



Briefing in advance of the plenary debate on pupil absence on Wednesday 8 February 2023

Key points

- There is a significant correlation between disadvantaged and vulnerable learners who are more likely to have poor attendance records and the prevalence of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). We welcome the fact that this issue is referenced within the committee report.
- We welcome Welsh Government's commitment to review the attendance, exclusions, and behaviour guidance and have been pleased to have been part of early discussions about these documents.
- Given the strong evidence that children and young people who are more likely to have poorer absence attendance records are also more likely to have SLCN, **there is a need to ensure that the wider education workforce is aware of SLCN and that the workforce is able to identify and support the needs of children and young people in this area**

Background on the relationship between SLCN and persistent absence

The Welsh Government report 'Attendance review - implications of the pandemic for school attendance' (2022), the authors highlighted a number of pre-existing reasons for absence exacerbated by COVID. These included;

- poverty, disadvantage and learners eligible for free school meals,
- special and additional learning needs and
- anxiety and mental health and wellbeing and disengagement issues.

There is significant evidence to suggest that there is a higher likelihood of SLCN in these identified groups of vulnerable learners, as explored further below.

Poverty and social disadvantage

Good early language skills are central to the ability of a child to achieve their educational potential and improve their life chances. Research shows that there is a strong correlation however between poverty and delayed language. Studies of whole populations reveal a clear social gradient for language development, with children from the most disadvantaged groups more likely to have weaker language skills than those in more advantaged groups (Law, 2013). Over **50%** of children in socially deprived areas may start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills (Locke et al, 2002).

As the inquiry response by the Children’s Commissioner for Wales highlighted, ‘action to prevent and tackle child poverty needs to be a key driver in reducing absence from school’ (2022). **It is vital that identification and support for SLCN is considered as part of the jigsaw when considering responses to persistent absenteeism for this group of learners.**

Additional learning needs

Data from Welsh Government shows that as with other learners the attendance of learners with additional learning needs has decreased overall (Welsh Government, 2022). **30%** of children in Wales with additional learning needs have SLCN. SLCN is the most common type of Additional Learning need in Wales. **It is essential that identification and support for SLCN is prioritised when developing policy responses to persistent absenteeism for this group of learners.**

Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing and disengagement issues

The Welsh Government report on attendance noted that ‘it is well established that poor attendance patterns for students prior to the pandemic was often related to a range of anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues’ (Welsh Government ,2022). Research has found that many children and young people with mental health needs also have SLCN and interaction difficulties. These are often previously unidentified:

- Children with a mental health disorder are **five times** more likely to have problems with speech and language (NHS Digital, 2018).³
- **81%** of children with social, emotional and mental health needs have significant unidentified language deficits (Hollo et al, 2014).⁴

This compelling evidence suggests that prevalence of SLCN should be considered in relation to persistent absence within this group of learners.

What needs to happen

As highlighted above, children and young people who are more likely to have poorer absence attendance records are also more likely to have SLCN. It is positive that we are involved in discussions with Welsh Government about the exclusion, behaviour and attendance guidance. However, we believe strongly that there is a need to ensure that the wider education workforce is aware of SLCN and able to identify and support the needs of children and young people in this area.

We believe the following steps are required to ensure that teaching staff are able to adapt their interaction and teaching to support learners with SLCN. These actions are vital given the prevalence of SLCN amongst vulnerable groups and the potential impact if needs are unidentified and/or unsupported.

- training for new teachers and as continuous professional development for existing staff members on how to support speech, language and communication skills, and how to identify and support SLCN.
- a focus on ensuring support staff are able to assist teachers in the provision of universal and targeted services to support language development in schools – a key element of the curriculum.
- training for Estyn inspectors to evaluate the impact of oracy education in schools, building on positive steps forward taken in relation to training for Childcare Inspectorate Wales and Estyn inspectors in relation to speech, language and communication in early years settings.

Further information

1. We hope this paper will be helpful in supporting the debate. We would be happy to provide further information if this would be of benefit. Please see below our contact details.

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