Through the Doors

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

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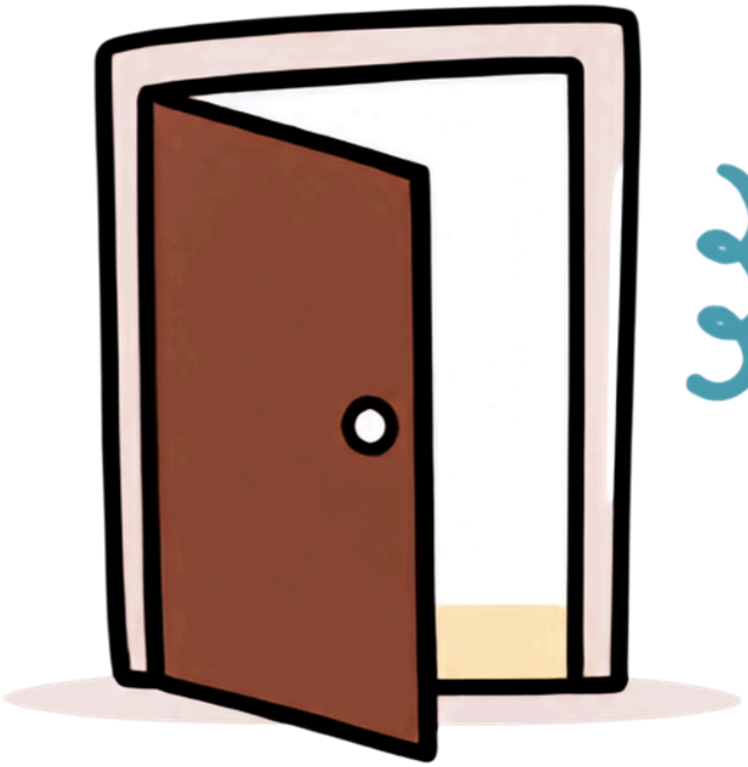
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Through the Doors

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	69	5
young people completed the survey	young participated in focus groups	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 Mattering
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.

Introduction

Through the Doors: Understanding Non-Attendance Among Young People in Carmarthenshire

The primary aim of *Through the Doors* was to engage with young people in Carmarthenshire, aged 11 to 16 years old, both in and out of mainstream education, to develop a deeper understanding of the barriers and motivations that influence school attendance. The study moves beyond surface-level interpretations of attendance data to examine the underlying and often intersecting factors that shape disengagement. Grounded in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Article 12, and the National Participation Standards for Wales, this report positions young people as active agents in informing both analysis and response.

Why this work matters

Understanding why young people do and do not attend school is complex. Attendance data can tell us how often a young person is absent, but it does not necessarily tell us why they are not attending, what is happening in their lives, how they experience school, or what might support them to engage more positively with education. Developing a better understanding of these experiences is central to the purpose of *Through the Doors*.

Nationally, improving attendance remains a significant challenge across Welsh secondary schools. Estyn, in Improving attendance in secondary schools: an update on progress (2025), highlights that although there has been some recovery since the pandemic, overall attendance rates remain below pre-pandemic levels, and rates of persistent absenteeism have increased substantially (Welsh Government, 2023a; 2025). This reinforces the need for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing disengagement and the effectiveness of current responses.
The work aligns with the strategic priorities set out in Carmarthenshire's Attendance Strategy and is designed to generate insight that supports more inclusive, relational, and system-informed approaches to improving engagement. This report foregrounds the perspectives of young people, providing an evidence base to inform a system-level action plan for the Authority, aligned with findings from Estyn inspection activity (Estyn, 2023). The project was delivered between mid-December and June 2026.

About Through the Doors

The findings presented within this report are informed by the experiences and perspectives of more than 200 young people from across Carmarthenshire. A total of 137 young people participated in the survey element of the study, 69 took part in focus groups, and five contributed detailed life timeline interviews that explored their educational journeys in greater depth. Together, these contributions provide a rich and diverse picture of the factors influencing attendance, engagement and participation across a range of educational settings and experiences.

A range of stakeholders were consulted at the outset of the project to inform the research design, identify target groups, and consider how best to increase access and participation among young people. This reflected a genuinely collaborative approach between the research team and Carmarthenshire's Education and Children's Services Department, including the Youth Support Service, ensuring that the design of the study was both contextually grounded and responsive to local knowledge and practice.

About this report

While stakeholder input informed the design of the study, the research itself deliberately centres the voices and experiences of young people, with participation as a core methodological and ethical principle. This reflects a critical gap identified within policy and inspection evidence. Estyn highlights that, while schools are increasingly drawing on young people's voices, this often captures the perspectives of those who attend regularly. As a result, the experiences of those with lower levels of attendance remain underrepresented, limiting the system's ability to fully understand and respond to the underlying causes of disengagement. This study therefore prioritises more inclusive and targeted approaches to participation, ensuring that the voices of those least visible within existing data are central to the analysis.

The report begins by exploring what we already know about attendance and engagement from existing research, policy and practice, before outlining the approach taken within Through the Doors. It then focuses on what young people told us about their experiences of school, the factors that help and hinder attendance and engagement, and what and what they told us could help to improve their experiences of school and attendance. The final sections bring these findings together to consider what they mean for future policy, practice and approaches to improving attendance and engagement across Carmarthenshire.



What We Already Know About Attendance and Engagement

Rethinking Attendance: From Compliance to Engagement

Recent policy and research increasingly frame school attendance as a relational, wellbeing and participation issue, rather than simply a matter of compliance. This is particularly significant within Wales, where national guidance has moved towards a broader understanding of attendance that foregrounds learner engagement, belonging and voice. The Welsh Government's *Belonging, engaging and participating* guidance states that schools should support learners to develop "a sense of belonging, connectivity and engagement with school" and strengthen their resilience in response to the challenges they face (Welsh Government 2023a, p.6). This marks a shift from earlier approaches, such as the *All-Wales Attendance Framework* (Welsh Government, 2012), which focused more strongly on systems, monitoringand escalation processes.

The 2023 guidance positions attendance as everybody's business, involving school leaders, staff, governors, families, local authorities and wider partners. It recognises that barriers to attendance are often rooted in emotional, relational and contextual factors, including wellbeing, discrimination, unmet learning needs, family circumstances and feelings of exclusion or disconnection from school. This policy direction aligns closely with the methodological approach of the Through the Doors project, which centres young people's lived experiences and seeks to understand the factors that shape attendance from their perspectives.

Nationally, attendance remains a significant concern. Estyn's update on attendance in secondary schools, highlights that although there has been some recovery since the pandemic, attendance across Welsh secondary schools remains below pre-pandemic levels and persistent absenteeism has increased substantially (Estyn, 2025; Welsh Government 2025). Estyn also identifies persistent inequalities in attendance, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils with additional learning needs and some ethnic groups. Although rates of persistent absence have fallen slightly in recent years, they remain at historically high levels. In 2024/25, 33.0 per cent of secondary school-aged pupils were persistently absent, compared with 37.1 per cent in 2023/24. Persistent absence remains particularly pronounced amongst learners experiencing disadvantage and additional learning needs, affecting 58.0 per cent of pupils eligible for Free School Meals and 47.0 per cent of pupils with a SEN/ALN provision (Welsh Government, 2025). These figures highlight the continuing inequalities that characterise attendance patterns across Wales and reinforce concerns regarding the experiences of pupils who may be most vulnerable to disengagement from education.

Welsh Government national attendance data further demonstrate a widening attendance gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers (Welsh Government, 2023a).

Prior to the pandemic, attendance among pupils eligible for free school meals remained relatively stable at around 89 to 90 per cent, compared with approximately 94 to 95 per cent among pupils who were not eligible. By 2022 to 2023, attendance among pupils eligible for free school meals had fallen sharply to 79.4 per cent, compared with 89.8 per cent among pupils not eligible for free school meals, widening the gap to 10.4 percentage points. These patterns suggest that the post-pandemic period has disproportionately affected pupils experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and reinforce concerns regarding unequal access to educational participation, belonging and engagement.

Inspection evidence also highlights the need for more inclusive approaches to pupil voice. Estyn (2025) notes that, while schools increasingly gather pupil voice data, this often reflects the views of pupils who attend regularly, meaning that the experiences of pupils with lower attendance remain underrepresented. This creates a significant gap in understanding, as the young people most affected by disengagement are often least visible within existing systems and data. These concerns provide a strong rationale for the Through the Doors project, which intentionally prioritises the voices and experiences of young people whose perspectives are less likely to be captured through routine consultation approaches. Examples from Estyn's (2025, p.14) case studies show how some schools are beginning to respond to these challenges through relational and practical approaches (Estyn 2025)*

**Estyn (2025, p.14) case studies are available at: https://estyn.gov.wales/app/uploads/2025/05/Improving-attendance-in-secondary-schools-an-update-on-progress-1.pdf*

The Local Picture: Attendance in Carmarthenshire

The local context within Carmarthenshire further reinforces the relevance of this study. Estyn's inspection of Carmarthenshire County Council identified improving attendance as a key priority, noting that attendance rates remained low following the pandemic and that progress was uneven across schools (Estyn, 2023). The report highlighted variability in the effectiveness of support and challenge provided to schools, particularly at secondary level, alongside lower attendance rates for pupils experiencing disadvantage, including those eligible for free school meals and those with additional learning needs.

Carmarthenshire's long-term education strategy, *Education Sir Gâr 2022 to 2032*, provides an important local policy context. Its vision prioritises learners being happy, safe and thriving, and recognises the importance of emotional wellbeing, inclusion, engagement and belonging. The strategy also emphasises early intervention, transitions, whole-child outcomes and listening to improve. These priorities align closely with the aims of this study, particularly its focus on understanding how qualitative insights from young people can complement quantitative attendance data and support more responsive approaches to improving attendance.

Yet the literature highlights a disconnect between strategic intentions at policy and organisational levels and the lived experiences of young people, reinforcing the importance of research that centres and listens directly to their voices.

Belonging, Mattering and Connection

Wider literature increasingly positions attendance and engagement as relational, emotional and contextual issues rather than solely matters of compliance or motivation (Welsh Government 2023a; The Children's Society 2025). Research on school belonging highlights the importance of connection, recognition and participation within school communities, although belonging alone does not consistently predict attendance or educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2018; Jetten et al., 2017). Abdallah (2024) argues that pupils may formally belong to a school while still feeling invisible or insignificant within it, highlighting the distinction between physical presence and meaningful inclusion. Related concepts such as mattering further extend this discussion by emphasising whether young people feel valued and able to contribute meaningfully within their school communities. Drawing on Prilleltensky's work, mattering refers to feeling valued and feeling that one adds value. Applied to education, it shifts attention from presence to significance. It raises questions about whether pupils feel their absence would be noticed, whether adults understand them, and whether they are able to contribute meaningfully to school life. This is particularly relevant for pupils whose experiences are shaped by disadvantaged, unmet needs, poverty or conditional inclusion.

Relationships with trusted adults are similarly identified as critical protective factors. Reynolds (2024), through the Trusted Adult Guarantee, argues that sustained and meaningful relationships with adults are central to wellbeing, engagement and longer-term outcomes. Schools are therefore positioned not simply as sites of academic learning, but as relational environments in which trust, emotional regulation and connection are developed through consistent s with adults and peers.

Relationships, Trust and the Everyday Experience of School

Emerging practitioner literature on *Relational Inclusion* further reinforces the importance of relationships, emotional safety and compassionate practice within educational settings. Benedict and Braven (2025) argue that schools should move beyond compliance-driven and behaviourist approaches towards relational and inclusion-focused models that seek to understand the underlying causes of behaviour and disengagement. Drawing on trauma-informed practice, neuroscience and inclusive education, they position schools as relational environments in which belonging, trust, co-regulation and meaningful participation are central to engagement and inclusion. These perspectives align closely with Welsh Government guidance that increasingly frames attendance as linked to wellbeing, belonging and participation (Welsh Government 2023a).

Recent evidence from young people themselves reinforces this relational focus. Carr et al. (2025), building on earlier work with parents by Burtonshaw and Dorrell (2023), found that many young people experience school as rigid, exhausting and disconnected from their lives, even when they recognise the importance of education. Their findings point to an erosion of trust between schools, families and young people, and suggest that attendance is closely linked to agency, connection, enjoyment and meaningful relationships. Research highlights the complex role of peer relationships in shaping young people's attendance and engagement. Evidence from the OxWell Student Survey suggests that peer relationships can both support and challenge engagement, depending on young people's experiences and circumstances. Friendships can support belonging and motivation, but peer pressures, conflict and expectations of constant digital

availability can also increase emotional load and fatigue. Related research on "online presenteeism" suggests that peer relationships can act both as protective factors and sources of emotional pressure (Fazel 2025). It captures the expectation that young people remain continually available to peers outside school hours, which may affect sleep, wellbeing and readiness to attend school.

Wellbeing literature further reinforces the importance of understanding attendance through young people's lived experiences. *The Good Childhood Report 2025*highlights the central role of school in shaping subjective wellbeing,2 particularly through relationships with peers and staff, feelings of safety and perceptions of whether learning is relevant and meaningful (The Children's Society, 2025). Similarly, findings from the School Health Research Network identify concerns relating to sleep, school connectedness and whether pupils feel their voices are heard and valued (Liu et al., 2025). The literature suggests that attendance is closely connectedto emotional wellbeing, peer and staff relationships and everyday experiences of school, highlighting the importance of listening directly to young people rather than relying solely on adult interpretations of attendance behaviour.

When School Itself Becomes a Barrier

Alongside these relational concerns, emerging evidence also highlights the impact of exclusionary practices on engagement and attendance. Thornton et al. (2025), in a large-scale study of internal exclusion in mainstream secondary schools in England, found that 8.3 per cent of pupils reported experiencing isolation in a typical week, often for extended periods. Pupils who experienced isolation reported lower levels of belonging, weaker relationships with staff and reduced wellbeing. Evidence from Wales suggests a related pattern. Power and Taylor (2024) found that one-third of pupils reported being removed from the classroom at some point in the previous year, often through informal practices such as being asked to stand outside. Although these practices may not always be recorded as formal exclusion, they still represent lost learning time and disconnection from teaching and peers. Taken together, this research suggests that exclusion operates across a continuum and raises concerns that punitive or compliance-led approaches may unintentionally deepen disengagement for some pupils by increasing anxiety, disconnection and feelings of exclusion.

The Welsh Government's *Framework on Embedding a Whole-School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being* (2021, updated 2026) promotes a preventative and relational approach in which emotional wellbeing, belonging and participation are understood as central to engagement within school communities (Welsh Government, 2021). The framework emphasises trusted relationships, inclusion and school connectedness, reflecting wider literature that positions attendance and engagement as shaped by everyday experiences of safety, recognition and belonging rather than solely individual motivation or compliance.

However, emerging evidence from Wales highlights tensions between the relational aspirations of the Whole School Approach and the realities of implementation within increasingly pressured educational environments. Evaluation research identifies challenges relating to workforce capacity, increasing learner need, staff wellbeing and inconsistencies in delivery across settings (Public Health Wales, 2024; Welsh Government, 2025). This raises broader questions regarding the extent to which schools are able to sustain

relational and inclusive practices for young people experiencing anxiety, exclusion or disengagement from education.

Voice, Agency and Being Heard

The Welsh policy context increasingly positions children's rights, participation and wellbeing as central to educational engagement and school experience. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasises children's rights to participation, dignity and education, while Welsh Government policy places growing emphasis on belonging, wellbeing and emotionally supportive school environments (Welsh Government, 2021; 2023a). Lundy's (2007) model of participation further highlights the importance of ensuring that young people are not only given opportunities to express their views, but that these views are meaningfully heard and acted upon within decision-making processes. Within Wales, these approaches are reinforced through the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, whichpromotes prevention, inclusion and long-term wellbeing across public services. Together, these frameworks position participation, agency and relational practice as central to how young people experience engagement within educational settings. The findings and wider evidence reviewed within this report also resonate strongly with the principles and purposes of youth work in Wales. *Youth Work in Wales: Principles and Purposes* positions youth work as a voluntary, relationship-based educational process that supports young people's personal, social and educational development through participation, inclusion, empowerment and trusted relationships (Youth Work in Wales Review Group, 2022). It emphasises young people's voice, agency and active involvement in decisions affecting their lives, alongside the creation of environments where they feel valued, respected and able to realise their potential. These principles align closely with contemporary Welsh policy approaches to wellbeing, participation and engagement, and reflect many of the conditions that young people within *Through the Doors* identified as supporting attendance, belonging and positive engagement with education.

Learning That Matters: Relevance, Purpose and Engagement

Within the Welsh context, these principles are reflected in Curriculum for Wales, which places learner voice, participation and meaningful engagement at the centre of educational experiences (Welsh Government 2022). Curriculum for Wales represents a significant shift in educational policy in Wales, moving away from a predominantly content-driven curriculum towards a more learner-centred approach that emphasises wellbeing, progression, participation and meaningful learning experiences (Welsh Government 2022). Central to the curriculum are the Four Purposes, which seek to support young people to become ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals. The Four Purposes are intended to underpin all teaching and learning and provide a shared vision for what young people in Wales should experience through education (Welsh Government 2022; Donaldson 2015).

A key principle underpinning the Curriculum for Wales is that learning should be authentic, engaging and connected to learners' lives, interests and future aspirations. Curriculum guidance emphasises the importance of learner voice, meaningful participation and learning experiences that enable young people to apply knowledge in real-world contexts (Welsh Government 2022).

Similarly, the pedagogical principles associated with Curriculum for Wales highlight the importance of creating authentic contexts for learning, supporting learner agency and encouraging active participation in the learning process (Welsh Government 2022). These developments reflect wider recognition that engagement is strengthened when learners experience education as relevant, purposeful and responsive to their individual needs and circumstances.

Within the context of attendance and engagement, Curriculum for Wales therefore provides an important framework for understanding how experiences of curriculum relevance, learner participation and access to meaningful learning opportunities may influence young people's motivation to engage with education. This is particularly significant given growing policy emphasis on wellbeing, belonging and learner engagement within Welsh education policy (Welsh Government 2023a).

Belonging Through Change and Transition

Recent findings from the School Health Research Network (SHRN) further reinforce concerns regarding the changing nature of school connectedness and emotional engagement across childhood and adolescence. Although most learners reported positive feelings towards school overall, the proportion who stated they liked school "a lot" declined significantly with age, suggesting that experiences of belonging and connection may become increasingly fragile over time (SHRN, 2025).

The literature highlights important social and gendered dimensions of school experience. While girls were more likely to report positive feelings towards school, learners from lower-affluence households were also more likely to report liking school "a lot," complicating deficit assumptions that position socio-economic disadvantage as directly associated with disengagement. Instead, the data suggests that school connectedness is shaped by a wider set of relational and emotional factors, including recognition, safety, inclusion and the quality of everyday interactions within school environments. Recent findings from the School Health Research Network (SHRN) reinforce transition to secondary school as a significant point of emotional vulnerability within children's educational journeys. In 2024, 62% of Year 6 learners reported feeling worried about transition to some extent, with almost half indicating they were worried "quite a bit" or "very much" (SHRN, 2025). Anxiety relating to transition was highest amongst girls, learners identifying outside binary gender categories, and those from lower-affluence households. This report suggests that transition involves more than movement between educational settings, with disruption to peer networks, trusted relationships and feelings of belonging associated with increased anxiety during transition periods.

This is further reinforced by Welsh longitudinal research conducted by Donaldson et al. (2025), which found that worries relating to transition were associated with higher emotional difficulties post-transition, particularly amongst young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in comparison to their more affluent peers. The study also identified school connectedness, belonging and perceptions of teacher care as important protective factors, reinforcing arguments that emotionally supportive and relational approaches may be central to sustaining wellbeing and engagement during periods of educational change.

The School Environment: When the Small Things Are Not Small

Emerging evidence suggests that school uniform policies can shape pupils' experiences of belonging, wellbeing and engagement within school environments, particularly where rules are experienced as inflexible or disproportionately enforced. Welsh Government guidance emphasises that school uniform and appearance policies should consider affordability, equality, inclusion and consultation with pupils, while avoiding practices that may contribute to exclusion or disengagement (Welsh Government 2023b). Wider evidence from Wales similarly highlights concerns regarding the financial pressures associated with school uniforms and the impact that punitive responses to non-compliance may have on pupils' participation and emotional wellbeing (Children in Wales, 2024; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023). Although school uniforms are often positioned as promoting consistency and school identity, the current evidence base suggests there is limited robust evidence that uniform policies alone improve attendance, behaviour or academic outcomes (Education Endowment Foundation, 2025). Emerging research also suggests that rigid or highly punitive approaches to enforcement may negatively affect pupils' sense of school belonging and contribute to relational tension, anxietyand feelings of exclusion for some pupils (Ansari et al., 2021).

Research further highlights how school uniforms may contribute to sensory discomfort and emotional distress for some young people, particularly those experiencing sensory over activity or wider sensory sensitivities (Jordaan et al., 2024). The research suggests that sensory experiences within school environments extend beyond uniform policies alone, with wider aspects of the physical and learning environment also shaping pupils' comfort, emotional

The study suggests that participation is influenced not solely by individual need, but by the extent to which classroom environments are responsive, manageable and emotionally accessible for pupils experiencing sensory pressures. Emerging evidence regarding sensory support within classroom settings, including fidget tools, headphones and flexible classroom adaptations, remains mixed. While some studies suggest that such approaches may assist emotional regulation, concentration and participation for some young people, evidence of consistent behavioural or academic improvement remains inconclusive (Roche et al. 2024; Schoenen et al. 2025). Current evidence instead points towards the importance of individualised, flexible and context-specific approaches that support accessibility and participation, rather than universal interventions applied uniformly across classroom settings.

What the Evidence Tells Us

Overall, the literature suggests that non-attendance cannot be understood through attendance data alone. Barriers to attendance are often practical, emotional, relational and structural, shaped by wellbeing, relationships, peer pressures, unmet needs, family circumstances and wider experiences of inclusion or exclusion. These findings reinforce the importance of approaches that centre young people's lived experiences, relational support and meaningful participation in understanding and responding to non-attendance. Such perspectives underpin the Through the Doors project and inform the analysis of young people's accounts of what helps, hinders and could improve attendance within Carmarthenshire.

How We Listened to Young People

Through the Doors was designed to understand school attendance from the perspective of young people themselves. Rather than focusing solely on attendance figures or rates of absence, the study explored young people's lived experiences of education and the factors that influence whether they feel able, willing and supported to attend and engage with school.

The research engaged young people aged 11 to 16 across Carmarthenshire, including young people attending mainstream education and those accessing alternative or non-mainstream provision. Attention was given to hearing from young people whose experiences of attendance may be less visible within traditional school-based consultation.

A participatory approach was used to create different opportunities for young people to share their experiences, perspectives and ideas. Through surveys, focus groups and more detailed life timeline conversations, young people were able to describe not only the barriers they experienced, but also the relationships, environments and forms of support that helped them to engage with education.

These experiences informed the development of the Through the Doors framework. 'Open Doors' describe the relationships, experiences and conditions that support attendance, engagement and belonging, while 'Closed Doors' capture the barriers that can make attending and engaging with education more difficult.

This approach recognises attendance as more than a measure of whether a young person is physically present in school. It provides an opportunity to understand attendance through young people's experiences of relationships, wellbeing, belonging, inclusion and participation.

Whose Voices Did We Seek to Hear?

A key limitation identified by Estyn (2025) is that 'pupil voice' activity often reflects the views of young people who attend regularly, meaning that the experiences of those with lower levels of attendance, may be less visible. In response, *Through the Doors* intentionally sought to hear from young people whose experiences may be underrepresented within existing data. This included:

- Young people experiencing persistent or severe patterns of non-attendance, providing important insight into the factors that can make sustained engagement with education difficult.
- Young people accessing alternative or non-mainstream provision, capturing different experiences of education, attendance and engagement.
- Young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), who represented 39% of participants, enabling the study to explore how financial and structural inequalities can shape experiences of attendance.

In line with Carmarthenshire's *Education Sir Gâr 2022 to 2032* strategy, the research was grounded in a 'listening to improve' approach. This moves beyond passive consultation towards meaningful participation, ensuring that the lived experiences and perspectives of young people, particularly those whose voices are less often heard, are central to the analysis and used alongside attendance data to develop a fuller understanding of the factors that support or hinder engagement with education.

How We Gathered The Evidence

To develop a comprehensive understanding of attendance, the study drew on a range of complementary methods, bringing together young people's individual experiences, wider patterns in the data, and existing research, policy and practice evidence. This multi-method approach enabled a more detailed and balanced analysis of the factors influencing attendance and engagement.

Four complimentary sources of evidence informed the study:

1. **Survey - 137 young people**

To identify wider patterns and the most common 'Open Doors' and 'Closed Doors' influencing attendance and engagement.

2. **Focus Groups - 69 young people**

To capture the experiences and stories behind the survey findings and explore these in greater depth.

3. **Life Timelines - 5 young people**

To map individual educational journeys, exploring how experiences within and outside school shaped attendance and engagement over time.

4. **Evidence Review - Academic, policy and practice-based evidence**

To provide a focused synthesis of existing evidence relevant to the study and support the context, analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Bringing The Evidence Together

Using different approaches enabled the study to capture both wider patterns and individual experiences. Rather than relying on any single source of evidence, the findings were considered across the survey, focus groups and life timelines, alongside relevant research, policy and practice evidence.

This enabled common themes to be identified, while also recognising differences and complexities within young people's experiences. Bringing the different forms of evidence together strengthened the analysis and provided a richer understanding of the factors that can open or close doors to attendance and engagement.

The research methods were designed to be accessible and appropriate for the young people taking part. Questions and discussion prompts used clear, age-appropriate language, with opportunities for young people to share their experiences in different ways.

Ethics and safeguarding

This study was conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines for educational research (Fox et al., 2024). A collaborative approach was taken with Carmarthenshire Local Authority to ensure that all safeguarding procedures and protocols were adhered to throughout the project.

Youth workers, youth support workers, and education professionals involved in the study were supported to understand and apply the ethical framework in practice. This included clear guidance on informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the research at any stage. These principles were introduced and discussed during initial project meetings and embedded within a practitioner pack, which provided accessible materials to support practitioners in explaining the research process to young people.

Protecting the identity and confidentiality of young people was a central ethical priority. All data was anonymised, with pseudonyms used for both participants and the settings they attended, to reduce the risk of individuals being identified through the research or reporting of the findings. This was particularly important given the localised nature of the research and the inclusion of participants from smaller or specialist educational contexts, where the risk of indirect identification may be heightened.

This approach ensured that participation was voluntary, informed, and ethically grounded, enabling young people to engage in ways that felt safe, respectful, and appropriate to their individual circumstances.

Sharing the findings with young people

Consistent with the project's commitment to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the National Participation Standards, findings will also be shared with young people through a youth-friendly infographic. The infographic will provide an accessible way for participating young people to see how their views have shaped the findings and recommendations emerging from the study (See Appendix 1).

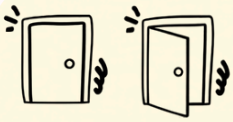
Taken together, these approaches provide a robust and nuanced evidence base, enabling a deeper understanding of the factors influencing attendance and engagement. The following chapter draws on this evidence to present what young people told us about their experiences of education and the 'Open Doors' and 'Closed Doors' that shape attendance and engagement.

Findings: What Young People Told Us

This section presents the key findings from the *Through the Doors* project, drawing together the experiences and perspectives shared by young people across Carmarthenshire.

The findings draw together evidence from the survey, focus groups and life timeline interviews, providing both an overview of wider patterns and a more detailed understanding of young people's individual experiences. Direct quotations are included throughout to ensure that young people's voices remain central to the findings.

Across the research, several recurring themes emerged around young people's experiences of attendance and engagement with education. These included relationships, emotional wellbeing, belonging and mattering, feeling listened to and respected, experiences of learning and the ways in which school environments and systems responded to young people's individual needs.



Open Doors and Closed Doors

Across these themes, young people described experiences that could either support their connection with education or make attendance and engagement more difficult. These have been captured through the *Through the Doors* framework of 'Open Doors' and 'Closed Doors'.
'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.

The themes that follow explore these 'Open Doors' and 'Closed Doors' through young people's own accounts, highlighting both the experiences that supported engagement and those that contributed to disconnection from school.

Theme 1

Feeling at Home: Belonging, Mattering and Emotional Wellbeing

This theme explores young people's emotional experiences of school, including their sense of belonging and mattering, how they feel about attending,and the role of relationships in shaping engagement. It examines the impact of emotional wellbeing and anxiety, the importance of peer relationships and social connection, and the barriers that can emerge when young people become disconnected from school. The theme also explores pupils' experiences of returning following periods of absence, highlighting the social, emotional and academic factors that influence re-engagement with education.

Understanding why young people do not attend school was a central focus of the consultation. Survey responses highlight a range of factors influencing attendance, reflecting the emotional, relational and environmental challenges described by participants. Figure 1.1 presents the key barriers identified by young people.

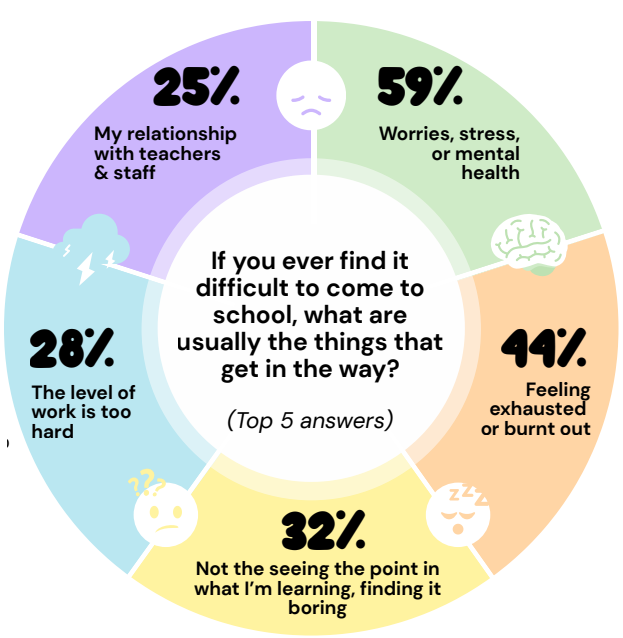


Figure 1.1: Key barriers to school attendance identified by pupils (Through the Doors survey)



Closed Door: When School Feels Overwhelming

While the survey identifies the factors influencing attendance, young people's own words provide a deeper understanding of how these barriers are experienced in everyday school life.

"I feel trapped in school."

"I hate going to school, it makes me ill."

"I don't feel like I belong there.""

"School makes me feel miserable. I'd rather stay in bed and sleep."

Alongside these accounts, young people frequently described mainstream school environments using words such as "depressing", "miserable", "traumatic", "exhausting", "lost" and "dread". Together, these responses illustrate how anxiety, emotional strain and feelings of disconnection can act as powerful brakes on attendance and engagement. For some young people, the experience of attending school itself appears to carry a significant emotional burden, helping to explain why attendance can become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Survey responses reinforced these accounts. Worries, stress and mental health were among the most frequently identified barriers to attendance, alongside fatigue and burnout and factors relating to engagement and relationships within school. These findings were reflected in the experiences described by young people during the focus groups and life timeline interviews.

Young people also spoke extensively about whether they felt that they belonged within school. Their accounts illustrated considerable differences in experiences of connection, safety and recognition across educational settings, including both mainstream and alternative provision.

1.1 How Young People Feel About Going To School

Overall, the survey data indicates that a majority of young people (54%) reported feeling either good or okay/fine about going to school. However, almost one in three young people (31%) expressed more negative feelings about attending school.

Generally, how do you feel about going to school (or wherever you go to learn)?

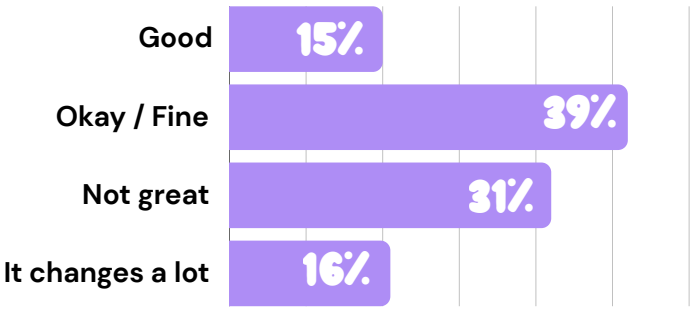


Figure 1.2: Young people's feelings associated with going to school

The focus groups provided further insight into what these negative feelings could mean in practice. Young people described heightened emotional distress, anxiety and apprehension. Participants described feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the school environment, including navigating large and crowded spaces, managing social pressures and coping with the emotional demands of daily attendance.

Young people also reported physical manifestations of this emotional strain, including fatigue, low energy and a sense of depletion associated with the daily routine of attending school. These accounts suggest that attending school can involve considerable emotional and physical effort for some young people, extending well beyond the academic demands of the school day.

Young people were clear that attendance should not come at the expense of wellbeing:

> **"School attendance is just a number and that number doesn't matter cos you end up coming in at some point and you can regain numbers by coming into school. Mental health and well-being is more important."**

This perspective highlights an important message from young people: for some, feeling emotionally well enough to attend needs to come before meaningful engagement with education can take place. The intensity of these experiences is further illustrated in Figure 1.3 below, which shows the range and frequency of negative feelings and associations described by young people in relation to mainstream school environments.

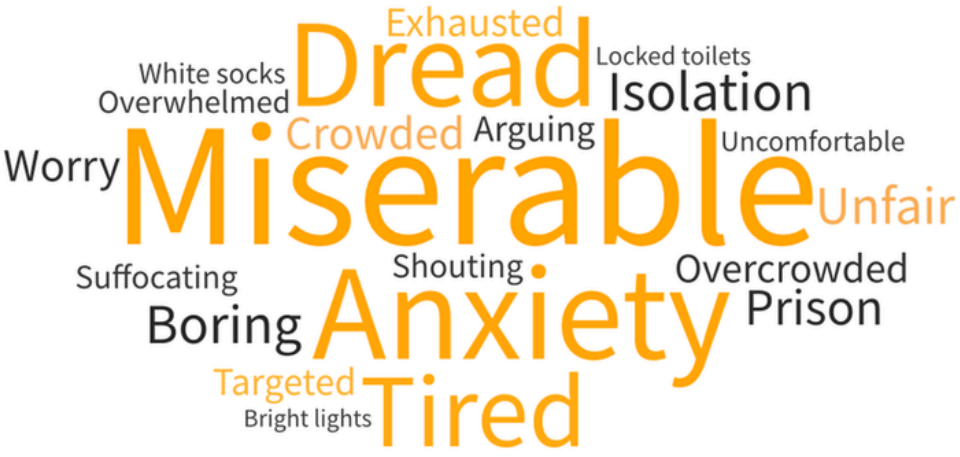


Figure 1.3: Negative feelings and associations described by young people to describe their experiences within a traditional school setting:

Figure 1.3 reflects the predominance of negative emotional responses within the focus group data, highlighting how emotionally demanding the school environment can be for some young people. While many young people associated mainstream school environments with anxiety, pressure and emotional strain,a markedly different picture emerged from young people attending alternative provision. These young people described more positive feelings, relationships and experiences within their current learning environment, often contrasting these with their previous experiences of mainstream school. Figure 1.4 below presents the positive feelings and associations described by these young people.



Figure 1.4: Positive feelings and associations in alternative provision, compared with mainstream school experiences

Open Door: Feeling Safe, Respected and Valued

The experiences shared by young people provide important insight into the factors that support engagement and attendance.

"Now I'm out of mainstream school and in [anonymous alternative provision college] I feel like I belong in one big family."

"I never want to leave here"

"The teachers don't shout here. They listen and speak to me like I'm one of them"

Young people frequently described alternative provision using words such as "relaxing", "comfortable", "supportive", "respected" and "acknowledged". Their accounts also reflected motivation to attend and a strong sense of belonging. Together, these experiences illustrate how positive relationships, emotional safety, feeling listened to and feeling valued can create important conditions that support attendance, engagement and participation.

1.2 The Social Safety Net: Belonging and Peer Relationships

Alongside the emotional challenges described above, peer relationships were identified as a key factor supporting attendance. Figure 1.5 shows that 64% of young people reported that having friends in school encourages them to attend. Focus group discussions provided further insight into the importance of these relationships, with young people describing friendship, social connection and a sense of belonging as important features of their experience of school.

"I only come to school to see my friends. That's the only reason I bother to come in."

For many young people, school functions as an important social space where friendships provide motivation, emotional support, structure and a sense of belonging. For some, friendships appeared to provide a reason to attend even when other aspects of school were difficult, with young people describing friends as their primary reason for coming to school. These accounts suggest that friendships can act as a social safety net, helping some young people to maintain their connection with school despite wider challenges associated with attendance.

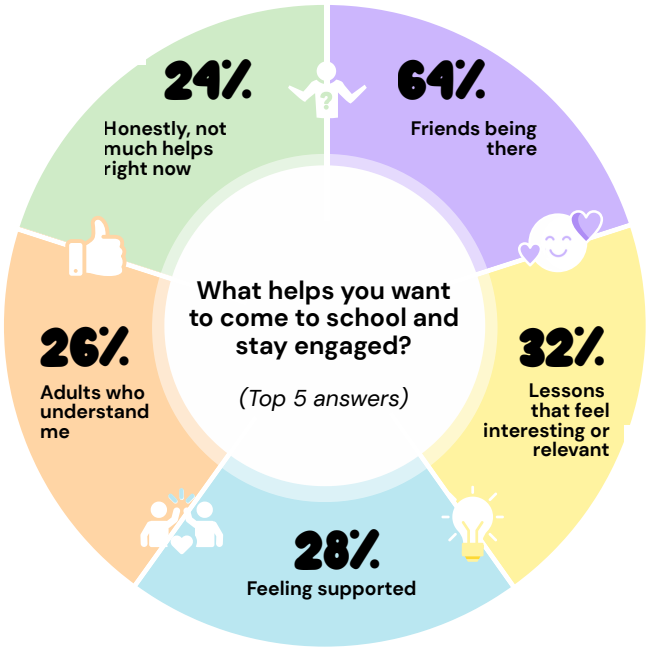


Figure 1.5: Factors identified by young people as supporting attendance and engagement

Closed Door: Unstable Friendship Dynamics

However, the social connections that can encourage attendance may also become a source of difficulty when friendships break down or conflict emerges.

"Arguments with friends and people picking sides is what I hate most about school and sometimes it makes me not want to come in, if I have to spend breaks on my own because of it."

Young people described friendship difficulties, conflict and issues of trust as factors that reduced their willingness to attend, with references to "drama", "fake friends" and ongoing tensions within peer groups. These accounts demonstrate the dual role of peer relationships in shaping attendance: friendships can foster belonging and connection, but when relationships become strained, they can also contribute to isolation, avoidance and disengagement from school.

1.3 Barriers to Re-engagement: Falling Behind and Social Disconnection

Patterns of non-attendance can create additional barriers to re-engagement, making it increasingly difficult for some young people to return to school even when the original reasons for absence have begun to improve. As shown in Figure 1.6 below, young people identified a range of interrelated reasons for missing school, with mental health or anxiety most frequently reported (56%), followed by bullying or feeling unsafe (26%) and feeling too far behind to return (23%).

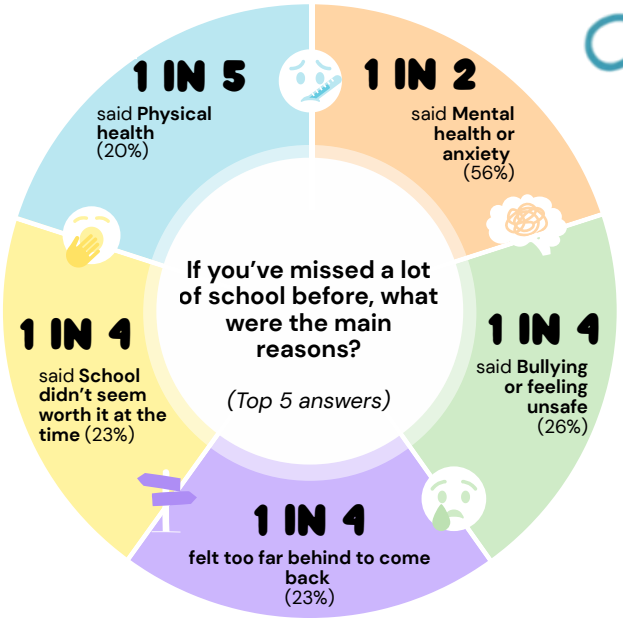


Figure 1.6: Main reasons reported by pupils for missing significant amounts of school

These findings highlight the interplay between emotional, social and academic factors in shaping young people's experiences of absence and return to school.

Closed Door: Missing Too Much to Return

A total of 23.3% of young people who reported missing significant amounts of school indicated that they felt too far behind to return. This finding was echoed throughout the focus group discussions, where young people described both academic and social anxieties associated with returning to school. Concerns about missed learning were frequently compounded by fears of social disconnection, particularly the perception that friendships, peer groups and classroom routines had moved on during their absence:

"Coming back is scary... you think everyone's forgotten you."

"You feel too far behind to even try."

Young people's accounts suggest that absence can become a barrier, with time away from school increasing the emotional, social and academic challengesassociated with returning. They described how concerns about being judged, standing out or drawing attention to themselves often made returning feel overwhelming.

This was evident even when young people described arriving late to a lesson. For some, the discomfort of entering a classroom after others had arrived was significant enough that avoiding school altogether felt preferable:

"Walking into a classroom late, people stare, it's awkward, so I'd rather not go if I'm a bit late."

In response to these challenges, young people identified a range of factors that would support their return to education. Figure 1.7 highlights the importance of reconnecting with peers, feeling welcomed back without judgement, accessing wellbeing support and receiving understanding from trusted adults. Support to catch up with learning in ways that reduce embarrassment also emerged as an important consideration for many young people.

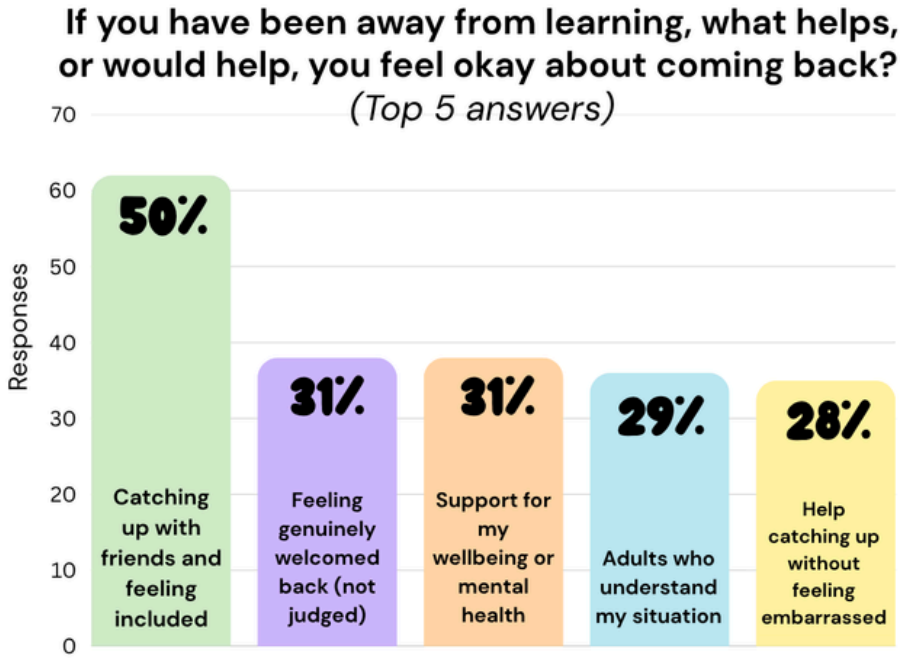


Figure 1.7: Factors identified by young people as supporting re-engagement following absence from learning

Taken together, these findings suggest that successful re-engagement is shaped not only by academic support, but also by relationships, belonging and emotional safety. Young people highlighted the importance of returning to environments where they feel welcomed, understood and supported, rather than judged for their absence. Equally important was reassurance that they could catch up with missed learning without embarrassment, judgement or fear of failure. These findings demonstrate that re-engagement is not simply about catching up academically, but also about rebuilding confidence, connection and a sense of belonging.

Theme 2

Relationships, Respect and 'Open vs Closed Doors'

The quality of relationships between young people and school staff emerged as a prominent theme across the findings. Throughout the *Through the Doors* project, young people described their experiences with staff through a clear distinction between 'Open Doors' that helped them engage with school, and 'Closed Doors' that made engagement and attendance more difficult.

2.1 'Open Door' Experiences and Motivators

The importance of trusted adults emerged consistently across the data, with young people frequently identifying supportive relationships as central to whether they felt able to attend school, remain engaged and seek help when attendance became difficult. Across the survey and focus groups, positive relationships were described as creating 'Open Door' experiences that encouraged participation, reduced anxiety and helped young people to remain engaged with school.

Open Door: Trusted Adult Support

Figure 2.1 presents young people's reported access to trusted adult support during periods when attendance became challenging. Positive relationships emerged as a significant 'Open Door' for attendance. A total of 60.4% of young people reported that there was at least one adult, either within or outside school, they could talk to when attending became difficult. Across the qualitative data, young people also described mutual respect, being listened to and knowing that someone would support them as important features of these relationships.

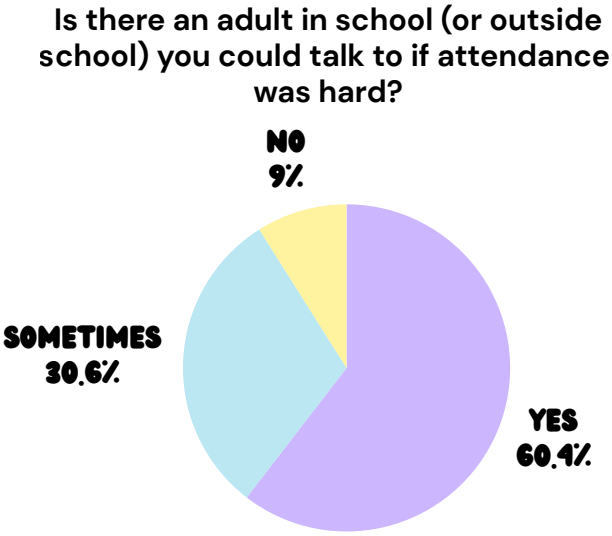


Figure 2.1: Access to trusted adult support during attendance difficulties

The comments below illustrate how trusted adults can make a significant difference to young people's experiences of school, particularly during periods when attendance feels difficult or overwhelming:

> **"To be fair, we get loads of support in this school, there's a few teachers I know I can go to who will try and help me"**

"If I've been off school, [anonymous school-based youth worker] will ask me if I need any support or if everything is okay. This helps me feel better about going back. But other teachers just give me a hard time about it."

"[anonymous school-based youth worker] walks with me to each lesson and encourages me to attend even when I don't want to. Sometimes she rings me in the morning to check on me. If it wasn't for her I probably wouldn't come to school."

"The three best things about school are seeing my friends, going on activities / trips away from the classroom and seeing [anonymous school-based youth worker]"

Across focus group sessions, staff who "actually care", build rapport through informal interaction, and take time to acknowledge young people as individuals were identified as central to creating environments where young people felt able to attend.

Young people rarely described these interactions in formal or official terms; instead, they focused on everyday moments where staff showed understanding, consistency and genuine respect.

A key feature of these positive relationships was the feeling of being listened to and understood. A total of 60.8% of young people (73 responses) identified staff who "actually listen and get it" as the most significant change that would support attendance (explored further in Figure 5.1). This emphasis on being listened to was also evident throughout the focus group discussions, where young people repeatedly linked positive relationships with feeling understood, respected and supported.



Open Door: Supportive Spaces and Practical Adjustments

Young people also highlighted the importance of specific roles and spaces that enabled more supportive interactions within school environments. School-based youth workers and dedicated provision, such as the Hiraeth Centre* , were described as offering non-judgemental and "safe" spaces where young people felt more comfortable seeking support. These environments were frequently contrasted with mainstream classroom settings, where opportunities for informal interaction, relational support and emotional safety were perceived to be more limited.

**Hiraeth Provision is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of the educational setting and participants involved in the study. All educational settings referred to within this report are presented using pseudonyms in accordance with the study's ethical framework.*

"It's good to have Hiraeth Provision, it's a quiet place I can go and sit away from everything if things get too much."

Alongside these relationships and supportive spaces, young people identified practical adjustments that helped make the learning environment more accessible and manageable. Tools such as time-out cards, alongside greater flexibility within classrooms, including the use of headphones to support concentration, were described as helping to reduce pressure and support engagement. These adjustments, while relatively small in practice, were experienced as meaningful forms of support,helping young people to remain in lessons, manage emotional pressures and engage with learning.

"Earphones are banned, but because they help me concentrate, they let me have them. It helps me block out everyone and concentrate."

Across these accounts, 'Open Door' experiences included positive relationships, supportive spaces, flexibility and access to practical support when it was needed. Young people consistently highlighted the importance of feeling listened to, respected and supported, alongside having their individual needs recognised and responded to.

2.2 'Closed Door' Experiences and Relational Barriers

Conversely, poor relationships with staff were identified as a significant 'Closed Door' on attendance. Young people described a range of 'Closed Door' experiences that made them feel disconnected from school, less likely to seek support and, in some cases, less willing to attend.

Closed Door: Shouting, Targeting and Not Listening

Focus group discussions highlighted specific behaviours that contributed to 'Closed Door' experiences, including shouting, a perceived lack of respect, and the sense that staff "hold grudges" following previous incidents. A recurring concern was the perception of being "picked on" or "targeted," which contributed to feelings of disconnection from school. As one young person noted, "Some teachers just hold a grudge," while another stated, "Stop the shouting. It's not hard." Pupils also described situations where they felt staff did not listen to their perspectives, making decisions appear one-sided or unfair. These experiences were frequently linked to a sense that "they don't listen to both sides" and instead "just shout orders," reinforcing feelings of being unheard and misunderstood.

This lack of voice and agency emerged as a significant issue across the findings. As illustrated in Figure 2.2 below, 73.7% of young people reported that adults had either never asked for their views on how to improve attendance, could not remember being asked, or felt that their input had been ignored. This was consistent with focus group accounts, where young people frequently described the importance of being listened to and taken seriously by adults in school.

3 IN 4

young people feel their thoughts and ideas on how to make their attendance better have either never been asked for, or were ignored.

Figure 2.2. Young People's Perceptions of Whether Their Views on Attendance Were Heard

The survey findings were reflected in focus group discussions, where young people described the impact of feeling unheard or excluded from decisions affecting them. For some young people, these interactions contributed to a broader sense of exclusion from the school environment. Where they felt unheard or dismissed, school was sometimes described as restrictive or controlling, with several young people describing mainstream settings as confining.

Closed Door: Inconsistent Support

Inconsistency in relational support also emerged across the findings. Young people described differences in how individual staff responded when they were struggling, including occasions where support had been offered but was not available when they attempted to access it. One young person reflected:

> **"Some staff listen and encourage me to be better, and other staff just don't understand and don't listen to what I'm saying when I'm struggling. They say I can have support and when I turn up they tell me I need to go back."**



Theme 3

Rules, Regulation and Institutional 'Closed Doors'

Beyond interpersonal relationships, young people also identified school systems, disciplinary practices and institutional rules as significant barriers to attendance. Across the data, young people described experiences of regulation, punishment and restricted choice that contributed to perceptions of school as controlling, inflexible and, at times, emotionally unsafe.

"Sometimes you instantly get detention and get called disruptive, but they don't listen to you when you're trying to explain."

3.1 Isolation and Punishment

Experiences of isolation and disciplinary practices were identified as a significant 'Closed Door' within the school environment. Young people frequently described isolation rooms as punitive rather than supportive, using terms such as "harrowing" and "suffocating" to characterise their experiences.

"Sitting in a booth staring at a wall all day doesn't help me want to come to school."

"Isolation just makes you hate school more."

"It's like a punishment for being stressed."

One young person described isolation as feeling "more like being trapped than a place of learning", while others reflected on the emotional impact of spending prolonged periods separated from both peers and classroom activity. Young people described being placed in isolation for extended periods, sometimes in environments with limited interaction, restricted movement and little opportunity to talk. Several young people described being alone "for days at a time", in rooms with "no windows and no talking", reinforcing perceptions of these spaces as emotionally distressing rather than supportive. Young people associated these experiences with feelings of loneliness, frustration and disconnection from both learning and wider school life. Isolation was frequently described as punitive rather than supportive.

A consistent concern across the data was the perception of disproportionate punishment. Young people reported being sent to isolation for what they described as minor infractions, including uniform issues such as hair dye or wearing white socks. One young person reflected that staff "act like you've committed a crime over white socks,"

highlighting how some sanctions were experienced as disproportionate to the behaviour or issue involved. These experiences contributed to feelings of unfairness and inconsistency in the application of school rules.

For some young people, the anticipation of sanctions became a barrier to attendance in itself. This was particularly evident in accounts where young people actively avoided school to prevent being placed in isolation. As one young person explained:

> **"I missed three weeks of school just to avoid a three-day stint in the isolation room."**

This account provides a particularly stark example of how a short-term disciplinary sanction can be associated with a much longer period of absence when the sanction itself becomes something a young person seeks to avoid.

These concerns were also reflected within the "If I was in charge" activity, where young people explicitly identified the removal or reform of isolation rooms as an important change that would make school environments feel more accessible and supportive. Across these accounts, young people described uniform-related 'Closed Doors' in relation to discomfort, perceived unfairness, inconsistent enforcement and limited flexibility. Their concerns often centred not simply on the existence of uniform requirements, but on how rules were applied and how individual circumstances were responded to.

3.2 The Impact of School Uniform Policies

School uniform policies emerged as a significant institutional 'Closed Door' within young people's accounts of attendance and school life, frequently contributing to tension and friction between young people and staff before learning had begun. Across the data, young people described experiences of being "targeted" or "picked on" for issues relating to appearance and uniform compliance. These accounts often centred on what young people perceived to be disproportionate responses to relatively minor infractions, including white socks, jewellery, make-up or hair colour. **As one young person reflected, "They act like you've committed a crime over white socks."**

> **"Getting shouted at the gate for wearing the wrong shoes or white socks."**

> **"Wearing a coat inside because you're freezing and getting detention for it."**

> **"They care more about the uniform than what's in your head."**

> **"Sometimes I'm allowed to wear a PE kit, which is way more comfortable, especially in summer."**

"The uniform rules are just a way to pick on people."

For many young people, these interactions contributed to wider feelings of frustration, unfairness and disconnection from school. Young people described being repeatedly challenged about uniform requirements, often before having the opportunity to enter lessons or engage with learning,

"Teachers are always badgering you about a jumper when it's boiling."

For many young people, the issue was not simply the uniform rules themselves, but the way in which these rules were enforced and how these interactions affected their experiences and relationships with staff.

Sensory and physical discomfort also emerged as important considerations within the focus group discussions. Several young people described school uniforms as "uncomfortable", particularly during warmer periods or where they experienced sensory sensitivities. Some young people suggested that being allowed to wear PE kits throughout the day would help them feel more relaxed, comfortable and "at home" within school environments. Comfort and individual needs were therefore also prominent within young people's accounts of uniform requirements.

Alongside concerns relating to comfort and enforcement, young people also raised broader issues regarding fairness and consistency in how school rules were applied. Only 24.1% of young people surveyed reported that they "definitely" felt school rules about attendance and conduct were fair for everyone. Focus group discussions highlighted perceptions that young people who were "quietly struggling" were often overlooked, while those displaying more visible behavioural difficulties were more likely to receive attention or support. This contributed to perceptions of inconsistency and unequal treatment within school environments.

Financial pressures associated with school uniforms also emerged within the survey findings. A total of 24.2% of young people surveyed identified that additional help with the cost of uniforms would improve attendance. Although not the most prominent issue across the data, the findings show that uniform costs were identified as an additional practical barrier to attendance by some young people.

Across the findings, young people described uniform-related 'Closed Doors' in relation to discomfort, perceived unfairness, inconsistent enforcement and limited flexibility. Their concerns centred not simply on the existence of uniform requirements, but on how rules were applied, the flexibility available to respond to individual circumstances, and how young people were treated when they did not comply.

3.3 Toilet Access, Agency and Emotional Safety

The management of school toilet facilities emerged as a further institutional 'Closed Door' within the findings, with young people describing feelings of anxiety, frustration and a lack of control in relation to access. Across the focus group discussions, young people frequently described restrictions surrounding toilet access as emotionally

distressing and unnecessarily controlling, particularly where toilets were locked or where permission was required to meet basic biological needs. As one young person reflected:

"Needing a 'toilet pass' is just silly."

Another commented:

"It's embarrassing having to ask permission for a biological need."

For some young people, these experiences were associated with heightened anxiety at school. Several young people described toilet facilities as a source of emotional discomfort and stress, with one young person stating simply:

"The toilets make me anxious."

Young people also expressed frustration regarding restrictions on filling water bottles and accessing facilities freely throughout the school day, which some described as contributing to feelings of anger and loss of control.

Concerns regarding privacy and supervision also emerged across the data. Young people described feeling uncomfortable with "supervised toilets" or teachers sitting outside toilet facilities during break times, with some saying it made them feel like they had "no rights" or "no privacy". Their accounts also highlighted concerns about control, trust and dignity within school settings. Overall, young people described toilet access as closely connected to their sense of comfort, privacy and control within school. Where restrictions were experienced as excessive, embarrassing or lacking trust, young people associated them with feelings of anxiety, frustration and a lack of control.

Theme 4

The Building, The Clock, and The Lessons

This theme explores how young people experienced the physical and structural aspects of school, including the timing of the school day, fatigue, sensory experiencesand the condition of school spaces. Across the data, young people described aspects of the school environment that made attending, concentrating and engaging with learning easier or more difficult.

4.1 Timing, Fatigue and the Structure of the School Day

The structure and timing of the school day emerged as a significant factor shaping young people's experiences of attendance and engagement. Across the focus group discussions, many young people described feeling physically exhausted during the school day, particularly during early morning lessons. Several young peopleidentified lack of sleep, tiredness and difficulties managing early starts as barriers to attendance, with some suggesting that later start times or shorter school days would support engagement more effectively. Young people frequently described arriving at school already feeling tired, which they felt affected their concentration, motivation and ability to participate fully in learning. Young people described fatigue as affecting not only how they felt, but also their attendance, concentration and engagement throughout the school day. As one young person reflected:

"Start the day later so we aren't walking around like zombies."

4.2 The Physical Environment, Sensory Experience and Emotional Safety

The physical and sensory environment of school emerged as a significant factor shaping young people's experiences of attendance and engagement. Across the data, young people frequently described school environments as emotionally and physically overwhelming, particularly where buildings were experienced as crowded, noisy, uncomfortable or emotionally restrictive.

Terms such as "depressing", "miserable", "stressful" and "overwhelming" were commonly used to describe aspects of the school environment. Young people also described some classrooms and wider school spaces as "old fashioned" and "out of date", contributing to wider perceptions of school as a place to be endured rather than an environment in which they felt comfortable and supported.

Crowded corridors and communal spaces were frequently identified as particularly challenging. As one young person explained:

"Bumping into people, getting pushed - it makes me angry and scared."

"The hallways are like a stampede."

Sensory experiences emerged consistently across the focus group discussions. Young people identified a range of environmental stressors, including bright classroom lights, overcrowded corridors and canteens, uncomfortable seating and the "gross smell and dirtiness" of school buses.

"Sitting for ages on hard plastic chairs is really uncomfortable and makes me want to get up and move"

Young people therefore identified a range of everyday environmental features as sources of physical discomfort and sensory pressure.

Feelings of social exhaustion and overcrowding also emerged strongly across the findings. Young people frequently described being "forced into crowds" within corridors and shared spaces, with several linking these experiences directly to feelings of anxiety and emotional overwhelm.
One young person reflected:

"Being forced into crowds makes me feel like I'm going to snap."

Such accounts illustrate the extent to which overcrowded environments could become emotionally challenging for some young people during the school day. Similar concerns were described by young people who also reported social anxiety, emotional distress or sensory sensitivities.

Alongside these challenges, young people consistently highlighted the importance of feeling safe within school environments. Many young people identified the need for "safe places" or designated "timeout" spaces within the school day to help manage anxiety, sensory overload and emotional pressure more effectively.

These spaces were described as helping some young people to regulate their emotions and remain engaged during periods of heightened stress or overwhelm. In contrast, some young people described the absence of emotionally safe or low-stimulation environments as contributing to feelings of being "trapped" within mainstream school settings. As one young person reflected:

"Mainstream is just like a prison."

Overall, young people described a range of physical and sensory features of school that affected their comfort and experiences during the school day. Crowded and noisy spaces, uncomfortable physical environments and sensory pressures were frequently identified alongside the importance of access to quieter, emotionally safe spaces when young people felt overwhelmed.

4.3 Curriculum Relevance and Learning Support

Experiences of learning and curriculum engagement emerged as important factors within young people's accounts of attendance and participation within school. Across the data, young people frequently reflected on whether lessons felt meaningful, engaging and relevant to

their lives, future aspirations and individual interests. Where learning was experienced as purposeful and achievable, young people described positive experiences of school. Conversely, lessons perceived as repetitive, disconnected from real life or insufficiently responsive to individual needs were often associated with frustration, disengagement and reduced motivation to attend.

A significant proportion of young people questioned the relevance and purpose of their learning. Around 32% of young people reported finding school difficult because they "don't see the point" of what they are learning or found lessons "boring." For some young people, difficulties attending school were associated with perceptionsthat learning lacked relevance, purpose or interest. In contrast, 55% of young people surveyed identified that "lessons that actually feel useful for real life" would improve attendance. Together, these survey findings show that the relevance and usefulness of learning were important considerations within young people's accounts of attendance and engagement.

These views were reflected throughout the focus group discussions, where young people frequently questioned the purpose and relevance of aspects of their learning. As one young person explained:

> **"Lessons feel completely pointless sometimes".**

Others described difficulties connecting classroom learning to their future aspirations, interests or everyday lives.

The findings also highlight challenges relating to young people's' confidence in accessing and understanding learning. While 32.8% of young people surveyed reported that they could usually keep up with their work and understand what they were being taught, 45.5% indicated that this was only the case "sometimes", and a further 21.6% reported that they did "not really" keep up with or understand their work. For some young people, difficulties engaging with learning were associated with wider feelings of stress, frustration and disengagement during the school day. Figure 4.1 illustrates young people's perceptions of their ability to keep up with and understand what they are being taught:

Do you feel like you can usually keep up with your work and understand what you're being taught?

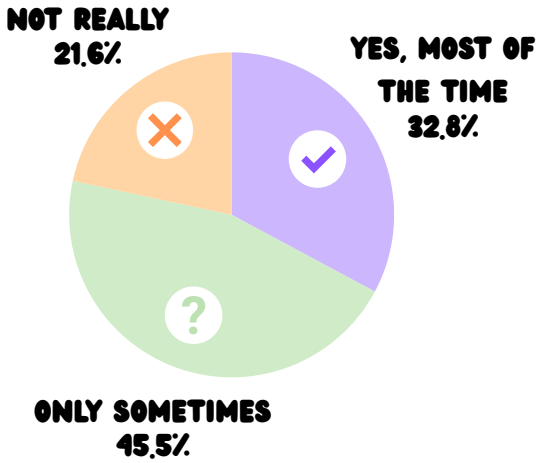


Figure 4.1. Young people's perceptions of their ability to keep up with and understand what they are being taught

Concerns regarding learning support emerged consistently across both the survey and focus group data. Only 19.4% of young people surveyed reported that they "definitely" received support that worked for them when they were struggling with their work, while 29.1% felt they "mostly" received the right help. However, over half of young people surveyed (51.6%) reported either uncertainty or dissatisfaction with the support available, with 28.4% selecting

"in the middle" and 23.2% reporting that the support available did "not really" or "definitely not" work for them. This was particularly notable alongside the 27.8% of young people surveyed who reported finding school difficult because the work was "too hard".

Focus group discussions further highlighted a preference for more practical and applied approaches to learning. Young people frequently expressed a desire for "practical lessons" and "hands-on" projects, contrasting these experiences with what they perceived as prolonged periods of desk-based learning. Several young people suggested that more active and applied forms of learning would improve engagement and make school feel more worthwhile. As one young person reflected:

"You're stuck at a desk for five hours doing stuff that doesn't matter."

Overall, young people's accounts highlighted the importance of learning that felt relevant, achievable and connected to their lives and future aspirations, alongside access to support that worked for them when they experienced difficulties. Practical and applied approaches to learning were also frequently identified as ways of making lessons feel more engaging and worthwhile.

4.4 Learning Differently: Experiences of Alternative and Specialist Provision

Young people attending alternative and specialist educational settings frequently described more positive experiences of attendance, engagement and wellbeing than those they described within mainstream school environments. Across the discussions, young people highlighted the importance of smaller learning environments, respectful relationships and a stronger sense of community. These settings were often characterised as feeling "like a family", where young people felt known as individuals and staff were perceived as approachable, supportive and less reliant on shouting or punitive responses.

As one young person reflected:

"Nobody shouts at you. They talk to you properly."

Young people also valued features such as outdoor learning, activity-based programmes and opportunities to interact with animals, which were described as contributing to calmer and more welcoming environments. For many young people, these experiences were associated with feelings of safety, respect and belonging, which they linked to greater motivation to attend and engage in learning.

Many described feeling better known by staff and more supported as individuals, with several contrasting these experiences with those of larger mainstream settings. As one young person reflected:

"I don't have panic attacks here because the pressure is different."

Young people also valued the greater flexibility available within these environments, including reduced emphasis on school uniform, and opportunities to engage in practical experiences beyond the classroom. These aspects of flexibility were described alongside the outdoor and activity-based opportunities identified above.

These features were often associated with feelings of being respected, trusted and understood. Young people frequently described these settings as calmer and less overwhelming, particularly where there were fewer young people, less noise and fewer crowded spaces.

Relationships emerged as a particularly important feature of these environments. Young people spoke positively about interactions with staff, describing settings where there was “no shouting”, where they felt listened to and where staff took time to understand their individual circumstances. As one young person explained:

"They don't instantly shout at you if you are having a bad day."

Several young people described their provision as feeling “like a family”, highlighting the importance of belonging, familiarity and emotional safety. Another reflected:

"They don't treat every mistake like the end of the world."

Overall, young people associated more positive experiences of attendance and engagement within alternative and specialist provision with smaller and calmer environments, greater flexibility, supportive relationships, practical learning and a stronger sense of belonging. These features were frequently described alongside one another within young people’s accounts of what made these settings feel more manageable and supportive.

Theme 5

Opening the Doors: "If I Was in Charge" – Young People's Solutions for Change

This section moves beyond understanding the barriers affecting attendance and engagement to explore the solutions proposed by young people themselves. A central component of the Through the Doors project was ensuring that young people were not only asked to describe the challenges affecting attendance but were also given the opportunity to identify what they believed would improve their experiences of school. When asked, "If I was in charge…", young people provided highly specific, practical and often relational recommendations aimed at reducing the everyday "Closed Doors" that affect attendance, wellbeing and participation. As illustrated in Figure 5.1, many of these priorities reflected the experiences and concerns identified by young people throughout the wider findings.

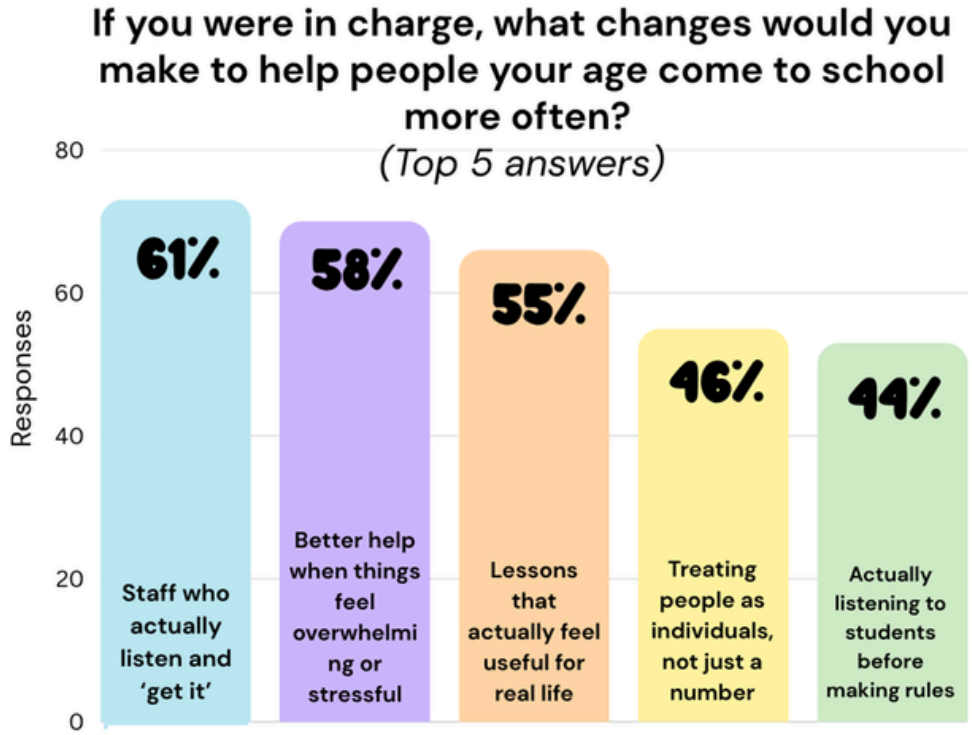


Figure 5.1. Young people's priorities for improving school attendance and engagement

The survey findings show that young people's recommendations focused strongly on relationships, emotional support and feeling listened to. The most frequently identified priority was having staff who listened and understood their experiences (61%), captured by one young person simply as:

"Actually listen and get it".

This was followed by better support when things feel overwhelming or stressful (58%). More than half of the young people surveyed (55%) also identified the importance of lessons that feel useful for real life. Young people further highlighted the need to be treated as individuals rather than "just a number" (46%) and to be listened to before decisions and rules are implemented (44%). Overall, young people's priorities centred on being listened to and understood, having access to support when they were struggling, experiencing learning as relevant and useful, being treated as individuals, and having a meaningful voice in decisions that affected them.

5.1 Relational Shifts and Staff Interaction

The strongest recommendations centred on the quality of interactions between staff and young people. Young people frequently called for a shift away from approaches characterised by shouting, punishment and confrontation towards more relational and supportive forms of communication. Many emphasised the importance of being listened to, understood and treated with respect, describing these as changes that they felt could reduce anxiety and make school environments feel more welcoming and supportive.

"Teachers actually listen".

A recurring recommendation was for staff to move away from "instantly shouting" and take time to listen to young people's concerns and experiences. Young people also highlighted the importance of everyday interactions, including being greeted positively at the start of the day and having opportunities for informal check-ins with staff, rather than immediately focusing on issues such as uniform compliance. Several young people suggested that a friendly welcome would help them feel more comfortable and supported at the beginning of the school day.

Young people frequently spoke about wanting to be treated as individuals rather than "numbers", and suggested that greater trust, independence and mutual respect would improve their experiences of school. Rather than describing relationships with staff as separate from their wider experience of school, young people consistently included being listened to, respected and supported within the changes they believed would help them to attend and engage.

5.2 The Structure of the School Day and Wellbeing

Alongside recommendations relating to relationships and school culture, young people also identified a range of practical changes to the structure and organisation of the school day that they felt would improve attendance and engagement. Many of these recommendations reflected concerns raised throughout the wider findings regarding fatigue, concentration, emotional wellbeing and the pressures associated with navigating the school day.

A recurring recommendation was for later school start times, with several young people suggesting that beginning the day at 10:00am would better reflect their experiences of tiredness and exhaustion and make the school day feel more manageable. These views were consistent with earlier findings, where many young people described arriving at school already feeling fatigued and struggling to concentrate during the early part of the day. Young people also

advocated for shorter lessons, shorter school days and, in some cases, a four-day school week, suggesting that these changes would help reduce stress and feel less exhausting.

Wellbeing support emerged as a further priority. Young people highlighted the need for welcoming wellbeing teams and more flexible opportunities to access support when feeling overwhelmed. Several young people suggested that existing time-out arrangements were often insufficient, recommending longer breaks or access to safe spaces where they could manage sensory or emotional overload. These views were also reflected in the wider survey findings, where 58.3% (70 young people surveyed) identified better support when things feel overwhelming or stressful as a factor that would improve attendance. Young people also emphasised the importance of restorative approaches to conflict. As one young person suggested:

"If people argue, mediate instead of punish."

5.3 Curriculum Relevance and Practical Learning

Young people consistently highlighted the importance of learning that felt meaningful, useful and connected to life beyond the classroom. Many expressed a preference for more practical and hands-on approaches to learning, reflecting wider survey findings in which 55% of young people surveyed identified lessons that feel useful for real life as a factor that would improve attendance. As one young person reflected:

"You're stuck at a desk for five hours doing stuff that doesn't matter."

For some young people, the changes they wanted to see centred on making learning more relevant and useful to their lives. Young people also advocated for more personalised learning opportunities and smaller class sizes that would enable greater participation in practical activities rather than prolonged periods of desk-based learning.

Making learning feel achievable emerged as an equally important consideration. Young people emphasised the importance of work feeling manageable and accessible, particularly for those who struggle to keep up with learning. These recommendations were consistent with earlier findings, where a substantial proportion of young people reported difficulties understanding or keeping up with their work. Young people's recommendations therefore included making learning more relevant, practical and achievable, alongside providing learning experiences that better reflected their individual needs. Alongside recommendations relating to learning and curriculum experiences, young people also identified a range of changes to the wider school environment that they believed would improve attendance, wellbeing and engagement.

5.4 The School Environment, Agency and Choice

While curriculum and learning experiences were viewed as important factors in improving engagement, young people also highlighted the need for greater autonomy, flexibility and comfort within the wider school environment.

Across the discussions, young people identified aspects of school routines and facilities that they felt limited their sense of agency and contributed to feelings of frustration or disengagement.
Access to basic facilities emerged as a recurring concern. Young People frequently questioned the need for toilet passes and restrictions on accessing toilets during the school day, arguing that they should not have to ask permission to meet basic needs. As one young person explained:

"I shouldn't have to ask permission."

Many young people called for greater flexibility in accessing toilet facilities, alongside greater trust and respect for their individual needs.

Young people also expressed a desire for greater involvement in decisions affecting their learning and wider experiences of school. Survey findings indicated that 42% of young people surveyed believed schools should listen to them before introducing rules, highlighting a desire for greater participation in decisions that directly affect them. Similarly, 46% identified being treated as individuals rather than "just a number" as an important factor in improving attendance and engagement. A further 25% identified having more say in how and where they learn as a factor that would improve engagement. Young people also highlighted greater access to safe spaces and timeout areas, alongside more flexible approaches that recognised individual needs and circumstances. Similar themes emerged regarding support following periods of absence, with 39% of young people surveyed identifying the importance of making the return to school less stressful or intimidating.

The physical comfort of school environments was also identified as an area for improvement. Young people suggested providing more affordable and appealing food options, more comfortable seating and greater flexibility regarding school uniforms, including access to more comfortable fabrics or the option of wearing PE kits. These recommendations were consistent with concerns raised elsewhere in the findings regarding sensory experiences, emotional wellbeing and young people's experiences of the school environment.

Discussion and Analysis: Integrating Young People's Experiences of Attendance, Engagement and Belonging

The findings from Through the Doors highlight the complex and interconnected nature of school attendance and engagement. Across the study, young people described how emotional wellbeing, relationships, peer dynamics, school systems, the physical and sensory environment and experiences of learning shaped whether school felt accessible, supportive and worth attending. While these factors were presented separately within the findings, young people's accounts demonstrateconsiderable interaction between them. Attendance difficulties rarely appeared to exist in isolation, but were connected to young people's wider everyday experiences of school.

The distinction between 'Open Doors' and 'Closed Doors' provides a useful way of understanding these experiences. 'Open Door' experiences were associated with feeling listened to, respected and valued, having supportive relationships, experiencing a sense of belonging and being able to participate in learning and school life. Conversely, 'Closed Door' experiences were associated with anxiety, disconnection, feeling unheard, punitive or inflexible practices and environments or learning experiences that some young people found difficult to manage. 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.

The discussion that follows considers these findings alongside wider research, children's rights and participation frameworks and the evolving Welsh policy context. It explores three closely connected dimensions of young people's experiences: belonging, relationships and emotional safety; voice, agency, dignity and institutional culture; and the environmental and educational experience of attendance, before considering what young people's own recommendations reveal about these experiences.

6.1 Belonging, Relationships and Emotional Safety

The findings highlight the importance of belonging, emotional wellbeing and relationships in shaping school attendance. Emotional responses to school, including anxiety, fatigue and a sense of disconnection, were evident across the data and appear to influence both initial attendance and longer-term patterns of engagement. These patterns suggest that attendance is not just a behavioural issue but is closely connected to how young people experience school on a daily basis. This includes the extent to which they feel safe, valued, listened to and able to participate within school environments, as reflected within children's rights and participation frameworks (United Nations, 1989; Lundy, 2007).

The data also highlights how periods of absence can create further challenges over time. Where young people experience ongoing emotional distress or difficulties in their relationships and connections within school, periods of non-attendance can create additional barriers to re-engagement, including feelings of falling behind and social disconnection. In this way, absence can become increasingly difficult to overcome, as emotional, social and practical barriers build over time. Re-engagement therefore needs to be understood not simply as a return to physical attendance, but in relation to the wider experiences that may make returning to school difficult.

These findings reflect wider research showing that young people are more likely to engage when they feel a sense of belonging, have opportunities to participate and are supported by positive relationships (Allen et al., 2018; Jetten et al., 2017). Abdallah's (2024) work highlights that young people can formally belong to a school while still feeling invisible or insignificant. The related concept of mattering extends this further by considering whether young people feel valued and able to contribute meaningfully within their school community. This is particularly relevant to the accounts within Through the Doors, where young people repeatedly emphasised the importance of being noticed, listened to, understood and treated as individuals.

Relationships were a recurring theme throughout the findings. Research highlights the important role of trusted adults and positive relationships in supporting engagement with education. Reynolds (2024), through the Trusted Adult Guarantee, argues that sustained and meaningful relationships with adults are central to wellbeing, engagement and longer-term outcomes. Schools are therefore positioned not simply as sites of academic learning, but as relational environments in which trust, emotional regulation and connection are developed through consistent interactions with adults and peers.

Within Through the Doors, young people frequently differentiated between 'Open Door' and 'Closed Door' experiences through the quality of their interactions with staff. This aligns with relational inclusion approaches, which emphasise belonging, trust, co-regulation and meaningful participation rather than relying primarily upon compliance-driven responses to behaviour and disengagement (Benedict and Braven, 2025).

Importantly, young people could experience supportive and unsupportive relationships within the same school. Having access to an individual trusted adult did not necessarily mean that the wider school environment was experienced as relationally supportive. This highlights the importance of relational consistency across the school and raises questions about how belonging, emotional safety and relational approaches become embedded within everyday school culture rather than being dependent upon individual members of staff.

Peer relationships were also important. Friendships could provide motivation, emotional support and a sense of belonging, while friendship breakdown, conflict and peer pressures could contribute to anxiety, isolation and disconnection. Wider research similarly highlights this dual role, with peer relationships operating as both sources of connection and potential emotional pressure.

These findings align with the shift within Belonging, Engaging and Participating (Welsh Government, 2023), which increasingly frames attendance

through belonging, wellbeing and participation rather than compliance alone. However, the findings also highlight a potential tension between these aspirations and some young people'slived experiences, particularly where relationships were experienced as punitive, inconsistent or dismissive.

Taken together, the findings suggest that attendance cannot be understood solely as an issue of individual motivation or behaviour. Young people's accounts demonstrate the importance of whether school is experienced as relationally safe, respectful and consistent, and whether they feel that they belong and matter within the school community.

6.2 Voice, Agency, Dignity and Institutional Culture

The findings reflect wider research suggesting that exclusionary and punitive practices can contribute to disengagement from school rather than supporting re-engagement. Across the data, young people consistently described isolation as emotionally distressing, relationally disconnecting and closely associated with feelings of exclusion from both learning and school life. This aligns with emerging evidence on internal exclusion and classroom removal practices. Thornton et al. (2025) found that young people experiencing isolation reported lower levels of belonging, reduced wellbeing and weaker relationships with staff, while Power and Taylor (2024) highlight how informal removal practices can similarly contribute to lost learning, disconnection and reduced engagement within mainstream settings.

The findings also reinforce concerns regarding the unintended consequences of compliance-led approaches to behaviour and attendance. Young people frequentlyassociated isolation and disciplinary sanctions with feelings of unfairness, humiliation and anxiety, particularly where sanctions were perceived as disproportionate or inconsistently applied. For some young people, the anticipation of isolation itself became a barrier to attendance. This highlights a potential tension between practices intended to regulate behaviour and their unintended impact on attendance and engagement.

These experiences were closely connected to young people's wider accounts of voice, agency and participation. Lundy's (2007) model emphasises that participation involves more than simply giving young people a voice; young people require space to express their views, an appropriate audience to hear them and opportunities for their views to have influence. Throughout Through the Doors, young people repeatedly highlighted the importance of feeling heard, understood and taken seriously. Their accounts suggest that participation was connected to wider experiences of recognition, respect and agency, particularly where decisions and rules directly affected their everyday experiences of school.

School uniform, toilet access and disciplinary practices provide different examples of how institutional rules were experienced in everyday school life. Wider evidence highlights concerns regarding the potential impact of punitive uniform enforcement on belonging, inclusion and participation (Ansari et al., 2021; Children in Wales, 2024; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023; Welsh Government, 2023). Restrictions surrounding toilet access and supervision were similarly experienced by some young people as affecting privacy, dignity and autonomy.

Importantly, the findings suggest that it was not necessarily the existence of rules that young people experienced as a

'Closed Door', but how those rules were applied, explained and experienced. Perceptions of fairness, consistency and flexibility, alongside whether young people felt listened to when explaining their circumstances, were particularly important. Isolation, uniform and toilet access may appear to be very different issues, but young people's accounts reveal a common underlying concern: the extent to which everyday institutional practices communicated trust, respect, fairness and dignity.

This extends the relational analysis beyond individual interactions with members of staff. School systems and rules were themselves experienced relationally. How expectations were communicated and enforced could influence whether young people felt trusted and respected or controlled and excluded.

These findings raise important questions in relation to current Welsh policy directions. The Welsh Government's Framework on Embedding a Whole-School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being promotes a preventative and relational approach in which emotional wellbeing, belonging and participation are central to engagement within school communities. However, wider evidence also identifies challenges relating to capacity, increasing learner need, staff wellbeing and inconsistencies in implementation.

The findings therefore highlight a potential tension between rights-based, relational and wellbeing-oriented policy aspirations and how some everyday institutional practices were experienced by young people. Institutional practices are not experienced simply as procedures or behavioural expectations. They contribute to young people's wider perceptions of school culture and can operate as 'Open' or 'Closed Doors' depending upon whether young people experience them as fair, respectful, proportionate and responsive to their circumstances.

6.3 Attendance as an Environmental and Educational Experience

The findings draw attention to the often-overlooked role that physical, sensory and educational environments play in shaping attendance and engagement. Across the findings, young people described how the organisation of the school day, the characteristics of school spaces and their experiences of learning influenced whether school felt manageable, welcoming and worthwhile.

Recent evidence from Wales highlights ongoing concerns relating to learner wellbeing, sleep and school experiences among young people (Page et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2025). While fatigue did not emerge as a dominant theme within this study, several young people identified tiredness and difficulties managing early starts as affecting their concentration, motivation and participation in learning. This suggests that attendance and engagement may be influenced not only by relational and emotional factors, but also by practical aspects of how the school day is organised and experienced.

The findings relating to the physical environment highlight the importance of considering attendance as an environmental as well as a relational experience. Young people frequently described overcrowding, sensory discomfort and limited access to safe or low-stimulation spaces as barriers to engagement. The literature further highlights how sensory aspects of school environments, including clothing, noise, visual environments and wider sensory overload, can shape young people's comfort, emotional regulation and capacity to engage. Evidence points towards the importance of individualised,

flexible and context-specific approaches rather than universal responses applied in the same way to all young people.

These experiences also resonate with wider evidence relating to Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), where anxiety and emotional distress can contribute to difficulties attending school, with avoidance sometimes functioning as a way of managing that anxiety. Through the Doors did not seek to identify young people experiencing EBSA specifically, and the findings should therefore not be interpreted as identifying EBSA among the young people involved. However, their accounts of anxiety, sensory overwhelm and environments experienced as emotionally difficult or unsafe reinforce the importance of recognising the emotional and environmental dimensions of attendance difficulties.

The physical environment therefore cannot be understood simply as a neutral backdrop to attendance and learning. For some young people, the sensory and physical experience of being in school formed part of whether the school day felt manageable and emotionally safe. Importantly, these experiences may not be readily captured through attendance data alone. This is particularly significant given Estyn's observation that pupil voice activity can disproportionately reflect young people who attend regularly, leaving the experiences of those with lower attendance less visible.

The findings also reinforce wider evidence that engagement is strengthened when learning is experienced as meaningful, relevant and accessible. Curriculum for Wales places learner voice, participation and authentic learning experiences at the centre of educational practice, emphasising the importance of helping learners make connections between their learning and life beyond the classroom (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022).

Similar issues emerged within this study, where young people frequently linked engagement to the perceived relevance and usefulness of what they were being taught. The findings also raise questions regarding the extent to which some young people experience learning in ways that align with the aspirations of Curriculum for Wales. This was particularly evident in Figure 4.1, where over two-thirds of young people surveyed reported only sometimes, or not usually, being able to keep up with and understand their learning.

Importantly, curriculum engagement was not simply about whether young people considered learning interesting or relevant. Their accounts also highlight the importance of whether learning felt accessible and achievable and whether appropriate support was available when they were struggling. Participation in learning therefore depends not only upon what is taught, but also upon whether young people feel able to understand, engage with and succeed in that learning. Young people's preference for practical, hands-on and more personalised learning further reinforces the importance of learning feeling purposeful, achievable and connected to their interests, experiences and future aspirations.

The experiences described by young people attending alternative and specialist educational settings provide a further perspective. Young people frequently contrasted the smaller, calmer and more relational nature of these environments with their experiences of mainstream education. They valued supportive relationships, greater flexibility, practical learning, feeling recognised as individuals and environments characterised by trust, respect and belonging.

These findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that alternative provision models can be directly replicated within all mainstream settings. Differences in scale, staffing, resources and organisational culture inevitably shape how such approaches can be enacted in practice. Nevertheless, the experiences described by young people provide valuable insight into the conditions they associated with more positive experiences of attendance and engagement.

Taken together, the findings suggest that attendance is shaped not only by individual motivation or behaviour, but by the extent to which educational environments are experienced as manageable, meaningful and emotionally safe. This broadens the understanding of attendance beyond whether a young person is physically present in school towards consideration of what they experience once they are there and whether the environment enables them to participate, engage and learn.

6.4 Listening to Young People: Participation, Relationships and Engagement

The recommendations made by young people reinforce the wider findings of Through the Doors, particularly the importance of relationships, trust, recognition, meaningful learning, agency and emotional safety in shaping attendance and engagement. Importantly, young people's recommendations provide insight not only into what they would like to change, but also into the underlying experiences and conditions that make attendance and engagement more difficult.

The value of these recommendations lies not necessarily in their direct implementation, but in what they reveal about the underlying issues young people are seekingto address. Suggestions such as later school start times, shorter school days and four-day school weeks would represent significant departures from established educational structures and practices. However, these recommendations highlight the extent to which young people perceived tiredness, stress and emotional wellbeing as influencing their experiences of school and their capacity to attend, participate and learn.

Similarly, recommendations for more practical, hands-on and personalised approaches to learning highlight the importance young people placed on learning being meaningful, relevant and accessible. Curriculum for Wales places learner voice, authentic learning and real-world relevance at the centre of educational practice, emphasising the importance of helping learners make connections between their education and life beyond the classroom (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022). Young people's recommendations reinforce the importance of ensuring that they feel able to access, understand and succeed in their learning, alongside experiencing learning as purposeful and connected to their lives and future aspirations.

The recommendations relating to agency, participation and the wider school environment reinforce broader evidence highlighting the importance of young people's voice and involvement in decisions that affect everyday school experiences. Consistent with Lundy's (2007) model of participation and the National Participation Standards for Wales, young people emphasised the importance of being listened to, treated as individuals and having meaningful opportunities to influence aspects of school life. These findings suggest that attendance and engagement may be shaped not only by formal educational processes, but also by the extent to which young people experience autonomy, respect and recognition

within school environments. Many of the issues identified related to routine aspects of school organisation, demonstrating how everyday practices can influence feelings of belonging, trust and participation.

Taken together, the recommendations generated by young people suggest that improving attendance requires attention not only to individual circumstances, but also to the relational, educational and environmental conditions that shape everyday experiences of school. The findings demonstrate that young people possess valuable insight into the barriers affecting attendance and are able to identify practical and meaningful solutions. Consistent with the participatory ethos of the project, these recommendations highlight the importance of involving young people as active partners in efforts to improve attendance, wellbeing and engagement.



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.

Through the Doors

WHAT YOU TOLD US
ABOUT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE
in Carmarthenshire

THE BRAKES
(stuff that makes school hard)

ARGUMENTS
falling out with friends or **being bullied.**

DISCOMFORT
scratchy **uniforms**, uncomfortable **chairs, & bright lights.**

ISOLATION ROOMS
stuck in a confined space for a long time over what can feel like a minor issue.

59% said **worries, stress, & bad mental health**

44% said feeling **too tired or 'burnt out'**

1 IN 3 said **bad relationships with teachers**

FEELING TARGETED
being **'picked on' for behaviour** and small things like **white socks.**

OVERCROWDING
crowded hallways and canteens are really off-putting.

LOCKED TOILETS
limiting bathroom access is causing a lot of **anxiety and anger.**

THE FUEL
(stuff that makes school easier)

TRUSTED ADULTS
60% said there is at least **one trusted adult they can speak to** when attendance gets hard

FRIENDSHIPS
2 IN 3 said **friends being there** to get through the day with

DITCHING THE DESKS
hands-on projects, activities, and visits outside the classroom help to keep focus!

WELLBEING SPACES
quiet and calming areas to escape to when things get overwhelming.

SMALL TOOLS
easy adjustments, like headphones and time-out cards to help cope.

WHY THIS MATTERS
Your voice is being shared with leaders to help **shape learning spaces into places where everyone feels welcome and wants to show up.**

YOUR IDEAS FOR CHANGE...

- ☑ Calmer staff communication with less raised voices
- ☑ Lessons that feel useful for real life
- ☑ Unlock toilets
- ☑ More flexible uniform rules when needed
- ☑ Staff who "actually listen and get it"
- ☑ Get our thoughts before making new school rules

"School attendance is just a number... mental health and wellbeing are more important."

Youth Work Leadership Lab
Labordy Arweinyddiaeth Gwaith Ieuenctid

promo cymru

Cyngor Sir Gâr
Carmarthenshire County Council

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