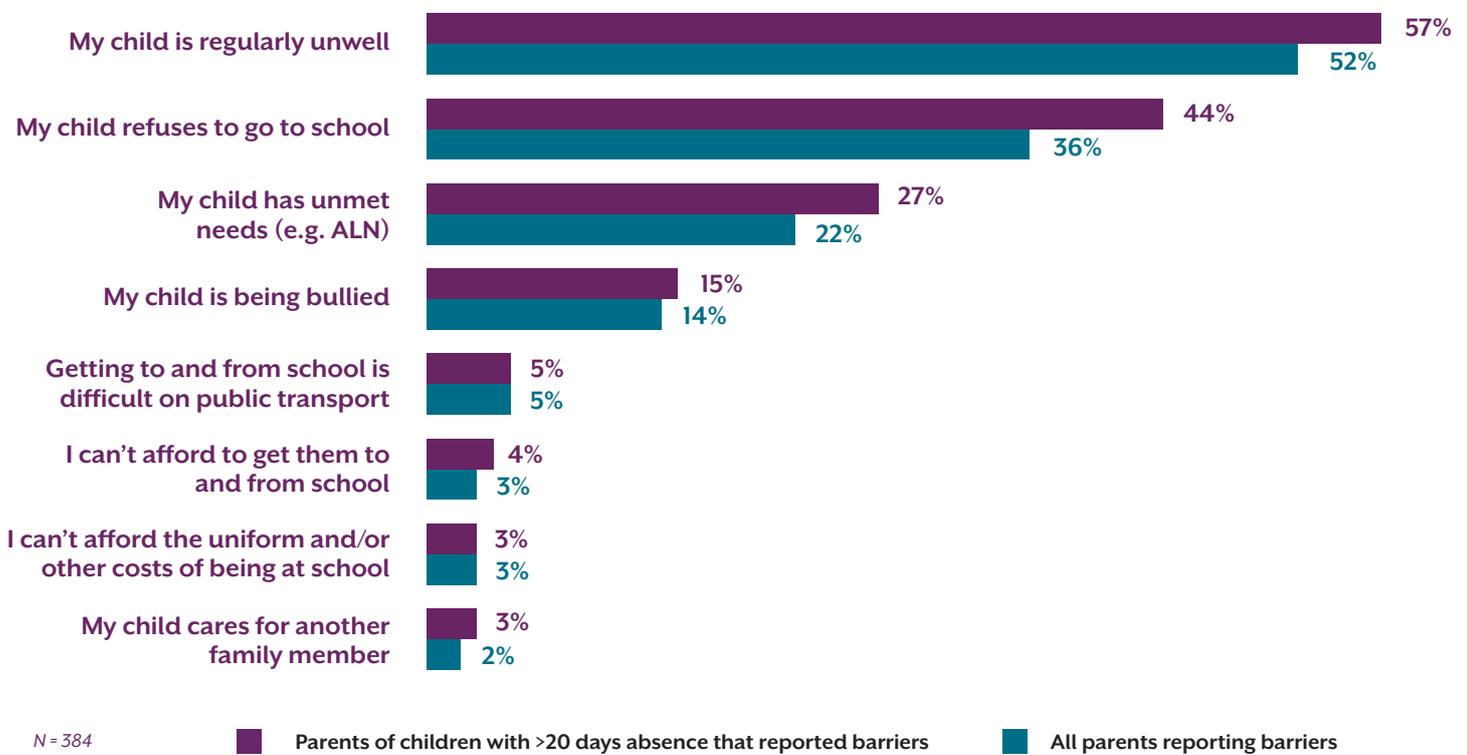
FIGURE 13 Does your child have any barriers to attending school regularly? (Parents with a child with attendance issues)

N = 650

Parents with a child with attendance issues were more likely to report facing barriers relating to health issues, a refusal to go to school and having unmet needs (Figure 14). For the most part, the distribution of barriers is relatively similar to all parents responding, although there is a more significant increase in refusing to attend school.

A similar picture can be seen amongst the third of parents who gave ‘Other’ responses, which included a mixture of other barriers and parents giving additional information on the barriers listed above. In these responses, parents indicated that ‘unwell’ could refer to issues around mental health (125 responses) as well as physical health (95 responses) and that a refusal to go to school could be linked to a number of different factors (e.g. bereavement, bullying, being unhappy at the school or with the school environment, behavioural issues, etc.)

FIGURE 14 *What sort of barriers do you face supporting your child to attend school?*



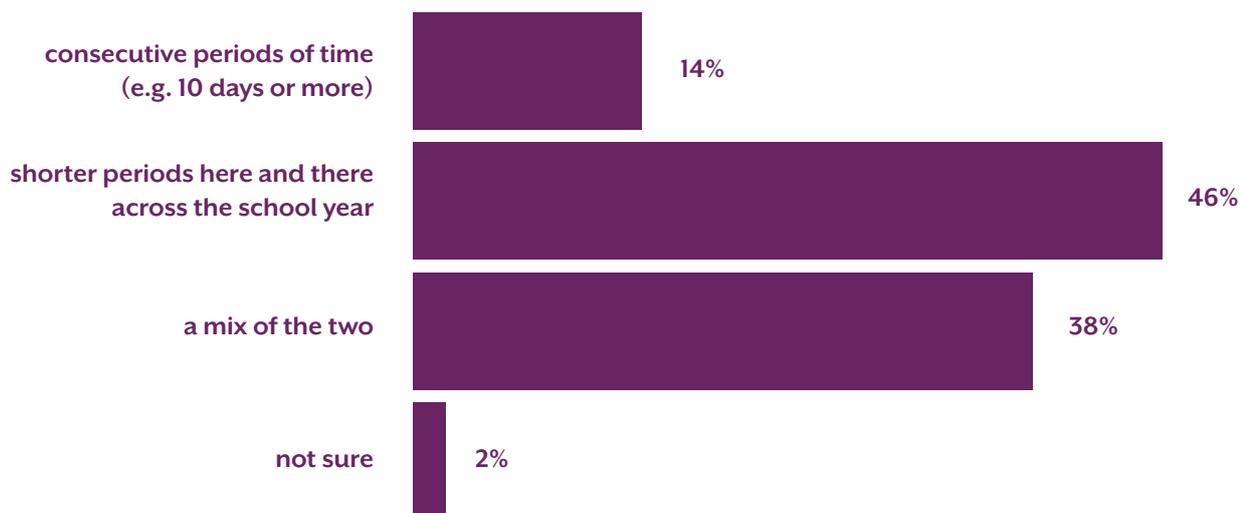
We also explored to what extent parents’ experiences of these barriers had changed following the pandemic, in order to understand what might be driving the increase in absence reported in Wales. Amongst parents of children with attendance issues who reported experiencing specific barriers, 4% said the situation had improved since the pandemic, 19% said that things had stayed broadly the same whilst 77% said that the situation had deteriorated since the pandemic.

In most cases, this profile was broadly repeated across the different types of barriers and across different groups of parents, but in a couple of places there were notable differences:

- Parents with children in secondary school were more likely to report that barriers have become worse (81%) than those with children in primary school (71%).
- Parents were more likely to report that the situation has worsened since the pandemic when it came to children refusing to go to school (85% vs. 77%), being able to afford transport (84% vs. 77%) and the cost of uniform and other costs of attending school (90% vs. 77%)
- Parents reported fewer issues with public transport post-pandemic. On average, 4% of parents of children with poor attendance told us that issues had improved, but this rose to 9% amongst parents who mentioned transport issues as a barrier. Interestingly, there was no significant difference in transport issues reported between parents in rural or urban locations.

Parents with a child with attendance issues were then asked about the distribution of these absences. As Figure 15 shows, almost half (46%) said their child's 20+ days of absence were made up of shorter periods of absence across the year compared with 14% who said their child's absence was consecutive periods of time (e.g. 10 days or more). 38% told us it was a combination of the two.

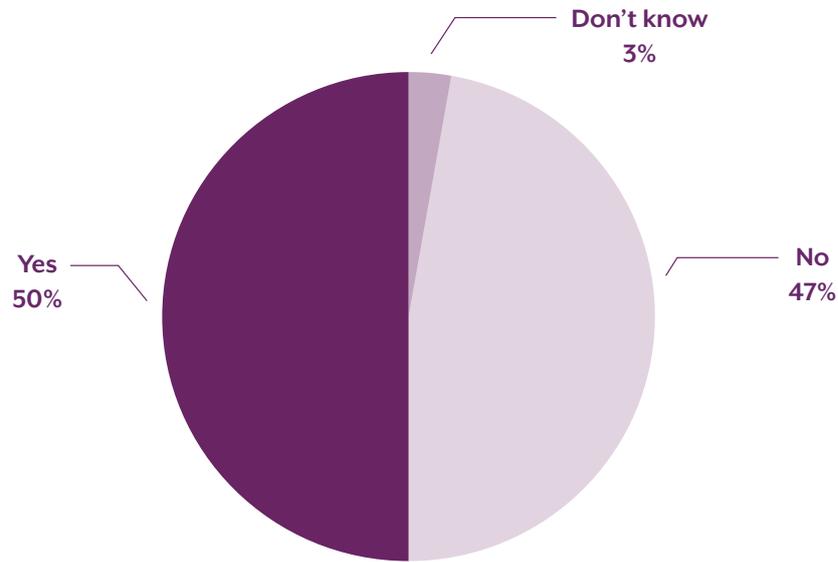
FIGURE 15 *If yes, would you say your child's absence was...*



N = 651

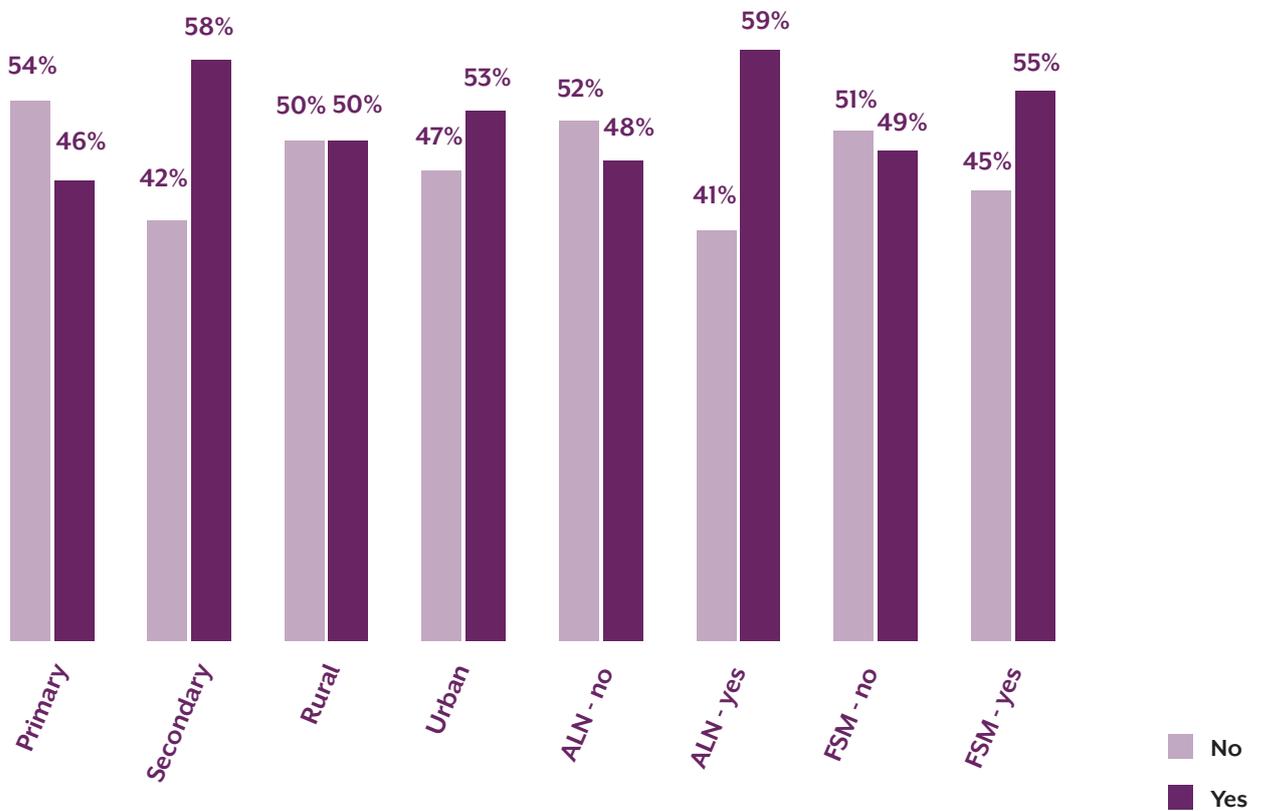
Half of parents (50%) have been asked for details of any issues which may be impacting on their child being at school whilst 47% said their child's school hasn't enquired (Figure 16). Secondary school parents are more likely to be asked about any issues than primary school parents (Figure 17), as are parents with a child with additional learning needs (ALN) and parents with a child eligible for free school meals (FSM) compared to parents without a child with ALN or without FSM.

FIGURE 16 *Has your school asked you for details of any issues which may be impacting on your child attending school?*



N = 653

FIGURE 17 *Has your school asked you for details of any issues which may be impacting on your child attending school? By school type/location/ALN/ FSM*

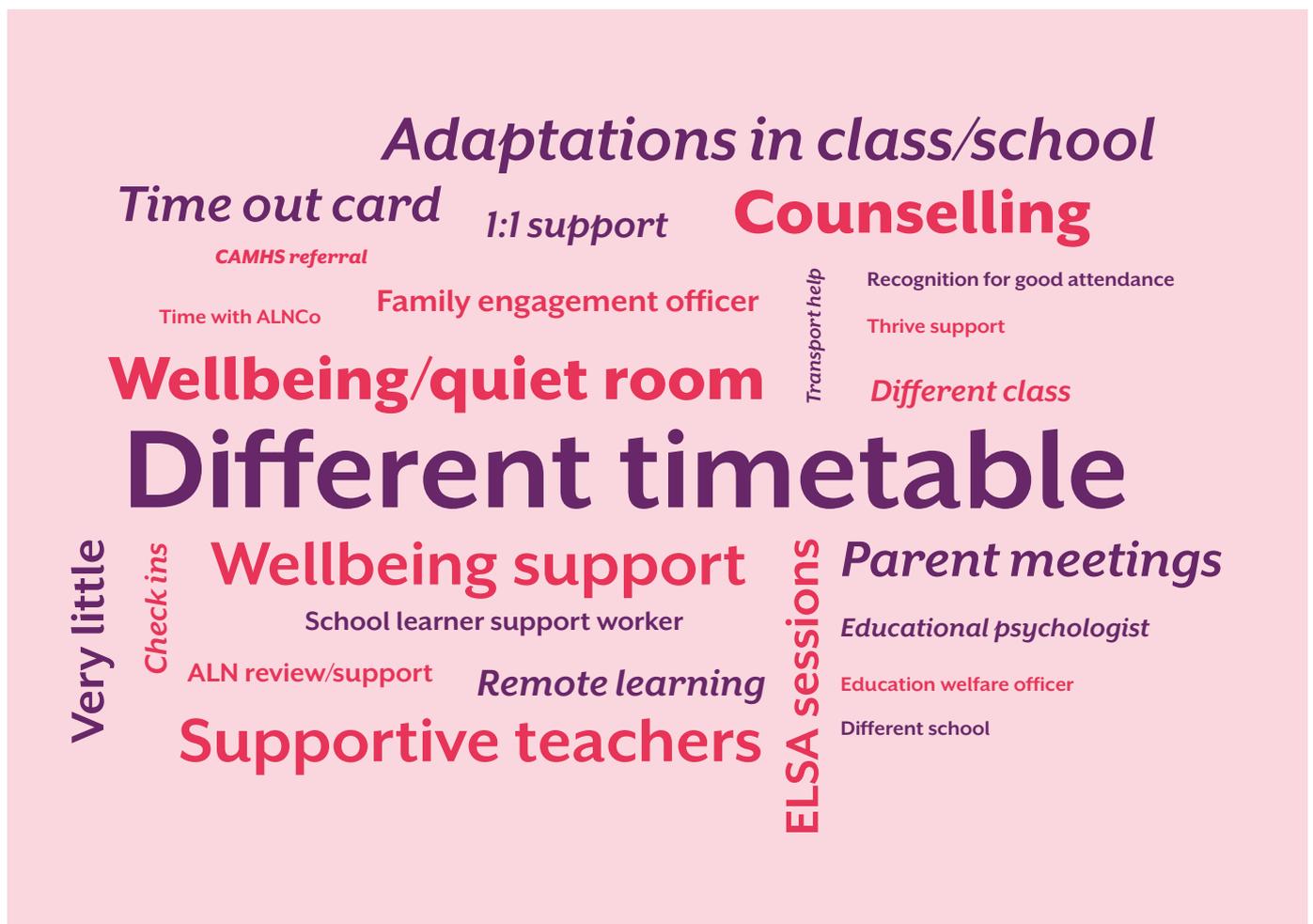


N = 560 - 611
3-18 schools/special schools/don't know/prefer not to says excluded

5.3. Support offered

Parents were asked what support their child’s school has offered. This was an open question which yielded hundreds of answers. The responses given by parents with a child with attendance issues included different timetables, ‘time out’ cards from lessons and other adaptations in class/school, counselling sessions, supportive teachers, and wellbeing support. The relative frequency of the themes is shown in Figure 18. their child didn’t have any barriers currently but had done previously.

FIGURE 18 What support has your child’s school offered?



Below are some quotes from parents:

“My child has been offered wellbeing support and has recently been referred to the school counsellor.”

“School Nurse, regular meetings, reduced timetable, change of classes and form groups etc.”

“They have been very supportive in relation to the family’s personal problems. Their assistance resulted in my child’s attendance improving.”

“Introduction back into school, this was after the pandemic, easing my son back into the school routine with shorter days and added support. He was encouraged and made to feel relaxed about returning to school.”

“Reduced timetable and IDP in place. Many adjustments made.”

“Support classes and a nurture class for breaks and lunch. Also reduced timetable.”

“Care and attention, also work to be completed from home if possible.”

“The school has a nurture team that is providing ongoing support and encouragement and offers a safe space for the child.”

“Checking in with my child regularly when in school.”

“Due to ongoing illnesses I have had passcodes for online learning when my child feels well enough to do it.”

“Wellbeing sessions, access to wellbeing room, time out card.”

“ALNCo has regular wellbeing sessions with my child, they give her a calm space when needed. They are fully supportive and help immensely.”

“We are working with the school Family Engagement Officer to try to get my daughter in.”

“Work being added to Google classroom, and a process plan in helping my child to catch up missed work.”

However, it should be noted that the most common response to the question about support offered was none.

“None, just threats of fines.”

“None. Asked to speak with the head teacher who stated they were very busy.”

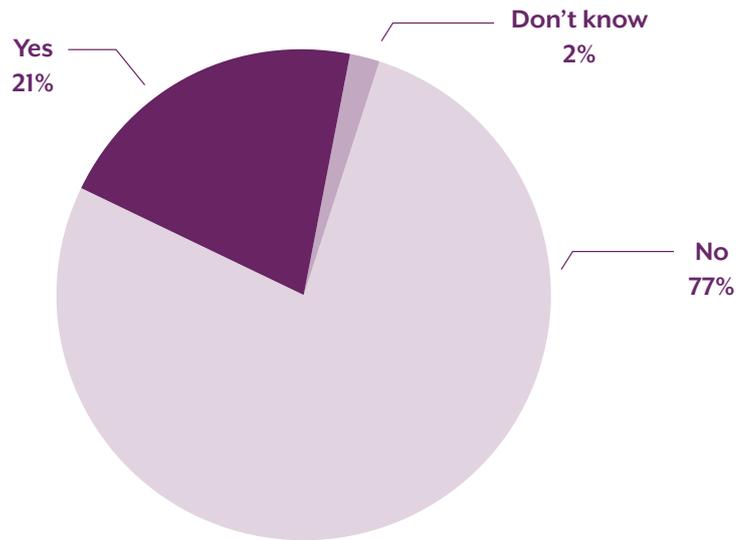
“Absolutely nothing as they have no money they feel that they cannot help.”

“Nothing except for constant communication to remind me of poor attendance.... Doesn’t help the situation.”

“None. The paediatrician and doctor have suggested both reduced days and rest days. All that was offered was a pass in her first term in year 7 but my daughter was too embarrassed to use this as she was picked on but the head of year said tough.”

Parents were then asked a specific question about timetables. As Figure 19 shows, just over a fifth of parents (21%) said the school suggested a different timetable to support their child to return to school. Parents with a child with ALN or at secondary school are more likely to have had the suggestion of a different timetable from their child's school (Figure 20).

FIGURE 19 *Has the school suggested a different timetable to support your child to return to school?*



N = 648

FIGURE 20 *Has the school suggested a different timetable to support your child to return to school? By school type/location/ALN/ FSM*



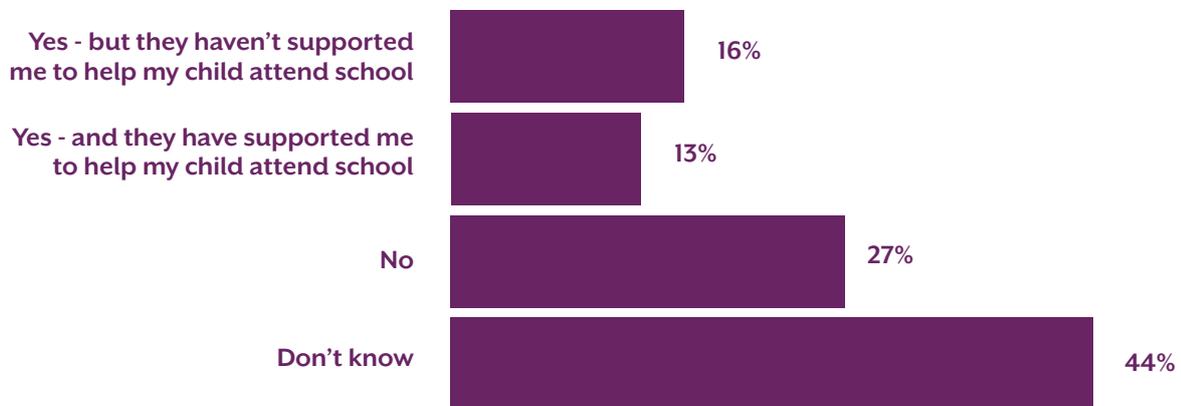
N = 557 - 613

3-18 schools/special schools/don't knows/prefer not to says excluded

5.4. Family Engagement Officers

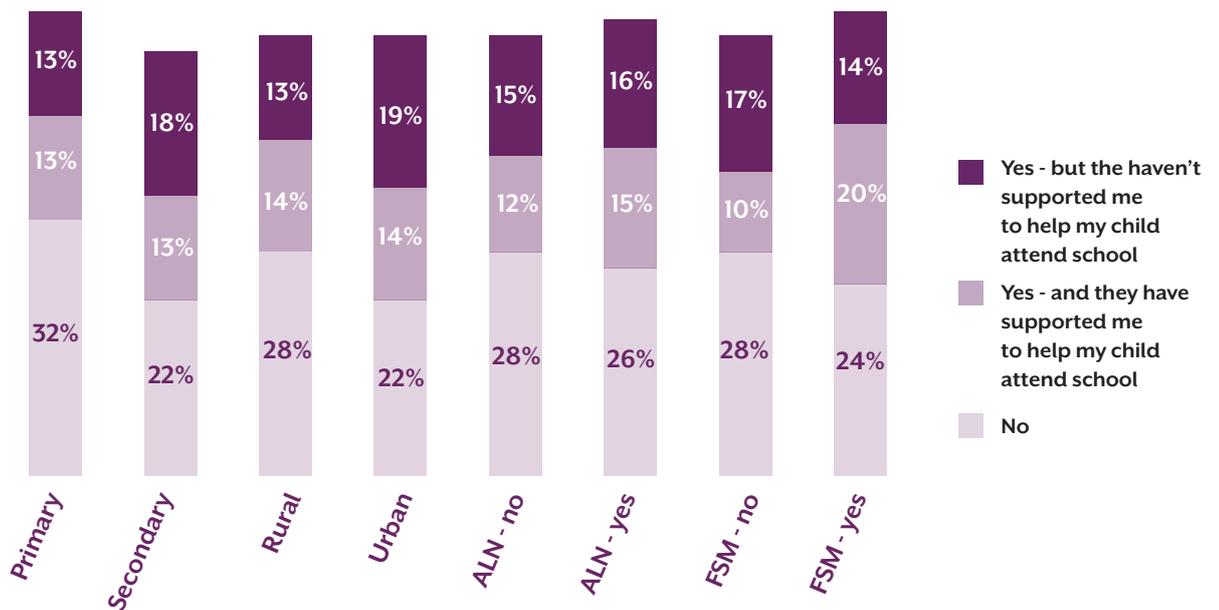
Almost three in ten parents (29%) said their child’s school has a Family Engagement Officer (FEO) or similar member of staff: 13% said they have supported them to help their child attend school compared with 16% who said the FEO hasn’t offered this support (Figure 21). 27% of parents said their child’s school doesn’t have a FEO whilst more than four in ten parents (44%) don’t know if their child’s school has a FEO or not. Looking at the demographic breakdowns of these responses in Figure 22 parents with a child on FSM are more likely to say their child’s school has a Family Engagement Officer who supported them to help their child attend school (20% vs. 10% non FSM parents) and primary school parents are more likely to say their child’s school doesn’t have a FEO than secondary school parents (32% vs. 22%).

FIGURE 21 Does your child’s school have a Family Engagement Officer or similar (e.g. Family Liaison Officer, Family Support)?



N = 649

FIGURE 22 Does your child’s school have a Family Engagement Officer or similar (e.g. Family Liaison Officer, Family Support)? By school type/location/ALN/ FSM

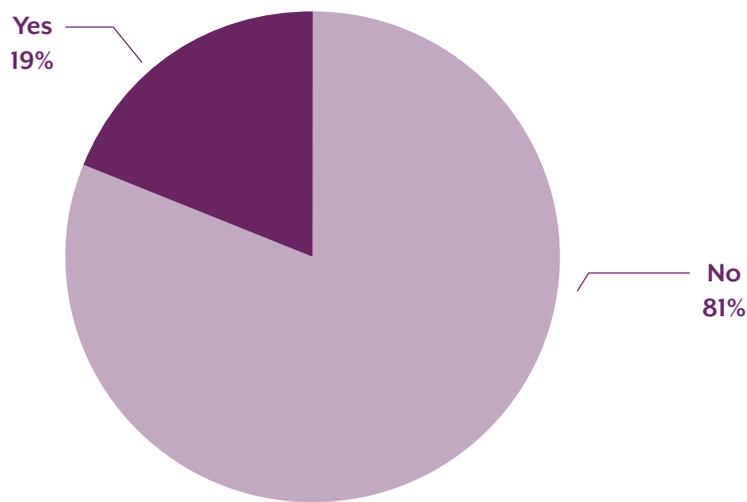


N = 568 - 625
3-18 schools/special schools/don't knows/prefer not to says excluded

5.5. Engagement with other agencies

Almost one in five (19%) parents with a child with attendance issues said their child's school has suggested referring them to other agencies who may be able to provide them with support to help their child attend school (Figure 23). Parents with a child with ALN, at secondary school or from an urban location are more likely to be referred than other parents (Figure 24). In terms of the source of referrals listed by parents in open comments, the top 5 most frequently mentioned were Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) (39), Space (16), Families First (12), Social Services (7), Resilient Families (6) and Barnardo's (6). Below this were a wide variety of agencies operating at either a local or national level.

FIGURE 23 *Has the school suggested referring you to other agencies who may be able to provide you with support to address these issues so that your child can attend school?*



N = 649

FIGURE 24 *Has the school suggested referring you to other agencies who may be able to provide you with support to address these issues so that your child can attend school? By school type/location/ALN/ FSM*

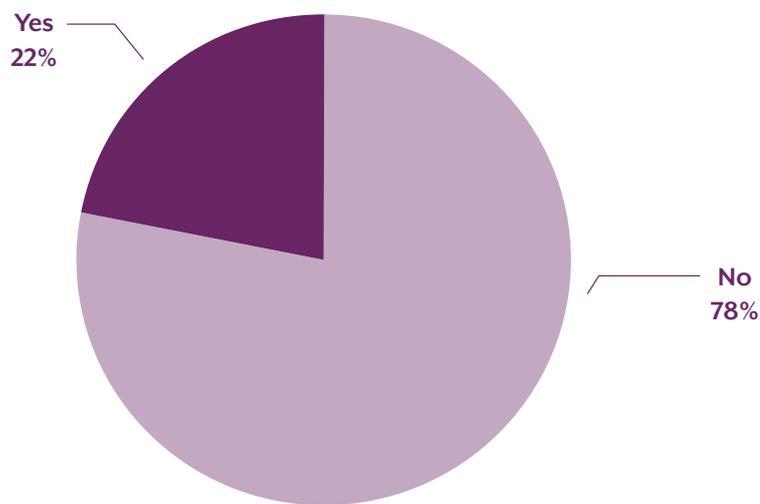


N = 568 - 625
3-18 schools/special schools/don't know/prefer not to say excluded

22% of parents with a child with attendance issues have had some contact with their Local Authority Welfare Service (Figure 25). Parents with a child with ALN are more likely to have had contact with their Education Welfare Service compared with those without a child with ALN (32% vs. 16%) as are secondary school parents (28%) compared with primary school parents (15%) – Figure 26.

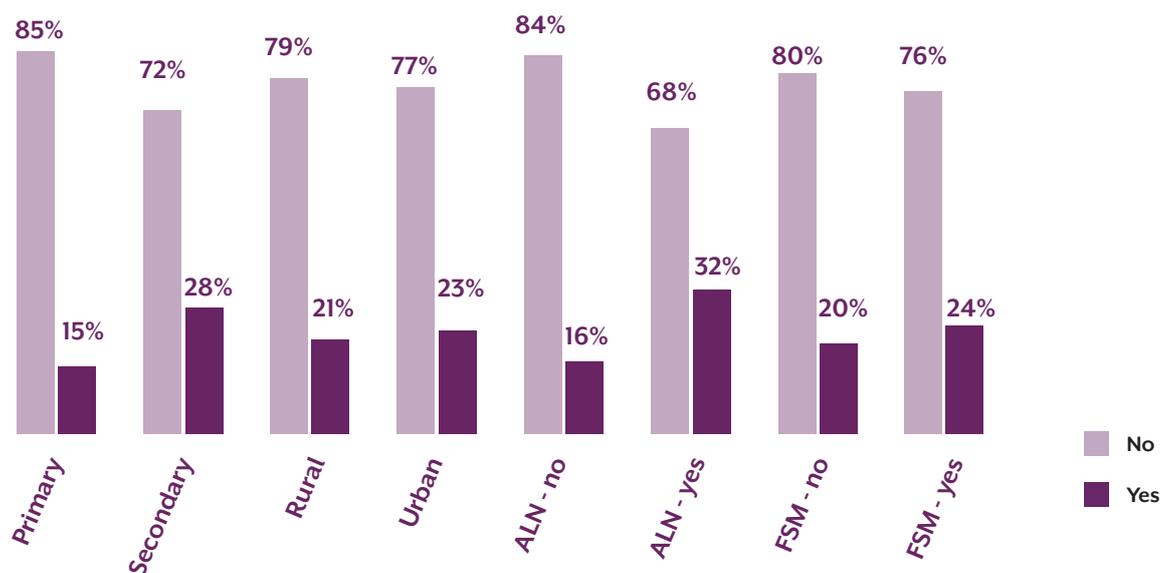
When asked what support their Local Authority Education Welfare Service has offered these parents the largest response was none. This was followed by details of negative experiences for some, including letters explaining the consequences of absences whereas other parents said they were supportive, including facilitating referrals or returns to school (or in a few cases to a different school), offering advice, meetings and regular check ins, and giving support to help relations with school.

FIGURE 25 *Have you ever had contact with the Local Authority Education Welfare Service?*



N = 639

FIGURE 26 *Have you ever had contact with the Local Authority Education Welfare Service? By school type/location/ALN/ FSM*



N = 558 - 616

3-18 schools/special schools/don't know/prefer not to say excluded

Some quotes from parents on the support offered by the Education Welfare Service:

“They were extremely helpful and listened and helped to secure a place at a PRU [pupil referral unit].”

“Worked with my child to find out why he wouldn’t go to school and helped to get issues sorted.”

“Not a lot, we’ve had 3 EWOs in the time my child has been off school. The current one understands his presentation of ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] so at least believes us.”

“They were not particularly helpful just tried to enforce what was expected of attendance.”

“None. Banged on my front door shouting and demanding I open the door. Threats, not support.”

“[They] did offer a meeting which they then couldn’t make but we did meet with school staff. Not heard from them since.”

“A mid-term review of the SEN [Special Educational Needs] which, after years of struggling to get my daughter to fit into a system that could not accommodate her way of learning, finally acknowledged that a different approach was needed. The officer was understanding, insightful and helpful.”

“None. They were unsupportive and I would not wish to be involved with them ever again. I found the EWO to be lacking in knowledge and to be confrontational, making things so much worse for my child.”

“Not much apart from reintegration meeting.”

“Attended meetings in school. Have said they can’t do anything as the Educational Psychologist makes a decision. Been waiting a year.”

“They liaised with the school to formulate a plan to improve attendance/address barriers.”

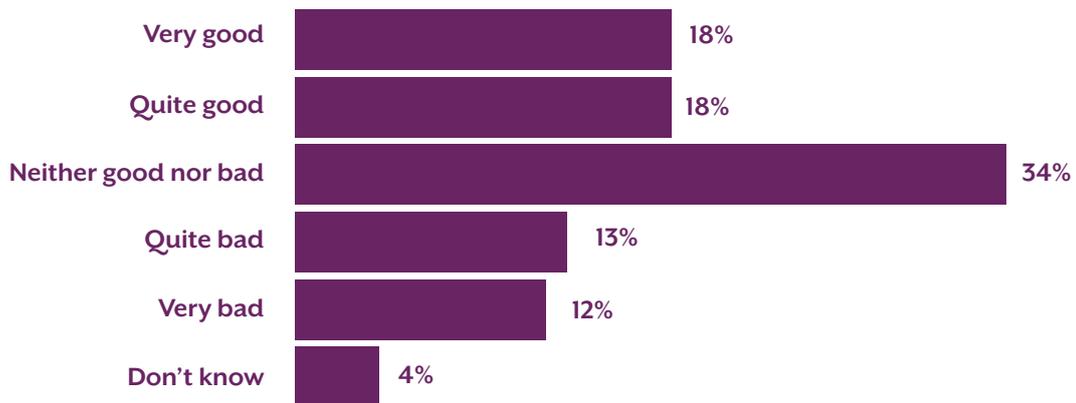
“Very supporting and understanding. They understood my concerns and my need for remote learning and phased transition back to school. The school was very understanding too.”

“[The] education officer was amazing, she spoke to my child on a few occasions and listened to his worries, concerns and issues. [She] helped my child immensely by putting him at ease and being concerned for him. [She] is friendly and respectful towards parent and child, she is very supportive. It was a pleasure to meet her, she put my mind at rest as I was very worried and concerned.”

5.6. Rating of school support

Overall, parents' rating of the attendance support received from school is mixed. As Figure 27 shows, just over one third (36%) of parents with a child with attendance issues rate the support received from their child's school on attendance as good (18% very good, 18% quite good) with a third of parents (34%) rating the support neither good nor bad. A quarter of parents (25%) said the support received was bad (13% quite bad, 12% very bad).

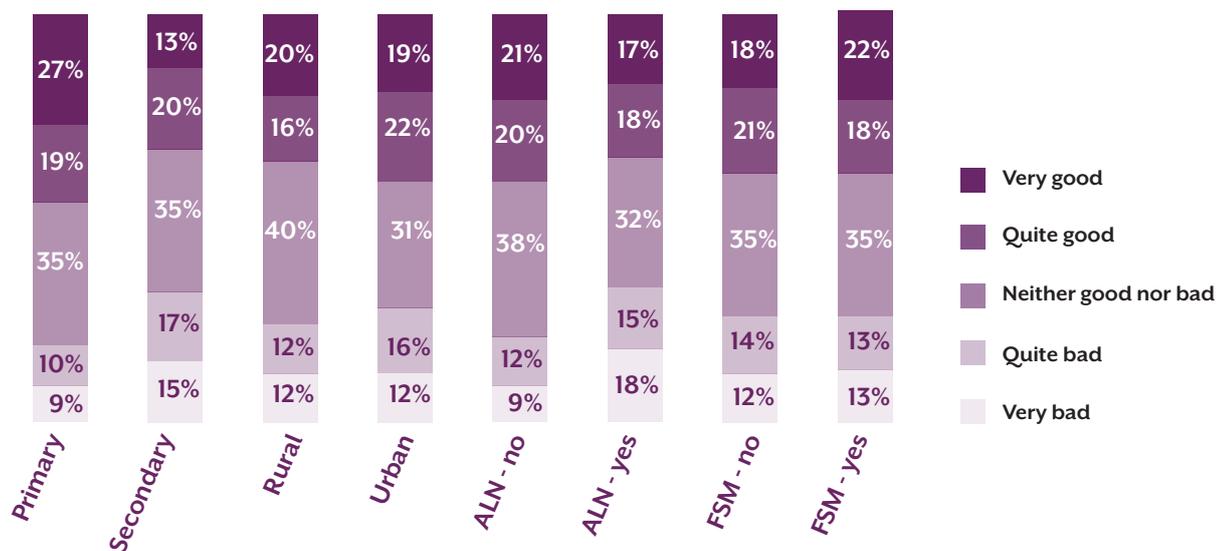
FIGURE 27 Overall, how would you rate the support received from your child's school on attendance?



N = 646

There are some differences in ratings by different parent groups. As Figure 28 shows, primary school parents rate the support they have received from their child's school more highly than secondary school parents (46% of primary parents said very good or quite good vs. 33% of secondary parents), as do parents with a child without ALN (41% vs. 35% of parents with a child with ALN) and parents for an urban location (41% vs. 36% of parents in a rural location).

FIGURE 28 Overall, how would you rate the support received from your child's school on attendance? By school type/location/ALN/ FSM



N = 543 - 595

3-18 schools/special schools/don't knows/prefer not to says excluded

When asked what support, if any, their family have found most useful, many parents with a child with attendance issues shared qualitative feedback. Excluding those parents answering none, the most popular theme by some margin was supportive/understanding staff followed by good communications/easily contactable, a different timetable, and having access to a mental health/wellbeing team. All themes mentioned at least twice are shown in Figure 29.

FIGURE 29 *What support, if any, have you and your child found most helpful?*



Some comments received from parents are below:

“Being understanding and listening to our daughter and us as a family.”

“LSA provision to help my child’s anxiety and feel supported to attend school. Educational psychologist who were fantastic and who helped us with an autism diagnosis.”

“Being listened to and having good communication pathways with the ALN team. They are very responsive. I feel we are working together.”

“They are always available to discuss any concerns at the time.”

“No pressure from the class teacher as we both agree we are doing the best we can with no funding available for any real support.”

“Updates on how he is, working with the teacher to support my child.”

“Good engagement with school and them taking the issue seriously and engaging and working with me and my daughter to help. This issue won’t go away overnight and the school have been patient and supportive throughout.”

“Wellbeing support given a safe space when anxiety attacks or feels overwhelmed.”

“My son was off school for a long period of time seriously ill and in hospital. The school have been amazing and supporting us through that time ... They have been amazing with him starting back and doing half days originally, then back to full days when he was well enough.”

“Having a room to herself and having the chance to be able to carry on with her school work whilst feeling sick and anxious rather than just sitting in the nurse’s room or the hall and calling me to pick her up and take her home. As her sickness was becoming so widespread, constantly sending her home wasn’t helping so her head of year found the solution of giving her a safe space for her to enable learning whilst feeling poorly which in turn makes her feel less anxious and reduces her sickness feeling.”

“The school understands what my kids are going through and they allow them to express when they need to.”

“A zero-pressure approach and reduced timetable, and understanding of my child’s anxiety. The school have been excellent in their support.”

“The school has a nurture team that is providing ongoing support and encouragement and offers a safe space for our child. Direct communication with school’s reception team who have been very helpful and proactive in engaging with our child.”

“My child was supported 100% by the family/attendance officers. They gradually eased him back into registration and lessons with shorter days, encouraging his attendance and praising his achievements.”

“Space and time without pressure to attend 100% of the time. It’s really difficult with a child who has additional learning needs that are combative with a school environment to get the balance right. The school are sensible in their approach and recognise it’s better for my child to be in school and happy and learning when they can and to stay at home when they’re going to find school very difficult and if they did attend it would end in meltdowns and emotional distress for my child.”

When asked what other ways the school could provide support the hundreds of responses fall into a number of themes (Figure 30). Being more understanding and better communications/easier to contact both receive the most mentions, followed by earlier diagnosis/intervention, for the school to listen to the child directly, being able to do school work at home, for concerns to be listened to and better support, including ALN support. Several parents asked for some absences to be recategorised whilst a few parents said they would like their child’s school to stop rewarding 100% attendance.

FIGURE 30 What other ways could the school support you and your child?



Verbatim feedback from parents included:

“I would have liked for the school to meet with me in person to discuss a way to help improve his attendance.”

“Help with understanding what my child has missed due to his illness and what I need to help him with at home.”

“Take the time to look at underlying issues. Address needs. Speed up educational psychologist visit.”

“More one in one support for my son who is suspected ASD, more understanding when it comes to illness, meltdowns, refusals to attend. Not sending red letters every single term about attendance when my children have been off school sick.”

“Offer my child solutions to the problems she is facing and not tell her to ‘tough it out’ ‘ignore it’ etc.”

“By being truthful and open and following through with the things that they say they are going to do.”

“Regular discussions about barriers and concerns. Knowing who to discuss attendance with at school - there is sometimes too many people. Take the time to talk to my child about their worries and issues.”

“Stop signing go home slips every time she asks for one.”

“Stop sending threatening letters regarding poor attendance when they know my child has a chronic lung condition.”

“Having a face to face between parent and teacher to properly discuss lack of attendance. Give my child a neutral person to talk to about their issues with school.”

“Be there for her keep her safe and stop the bullies.”

“A sick note system whereby if a child is genuinely ill and has seen a doctor, this does not go against their attendance record. Also, if a child is sent home ill from the school, this should not go against the child’s attendance record.”

“More communication. Informing us what options are available. More mental health support available in school and understanding the issues that the pandemic caused to children mental health.”

“Downloadable at home resources. Personal letters about absence. Consideration to health needs, medical appointments. I disagree with rewarding good attendance as those genuinely unwell miss out.”

“Allow children places they can gather safely as a friend group out of the way of targeted bullying that doesn’t involve academic or activity-based clubs. Just a place for them to be together without interruption or interactions from other unwanted pupils. Different indoor or dedicated “spaces” for recreational uses.”

“My daughter finds it difficult to attend school, she does make it in most days, but often late. When the school talk to her about this, it makes her anxious and more difficult to attend. Being positive that she is in fact there, would make her feel better, instead of constant referrals to her lateness.”

“Being flexible with his time table. Give work for him to do in the home at good pace.”

“More availability to discuss plans, due to school’s timetable and my work commitments, barriers are in the way.”

“I just need someone to support and help them, I believe there may be ASD involved but getting any help to find out if that is the case is like digging for gold. I am completely lost and not knowing what to do.”

“Allow my child to take medication in school to allow attendance during periods of being prescribed antibiotics.”

“Listen to me when I’ve told them that my daughter is struggling, the answer is always tell her to ask for help but she is very shy and suffers with anxiety so she won’t speak to the teachers.”

“Not to send children home so often if they have a slight headache, sickness etc.”

“Acknowledge issues sooner, be easier to contact, understand that not all children can meet the standard expected and cope with pressure put on them, listen to the child and implement what they need to feel safe, think about how they speak to the child - volume and words used.”

“By not taking percentage off his attendance for his hospital appointments etc. as he has always been upset that he could not get a reward for 100% attendance due to these appointments which is unfair on children with disabilities.”

“School work sent home, more empathy.”

“It would be good if the school would individually assess attendance issues and have more leeway if reason for not attending is genuine.”

“I don’t know if there is any support that can be given in all honesty. But because no one has reached out and I’m too embarrassed to ask for help (or don’t want to be seen as a bad parent or as if I’m failing my son) I have no idea about the options and opportunities out there.”



5.7. Fixed penalty notices/fines

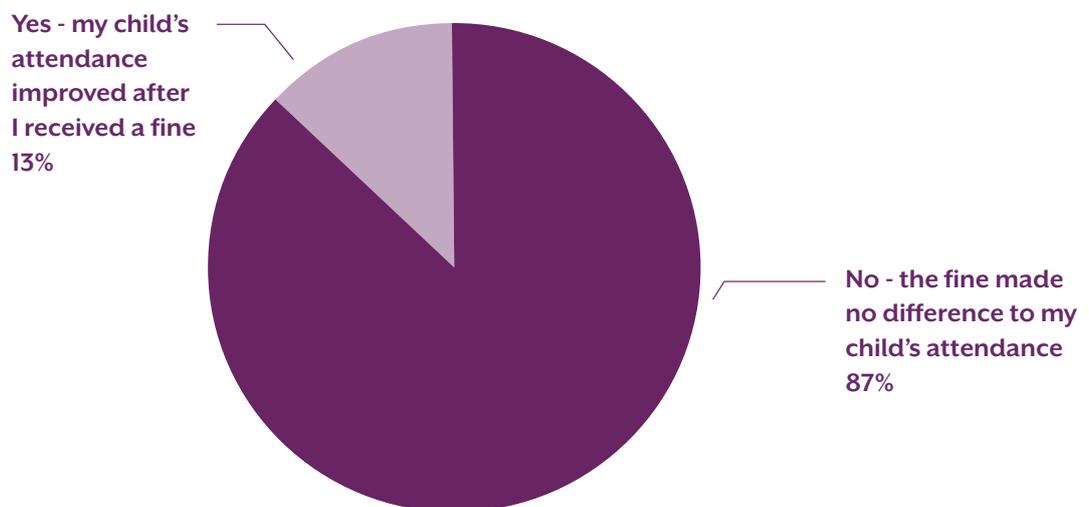
Finally, parents were asked whether or not they had ever received any fixed penalty notices/fines due to their child not attending school. Only 3% of parents with a child with attendance issues said they had, with 96% of parents telling us they hadn't (Figure 31). Our intention was to look at the impact of fines on attendance but with such low numbers of parents receiving fines the results in Figure 32 - showing that 13% of parents said their child's attendance improved as after receiving a fine compared with 87% of parents who said that receiving a fine had no impact on their child's attendance - should be treated with caution.

FIGURE 31 *Have you ever received any fixed penalty notices/fines due to your child's non-attendance at school?*



N = 649

FIGURE 32 *If yes, did the fine(s) have any impact on your child's attendance afterwards?*



N = 15
 Caution - very low base
 Excludes 'other' (4) and prefer not to say(1)

6. Conclusions

This research received responses from a wide variety of parents, with key parent groups (e.g. primary and secondary schools, rural and urban locations, receipt of free school meals and children with additional learning needs) having enough representation amongst respondents to explore similarities and differences in their experiences.

Broadly speaking, parents told us that communication with schools around absence in general terms is working well. Parents are aware of schools' expectations around attendance (84% of all respondents), and feel that the information and communication by schools on this topic is clear and easy to understand, with only 1% of all respondents and 3% of parents of children with attendance issues rating it as quite/very difficult.

A similarly high proportion of parents (97%) told us that there was at least one point of contact at the school who they feel comfortable discussing the school's attendance policy with, and a little over half of parents of children with absence issues said that they are typically contacted by the school on the same day that their child is absent.

However, the situation becomes more complex when taking into account the circumstances and experiences of particular children. Parents indicated that the barriers to their child attending school can be quite varied and when giving additional information quite a few parents outlined that they felt their child's absence was justified. In most cases the higher absences were made up of short periods adding up to at least 20 days rather than consecutive periods of 10+ days of absence, or a mix of both. Amongst children absent for 20 days or more, 59% of parents told us that there were specific barriers related to their attending school. Of those, 77% said that these have become worse since the pandemic, with only 4% saying that had improved.

Only a fairly small number of parents specifically mentioned new issues directly relating to the pandemic; in most cases it appears the increase in absence is occurring amongst pupils that already had unresolved absence issues during the pandemic, or would have had experienced emerging issues with absence in any case.

The most common of these relate to illness (57%), a refusal to go to school (44%), the child having unmet needs such as ALN (27%) and issues related to bullying (15%). Around 5% of parents raised issues around the cost or practicality of getting children to and from school.

Exploring these areas in more depth through parents' open responses, indicates that physical and mental health issues may be equally prevalent as problems under illness. It also shows that while a refusal to go to school is sometimes an indicator of behavioural issues from the child, it is also likely to overlap with a variety of other factors such as bereavement, bullying, and being unhappy at the school due to unsupported needs, the actions of other pupils or teachers, or in some cases specific policies set by the school that impact them personally.

Around half of parents told us that their child's school enquires about the reasons for absence, with figures slightly higher amongst secondary schools and for parents of children with ALN. In terms of practical support offered by the school this is very varied, to a large extent reflecting the variation of reasons for absence. However, a number of parents reported that the school did not offer any particular support in helping them resolve issues around absence. The use of fines by schools does not appear to be commonplace, with only 3% of parents whose children had been absent for 20 or more days reporting that they had received a fine. Feedback around support offered by schools was typically mixed. Amongst parents of children with absence issues, 36% rated support from the school as very/quite good and 25% as very/quite bad. Support from primary schools is rated slightly better on average than support at secondary schools. 29% of parents said that the school had a Family Engagement Officer, but of these fewer than half said that they had been involved in helping to manage absence with their child. 19% of parents said the school had referred them to other agencies for potential help; the most common of these was CAMHS, but a wide variety of national and local organisations were also mentioned.

When asked what support parents found most helpful, the answer most commonly given was around school staff being supportive and understanding the issue, followed by the school being easy to contact and the general quality of communications between the school and parents. Parents also mentioned adaptations to the timetable and other elements of the school day and the support provided by mental health/wellbeing teams.

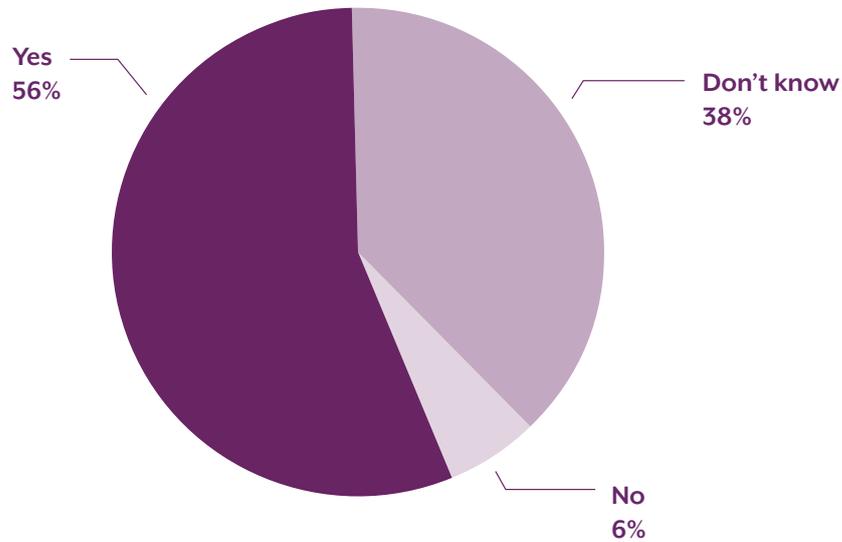
Along similar lines, when asked how schools could improve the support they offer to parents, the most common responses were for schools to be more understanding of the situation and for there to be better communication between schools and parents around the child's absence, particularly in listening to what parents had to say. Parents also mentioned that earlier diagnosis and earlier intervention would have been helpful, their child being able to continue school work at home while absent and having support for additional learning needs in place. What is clear is that absenteeism in general, and the recent rise in figures in Wales, reflects a complex mix of different factors amongst families and there is no single solution that will resolve these problems.

There is a degree of tension between some parents who have deliberately withdrawn their child for what they believe are legitimate reasons, and who are seeking more understanding and flexibility from schools, with schools and government being assessed against a fixed target which does not encourage flexibility in response. There are also some cases which would be difficult for either the school or parent to directly act upon (e.g. absences caused by illness, delays to receiving CAMHS support, etc.) However, there are a number of cases where schools can potentially facilitate swifter and more successful returns, e.g. ensuring additional learning support is in place, and investigating and addressing concerns raised around bullying or school policies which are having an effect upon absences.

7. Appendix

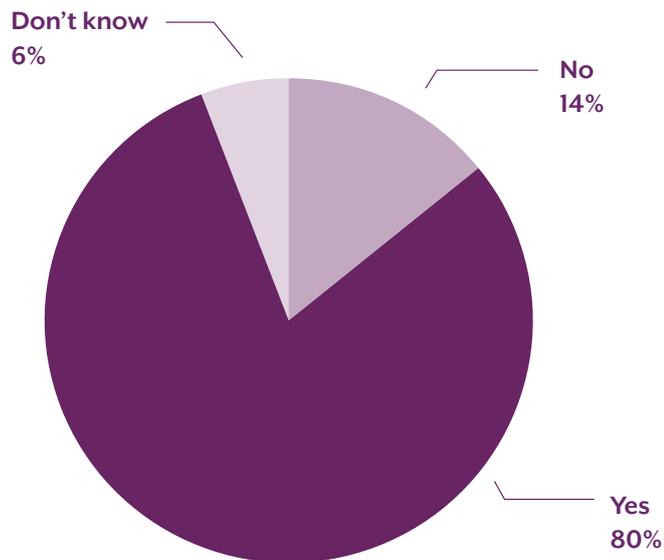
Additional charts showing results for parents with a child with attendance issues.

FIGURE 33 *Does your child's school have a written policy on attendance?*



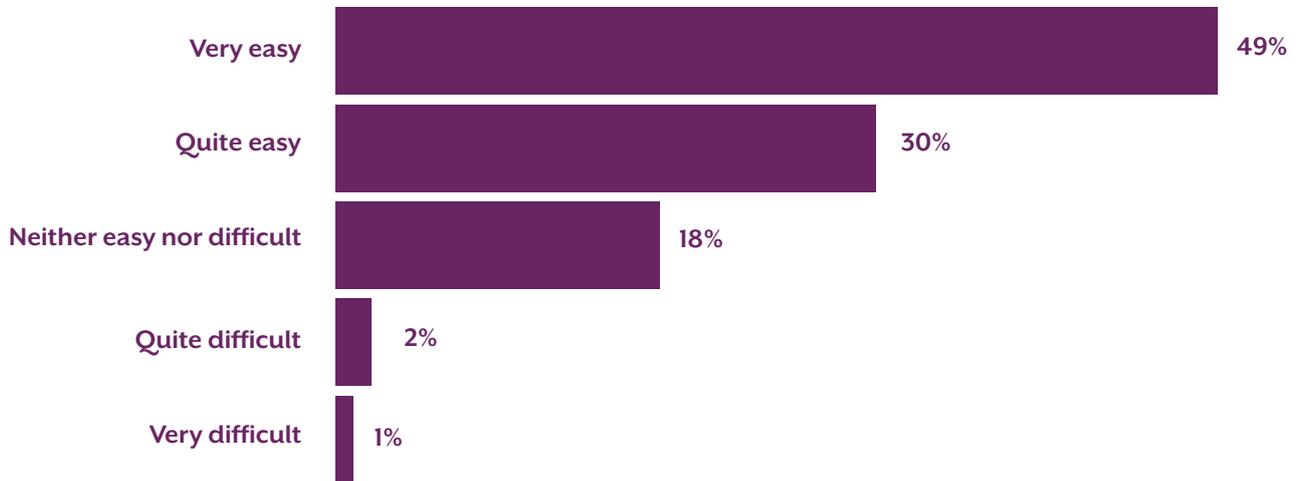
N = 654

FIGURE 34 *Has the school communicated with you their expectations about attendance?*



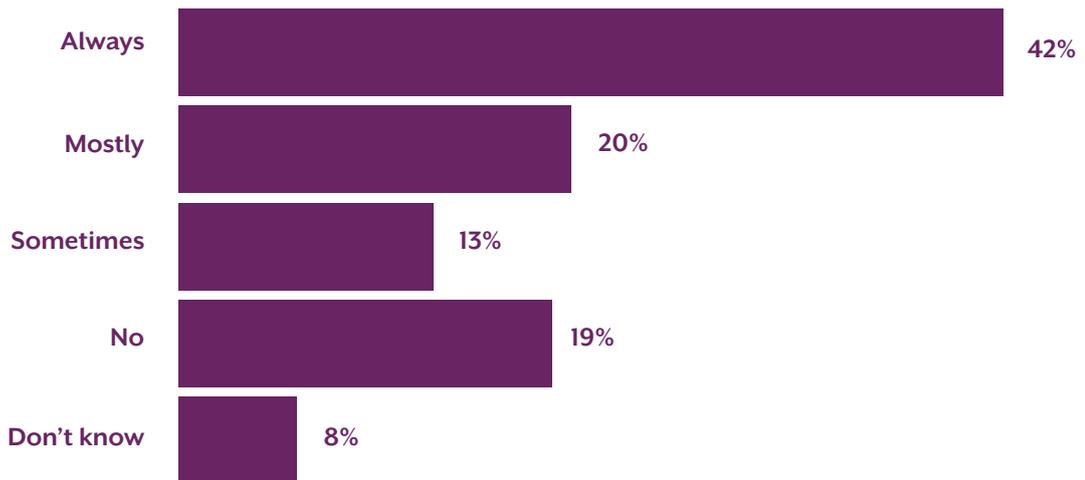
N = 654

FIGURE 35 *Was this information clear and easy to understand?*



N = 572

FIGURE 36 *If your child is absent from school, does the school contact you straight away, i.e. the same morning?*



N = 654