

Through the Doors

Report Summary: Through the Doors

Young People's Experiences of School
Attendance and Non-Attendance in
Carmarthenshire

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



THE PROJECT

Through the Doors: Understanding Non-Attendance Among Young People in Carmarthenshire was developed to better understand the barriers and motivations that influence school attendance among young people aged 11 to 16, both in and out of mainstream education. Attendance data can tell us how often a young person is absent, but it does not necessarily tell us why they are not attending, how they experience school, what is happening in their lives, or what might support them to engage more positively with education.

The study therefore sought to move beyond attendance figures by listening directly to young people about their experiences of education.

It was grounded in a participatory and rights-based approach, informed by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the National Participation Standards for Wales. In line with Carmarthenshire's Education Sir Gâr 2022 to 2032 strategy, the research adopted a 'listening to improve' approach, recognising young people as active contributors to understanding the factors that support or hinder engagement with education.



WHO TOOK PART

Attention was given to hearing from young people whose experiences may be less visible within traditional approaches to pupil voice and attendance data. This included young people experiencing persistent or severe patterns of non-attendance, those accessing alternative or non-mainstream provision and young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

More than 200 young people shared their experiences.

137

young people completed the survey

69

young people participated in focus groups

5

young people took part in detailed life timeline interviews

These methods were brought together with an evidence review to explore wider patterns alongside the individual experiences and educational journeys of young people.



OPEN DOORS AND CLOSED DOORS



Young people's experiences informed the development of the Through the Doors framework.

'Open Doors' represent the relationships, experiences and conditions that young people described as helping them to attend, engage and feel connected to education.

'Closed Doors' represent the barriers and experiences that made attendance and engagement more difficult.

Across the study, young people described how emotional wellbeing, relationships, peer dynamics, school systems and rules, the physical and sensory environment and experiences of learning interacted to shape whether school felt accessible, supportive and worth attending.

Attendance difficulties rarely appeared to exist in isolation. Importantly, young people could experience both 'Open Doors' and 'Closed Doors' within the same school, depending on the relationships, practices, spaces and situations they encountered.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US:



CLOSED DOORS

What Makes School Harder

Young people described a range of experiences that could contribute to anxiety, disconnection and difficulties attending or engaging with school.

59%

identified worries, stress, and poor mental health

44%

identified feeling too tired or 'burnt out'

1 IN 3

identified difficult relationships with teachers.

Young people also described feeling targeted or not listened to, isolation and punitive responses, bullying and friendship difficulties, overcrowded and noisy environments, sensory discomfort, restrictions on toilet access and difficulties accessing or keeping up with learning.

Periods of absence could themselves create additional barriers to returning, including anxiety about catching up, reconnecting with peers and fear of judgement.



OPEN DOORS

What Makes School Easier

Positive relationships emerged as one of the strongest 'Open Doors'.

60%

of young people reported having at least one adult, with or outside school, they could talk to when attendance became difficult.

Young people particularly valued adults who listened, understood their circumstances, treated them with respect and provided consistent support.

Friendships also provided an important source of connection and motivation, while young people valued calmer and safer spaces, flexibility, practical and hands-on learning and support that recognised their individual circumstances.

Young people attending alternative and specialist provision frequently described smaller and calmer environments, supportive relationships, greater flexibility, practical learning and a stronger sense of belonging as contributing to more positive experiences of attendance and engagement. While these settings cannot simply be replicated within mainstream education, they provide important insight into the conditions young people associated with feeling safe, respected, recognised and able to engage.



OPENING THE DOORS: 'IF I WAS IN CHARGE...'

When asked what they would change to make school easier to attend and engage with, young people's priorities strongly reflected the experiences identified throughout the study:

61%

Staff who
"actually listen
and get it"

58%

Better support
when things feel
overwhelming or
stressful

55%

Lessons that
feel useful for
real life

46%

Being treated as
an individual
rather than "just
a number"

42%

Schools listening
to young people
before
introducing rules

Young people also called for more practical and personalised learning, greater flexibility, improved access to safe spaces and facilities, less shouting and punitive responses, and support to make returning following absence less stressful.

Taken together, their recommendations reinforce the importance of relationships, trust, recognition, meaningful learning, agency and emotional safety in shaping attendance and engagement. They also demonstrate the value of involving young people as active partners in developing responses to attendance difficulties.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen Relational and Inclusive School Cultures
2. Create School Environments Where Young People Experience Belonging and Matter
3. Embed Meaningful Participation Within Attendance Improvement Activity
4. Strengthen Early Wellbeing and Emotional Support
5. Review Behaviour, Inclusion and Attendance Practices Through a Relational Lens
6. Strengthen Re-engagement and Transition Pathways
7. Learn from Effective Practice Across Alternative, Community and Specialist Settings
8. Align Strategic Priorities Through a Shared Evidence Base

Overall, Through the Doors demonstrates that school attendance is shaped by a complex interaction of relationships, belonging, emotional wellbeing, school culture, peer dynamics, physical and sensory environments and experiences of learning. The findings reinforce the importance of moving beyond an understanding of attendance based primarily on presence, absence or compliance towards one that considers young people's everyday experiences of school.

Ultimately, improving attendance is not simply about enabling more young people to come through the doors; it is about creating the conditions that help them feel that they belong and want to stay.



Implications for Practice and Recommendations

The findings from Through the Doors suggest that improving attendance requires a shift from viewing attendance primarily as a matter of presence or compliance towards understanding it in relation to engagement, belonging, mattering, wellbeing, participation and inclusion. Across the findings, young people repeatedly described the importance of school culture in shaping their experiences of attendance, engagement and wellbeing.

The implications for practice and recommendations presented below are informed directly by the views, experiences and suggestions shared throughout the consultation. They seek not only to address specific barriers to attendance, but also to strengthen the wider cultures, relationships and systems that shape whether young people feel able to engage, participate and thrive within education.

In keeping with the project's commitment to meaningful participation and accessible communication, key findings and recommendations have also been translated into a youth-friendly infographic to support dissemination amongst participating young people, schools and wider stakeholders (Appendix 1).

1 **Strengthen Relational and Inclusive School Cultures**

Continue to strengthen relational and inclusive school cultures that promote belonging, mattering, participation and engagement. Young people's accounts consistently highlighted the importance of feeling

valued, listened to, respected and understood within school communities.

Professional learning should support staff to develop relational practice, restorative approaches, trauma-informed responses and inclusive approaches to behaviour that maintain high expectations whilst strengthening connection, accountability and support. Consideration should be given to evidence-informed frameworks, including Reynolds' BELONG Framework and Trusted Adult Guarantee, alongside Benedict and Braven's Relational Inclusion Framework.

The Lost Boys Taskforce's recent Supporting Students to BELONG report provides further practice-based examples of how schools are using Trusted Adults to strengthen belonging, engagement, attendance and attainment, offering useful learning for schools considering how these approaches might be developed within their own context (Lost Boys Taskforce, 2026).

2 **Create School Environments Where Young People Experience Belonging and Mattering**

Recognise that attendance is influenced not only by whether young people are present within school communities, but by whether they feel valued, respected, listened to and able to contribute meaningfully.

Schools should consider how policies, practices, relationships and everyday interactions influence young people's





sense of belonging and mattering, recognising these as important foundations for engagement, wellbeing, participation and attendance. This should include consideration of the physical and sensory environment and whether school spaces feel manageable and emotionally safe, alongside whether learning is experienced as accessible, meaningful and achievable.



3 Embed Meaningful Participation Within Attendance Improvement Activity

The Through the Doors consultation demonstrates the value of creating meaningful opportunities for young people to share their experiences of attendance, engagement and participation, and to influence the changes they believe would improve school experiences. Future attendance improvement activity should build on this approach by embedding ongoing mechanisms that actively seek, hear and respond to the views of young people experiencing attendance difficulties.

Particular attention should be given to those whose voices are often least represented, including young people with lower attendance, those accessing alternative provision and those experiencing disadvantage. Participation should move beyond one-off consultation activities and contribute meaningfully to decision-making, policy development, service improvement and evaluation, ensuring that responses remain grounded in the lived experiences of young people.



4 Strengthen Early Wellbeing and Emotional Support

Recognise emotional wellbeing, anxiety and school-related distress as significant factors influencing attendance.



Schools and partner agencies should continue to strengthen early identification and intervention approaches, particularly before and during the transition from primary to secondary school, to address emerging emotional barriers before attendance difficulties become entrenched. Attendance support should be integrated with wellbeing support, recognising the close relationship between emotional health, belonging, mattering and engagement.



5 Review Behaviour, Inclusion and Attendance Practices Through a Relational Lens

Review behaviour, attendance and inclusion practices to better understand how they are experienced by young people. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that responses promote dignity, fairness, participation and accountability whilst maintaining connection to learning, relationships and school communities.

Young people's accounts suggest the need to continue strengthening approaches that combine high expectations with relational support and inclusion, moving from predominantly punitive responses towards approaches that seek to understand underlying needs, maintain relationships and support accountability. This should include consideration of how everyday practices, including isolation, uniform requirements and access to facilities, are applied and experienced by young people, with particular attention to fairness, proportionality, consistency, flexibility and dignity.





6 

Strengthen Re-engagement and Transition Pathways

Continue to develop consistent approaches to supporting young people returning to education following periods of absence. Re-engagement should recognise that absence can itself create additional barriers to returning, including falling behind, social disconnection, anxiety and reduced confidence.

Re-engagement processes should prioritise emotional safety, rebuilding relationships, reconnecting with peers and supporting young people to catch up without fear of judgement or stigma. Particular attention should be given to supporting key educational transitions and reducing barriers for those who feel disconnected from learning.

7 

Learn from Effective Practice across Alternative Community and Specialist Settings

Identify and share the relational, environmental and organisational practices that young people describe positively within alternative provision, specialist settings and community-based support services.

Attention should be given to approaches that promote belonging, mattering, flexibility, emotional safety and personalised support, considering how these principles may further inform practice across mainstream educational settings. Opportunities should also be explored to strengthen pathways and collaboration between schools, Youth Work, other education providers, youth support services and community-based provision, recognising that engagement and support frequently occur across formal, informal and non-formal settings. The focus should be on identifying transferable principles

rather than seeking to replicate alternative or specialist provision directly, recognising differences in scale, staffing, resources and organisational context.

8 

Align Strategic Priorities Through a Shared Evidence Base

Use the findings from Through the Doors as a shared evidence base to inform and strengthen existing strategic developments across Carmarthenshire, including the Attendance Strategy, Inclusion and Engagement work, Additional Learning Needs developments, Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) approaches, wellbeing and participation priorities, and the development of the five-year Youth Work Strategic Plan.

The findings highlight the interconnected nature of attendance, engagement, belonging, mattering, wellbeing and inclusion. Rather than developing separate responses to these issues, there is an opportunity to strengthen a coherent and integrated approach across schools, Youth Work, other education providers, youth support services, health services and community partners, working alongside young people and families. Existing collaborative arrangements provide strong foundations for this work and should continue to be developed and aligned.

The evidence gathered through Through the Doors also provides an important source of direct testimony from young people that can support future strategic planning, service development and evaluation. This evidence should inform the development of the five-year Youth Work Strategic Plan, alongside wider education, inclusion, wellbeing and participation priorities. An evidence-into-action approach could support the translation of these findings into sustained changes in practice.





The Education Endowment Foundation's Supporting School Attendance resources, including its Reflection and Planning Tool and accompanying Evidence into Action podcast, provide practical resources for schools to engage with attendance evidence and use it to inform approaches that respond to the needs and context of their own setting (Education Endowment Foundation, 2024a; 2024b). A School's Guide to Implementation provides a further evidence-informed framework to support schools to consider what is feasible within their context and to implement and sustain changes in practice (Education Endowment Foundation, 2024c).

The findings further support regional ambitions to strengthen voice and control, co-production and partnership working with children, young people and families, ensuring that future strategic developments remain grounded in direct testimony, lived experience and meaningful participation (West Wales Regional Partnership Board, 2025).

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from Through the Doors demonstrate that school attendance is shaped by a complex interaction of relationships, belonging, emotional wellbeing, school culture, peer dynamics, the physical and sensory environment and experiences of learning. Young people consistently highlighted the importance of feeling listened to, respected, valued and supported, and of experiencing school as a place where they feel able to belong, participate and engage. Their accounts also demonstrate that barriers to attendance are rarely experienced in isolation, but can develop through the interaction of emotional, relational, educational and environmental factors.

The findings reinforce the importance of moving beyond an understanding of attendance based primarily on presence, absence or compliance, towards one that considers young people's everyday experiences of school. The distinction between 'Open Doors' and 'Closed Doors' highlights how relationships, practices, environments and systems can either support connection and participation or contribute to disconnection and disengagement. Importantly, young people's experiences demonstrate that these 'Open' and 'Closed Doors' can exist within the same school, emphasising the importance of creating consistently relational, inclusive and responsive school cultures.

Through the Doors also demonstrates the value of listening directly to young people, particularly those whose experiences may be less visible within traditional approaches to attendance and participation. Young people offered considerable insight into both the barriers they experience and the changes they believe could make school more manageable, meaningful and welcoming. Their perspectives should therefore remain central to the development, implementation and evaluation of future approaches to attendance and engagement.

By using this local evidence alongside wider research, evidence-informed practice and professional expertise, Carmarthenshire has an opportunity to translate the findings into action in ways that are responsive to different school contexts and feasible to implement and sustain. Ultimately, improving attendance is not simply about enabling more young people to come through the doors; it is about creating the conditions that help them feel that they belong and want to stay.





Read the Full Report

Young People's Experiences of School Attendance
and Non-Attendance in Carmarthenshire



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