

<b>Meeting of:</b>	<b>SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1</b>
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>8 MAY 2025</b>
<b>Report Title:</b>	<b>PUPIL BEHAVIOUR, ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSIONS</b>
<b>Report Owner / Corporate Director:</b>	<b>LINDSAY HARVEY CORPORATE DIRECTOR - EDUCATION, EARLY YEARS AND YOUNG PEOPLE</b>
<b>Responsible Officer:</b>	<b>GAIL BIGGS GROUP MANAGER - INCLUSION  MARK LEWIS GROUP MANAGER - EARLY YEARS AND YOUNG PEOPLE</b>
<b>Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:</b>	<b>There is no effect on policy framework or procedure rules.</b>
<b>Executive Summary:</b>	<p><b>Issues regarding pupil behaviour in Bridgend schools have risen due to multiple factors, with the COVID-19 pandemic playing a key role. Challenges include mental health concerns, resource limitations, and societal issues, leading to increased exclusions and disruptions.</b></p> <p><b>The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate is implementing strategies to improve behaviour, attendance, and pupil wellbeing. While progress has been made, persistent absenteeism and behavioural concerns remain a challenge.</b></p> <p><b>The local authority has seen improvements in attendance, exceeding the all-Wales average, but disparities across schools remain.</b></p> <p><b>Support services, including wellbeing programmes and attendance initiatives, are in place to address these issues.</b></p> <p><b>Ongoing collaboration and sustained efforts are crucial to achieving long-term improvements in school environments.</b></p>

## **1. Purpose of report**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 (SOSC1) on the current position relating to pupil behaviour, wellbeing, exclusions and attendance in Bridgend schools.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 The increase in behavioural issues in Bridgend schools, and nationally, stems from a complex interplay of factors, with the pandemic serving as a significant catalyst. The challenges range from mental health concerns to resource limitations and broader societal issues.
- 2.2 Addressing behavioural problems in schools requires a multi-faceted approach that considers both the immediate management of disruptive behaviour and the underlying causes. The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate ('the directorate') has begun to implement strategies and targeted interventions to monitor pupil wellbeing, improve behaviour, reduce exclusions and support increases in pupil attendance.
- 2.3 There is no quick resolution to the issues we are currently faced with. However, understanding the factors is essential towards developing effective interventions that can improve the educational environment and outcomes for all learners and staff across Bridgend schools.
- 2.4 The interconnected nature of attendance, behaviour and wellbeing issues highlights the importance of holistic approaches. The directorate demonstrates clear ambition to improve outcomes. However, success will depend on sustained collaborative efforts across all three domains amid the context of potential budget constraints and the continuing aftereffects of the pandemic.
- 2.5 Recent data has revealed concerning trends in pupil behaviour across Bridgend schools and in schools throughout Wales. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant and lasting effect on learner behaviour. Following the end of the pandemic-related restrictions, schools have experienced deteriorating standards of behaviour with noticeable consequences.
- 2.6 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) reports the number of violent incidents in Welsh schools has nearly tripled since 2019, rising from 2483 in 2019-2020 to 6446 in 2023-2024. Over a third (35.5%) of teachers reported being physically abused or attacked by pupils in the past year while 92% experienced verbal abuse. Nationally, poor pupil behaviour is damaging teacher morale, with 79% reporting negative impacts and 55% considering leaving the profession.

- 2.7 The Children in Wales Member's Report 2022 on the impact and legacy of COVID-19 highlights that the pandemic lockdown measures inadvertently intensified household stressors, increasing the risks of domestic abuse, parental substance misuse, and neglect. Children in South Wales, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, experienced heightened exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) due to confined living conditions and limited access to protective community services.
- 2.8 Prolonged social isolation and disrupted education negatively impacted students' emotional regulation and socialisation skills. The Children's Society found that 69% of teachers in Wales attributed post-lockdown behavioural challenges, such as aggression and defiance, to pandemic-induced developmental delays. Neurodiverse pupils and those with pre-existing mental health conditions were disproportionately affected, as remote learning often failed to meet their specific needs.
- 2.9 The behaviours being witnessed are predominantly increases in verbal and physical aggression towards adults and other children, along with persistent disruptive behaviour.
- 2.10 A Co-SPACE study was created to collect data from parents/carers of children and young people aged 4-16 years. The Co-SPACE study tracked parents, children and young people's mental health between March 2020 and July 2021. This was followed up with participating families between March 2022 and March 2023. The Co-SPACE study documented a 35% increase in emotional dysregulation among primary school-aged children during lockdowns, with persistent symptoms observed upon their return to school. These factors contributed to a challenging environment marked by frustration and disengagement, often manifesting as verbal and physical aggression towards staff. The study found that secondary school pupils reported a reduction in emotional difficulties and an increase in restlessness during lockdown periods.
- 2.11 Educators faced the difficult task of managing heightened behavioural issues while simultaneously navigating their own pandemic-related stress. A 2023 NASUWT survey revealed that 84% of Welsh teachers reported declining mental health, with 61% citing inadequate support from senior leadership as a primary stressor.
- 2.12 Schools struggling with behavioural issues sometimes resorted to punitive measures, including fixed-term exclusions and reduced timetables. However, these approaches can exacerbate marginalisation. Excluded pupils face a significantly increased risk of criminal exploitation. The NASUWT found that 65% of Welsh schools rely on outdated behaviour policies, ill-equipped to address post-pandemic challenges, with 49% of teachers reporting leadership's reluctance to revise existing protocols.
- 2.13 Declining mental health has played a crucial role in behavioural challenges learners are exhibiting. During the pandemic lockdown periods, self-reported mild or severe depression doubled with around one third of adults, nationally, reporting that their

mental health was worse than before the pandemic. Young people have been particularly affected. The pandemic created significant disruptions to their social development, routines and sense of security. As schools returned to in-person learning, many pupils struggled to adjust to structured environments after extended periods of isolation and altered learning conditions.

- 2.14 The connection between wellbeing issues and attendance is notable, addressing wellbeing concerns are key in ensuring pupils reach their full potential in all aspects of life, including achieving a good education. Wellbeing interventions are seen as not just supporting learners' mental health but as fundamental to improving educational outcomes.
- 2.15 Local authority officers and schools work collaboratively with Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as part of the Schools In Reach Emotional Wellbeing Service (SHINE). The SHINE project aims to:
- offer school-based psychoeducation for children and young people, school staff and parents/carers;
  - provide access for both individual and group-based sessions within school;
  - increase confidence in promoting and addressing emotional health issues;
  - support school staff to discuss and raise safeguarding issues;
  - assist with identifying vulnerable groups or factors that may influence vulnerability of our children and young people;
  - offer training for school staff to build confidence as trusted adults; and
  - provide consultations for secondary schools to discuss concerns.
- 2.16 The Health and Well-being Promoting Educational Settings Programme Co-ordinator for Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board has met with local authority officers to discuss the scheme priorities for 2025-2026. Health practitioners continue to support schools to work towards the standards set out in the Welsh Network of Healthy School Scheme National Quality Award (NQA) Framework until the launch of the new standards.
- 2.17 Despite Welsh Government guidance advocating for trauma-informed schools, only 22% of educators report receiving related training. Untrained staff may misinterpret trauma symptoms as defiance, potentially triggering exclusionary cycles.
- 2.18 Trauma-informed practice can significantly reduce exclusions by creating a more supportive and understanding environment for pupils, addressing the root causes of challenging behaviours, and fostering positive relationships. This approach prioritises the emotional, social and psychological well-being of pupils, promoting a sense of safety and belonging, which can lead to improved engagement and reduced disciplinary issues.

- 2.19 Community-focused schools play a prominent role in tackling the impact of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage on educational attainment. High-quality learning and teaching has a major impact on the outcomes of socio-economically disadvantaged learners, but the home environment and the wider community are also significant influences. By working collaboratively across schools, homes and the community we can support our children and young people more effectively.
- 2.20 Research shows that a well-developed community school approach can improve attendance, behaviour, attainment and aspirations of children and young people (Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools, Rand (2020)).
- 2.21 The family engagement officer (FEO) role has been highlighted as being effective in bridging the gap between children and their parents and families in their home life contexts and school staff and school contexts. Many parents and family members may have had a poor educational experience themselves and may be anxious when engaging with the school. The FEOs can help to understand these broader factors and support all parents to feel valued, welcomed, listened to and supported.
- 2.22 The local authority has made good progress in improving pupil attendance rates since the pandemic with current figures above the all-Wales average. However, significant challenges remain across the attendance, behaviour and wellbeing domains. The 'Team Bridgend' approach continues to be a cornerstone of educational strategy, though recent incidents and persistent absenteeism indicate ongoing obstacles that require sustained attention and resources.
- 2.23 Poor pupil attendance creates cycles where learners fall behind academically, causing frustration and disengagement that can manifest as behavioural issues when they do attend. The local authority in collaboration with schools across Bridgend have been implementing various measures to address this including the 'Miss School, Miss Out' campaign to emphasise the importance of school attendance. These strategies aim to improve pupil confidence, self-esteem and sense of belonging.
- 2.24 The inappropriate use of social media has been identified as a contributing factor to behavioural problems. There is an increase in inappropriate social media use among learners. The pandemic accelerated the integration of technology into young people's lives, often with limited supervision. Social media has created new avenues for conflict, cyber bullying and exposure to inappropriate content that may manifest as behavioural issues in school settings.

### **3. Current situation/proposal**

- 3.1 The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate has set a clear target to improve pupil attendance rates demonstrating a commitment to addressing these issues through measurable objectives.

- 3.2 Despite positive initiatives and collaborative approaches, there are concerns about the sustainability of support services due to financial pressures. Diminishing resources have hampered schools' ability to address behavioural challenges effectively. Of the 60 schools in Bridgend, 40 (33 primary, 5 secondary and 2 (both) special schools) in Bridgend County were expected to run a budget deficit for 2024-2025. These financial pressures have significant implications for behaviour management.
- 3.3 Schools have made cuts to school therapeutic staff that has impacted behaviour management capabilities. The lack of funding for staff replacement has resulted in teachers having to cover multiple subjects, reducing their effectiveness. Some schools have had to exclude pupils for the first time because the pupils were not receiving appropriate support, causing their behaviour to deteriorate.
- 3.4 Early intervention and proactive measures to manage dysregulation in schools have been significantly reduced due to the reduction in support staff available in schools.

### **Inspire 2 Work/Achieve**

- 3.5 The Inspire 2 Work/Achieve programmes provide a vital engagement and support service for young people aged 11 to 25 within the county and is central to support those children who are or could be at risk of not being in education, employment or training (NEET). The project operates under the core principles of the Welsh Government's Youth Engagement and Progression Framework, with a strong focus on early identification of young people who are not maximising their potential during statutory education.
- 3.6 By engaging young people early and providing positive role models and opportunities, Youth Work helps to prevent issues such as unemployment, anti-social behaviour, or mental health struggles from escalating. By addressing and removing physical and emotional barriers, the initiative ensures that young people are 'work ready' when they leave statutory education, equipping them to transition into sustainable employment.
- 3.7 The project directly supports the local authority in meeting its commitments within the Corporate Plan (Wellbeing Objectives 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7). Specifically, it contributes to increasing employment and training opportunities for young people aged 16 to 24 within the county borough. A key focus of the project is targeting the most vulnerable young people through a comprehensive tracking exercise. This approach helps to build resilience and provides tailored support to enable them to reach their full potential.
- 3.8 Following the adoption this year of a minimum operating model across all projects funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund, the operating budget for the directorate's Inspire+ projects has been reduced from £1,562,423 to £960,520. An earmarked reserve of £112,375 is also available. These projects provide vital support to

vulnerable pupils and young people, many of whom face behavioural challenges and/or attendance issues in both school and community settings. This reduction in funding will inevitably result in less support for young people.

- 3.9 A managed move in Wales is a voluntary process designed to provide a pupil with a fresh start at a new school, often as an alternative to permanent exclusion. It is a planned transfer, agreed upon by the school, parents, and potentially the local authority, with the aim of alleviating difficulties the pupil is experiencing in their current placement. Managed moves ensure the pupil is not formally excluded from their previous school.
- 3.10 The directorate has adopted a new Managed Move Protocol in March 2025 taking account of Welsh Government's circular 'Effective Managed Moves – a fresh start at school for children and young people' and following consideration of the Newport Managed Move Protocol, which has been identified as good practice by regulators. Managed moves are an important tool in providing pupils with the opportunity of a fresh start in a new school. They can also reduce the need for permanent exclusions and minimise the negative outcomes associated with them. Schools will need to demonstrate that they have explored and utilised all strategies/support mechanisms available to them and be able to evidence that these have met with limited or no success. They can also reduce the need for permanent exclusions and minimise the negative outcomes associated with them. At the core of any managed move must be the best interest of the child in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the seven core aims in the Welsh Government document 'Children & Young People: Rights to Action.'
- 3.11 The Communication and Relationships Team (CART) has established regular training programmes to upskill school staff. Training recently delivered includes Lego Therapy, Massage Stories and Positive Relationships and De-escalation. All training will be reviewed and updated as required to reflect the current needs of pupils and the resulting demands and pressures on schools. The CART has delivered Team Teach Level 1 training to 12 schools this school year, training nearly 400 staff in the key values of de-escalation and appropriate physical interventions where reasonable, proportionate and necessary. The CART has also delivered Team Teach Level 1 training to additional support officers within the directorate to ensure they are able to best support learners they work with. Whole-school twilight sessions have taken place at nine schools and the training offer will be updated in the summer term following feedback and input from schools.
- 3.12 Bridgend provides a variety of support services for pupils presenting with emotional, social and behavioral difficulties (ESBD). Educational psychological profiling (PERMA profile) has been implemented in 24 schools to monitor pupil wellbeing.
- 3.13 Due to the increasing number of referrals to Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board (CTMUHB) for children and young people to be assessed for

neurodevelopmental disorders, there is an increased demand for additional support or specialist placements from both schools and parents.

- 3.14 Available pupil spaces within the Communication, Autism, Resource Education (CARE) bases and Learning Resource Centres (LRCs) have been limited resulting in pupils identified for specialist provision remaining in mainstream settings with additional adult support required to meet their needs. This school year, we were unable to accommodate 44 pupils across all key stages.. The remaining 10 pupils each receive a package of ancillary support to meet their needs to remain in mainstream settings. In addition to this we were unable to accommodate 20 pupils identified for an Observation Class and LRC for moderate learning difficulties within the available provision at the start of the school year. 20 pupils received individual support packages to remain in mainstream environment.
- 3.15 Funding for three additional learning resource centres has been agreed by Council as part of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2025-2029. This includes a new Foundation Phase class for pupils with EBD and an additional secondary school CARE base. Discussions with schools have begun and two primary schools have agreed to locate classes on their sites. However, a location for the secondary school provision is yet to be agreed. A public consultation will progress when the potential location all three classes have been , identified with the intention of opening new classes in September 2025.
- 3.16 There are over 100 emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs) trained across Bridgend schools to provide intervention support. There are ten training places reserved every year to train new staff. Training and support is provided by Educational Psychology Service (EPS) alongside half-termly supervision for all trained ELSAs in all schools.
- 3.17 The NASUWT report on behaviour in Welsh schools in 2023 reveals that 38% of respondents experienced physical abuse or violence from pupils in the last 12 months, 95% experienced verbal abuse or violence from pupils and 91% were sworn at by pupils. Physical violence includes being hit or punched (12%), kicked (9%) and shoved or barged (43%). These experiences have taken a toll on the teaching professional, with 86% reporting that abuse has affected their morale and enthusiasm for their job, while 62% experienced stress and 53% experienced anxiety.
- 3.18 The local authority follows the statutory guidance stipulating that exclusion decisions should only be taken in response to serious breaches of the school's behaviour policy or if allowing the pupil to remain in the school would harm the education or welfare of themselves or others. However, in exceptional circumstances, it may be appropriate to permanently to exclude a learner for a first or one-off offence. The local authority recognises that a school's decision to permanently exclude should be the final step in the school's graduated response.



- 3.19 Recent studies show a concerning increase in violent incidents among school-aged children across the UK. National research indicates an 81% rise in violent incidents on school property since the COVID-19 pandemic (The Times, 2024). However, only 12% of offences known to the Bridgend Youth Justice Service (BYJS) are violent. This discrepancy suggests a potential gap in awareness among wider services regarding incidents occurring in schools, potentially hindering children from receiving necessary and timely support.
- 3.20 Studies by the Youth Justice Board (2023) show that a significant percentage of youth offenses involve first-time offenders, highlighting the need for early intervention. Research from the Education Endowment Foundation (2023) found a correlation between school exclusion and later criminal involvement, emphasising the importance of preventative measures within educational settings.
- 3.21 The Relationship Building Together (RBT) project in Bridgend aims to provide comprehensive support to vulnerable children and families (ages 10-21) entering Youth Development, Youth Justice, Edge of Care, or Early Help Services through a psychology-led, trauma-informed approach. This involves multi-agency case formulation for complex situations and a focus on understanding each child's unique experiences, needs, strengths, and protective factors to guide interventions.
- 3.22 Forty staff members across these four services have received extensive Trauma Recovery Model (TRM) Academy training, with additional training for senior managers and four dedicated trauma leads, supported by a psychology team for consultancy and complex cases. A thorough assessment process utilising trauma-specific screening tools and the "voice of the child" toolkit, alongside collaborative information gathering, will inform a three-tiered intervention strategy. This ranges from guidance for case managers to in-depth multi-agency formulation led by trauma leads or a clinical psychologist, ensuring tailored support and regular reviews.
- 3.23 The project is committed to equitable and culturally sensitive delivery through ongoing staff training, community engagement, accessible communication, and culturally appropriate assessments. Collaboration is central, involving various agencies like health, probation, and education, alongside the core services. The anticipated impact is improved relationships, trauma recovery, and better outcomes for approximately 204 young people participating in the intervention.
- 3.24 The directorate has successfully held two relationship building together plus multi-agency timelining meetings, which notably included the participation of clinical psychologists. This collaboration provided a more profound understanding of the children's psychological needs and enabling more informed, effective intervention strategies through a holistic and nuanced assessment. We observed a significant improvement in meeting attendance across schools, largely due to the proactive efforts of the trauma leads. Their direct engagement with schools, explaining the

benefits of a multi-agency, holistic approach and the value of universal assessments, significantly enhanced participation and fostered a more collaborative environment.

- 3.25 The directorate successfully completed the recruitment phase, closing with a total of 405 children and young people engaged in the project. Significant strides have been made in developing relationship building practice resources specifically for Pupil Services, that will be instrumental in expanding knowledge and approaches to wider service areas. This expansion of resources will contribute to a more integrated and consistent approach across the organisation in addressing the needs of children.
- 3.26 The Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary for Education has committed to supporting schools and local authorities to address poor behaviour. 'Behaviour in schools' was a key focus of discussion at the Welsh Government secondary school headteacher conference in November 2024. It was also the subject of a meeting between the Cabinet Secretary for Education and the with education trade unions, where discussions covered the impact poor behaviour is having on the education workforce staff and potential solutions. A national behaviour summit will take place on 22 May 2025 as a key part of the work to explore further, the issues raised, their causes, and the actions needed to tackle poor behaviour in schools.

## Exclusions

- 3.27 The number of permanent exclusions across Bridgend schools has trebled since 2021-2022. There were 9 permanent exclusions in 2021-2022. The number of permanent exclusions issued as at 11 April 2024 were 23 compared to 11 April 2025 when there have been 22 permanent exclusions. As at 11 April 2025, 3 permanent exclusions were overturned at an independent appeal panel.

**Table 1** Comparative permanent exclusion data during the period 2021-2022 to 31 March 2025

	School year 2021-2022	School year 2022-2023	School year 2023-2024	01/09/2024 to 11/04/2025
<b>Primary schools</b>	0		7	
<b>Secondary schools</b>	9	13	23	19
<b>Special schools</b>	0		0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>22</b>

- 3.28 Furthermore, there were 7 primary school and 23 secondary school learners permanently excluded in 2023-2024. There have been 19 secondary school learners permanently excluded this school year to date (2024-2025).

**Table 2** Permanent exclusions In Bridgend schools by reason during the period 2023-2024 and 2024-2025

Permanent exclusion data		
Reasons	2023-2024	01/09/2024 to 11/04/2025
Damage to property		
Drug and alcohol related		
Persistent disruptive behaviour		
Physical assault on a pupil		
Physical assault on an adult		
Theft		
Sexual misconduct		
Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult		
Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour towards a pupil		
Other		
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>22</b>

3.29 There were 1136 fixed-term exclusions in Bridgend schools between 1 September 2023 and 31 March 2024 compared to 1221 between 1 September and 31 March 2025, an increase of 85 fixed-term exclusions (7.48%). This equates to 2143.5 days lost because of fixed-term exclusions between 1 September 2023 and 31 March 2024 compared to 1976.5 days between 1 September 2024 and 31 March 2025, a decrease of 167 days or -7.79%.

**Table 3** Fixed-term exclusion data during the period 2021-2022 and 2024-2025 (until 31 March 2025)

		2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	01/09/2024 to 31/03/2025
<b>Primary schools</b>	Number of exclusions	166	248	280	163
	Number of days lost	351.5	441	553	267.5
<b>Secondary schools</b>	Number of exclusions	1224	1355	1309	984
	Number of days lost	2359	2574.5	2400.5	1604.5
<b>Special schools</b>	Number of exclusions	74	67	97	74
	Number of days lost	124.5	154	204.5	104.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>Number of exclusions</b>	<b>1390</b>	<b>1603</b>	<b>1589</b>	<b>1221</b>
	<b>Number of days lost</b>	<b>2710.5</b>	<b>3015.5</b>	<b>2953.5</b>	<b>1976.5</b>

**Table 4** Fixed-term exclusion data for pupils attend Bridgend primary, secondary and special schools during the period 2023-2024 to 31 March 2025

<b>Fixed-term exclusions by reason</b>		
<b>Reason</b>	<b>2023–2024</b>	<b>01/09/2024 to 31/03/2025</b>
Bullying		
Damage to property	38	29
Drug and alcohol related	26	20
Persistent disruptive Behaviour	554	460
Physical assault on a pupil	261	162
Physical assault on an adult	106	93
Racist abuse		
Theft		
Sexual misconduct		
Verbal Abuse/Threatening behaviour against an adult	349	256
Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour towards a pupil	106	50
Other	203	116
<b>Total</b>	<b>1686</b>	<b>1221</b>

- 3.30 Although fewer days have been lost during the autumn 2024 term, it should be noted that schools are issuing more fixed-term exclusions but for shorter durations. It is important to note that the trends in exclusions in Bridgend reflect a broader trend seen throughout South Wales.
- 3.31 Out of the above, there were 83 incidents of fixed-term exclusions in relation to care-experienced children out of the 1686 fixed-term exclusions issued in 2023-2024
- 3.32 There have been 80 incidents of fixed-term exclusions in relation to care-experienced children out of the 1221 fixed-term exclusions issued this year-to-date in 2024-2025.

#### **Weapons-Related Incidents in Bridgend Educational Settings Strategy Group (WRIBESSG)**

- 3.33 The local authority has established a Weapons-Related Incidents in Bridgend Educational Settings Strategy Group (WRIBESSG) which acts as the main forum for sharing information and driving forward improvements to reduce weapons-related incidents in educational settings in Bridgend.
- 3.34 The main purpose of WRIBESSG meetings is to allow senior officers, senior representatives from Bridgend's two headteacher representative groups, a senior representative from Bridgend College and the Cabinet Member for Education and Youth Services to discuss strategic and key operational issues that relate to weapons-related incidents in educational settings in Bridgend.

- 3.35 The inaugural meeting of the WRIBESSG was held on 26 March 2025. The meeting was chaired by the Cabinet Member for Education and Youth Services. The next meeting of the group is scheduled for 16 June 2025.
- 3.36 The 'use of weapons' reason was removed when the Welsh Government guidance changed. Consequently, the local authority does not have accurate data for the fixed-term exclusions in relation to the reason. In 2023, Bridgend's crime rate was 99 per 1,000 people. This is 25% higher than the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region average (79 per 1,000). This places Bridgend among the top 10 highest crime rates for small towns.

### Pupil attendance

- 3.37 Pupil attendance in Bridgend schools remains lower than pre-pandemic rates. This is further compounding behavioural issues. Pupil attendance levels across primary schools in Bridgend have increased by 2.2% from 2021-2022 to 2023-2024. Bridgend primary school pupil attendance for 2023-2024 is 0.2% above the all-Wales average. Pupil attendance levels across secondary schools in Bridgend increased by 2.4% from 2021-2022 to 2023-2024. Bridgend secondary school pupil attendance for 2023-2024 is 3.6% above the all-Wales average.
- 3.38 Attendance data for pupils attending Bridgend primary and secondary schools in the school years from 2021-2022 to the spring term 2024-2025 is highlighted in the table below (pp = percentage points).

**Table 5** Attendance data for pupils attending Bridgend primary and secondary schools during the period 2021-2022 to 2024-2025

	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	Autumn Term 2024-2025	Spring Term 2024-2025
<b>Bridgend primary schools</b>	90.1%	91.5%	92.3%	93.8%	93.9%
<b>All-Wales primary schools</b>	89.9%	91.4%	92.1%	92.8%	N/A*
<b>Difference</b>	+0.2pp	+0.1pp	+0.2pp	+1.0pp	N/A
<b>Bridgend secondary schools</b>	86.5%	87.9%	88.9%	89.9%	88.8%
<b>All-Wales secondary schools</b>	84.3%	85.1%	85.3%	89.1%	N/A
<b>Difference</b>	+2.2pp	+2.8pp	+3.6pp	+0.8pp	N/A

\* N/A = not available at time of writing this report

3.39 The comparative attendance data of the highest performing and lowest performing primary and secondary schools in Bridgend from 2021-2022 to 2024-2025 (autumn and spring term cumulative) is provided below.

**Table 6** Comparative attendance data for the highest and lowest performing Bridgend primary and secondary schools during the period 2021-2022 and 01/09/2024 to 11/04/2025

		Highest	Lowest	Gap
<b>01/09/2024 to 11/04/2025</b>	<b>Primary</b>	96.2%	90.1%	6.1%
	<b>Secondary</b>	93.2%	85.4%	7.8%
<b>2023-2024</b>	<b>Primary</b>	95.2%	89.3%	5.9%
	<b>Secondary</b>	91.1%	85.7%	5.4%
<b>2022-2023</b>	<b>Primary</b>	95.2%	86.9%	8.3%
	<b>Secondary</b>	90.4%	83.4%	7.0%
<b>2021-2022</b>	<b>Primary</b>	94.0%	85.2%	8.8%
	<b>Secondary</b>	90.6%	82.7%	7.9%

3.40 Persistent absenteeism remains a significant concern. Approximately 7% of primary school pupils and 16% of secondary pupils had attendance rates of 80% or below during 2023-2024 school year. More concerning is that around 5% of secondary school pupils attend school for 50% or less of the time. These figures highlight the magnitude of the attendance challenge despite overall improvements.

3.41 There continues to be disparities across schools in Bridgend which suggests uneven implementation of effectiveness of attendance strategies across different school settings.

3.42 In 2022-2023 (data for 2023-2024 has not yet been published), all-Wales persistent absenteeism data for primary schools was reported at 28.9% (based on a 90% threshold).

3.43 In 2023-2024, all-Wales persistent absenteeism data for secondary schools was reported at 37.1% (based on a 90% threshold).

**Table 7** Persistent absenteeism data for Bridgend primary and secondary schools during the period 2023-2024 to September 2024 to 11/04/2025

		% persistent absence (less than 90%)			% persistent absence (less than 80%)			% persistent absence (less than 50%)		
		Highest	Lowest	Gap	Highest	Lowest	Gap	Highest	Lowest	Gap
<b>01/09/2024 to 11/04/2025</b>	<b>Primary</b>	34.9%	5.9%	29pp	16.8%	0%	16.8pp	4.8%	0%	4.8pp
	<b>Secondary</b>	44.6%	19.2%	25.4pp	22.8%	8.3%	14.5pp	7.4%	1.6%	5.8pp
<b>2023-2024</b>	<b>Primary</b>	42.9%	7.6%	35.3pp	16.4%	1.0%	15.4pp	4.1%	0.0%	4.1pp
	<b>Secondary</b>	54.9%	38.2%	16.7pp	26.7%	11.6%	15.1pp	7.5%	2.6%	4.9pp

3.44 There are currently nine full-time equivalent education welfare officers (EWOs) that sit within the Education Engagement Team (EET) and are deployed on a school cluster basis. There are an additional three grant-funded, full-time equivalent EWOs who are deployed on a peripatetic basis.

3.45 For the school year 2025-2026, it is proposed that EWOs will be deployed on a needs basis to either those schools with lower levels of attendance and/or challenges with persistent absenteeism levels. This approach has been endorsed by Estyn and will support narrowing the gap and reducing persistent absenteeism.

### **Additional learning needs**

3.46 Bridgend County Borough Council is responsible for implementing the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 which aims to improve rights, planning and services for learners with special needs. Children with additional learning needs (ALN) face unique challenges that can manifest as behavioural issues. These learners may not be able to respond in the same way to behaviour strategies and behaviour that causes problems may escalate and become persistent.

3.47 The local authority is working with partners to ensure sufficient opportunities for ALN learners and to strengthen relationships to improve transition for learners with ALN. In Bridgend, children experiencing emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) present with high scores in emotional difficulties, hyperactivity and peer problems.

Without adequate support, these children are particularly vulnerable to behavioural problems and educational disengagement.

- 3.48 The EPS has developed materials for schools and support agencies to support EBSA and delivered training to EWOs. There is further training planned for FEOs. In addition, the Senior Educational Psychologist is completing a small-scale piece of research/pilot on EBSA with Bryntirion Comprehensive School. The initial results show a positive impact of the intervention, and the pilot is now being extended across all secondary schools in the next phase.
- 3.49 Increased stressors at home can impact pupil behaviour at school. Schools play a fundamental role in protecting children. ACEs can affect the wellbeing of children throughout life and increase health harming behaviours both immediately and long-term.

### **Counselling services**

- 3.50 The local authority approved a budget reduction in 2025-2026 in relation to counselling services for children and young people. The reduction will be challenging as counselling is crucial for supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. It can act as a preventive measure, early intervention and support alongside specialist services. Due to the increase in demand for counselling services the directorate has utilised specific grants differently to maintain and increase counselling resources for children and young people.
- 3.51 There remain strong collaborative efforts across agencies. School improvement officers work effectively with officers from Central South Consortium to support schools. The School Improvement Group (SIG), consisting of senior officers and elected members, regularly reviews schools causing concern. The local authority works with schools and partner agencies to respond to incidents. The multi-agency approaches help to ensure that complex issues affecting pupils receive coordinated attention from relevant services.

### **Community Focused Schools**

- 3.52 The directorate adopts the community focused schools approach. This aims to create learning communities that support lifelong learning and community wellbeing. FEOs in Bridgend play a crucial role in engaging with parents and the community that can positively impact pupil attendance and behaviour. The community focused schools' approach and the role of FEOs are integral to improving educational outcomes and community cohesion in Bridgend.
- 3.53 There are currently nine FEOs working to adopt community-focused school approaches in Bridgend. The FEOs support relationships between families and



schools and can encourage and develop links which have a positive impact on pupil attendance.

- 3.54 Since the restructure of early help services in Bridgend, the Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate has seen an increased referral rate for services of 39.9% compared to 2023-2024. The number of family assessments undertaken by FEOs has also increased by 35.5%.

### **Access to Education Panel**

- 3.55 The Access to Education Panel meets half-termly, working collaboratively in the best interests of pupils and to ensure that pupils' needs are met and provision provided within a timely manner. Referrals are submitted to the panel by schools to request provision or intervention for pupils they have exhausted all support options within the mainstream school environment. Panel members will consider any planning or additional support required while pupils await provision and ensure that there is responsibility and accountability for ownership of individual pupils.
- 3.56 Each panel has a headteacher representative for primary, secondary and special school settings who work with a range of local authority officers to review each referral. Since January 2024, members of senior leadership teams across all schools have been invited to observe panel meetings to better understand the process and for professional development.
- 3.57 The number of referrals to the Access to Education Panel has continued to increase over the last few years in line with the increase in exclusions. At the end of the last school year, the panel was able to ensure all pupils identified for specialist provision had a placement confirmed within two terms of being put on the waiting list.

**Table 8** Access to Education Panel referrals in Bridgend during the period 2022-2023 and 2024-2025

<b>Access to Education Panel new referrals received</b>	
2022-2023	60
2023-2024	117
2024-2025	109 (two terms only)

- 3.58 Panel members have worked hard to find creative solutions to provide support for pupils identified for specialist provision. Availability of available specialist provision is reviewed every meeting. The directorate has prepared a five-year ALN Provision Plan. Positive progress has been in respect of opening additional resource bases in mainstream schools from September 2025. However, expanding specialist provision for pupils with ESBD and complex ALN will require additional accommodation and investment and has an estimated completion date of September 2027.
- 3.59 Where pupils are supported in mainstream settings the potential for further fixed-term or permanent exclusion remains high. While schools work hard to support learners who display challenging behaviour within existing provision, this places additional pressure and risk for all staff and behavioural support systems, and can impact on the learning environment for other learners.

### **The Bridge Alternative Provision and Ysgol Bryn Castell**

- 3.60 Both The Bridge Alternative Provision and Ysgol Bryn Castell (YBC) are operating at full capacity and have no space to expand provision any further. Escalating exclusions in mainstream schools and a lack of space in provision has resulted in an increase in pupils accessing support with out-of-county providers. While this supports access to education for individual pupils, attendance at both out-of-county provisions and virtual tuition has resulted in lower predicted 'Capped 9' predicted scores for Year 11 pupils. The 'Capped 9' measure refers to a performance indicator that evaluates a student's best nine GCSE or equivalent results. This measure includes specific subject requirements like English/Welsh, Math/Numeracy, and Science, along with the remaining six best results. The Capped 9 is used to assess a school's overall performance and can be used to compare schools or learners.

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/guidance-on-the-calculation-of-the-capped-9-points-score-interim.pdf>

**Table 9** The Bridge Alternative Provision 2024-2025

<b>Average attendance including all pupils</b>	65%
<b>Average attendance excluding pupils attending offsite provision</b>	72%

**Table 10** The Bridge Alternative Provision, Capped 9 Predicted Scores for end of autumn term 2024

<b>Whole school - Year 11 Pupils (244 Predicted Score)</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>eFSM*</b>	<b>nFSM**</b>
<b>Number of pupils</b>	24	7	17	12	12
<b>Capped Nine Score</b>	217	204	222	220	215

<b>Virtual - Year 11 Pupils (120 Predicted Score)</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>eFSM</b>	<b>nFSM</b>
<b>Number of pupils</b>	6	2	4	3	3
<b>Capped Nine Score</b>	112	97	120	89	135

<b>Outside providers - Year 11 Pupils (246 Predicted Score)</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>eFSM</b>	<b>nFSM</b>
<b>Number of pupils</b>	3	2	1	1	2
<b>Capped Nine Score</b>	199	168	261	145	226

<b>The Bridge - Year 11 Pupils (293 Predicted Score)</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>eFSM</b>	<b>nFSM</b>
<b>Number of pupils</b>	15	3	12	8	7
<b>Capped Nine Score</b>	262	301	253	278	245

\* eFSM = pupil eligible for free school meals

\*\* nFSM = pupil not eligible for free school meals

- 3.61 The Bridge Alternative Provision Portfolio Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) provides education for pupils aged 5 to 16 years. There are four sites including the PRU, which has delegated responsibilities to arrange and oversee all the education other than at school (EOTAS) provision for the local authority. Admission to the PRU is through the CAMHS Panel or the Access to Education Panel. There are currently 95 pupils on roll at The Bridge.
- 3.62 YBC is a maintained special school for pupils aged 7-19 years who have ESBD and a wide range of other needs including autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). There are 181 pupils on roll at the school, with almost 50% of those pupils either diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or who have been referred for, neurodevelopmental pathway assessment.
- 3.63 An independent review of capacity at YBC took place in the summer term 2024, reporting that the school was at capacity and there is insufficient space to meet future demand.

- 3.64 Both YBC and The Bridge offer bespoke alternative packages for pupils who are unable to access onsite provision due to emotional based school avoidance, trauma and risk assessments.
- 3.65 A recent Estyn inspection at The Bridge spotlighted three areas of good practice:
- well-being, care support and guidance;
  - therapeutic support; and
  - equity of curriculum offer.
- 3.66 There has been a significant increase in demand for immediate support for pupils who have been permanently excluded putting additional demand on places at The Bridge and YBC when both provisions are constantly running at capacity.
- 3.67 Staff retention and recruitment can be challenging due to the level of challenging behaviour and expert support required. Trade unions continue to challenge the suitability of pupils placed in provision and the support available to staff when dealing with risk.
- 3.68 It is not possible to quantify precisely why there has been an increase in the number of pupils with ALN. However, it is important to recognise this is not unique to Bridgend. National data suggests contributing factors impacting on our service demands include:
- the increase in demand for complex medical support as well as emerging needs within the early years sector, which may in part be as a result of babies surviving more complex medical conditions from birth;
  - there is a greater awareness of additional learner needs by parents and teachers; and
  - one area in particular has seen a significant increase is pupils on the pathway for, or diagnosed with, neurodevelopmental (ND) needs such as ASD and ADHD.
- 3.69 Inclusion Group staff are working collaboratively with health colleagues on a pilot programme with the aim to reduce waiting times for those children and young people where an accurate ND diagnosis can be made from written information submitted at the point of referral by family/school. While support within the directorate is available based on need not diagnosis, the health board recognises the frustration with long waiting times for ND assessment and potential diagnosis.
- 3.70 Most schools take advantage of outside agencies to improve the learning experiences and support the engagement of pupils. These can be free to schools and provide opportunities for interactive learning. In some cases, the schools can, for example, attend a university for these engagement days at no cost to the schools. Recently there has been two occasions for schools to participate in Science,

Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) days for pupils of their choice within their schools.

- Brynteg School has expedition days where pupils will engage in a variety of activities and lessons around an Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE).
- A common practice across primary schools is to have an 'immersion' day or week, to introduce a new topic. These opportunities provide a variety of creative, stimulating and engaging activities for pupils. While immersed in these multi-sensory activities, pupils are given time to reflect and think about the experiences their new topic could provide.
- Immersion days or weeks can allow for experts from different industries and workplaces to come into schools to talk to the children about a topic or area of learning they are exploring.
- Pupil voice is often the driving force behind a school's curriculum planning. Pupils help to identify topics and decide what they want to learn and how they will learn it.
- Some primary and secondary schools provide 'enrichment days' or 'enrichment lessons' where pupils can choose an activity that would support their interests, health, and wellbeing.
- Curriculum for Wales provides more flexibility to schools to offer a range of digital learning. Many schools enrich digital learning with a Digital Competence Framework 'planning for progression' resource which suggest a range of innovative teaching and learning activities than can be applied across all curriculum areas (for example, podcast making, sound and music production, animation, photography, cyber security).
- Schools are being supported with the introduction of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) resources and schools are developing learning around responsible and ethical use of Gen AI to reflect the increased use of AI in society.
- Schools ensure learners have access to technology platforms within the Hwb platform. This platform provides learners with cloud technology, Gen AI, communication tools and are modern technology resources than support Curriculum for Wales and wider technology activities.
- Schools are developing and offering opportunities to enrich learning through 'gamification' (gaming) resources (for example, Minecraft Education and Scratch computational thinking software).

- Pencoed Comprehensive School's Year 8 Girls have taken part in CyberFirst National Competition and have been crowned champions. The event, a collaboration between CyberFirst Wales and 'About Women in Cyber', highlighted the crucial need for greater female representation in the cyber security sector and the need for understanding the concepts of cyber and digital security.

3.71 Progress on behaviour, attendance and exclusions are reported at the directorate's monthly senior management team meetings and are a key part of the Education Early Years and Young People Directorate Strategic Plan (2023-2028) Themes 1, 2, 3, 4 and 12. Outcomes and progress made are reported monthly within the directorate's performance management system.

#### **4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)**

4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. This is an information report, therefore it is not necessary to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment in the production of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts because of this report.

#### **5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives**

5.1 The well-being goals and principles prescribed for within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 connect directly to the approach to supporting children, young people and their families. The approach is consistent with the five ways of working as defined within the sustainable development principle and more specifically as follows:

<b>Long term</b>	The approach family support services focus on meeting the needs of a wide range of service beneficiaries including children, young people, adults, and families.
<b>Prevention</b>	The focus of family support services is upon early identification of need and ensuring that there is appropriate provision in place to meet individual needs.
<b>Integration</b>	The approach to family support services addresses the need for a coherent delivery of economic, social, environmental, and cultural outcomes.

<b>Collaboration</b>	A fundamental principal of the approach to family support focuses on improving collaboration and creating a unified system.
<b>Involvement</b>	Ensuring that children, young people, adults, and families are at the heart of the system and that needs are discussed in a person-centred way.

## **6. Climate change implications**

- 6.1 There are no climate change implications resulting from this project. However, we are committed to supporting the implementation of the local authority's 'Bridgend 2030 – Net Zero Carbon Strategy' and Welsh Government's carbon reduction commitments.

## **7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications**

- 7.1 The directorate has a robust approach to safeguarding, and this is detailed within the directorate's strategic plan. The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate Strategic Plan 2023-2026 is aligned with Bridgend County Borough Council's (BCBC's) Corporate Parenting Strategy.

## **8. Financial Implications**

- 8.1 There are no financial implications specifically relating to this report.

## **9. Recommendations**

- 9.1 Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 is asked to:
- consider the contents of the report; and
  - provide feedback.