Virtual online schooling: learner engagement and attendance

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Glossary

EBSA

Emotion-based school avoidance

EOTAS

Educated other than at school

NAT

The National Attendance Taskforce that was set up in late 2023. It involved Welsh Government officials and a range of stakeholders working within or in close association with the education sector. Its goal was to understand the drivers of increased absenteeism from school and to explore options and interventions that could help address the problem.

SWEET

Succeeding with Education, Employment, and Training qualification

SWSSN

The South Wales Secondary Schools Network is a network of schools located within the southwest of Wales who work together to provide support and share best practice on various aspect of education delivery. A group of five schools from within this network have developed the virtual online schools programme which features in this research.

Main findings

- The South Wales Secondary School Network's (SWSSN) virtual online schools programme was established in January 2024 to provide educational services to pupils with high levels of persistent absenteeism related to mental health and anxiety.

- The overall goal of the programme is to encourage learners struggling with attendance to re-integrate to in-person schooling or, short of this being possible, to improve engagement and to ensure that the learners receive continued education

- The online lessons are delivered by a qualified tutor who is employed directly by the lead school using funds that are pooled from each of the participating schools.

- Since it started, 128 learners have been involved in the programme. Out of these, around a tenth did not take up the offer and several left early to receive other provisions. At the start of research and interviews there was a capacity of 60 places across 5 schools, with 56 learners enrolled. The number who were receiving online lessons at the time of the survey reduced to 45, however, due to year 11 exam leave.

- The earners are given access to a laptop and required to register each morning and afternoon. They will receive a safeguarding call if they do not sign into their lessons. All learners have a session of English and Maths for 45 minutes daily, with some undertaking an additional BTEC qualification that is equivalent to 2 GCSEs.

- The tutor designs the format of lessons and monitors each session, and they are able to provide instant verbal feedback, tips, and advice. Some sessions are provided separately for learners who are deemed most vulnerable or new to the programme and consist of shorter 30-minute slots compared to the core group.

- The programme has led to greater engagement from nearly all learners, who are now attending the online lessons at a greater rate than they previously did for their school. In many instances, this is found to have increased by more than 50 percent.

- The programme is associated with numerous positive impacts and outcomes for learners, with many reporting that it has benefitted their learning in ways such as feeling more confident to participate in classes, better concentration and reported improvements in their knowledge and understanding and schoolwork.

- Over half of the learners also reported improvements to their mental health, which is important given how challenges of this nature are present in the majority of their lives. There are also notable changes in pupils' perception of their future prospects, and some who have sat their GCSEs have gone to college and/or found a job.

- The overall positive experience of learners does not appear to be translating into a desire to return to school in-person, with two thirds expressing a preference for online lessons only. Nevertheless, the programme has notable advantages for the learners, and the participating schools are managing to provide a level of continuity of learning to children who may otherwise have been lost to the education system.

- Some learners stated that they would like a mixture of both in-person and online lessons, and a small group of learners are currently receiving hybrid learning which may be a first step to toward reintegration. Moreover, since the programme began 13 pupils have gone back to in-person classroom-based schooling in full, with a further 20 returning to a unit or other provision their school has on offer. This is attributed to confidence in schoolwork increasing, or because they wanted to access full GCSE options and/or experience more social interaction with peers.

- Most of the learners provided insights into the different aspects of the programme that they like. They stated that it is less stressful, that they like being at home, and appreciate being able to work at their own pace, suggesting that online learning has removed some of the pressures that they associate with in-person schooling.

- A smaller number of learners reported things that they find challenging. Where they did, the largest number of responses noted technical and connectivity issues while some others reported having difficulties with understanding work or feeling isolated.

- The learners are satisfied with the level of support they receive, especially from the online tutor and to a lesser extent their parents. However, many say they do not feel supported by their school which may reflect their previous negative experiences or a feeling of disconnection due to their lack of proximity to school staff and premises.

- Nevertheless, a considerable 38 out of the 43 learners who responded to the survey said that they would recommend their online lessons to other similar learners.

- All of the headteachers interviewed were in favour of continuing the virtual school programme as a permanent and long-term solution for learners who require such a provision and also advocated for expanding its reach within their locality.

- In September 2025, a further 5 schools across 4 local authorities will join the online schools programme and increase its capacity to 120 pupils. There will be an additional online tutor which will enable a broadening of the subject range on offer.

- The headteachers and tutor are in favour of similar provisions being developed outside of their network and have since begun to assist 3 schools in a different area of Wales in the early stages of setting up and piloting their own programme.

1.   Background

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted traditional classroom-based modes of learning with lockdown measures and school closures necessitating a reliance on remote teaching. This led to a range of significant impacts for learners, many of which are having lasting effects. There is evidence of ongoing developmental delays and learning loss, challenging and disruptive behaviours, and an increase in mental health and wellbeing concerns. One aspect of education that has been particularly affected is attendance.

Figure 1: percentage of half day sessions missed due to absence, all pupils in maintained school settings 2015/16 to 2023/24
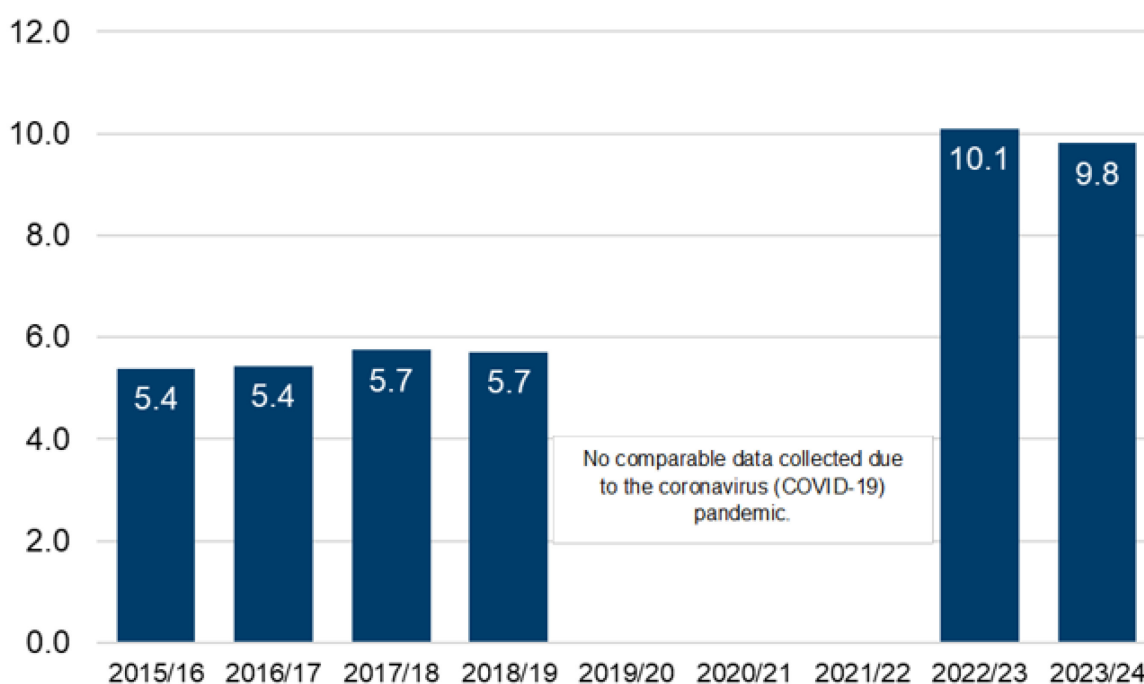
Figure 1 shows levels of school absence over the past decade for all pupils in Wales, with missing entries for three years during the pandemic due to a lack of comparable data. While absence rates remained steady between 5% and 6% prior to the onset of the pandemic, data for the following and most recent years indicate it has almost doubled to around 10%.

Official data also shows that there has been an increase in the proportion of learners who are persistently absent from school, defined as missing over 10% of half day sessions. In the years prior to the pandemic, the overall rate of persistent absence was around 14% but has more than doubled to 31% in 2023/24 (24.7% in primary and 37.1% in secondary).

It is known from annual data available prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that absenteeism has historically been higher in specific populations of students, often the most vulnerable. The pandemic appears to have disproportionately impacted attendance for these learners. The gap in overall absence rates between those who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those who are not has almost doubled. The disparity has widened even further with regards to persistent absence where 46.9% of primary school and 61.4% of secondary-

aged students eligible for free school meals were persistently absent from school in 2023/24. Similarly, 37.2% of primary and 49% of secondary school students with SEN/ALN provisions were persistently absent (for an overview of figures see Welsh Government, 2024a; Welsh Government, 2024b) .

Research has explored the reasons why attendance has dropped and has found these to be multiple and overlapping. They consist of pre-existing factors that have been exacerbated by the pandemic response, and more recent issues that appear to be having an impact on learners who previously did not have any issues with in-person schooling (see Rowlands 2022 and Children, Young People and Education Committee 2022).

Some of these include:

- inability to meet the costs of education
- lack of access to suitable transport and housing
- changing attitudes towards the importance of schooling
- school and classroom environments not meeting the needs of learners

Another major reason for the growth in school absence relates to the rise in mental health and wellbeing concerns. Research conducted by WISERD (2025) as part of its multi-cohort study found mental health and anxiety is a factor cited in 22% of absences. This is echoed in the work of ParentKind (2023) where 52% of parents report that the biggest barrier to attendance is that their child is "regularly unwell" with many indicating in open responses that this refers to mental ill health. These students often show high levels of distress when faced with the prospect of attending school that can lead to avoidant behaviours.

Attendance at school is a critical factor influencing learner achievement. Those who attend school regularly and receive consistent learning have stronger foundational skills, higher test scores, and greater chances of academic success, while those with high levels of absenteeism have worse educational outcomes and a greater likelihood of long-term negative impacts (see e.g. Department for Education 2015 and Klein and Sosu 2025).

Ensuring learners attend school is therefore of significant importance to policy makers and, in recent years, school attendance has been a major area of focus for the Welsh Government. In late 2023, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language (as it was then) established a National Attendance Taskforce (NAT) to gather views from a range of relevant stakeholders with the aim of understanding the attendance problem and exploring possible interventions at the national, local, and individual level. Several outputs were produced including a thematic review and a series of other actions are being taken forward.

In recent years, the use of alternative school-based interventions has emerged as a means of supporting some learners and was discussed during the taskforce. While varied, this can refer to educational services and settings that are designed for those who struggle with traditional schooling due to social, behavioural, or other medical reasons and aims to provide a flexible and tailored curriculum that caters to the needs of learners.

Remote and online schooling as an intervention

One such form of intervention is the provision of remote online learning. The pandemic normalised the use of digital technology, accelerated its development, and made these kinds of platforms a more practical and accessible option for many hard-to-reach students.

Remote or online learning exists in different forms and encompasses several models. They can be categorised broadly into learning that involves a blend of in-person and online-study or may be made up of online study alone (Cao, 2023; Li & Wang, 2022; Topping et al., 2022). Where an online element exists, it can also be provided synchronously through classes where students and teachers meet in real time (Shi, Tong, & Wong, 2021) or asynchronous through pre-recorded sessions accessed at any time (Zeng & Luo, 2024).

There have not been many studies published on the use of remote or online learning for those learners who are not attending school, but some examples and insights are available:

One directly relevant non-UK study explored of how an in-school reception protocol with face-to-face and distance online learning sessions could support students with high levels of absenteeism and school refusal by reducing stress associated with the school environment. It documents various aspects of the provision on offer and identifies positive results from interviews, which suggest it can be used as a means of maintaining continuity of education and learning and, in some cases, a return to mainstream school (Ferrandon, et al 2024).

Red Balloon is a third sector organisation in East Anglia that provides alternative schooling for students who have self-excluded from mainstream education due to factors like anxiety and mental ill-health that lead to Emotion-based School Avoidance (EBSA). The organisation adopts an integrated approach by providing therapy and wellbeing support to students to help them with re-engagement, tailored learning plans, small-sized lessons with no more than six students in a class, and the option of hybrid (online and face-to-face up to 15 hours a week) or physical house-based learning. Though not delivered via the learners' original school, the programme is reported to have brought about positive results. One learner who participated spoke positively about the alternative, stating 'I don't think things would have got better at my last school and I don't think I could have gone to another mainstream school.' Across GCSEs learners registered a 70-100% rate of A-C or equivalent and for non-GCSE exams and qualifications there is a 91% pass rate (2020/21).

The Cloud 22 project is another alternative online school provision launched by charity Catch22 in Norfolk and which provides full-time live lessons to students with social, emotional, or mental health challenges whose needs cannot be met in a mainstream school. Many of the students are from disadvantaged backgrounds with high rates of absenteeism. The charity provides resources such as laptops, internet, exercise books and stationery to enable learning, and this cost is offset by local authority funding. In 2022 to 2023 the project reported encouraging outcomes, with 79% of students achieving at least one GCSE, 93% gaining Maths, 71% achieving an English GCSE, and a 79% attendance rate over the year. Additionally, two students with behavioural challenges returned to on-site school provision.

Other literature focused more on the effectiveness of remote or online learning for the general learner population rather than those specifically with attendance issues or school

refusal. However, several findings may be relevant to learners with these issues where, for example, these mediums has been found to result in good levels of engagement and attendance, can ensure those who struggle to keep pace with whole-class teaching approaches can work a more suitable pace and do not fall behind their peers, can improve concentration and build confidence, and can lead to better pupil performance etc (see for example systematic reviews undertaken by Akpen et al, 2024 and Topping et al, 2022

It can also have benefits for supporting learner wellbeing, which is known to be a key factor involved in some learners struggling with attendance at school. It has been highlighted that digital learning environments can reduce the psychological and social pressures often associated with classroom settings and that students who experience anxiety, bullying, or feelings of exclusion in mainstream schools report higher emotional safety and greater willingness to participate in online schooling. This points to the potential for online learning to create suitable conditions that might enable cohorts of pupils who struggle with attendance to have a positive and productive educational experience and may lead to improved outcomes in terms of attainment and possibly a return to school.

It is worth noting that some studies show there are students who face challenges in online settings, for example, difficulties with the technology itself, which can have counterproductive effects. The wider literature also informs us that the success or failure of online provision is largely dependent on the way it is structured and delivered, meaning that it is not inevitable that it will fail and that it can be adapted to achieve the best results (as has been realised in an earlier government report and EEF, 2020). Some negative reports should not, however, detract from the value of online schooling as a viable, and often necessary, intervention. The effectiveness of online education lies less in its equivalence to mainstream schooling, and more in its capacity to offer inclusive adaptable pathways that can prevent learners from falling behind, or out of the education system.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this research is to provide initial insights into a remote or online school programme that has been implemented by five schools within the South Wales Secondary Schools Network (SWSSN) spread across Swansea, Port Talbot and Neath, that seeks to provide education to learners who struggle with in-person attendance with a view to integrating them back into school.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Why was the virtual online schools programme established?

2. How is the programme designed and how does it operate?

3. What impact has the programme had on learners and how effective has it been in relation to engagement, wellbeing, and reintegration into in-person schooling?

4. What aspects of the programme have been successful and challenging?

5. How is the programme expected to develop in future?

2. Methodology

To address the research questions above, a mixed-method approach was adopted that was comprised of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Semi-structured interviews

The headteachers of schools involved in the virtual online schools programme were contacted via policy officials in the Welsh Government. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three of these heads who represent a total of three out of the five schools involved. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a good background and strategic overview, as well as to collect insights in relation to the experiences of specific schools. In addition to this, an interview was held with the virtual tutor employed by the schools to gather detailed insights into the development and delivery of the programme.

Semi structured interviews were used because the method offers a balance between fixed and open-ended questions. This allowed for good contextual understanding and depth of discussion in relation to key topics of interest but also provided for a level of flexibility so that further areas of potential relevance could be covered.

Interview guides were constructed based on the research questions and these questions differed slightly depending on the profile of the interviewee. Interviews were conducted between March 2025 and April 2025 via Microsoft Teams and were recorded on video and via the transcription function in Microsoft Teams.

Survey

An online survey was also developed using the Smart Survey platform to gather insights into the perspectives of learners. The questionnaire is available in Annex A of this report.

In order to maximise responses, the survey was provided to learners across the schools by the virtual tutor who administered its completion during online lessons between the 3rd to 13th of June 2025. It collected a range of demographic information from respondents, had two main sections, and included both multiple choice and open-ended questions.

At the time of the interviews there were 56 learners on the programme. By the time the survey was distributed, which was two months after, there were 45 learners on the programme as some had left due their GCSE exam leave.

A total of 43 survey responses were received.

Analysis

The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns within the responses. The data were coded by theme to highlight areas of interest based on the research questions. The themes were:

- establishment of the virtual schools programme
- design and operation of the virtual schools programme
- impact and effectiveness of the virtual schools programme

- successful and challenging aspects of the programme
- future development of the virtual schools' programme(s).

For the survey, quantitative data analysis was undertaken using Excel and consisted of univariate and bivariate exploration of the data. Qualitative data from open ended responses were analysed separately, again to identify common themes and topics.

Additional materials that were gathered through the course of the work, were also analysed. This included a PowerPoint slide pack which was produced by the online tutor prior to this research to present detailed information about the programme structure and implementation, and feedback from learners and parents to stakeholders within the sector.

# 3.	Findings

## 3.1.	Establishment of the virtual schools programme

At the time of this report, the South Wales Secondary Schools Network (SWSSN) consisted of nine schools that collaborate, innovate and work together to share best practice and overcome different challenges that they commonly face. Five of these schools have decided to work together to establish a virtual online schools programme.

Many of the schools fit a profile associated with high rates of absenteeism. The schools form a "family of schools" and are located in disadvantaged areas in Wales as determined by where they sit in the lower percentiles of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. In these schools, a considerable number of pupils are eligible for free school meals, and a high number have additional learning needs and socio-emotional behavioural disorders.

> "The children here, I think it's something like 80% live in 20% of the most deprived areas in Wales. [The school has] got amongst the highest percentage of free school meals of any secondary school in Wales...It changes and fluctuates quite a lot, particularly with changes to the way in which people qualify for free school meals so, the real figure is probably more like 60 to 65%. There are high number of people with additional learning needs. Again, the highest in the secondary sector in Wales."
>
> Headteacher 1

Headteachers spoke of an attitude amongst parents that did not see the importance or value of school as a whole. This is attributed to their historical experiences of education and their own economic situation:

> "There's not a particularly positive perception of education in the community that we're located [in], lots of parents went to school, had a negative experience, didn't enjoy school… education isn't seen as a priority here. Quite a lot of it is like survival from day-to-day, and that's what they focus on so."
>
> Headteacher 1

The headteachers explained that this view had been complicated by COVID-19, which normalised a different mode of living and acceptance of their child being at home.

> "Since COVID we were in a position where everybody was staying safe, staying at home, a lot more people working from home. And I think sometimes that means that when they're home, it's ok for their child to be at home. Or even when they're not at home, they don't mind the child being at home."
>
> Headteacher 1

In this context, headteachers suggested there had been a further shift in parental attitudes toward formal education and observed that some parents viewed education as "optional," rather than essential. This led to situations where parents treat schools as a service they

can "pick and choose" from, deciding what aspects of schooling to accept or disregard, which undermines the consistent parental engagement needed for effective learning.

One headteacher explained that schools are only able to access a small portion of learners time and thus they might not be able to counteract these outside views of schools that can be passed down to the learners.

> "…they spend 80% of their time in the community and with their parents, we get them for a small period of time in the day, and you've got to do the best within that time. It's not always easy when there's outside influences on a lot of kids."

> Headteacher 1

Most importantly, however, and in line with existing research, the headteachers explained that since COVID-19 many of their learners were experiencing problems associated with increased mental ill health and anxiety often characterised by sensory issues, especially in relation to the noise level in classrooms, aversion to large numbers of people, and different academic pressures. This has led to emotional-based school avoidance (ESBA).

The schools acknowledge that, in the past, their support for learners facing these issues was limited to the efforts of pastoral support officers and safeguarding staff. They did not have enough alternative interventions or a significant, or a substantial programme to respond to the needs of these pupils and the challenges they face. There was, however, a "desperate need" to develop something that could re-engage them and a growing recognition that they should consider other options including a virtual or online school.

When asked how the programme was established, it was suggested that it emerged as a result of the headteachers communicating with each other and realising that they were experiencing similar things with these "very, very vulnerable children", as well as agreeing that something needed to be done to provide them with access to education. They explained further the nature of the learners they wanted to help, highlighting the full extent of their absenteeism and school refusal and the fact that they did not respond to traditional methods of re-engagement:

> "You're talking children who didn't attend school whatsoever. … it would be a case of we haven't seen these children for months and months and months. Everything we've tried to get them in has failed."

> Headteacher 1

> "These are kids who just totally, you know, total school refusers, can't leave the house, can't leave my bedroom, haven't been in for a significant period of time, might not have been in since September, might've disengaged last summer."

> Headteacher 2

In some cases, the need for an alternative provision was considered necessary to ensure education could be provided without resulting in a potential harm to learners.

"I've got one pupil in my mind, for example, who was very, very anxious, mental health challenged, serious self-harm...If we pushed [for a return to school through more traditional interventions], it was likely to end with dire consequences… so it was born out of those type of extreme cases."

<div align="right">Headteacher 3</div>

Asides from learners with mental ill health and anxiety, the programme is also used as a temporary fix in circumstances where the learner is at risk of missing out on a lot of school due to other complications such as conflicts with other learners. If these conflicts resulted in bail conditions, then the learner would not be able to come to school because they are not allowed to have direct or indirect contact with certain parties involved.

However, the headteachers made it clear that the programme is not a behavioural provision, in that it is not intended for those leaners who cannot be on the premises due to poor behaviour or have been excluded from school. Instead, it exists for the benefit of those "students that want to learn" but who have "barriers [to] coming into school."

In addition to providing insights into the learner-focused reasons, the headteachers were keen to emphasise that part of their motivation for taking the initiative to set up the programme of their own volition was born out of frustration with the local authorities and a view that there was a lack of resources provided for such support:

"…we were under lack of capacity within the local authority to provide necessary support on an educated other than at school (EOTAS) pathway.'

<div align="right">Headteacher</div>

Some of the local authorities in which schools are located were said to have objected to the plans for providing an online programme due to pressures on their system, concerns over implications for attendance figures, and uncertainty over how the programme would develop. Ultimately the headteachers went ahead, deciding to pool together and make use of funding they receive for learners in order to put in place the provision:

"A couple of the local authorities were very much 'you can't do this'. We said, well, we're doing it because if we don't do it, the kids are just in the house. What are we doing? You know, we're not removing something that's better. We're making something better. We are using our funds."

<div align="right">Headteacher</div>

The online school programme started in January 2024 and is now a far more complete provision targeted at the schools most challenging learners than they had in place before. Its overall goal is to encourage learners struggling with attendance to re-integrate to in-person schooling or, short of this being possible, to improve engagement and to ensure that these learners receive some continuity of education:

"[We now have a] far more strategic, far more comprehensive provision to offer these children. Not just to get them back into school, but whilst they're on the online school, they're getting a much better deal in terms of provision [than they would without]."

Headteacher 3

3.2. Profile of learners on the virtual schools programme

Since the programme of online lessons for those struggling with attendance began, there have been a total of 128 learners involved and 56 were enrolled at the start of the research.

The profile of the learners based on those who completed the survey is as follows: there are 17 learners who identified as male, 20 who identified as female, 4 who preferred not to say and 2 who identified as non-binary. Among the learners, 14 said they are eligible for free school meals, 10 reported that they are not, whilst 18 said they did not know.

On whether learners have ALNs, 3 reported to having ADHD, 5 had autism, 2 were awaiting an autism assessment, 1 had dyslexia, and 22 did not have additional learning needs.

Figure 2: number of learners in each year group currently on the programme (Base: 43 including 1 missing response)
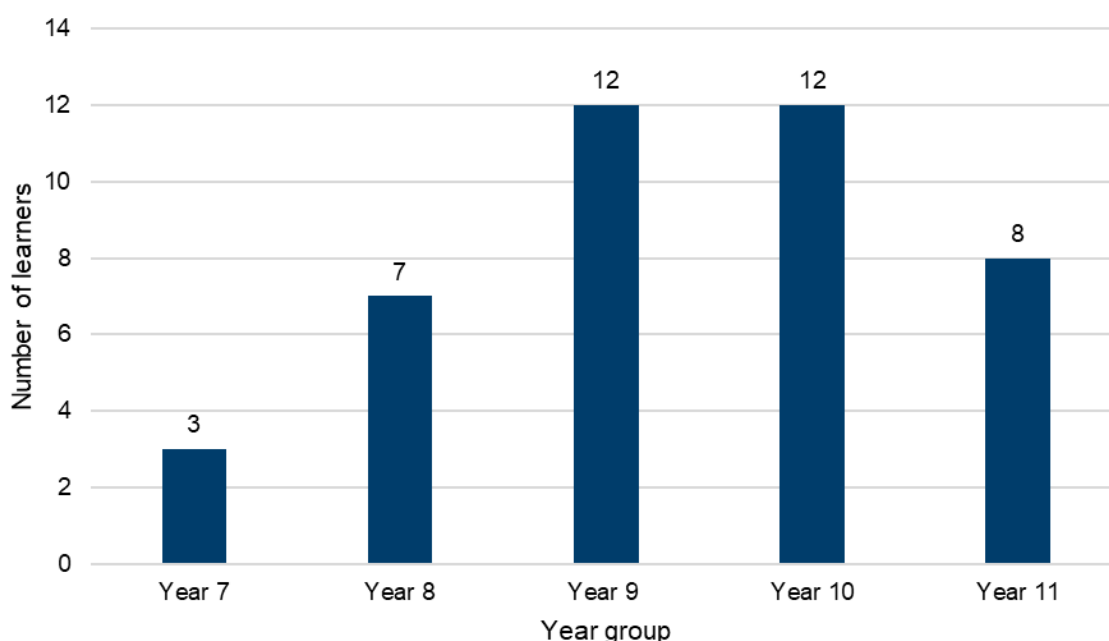
Figure 2 shows that learners on the programme are made up of all year groups, but there are more learners in years 9 and 10, compared to other years. The relatively fewer number of respondents in years 7 and 11 may reflect the fact that learners are not usually put on the programme during their first year in school, unless in extreme circumstances, and that some learners had recently left the programme ahead of sitting their GCSE examinations.

Figure 3: number of learners by length of time they have been on the programme (Base: 43)
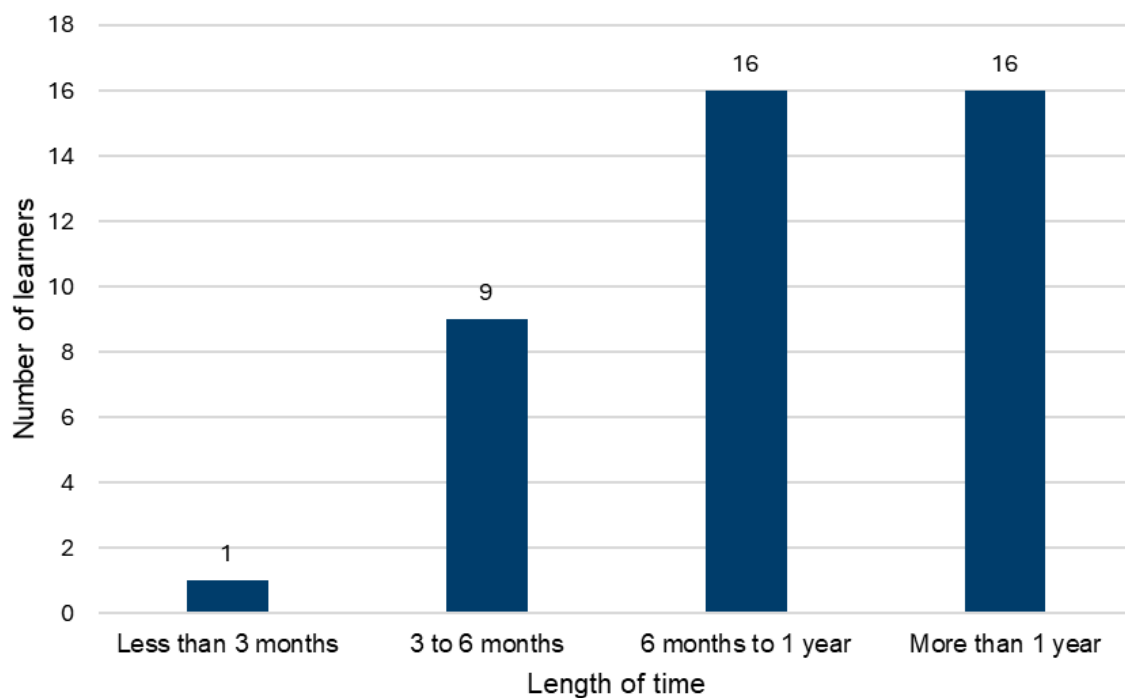
Figure 3 shows variation in the length of time that learners have been on the programme, with most reporting from 6 months to a year or more than a year. This indicates that the provision is acting as an ongoing and longer-term solution for most of the learners.

Figure 4: reasons why learners do not want or feel unable to attend school in-person (Base: 43)

As seen in Figure 4, insights from the learner survey were in line with the headteachers' accounts as to why many of the learners did not want to attend school. The survey clearly demonstrates that issues around mental health and wellbeing, particularly anxiety, is the main reason students feel unable, or unwilling, to attend school in-person (36 out of 43). Other reasons of note i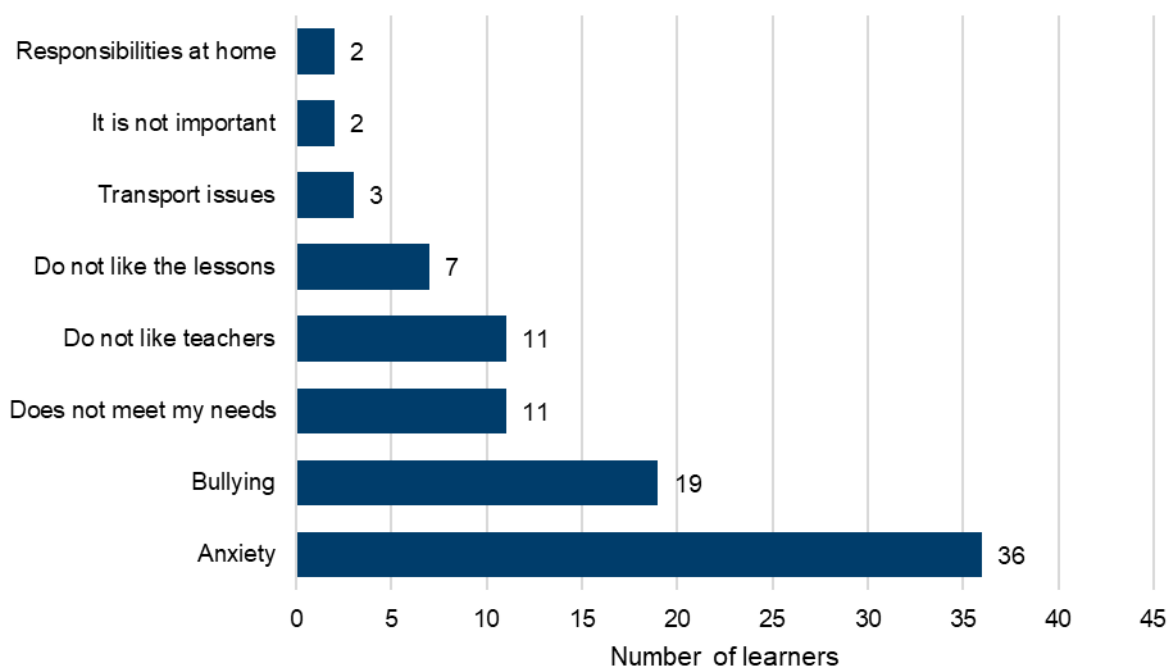nclude bullying (19 out of 43), while eleven learners indicated that school did not meet their needs and that they did not like their teachers, suggesting that for some, the service on offer in schools does not fully cater to individual learning requirements.

3.3. Design and operation of the virtual schools programme

In the initial development and design phase for the virtual schools programme, the participating heads within the network found that there was no existing set up or framework to follow, and as such there was a lot of early reliance on professional judgement.

> "The issue we had was there's nothing like this in Wales when we set it up, so we had no one to go to. We didn't have a sounding board. We didn't have a model to replicate. We just had to go from what we thought professionally was the right thing and the best thing to do in terms of provision for the children."

<div align="right">Headteacher 1</div>

The schools decided to employ a dedicated virtual tutor to deliver the programme. All schools have a budget they receive from the local authority and the cost of employing the tutor is split equally, despite one leading school officially employing them such that "it's like having an extra teacher." Once in place the tutor devised an action plan that covered how the programme would work, and this was signed off by the participating schools.

The virtual school programme is composed of five schools, over three counties. These can each enrol up to 12 learners, ideally six in Key Stage 3 and six in Key Stage 4[1]. At the start of the research, there was a capacity of 60 places and 56 learners on the programme.

Each of the five schools involved has a responsibility for their own technology required to deliver programme, so if they have a learner who does not have access to a laptop or does not have Wi-Fi, they will provide this for them. Additionally, a range of other resources are pooled and shared amongst the schools to ensure that all learners on the programme have access to them in a cost-effective way.

> "A lot of the programmes that we run on the course, there's, lots of online resources that we use... but I just make it accessible to the online school for free."

<div align="right">Headteacher 1</div>

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[1] With the roll-out of the new Curriculum for Wales, the curriculum will no longer be organised by key stages and will instead involve one seamless curriculum for children aged 3 to 16, providing more joined-up learning.

As will in-person classroom-based learning, there are conditions and expectations that participating learners have to meet in order to join and remain on the programme, including adult supervision and demonstrating regular engagement during the lessons:

> "There needs to be an adult in the house…from a safeguarding point of view. Children who were not attending school need to be sighted [and] on the virtual school they're being sighted every day, so they have to put the camera on even if they don't leave it on for the whole time. They need to engage, their attendance [online] needs to be of a certain percentage, and this is explained to them because they're taking a place that someone else could have been given because we've only got 12 spaces on the virtual school."

<div align="right">Headteacher 3</div>

To help monitor this, the online tutor takes a register of learners on Microsoft Excel each day, and learners receive an attendance mark if they are online for the full 45 minutes of the lesson. This register is then shared with each of the schools, the headteachers, deputy headteachers and admin staff that are in charge of recording school attendance.

The tutor who has been delivering the online lessons since the start is a qualified teacher (PGCE). They have also received additional support in maths and English from other teachers in the participating schools, and have had access to training during inset days.

The tutor currently teaches five lessons a day to different groups of learners across Key Stage 3 and 4. Individual learners only have a core of two 45 minute lessons a day, which consists of maths and English. These core subjects were chosen as they are the preference of the headteachers, and the intention is for the learners to sit and gain GCSEs in both.

The tutor noted that they wanted to develop the offer further and to provide lessons in more subjects that could enable learners to seek additional qualifications. To do this they adopted the Succeeding with Education, Employment, and Training SWEET qualification. At the time of the interview, there were 13 learners who were enrolled onto this additional qualification.

> "[A] SWEET qualification is like a BTEC course that they follow, which is booklet based covering various parts of reference to make them…a learner for life and they will do this with 22/23 different activities within these booklets. Five booklets is worth one GCSE in equivalence and, if they do all 8, which is my intention for many of them, then they'll get equal to two GCSE's. So, the potential then for these learners is to get maths, English, and two GCSE's."

<div align="right">Tutor</div>

The tutor is responsible for designing the format of each lesson. While it can differ from one lesson to the next, this generally involves a period of teaching via a collaborative technological platform like White Board, followed by a period of time for individual work which consists of the learners accessing worksheets online or through online resources such as Maths Watch.

> "…on the White Board we can collaborate together… so we build up our knowledge like a starter and a thought board and then there could be an activity on teams where they will then go on and complete their activity."
>
> Tutor

The tutor monitors the session just like in a classroom environment and is able to provide instant verbal feedback, tips, and advice because they can see the pupils screen at all times. In this way, the tutor can also ensure that they respond to the specific needs of learners who can indicate that they require assistance by using interaction tools such as the thumbs up function. They also reflected that they make efforts to assist and check in on learners, adapting and personalising the lessons as best as they can, aware that it is not a one-size-fits-all provision.

In addition to assistance within lessons, the tutor does provide separately for some learners who require more support or encouragement. These learners receive additional 30 minute lessons to the core group. This is usually for the most vulnerable or those who are new to the programme who "cannot necessarily sustain the attention for 45 minutes" and may benefit from a "shorter, sharper and more productive" session.

Out of a desire to make the online environment as positive and close to an in-school environment as possible, the tutor has created an online gallery wall so learners can showcase their work. They also do extracurricular activities through baking or "fun Fridays."

> "In an [in-person] classroom environment, learners would get praise… [such as] perhaps their work on the wall or a display… So, I wanted to see what I could do online also to mirror it in the best way possible, so I knew on my programme I wanted like a digital gallery with a link they can access."
>
> Tutor

The tutor also tracks the progress of every learner over time. This can be used to identify any potential problems that may arise and to prompt discussions with the learner's school or parents if necessary. Information from this exercise is also used to feedback into the learning process by enabling the tutor to take account of and adapt their provision to any pressing needs.

> "Every week I produce a little report on those learners, summarising how their week has been, perhaps if they've achieved things or what could be going on at that particular time. This is also colour coded so again it gives people in school that instant knowledge if everything's OK with our learner because they can look at my tracking system. If it's green, they instantly know that our learner's fine. There's nothing to worry about. If it's orange, they know they might have been something going on. If it's like a red colour, then it's telling them there's issues going on… and then we'd have discussions."
>
> Tutor

As part of this process, the tutor ensures they have a good working relationship with the parents so that any concerns can be resolved promptly.

> "All parents have my e-mail address so they can e-mail me at any time. And because I've got a work mobile, then parents will text me. So, there is a real strong relationship between me and the parents and the learner, as well as the school. We're literally all in this together."

<div align="right">Tutor</div>

In addition to the work of the tutor, there is a learning coach in each school who performs a pastoral role and is regarded as the link between the learner, their parents, and the school. They are responsible for resolving any issues that may arise and are flagged up via the monitoring process discussed above, and also any other problems that may occur with learners' digital devices or their internet connection.

> "Learning coaches are almost the pastoral element of the school. So, let's say for example, now the child hasn't attended and are not commutative [in lessons]. They'll try to make that phone call home to bridge the gap between the school and the family, get them back online and engaging. It might be a case of they're not calling or answering school messages, etcetera, they'll go out to the house and knock on the door and get to the bottom of it."

<div align="right">Headteacher 1</div>

3.4. Impact and effectiveness of the virtual schools programme

The research sought to understand what the impacts of the virtual schools' programme has been and how effective it is in achieving different outcomes for the learners.

The tutor provided a spreadsheet of information that enables a comparison of learners' attendance levels prior to the programme and during the online lessons they have been receiving for the period between September 2024 to June 2025 (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5: average learner attendance before and during the programme of online lessons between Sept 2024 and and June 2025 (Base: 49)
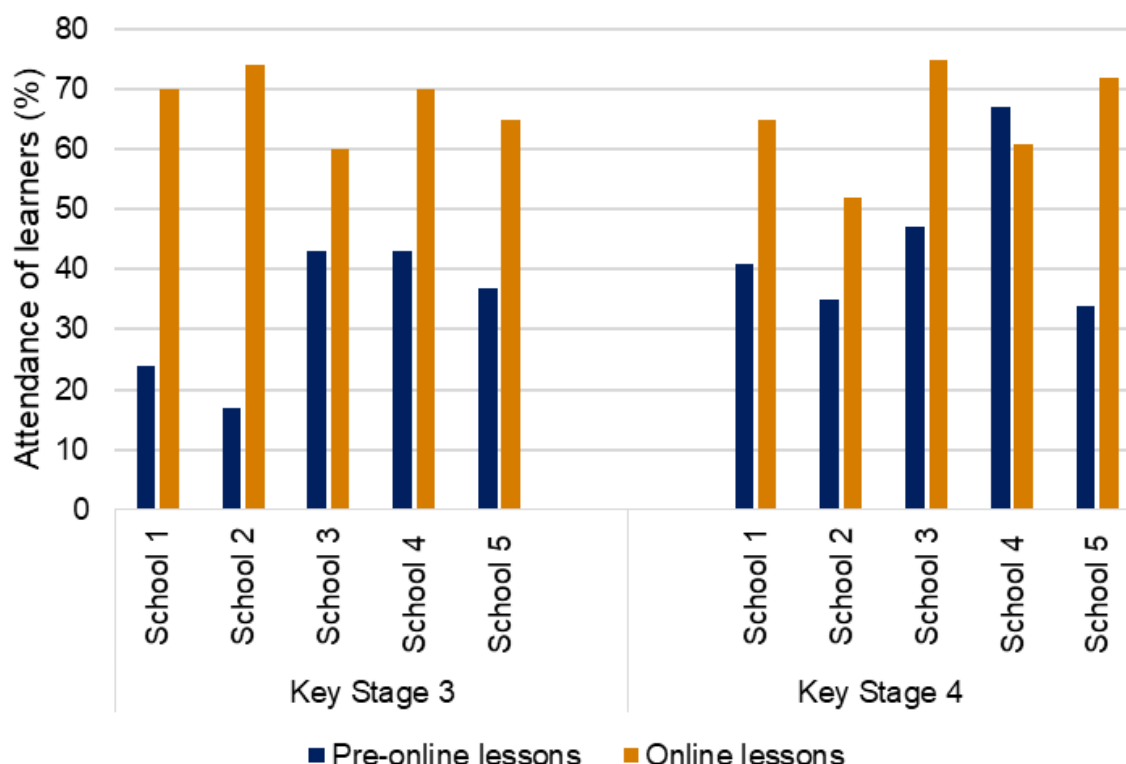
The data indicates that there has been a clear improvement in attendance and engagement across nearly all participating schools for learners in year 7 to 9 and 10 to 11 (formally KS3 and KS4). There is one instance in School 4 in Key Stage 4 where the attendance percentages did not improve and appears to be because of one pupil anomaly whose attendance worsened (92% to 68%). It is important to note that the tutor only provided data for learners that were on the pathway when the survey was sent out, so this does not reflect the monthly attendance of all of learners on the programme during the academic year 2024/25.

Nonetheless, the overall improvement in the attendance of this group has demonstrated that the programme has been a resounding success in improving the engagement of previously absent learners. This reflects the findings of a previous review undertaken by UK Government on the experience of remote learning during the pandemic for school refusers and those who find school anxiety inducing (Walker et al, 2022: 42-43).

Figure 6: how learners feel the online lessons have affected them (Base: 43)
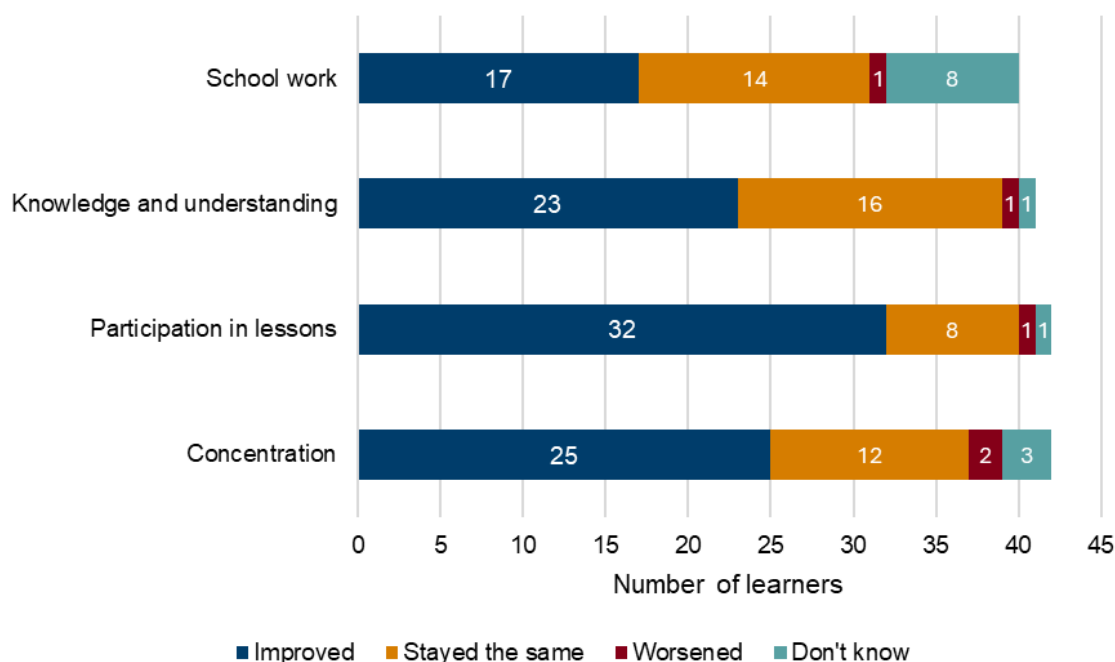

Figure 6 presents findings on how learners felt the online lessons affected aspects of their education and learning, which can also be seen as markers of engagement. A considerable proportion of students saw an improvement in their participation, and this is also evident in text responses. Around a half suggested that there have been improvements in their knowledge and understanding and their concentration, and a further third indicated their schoolwork had got better.

> "I am actually talking more and giving out answers unlike when I was in school and didn't bother.

> Learner Survey

Across all four categories above, some students reported that online lessons had no effect and that things had stayed the same. When looking deeper at the individual responses it appears that this might be related to the portion that have only been on the programme for a relatively short time (between 6 months and a year). However, even though some state that things stayed the same, it is noteworthy that these learners are receiving education when they otherwise would not be in school. Very few learners reported worsening in these areas, but where they did, their individual comments appeared to reflect their own personal struggles and challenges rather than shortcomings of the programme itself.

Figure 7: how learners feel the online lessons have affected them (continued) (Base: 43)
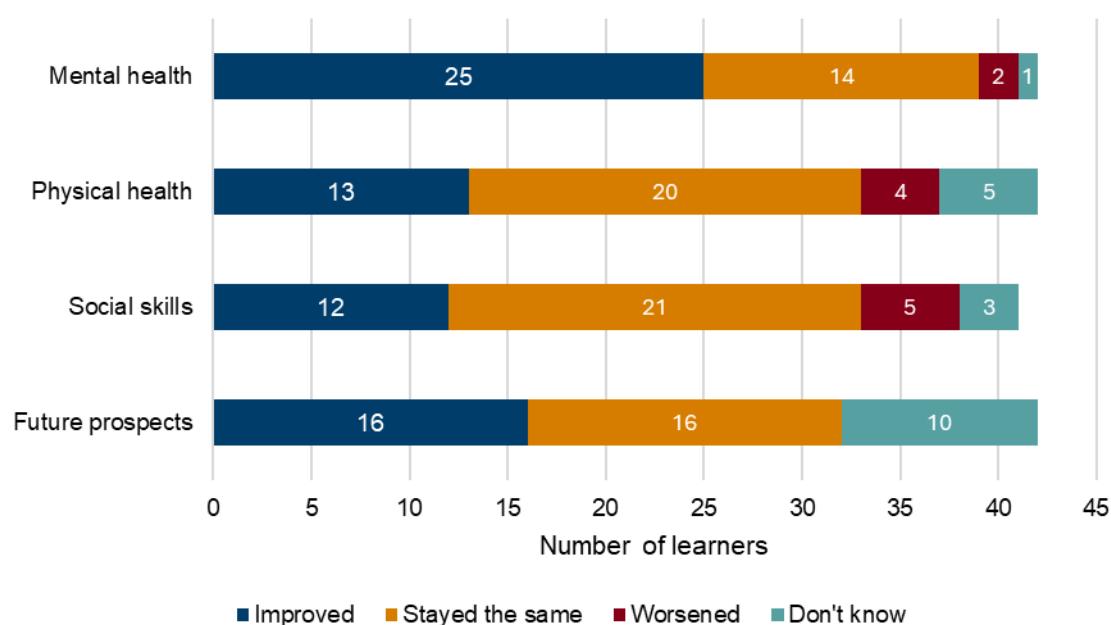
Other aspects of learner experience and outcomes beyond those directly related to education and learning were also explored and are presented in Figure 7 above. The online lessons have led to improvements in mental health for over half of the learners. This is likely to be attributable to the fact that the online lessons are designed to remove stressors associated with traditional classrooms that can affect learners who have anxiety and other related issues. For these students, online learning may provide a calmer and more manageable environment. This was reported in students open-text responses:

> "Personally, it removes the anxiety of attending school (I have social anxiety)."

> Learner survey

> "This online learning program has really helped with my anxiety and my confidence. This online program has helped me so much and I don't know what I would do if I wasn't in it."

> Learner survey

It is worth noting that three students did state that their mental health had worsened. When looking at the data closely it appears that this is due to the severity of their respective issues, and/or their own personal challenges that exist outside of the programme.

A similar level of improvement was reported for physical health and social skills (13 and 12, respectively). A substantial number of students reported that there has been no change, with some even reporting that these aspects worsened. It can be surmised that this is because attendance on the virtual school programme may result in reduced opportunity for social interactions with peers such as walking to school or participation in physical education or other such school activities. It also suggests that there are several critical

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aspects of students' development that are not as easily integrated within the virtual school environment. In relation to the final aspect, feedback from learners on their future prospects was mostly positive with a large portion of students saying that it had improved, and others saying it stayed the same. None of the learners reported that it had worsened.

In further exploration of the data, it is clear that there are gender differences across several of the categories related to students' experiences of online learning. While the overall gender split of respondents was fairly even, girls are more likely than boys to feel that the programme has improved their mental health (n=15, compared to n=8), physical health (n=10, compared to n=3), social skills (n=8, compared to n=3), and future prospects (n=11, compared to n=5).

The research also enquired as to how learner experience translated into feelings about their choice of learning medium and how effective the programme could be for helping learners to re-attend in-person schooling. This was considered important given that attendance is a WG priority and the fact that the wider literature finds it to be to be associated with better short and long-term outcomes for learners.

Figure 8: number of learners by the form of learning they would prefer (Base: 43)

- Online lessons only   - In-person lessons only   - Mixture of the two
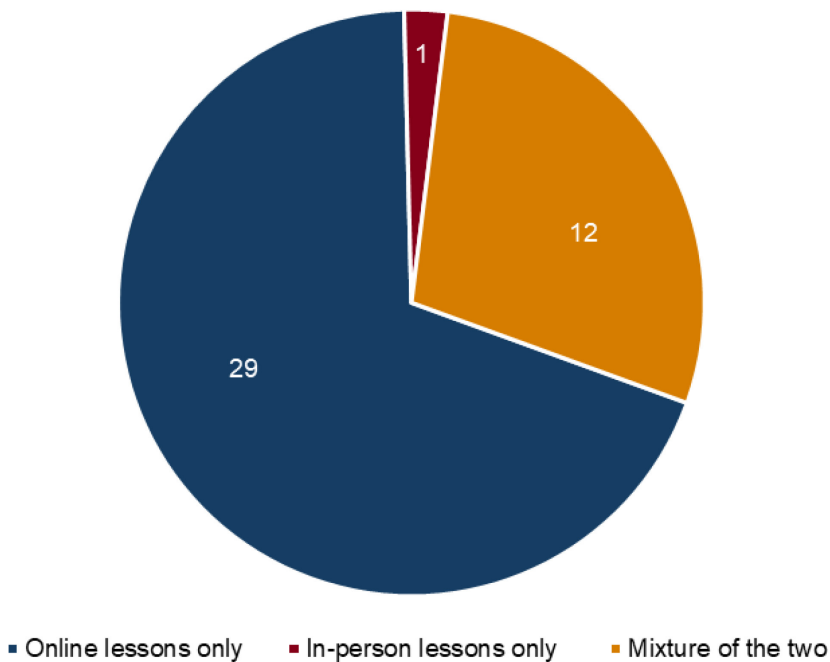
Figure 8 shows that a clear majority of the learners (29 out of 43) say they prefer online lessons only, which speaks to how valued the programme is when compared to their previous experiences of mainstream school settings. It also indicates, however, that the programme is not wholly effective in bringing about a desire amongst learners to re-attend school in-person. While this is the case, however, it is important to note that these learners are now receiving meaningful continuity of learning, with many reporting positive impacts and outcomes. The alternative would be total withdrawal from education the system.

Headteachers confirmed the positive experiences of those learners on the programme.

"A couple of students who weren't coming to school at all, [have] now engaged and attend every lesson. They've got 100% attendance on virtual schools, and they're learning. They're completing the work set. And it is building their confidence. So that if they weren't to return to school, they're still continuing with their studies."

<div align="right">Headteacher 3</div>

"The feedback from the pupils… have been really positive to the extent that some kids actually prefer being in the online school than they ever did enjoy coming into school...The feedback from the parents is marvellous because, you know, it's massive concern if you can't get your child out of bed or get them into school."

<div align="right">Headteacher 1</div>

While many prefer to remain purely in online lessons, this is not the case for all. A smaller, but sizeable proportion of learners (12 out of 43) indicated that they would prefer a blended approach of both online and in-person lessons. Some learners are already working on this basis with 7 currently having some days in school but spending the majority of their time on the online provision. In an open text response, a learner stated:

"After being on the programme for a month I felt that I was ready to try to go back to school [for some lessons] and I did. And I wouldn't have been able to do that if it wasn't for this programme or [the tutor]. I really love this programme.

<div align="right">Learner survey</div>

This desire for hybrid learning speaks to headteachers' suggestion that many of the learners do want to attend school and value the social or face-to-face interaction of a traditional classroom setting but often feel unable to see it through. It may also offer a cause for optimism and might bode well for the future in terms of re-integrating them into in-person schooling.

Despite the findings presented, the chart above does show that one learner would prefer in-person classes only, though it is unclear whether this individual is ready for a return to school or has been put on the programme through other circumstances. Importantly, the survey of pupils currently receiving online lesson does not account for those who have already returned to in-person schooling and, indeed, this research found that there have been success stories. A total of 13 learners have gone back to conventional classroom based schooling in full since the programme began, with a further 20 returning to a unit or other provision that their school has on offer. There was a myriad of reasons for this, with some headteachers putting it down to confidence acquired from being on the online schools programme, and others to learners missing the social aspects or because they wanted to access the full GCSE options available.

"We have had students that have… [come] back to mainstream because they've built their confidence up, because they are getting involved socially with the other students through virtual schools and they have come back into school."

<div align="right">Headteacher 3</div>

"[Some trial [the online school] and then they realise very quickly that they're going to get a limited diet [in terms of GCSE options] … and that can sometimes be a wakeup call for them and also they're attending because they want to be back with their friends."

Headteacher

Amongst learners who have been on the programme there can be setbacks, however. Whilst some learners engage for a period and are able to return to school indefinitely, others are on and off the provision due to the challenges they face. Those responsible for running the programme ensure they make it clear to the learners that there is a "fall back" if needed.

3.5. Successful and challenging aspects of the virtual schools programme

This section explores how those involved in the online school provision feel about the various aspects of the programme and its delivery, focusing on things that they find both successful and more difficult or challenging. It offers a deeper understanding of how well the programme is supporting learners and how it is contributing to their overall outcomes.

Figure 9: aspects that learners enjoyed about the online lessons, more than one answer permitted (Base: 43)

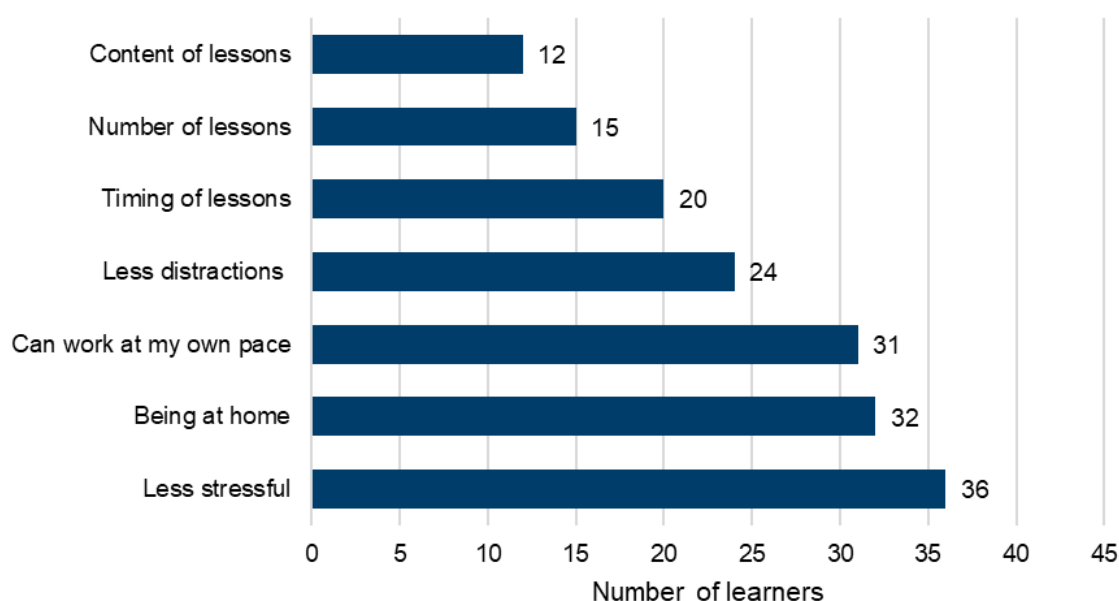Figure 9 presents responses from learners in relation to what they enjoy about the online lessons. The most commonly cited benefit is that online lessons are 'less stressful' (36 of 43), and this is closely followed by 'being at home' (32 of 43) and 'can work at my own pace' (31 of 43). This suggests that learners value the way that online learning has removed some of pressures associated with in-person schooling.

"I'm glad I had an opportunity to do this online learning as I was really stressed with school as it was too busy, too much going on at one time, limited quiet places for me to go."

<div align="right">Learner survey</div>

A number of learners (24 or 43) also appreciated less distractions, indicating that the online format created a more controlled and focused environment. This element seemed to be beneficial for those who may struggle with anxiety in school as is demonstrated by an open-text response from a learner:

"Whenever I did go into school I would never be able to focus because my anxiety wouldn't let me. I missed around 4 months of school this year in 2025… then my school put me onto this programme, and it was amazing. For the first time I was able to learn without any distractions or worrying about anything."

<div align="right">Learner survey</div>

Some learners felt that the lack of distractions enabled by the technological platform had helped to improve their ability to think and had benefited their learning:

"I like that I can mute sound to concentrate. I hate too many voices I can't think."

<div align="right">Learner survey</div>

"I believe I have learnt more on online learning than at school because of the fact that I can work without distractions."

<div align="right">Learner Survey</div>

Some learners also valued "timing of lessons," "number of lessons" and the "content of lessons," which indicates a level of satisfaction with the design and delivery of the programme. However, these are comparatively lower, which suggests that they are not regarded as the most appealing features compared to other aspects of the lessons.

Figure 10: aspects that learners found difficult about the online lessons, more than one answer permitted (Base: 43)
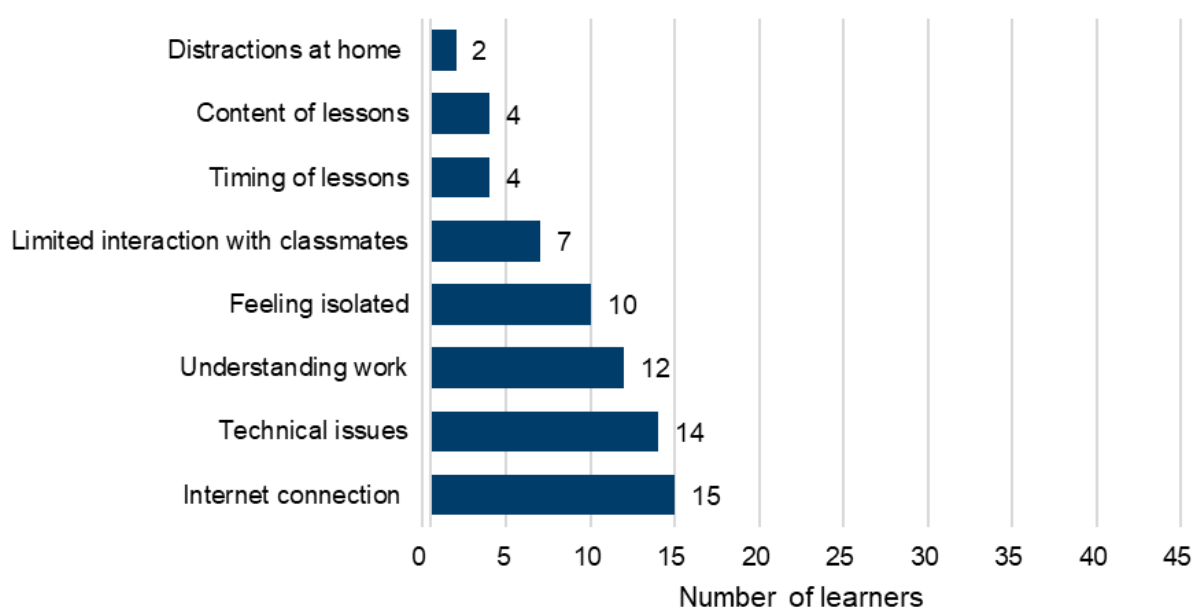

Figure 10 above provides a snapshot of the difficulties learners face with online lessons. It is notable that the responses are much less numerous across the board than they are with aspects of the programme that learners said they liked. The most commonly reported challenge was internet connection and technical issues (15 and 14 out of 43 respectively), which suggests, in line with findings in the literature, that despite recent developments in information technology and greater digital access, it still remains a barrier for many families.

Some learners elaborated on these issues:

> "… the group call frequently crashes, or it doesn't let me connect to teams which makes me late for the lesson."

> "… it's common to drop out of lessons due to connection issues."

> "… the connection issues seem to be a problem."

<div align="right">Learner survey</div>

Headteachers have also touched upon this:

> "We've had Wi-Fi issues in [learner's houses] and we've had to take some dongles out to families…those are the sorts of barriers that, you know, if the child wants to engage and the family are supportive, we'll put all those in place to avoid those barriers."

<div align="right">Headteacher 3</div>

Just over a quarter of learners responding to the survey also reported that understanding work set by the tutor can be difficult, indicating that, at present, the online lessons may not

necessarily make it easier for the students to follow and grasp what is being taught and that elements of the content are not as accessible to some of the learners as it could be.

Around a quarter of learners mentioned feeling isolated and a fifth reported limited interactions with classmates as drawbacks. This further speaks to the point that there are certain aspects of schooling that cannot be replicated via an online programme. These findings on challenges highlight that while online learning is clearly valued by learners, it brings its own unique challenges that are worthy of consideration going forwards.

The research also asked learners about the levels of support they receive in the online setting from various sources. Figure 11 below explores this in more detail, showing how learners perceive support from their online tutor, classmates, family, and their school.

Figure 11: learner views on how supported they feel by the tutor, classmates, family, and school (Base: 43)
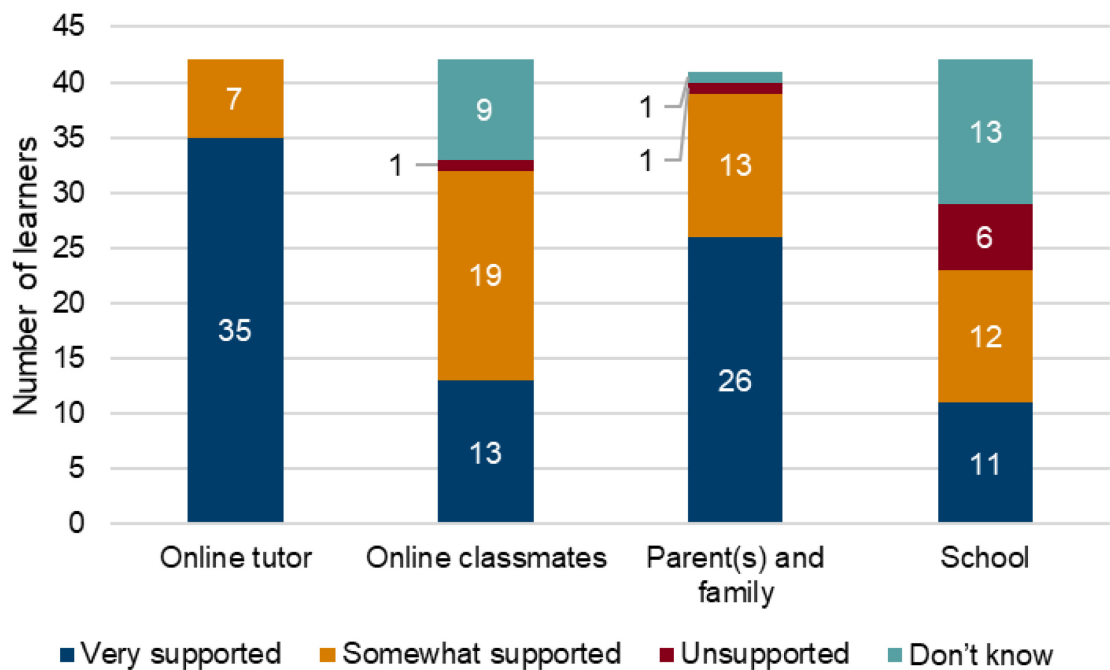
The strongest sense of support comes from the online tutor, with an overwhelming majority of learners (35 of 43) reporting that they feel very supported. On further elaboration, learners pointed to the tutors demeaner and approach, which appears to make for a highly effective and trusted relationship:

> "I enjoy having a supportive teacher who truly believes in me [and] who is generally lovely person."

Learner survey

> "I like the fact that the teacher does not yell or get angry at me or other students, it makes me feel comforted and safe since at school there was too much of it. Plus, the teacher helps me understand things better than other teachers, since she doesn't get frustrated and actually gives good advice in a simple way. I particularly like the

cooking on a Friday when it happens, since it is fun and we get to all decide what we make."

Headteachers also touched upon the tutor's abilities and attributes, particularly in relation to how it can lead to positive outcomes for learners in the form of re-attending school:

"[She is] very skilled in the way she talks to the kids, and she does talk about re-engaging, reintegrating back into school, and I think just listening to her and doing the work with her made them think, well, I can go back to school. "

In contrast, responses on support from online classmates presented a more mixed result. A large proportion felt somewhat supported while a smaller group also indicated feeling unsupported, which may reflect limited interaction or lack of connection amongst peers.

Support from parents or family was relatively strong, with a good proportion of learners feeling very supported, and many selecting somewhat supported. This can be seen as a positive, given the significant role that parents play in how children view their education.

However, the most divided responses are seen in the school category. While some learners felt very or somewhat supported, a larger number indicated feeling unsupported or that they did not know in comparison to other categories. This could be due to ongoing negative associations with the school environment or, as the quote below suggests, because the school as an institution feels disconnected from their day-to-day learning experience.

"I would like my school to [ack]knowledge what I'm achieving, I feel like I don't have support [from] them or praise or [I'm not] mentioned in school letters. [I'm] achieving like my other peers just [in a] different way and my family only have phone calls if I don't go online."

Beyond their views on their experience to date, the survey provided insights on areas of where learners felt the programme could be improved. Some of this can be inferred from what was said in relation to the difficulties and challenges above, but when asked directly what they thought could make the online lessons better, many learners admitted that they wanted more subjects to learn and for the technical issues to be fixed.

"I would like a new topic to start learning again like science or history."

"I think having more subjects on the programme because it's really helped my English and maths so it would be even better if it had other subjects."

However, this does not seem to affect how they feel about the overall effectiveness of the programme, and when asked if they would recommend their online lessons to other learners who may have difficulty attending school, a resounding 38 of 43 said yes (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: number of learners on whether they would recommend online lessons (Base: 43 with 1 missing response)

Yes   Don't know
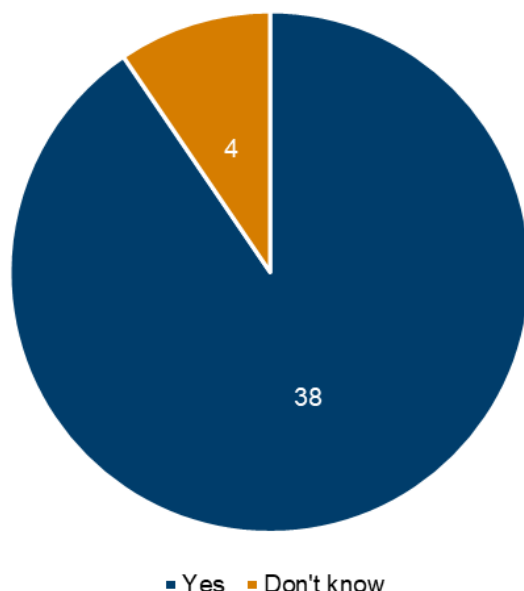
3.6.   Future development of the virtual schools programme

There is a consensus amongst those who oversee the management of the virtual online school programme that it has been a worthwhile endeavour, and this report has demonstrated that it is, overall, an effective means of providing education for learners with low attendance, especially those experiencing issues with mental health and anxiety. Insights were also sought on how they expect or plan to develop the programme in future.

The headteachers were asked whether the programme was seen as a long-term or short-term provision and were unanimous in stating that it depends on the learner. For some it may act as an effective temporary stepping stone back into school, whilst for others it will be a long-term provision or solution because there may be little change in their disposition and the problems they face. One of the headteachers suggested that "no one child is the same and we certainly can't treat them the same either", implying that the programme should exist for individual learners as long as is necessary to meet their learning needs.

The tutor expressed that the provision is something that can be provided over the long term and is needed for the learners who don't "fit in the box" for a classroom education. Resources for such learners should be put to use in a way that is best for them:

> "We have to adapt. We have to reach these learners in some way. You know, schools are getting money for these learners, we've got to use that…[and] they shouldn't be denied this…education for the longer term needs to be broader."

Although there was not much of a view on this from the learners, some did caution that where learners are able, it should be a temporary solution rather than a long-term one.

> "I think students could benefit from using the online learning as a temporary solution whilst they are out of school, but should work towards going back to school if possible, as it can isolate them and possibly make their fear of going back to school even worse."

<div align="right">Learner Survey</div>

After over a year of operation, a decision has been made by all the headteachers to "increase, expand, and enhance" the virtual schools programme. This would involve employing a second tutor and doubling the current learner capacity and reach:

> "We're in the process of expanding it to another five schools. So, we're going to appoint another teacher [which means we'd] have two teachers in the provision. One would be humanities in English and vocational qualifications, and the other will be science and maths… so the capacity will go from 60 to 120 by September [2025] from 10 different schools across I think four local authorities."

<div align="right">Headteacher 1</div>

The current tutor would be the senior of the two and would still teach English and the vocational qualification. The tutor also explained their desire and potential to expand the curriculum beyond core subjects once these are in place.

> "[The additional] teacher could teach science and take on the maths. So, then that would give the opportunity for the learners to leave with a three core [subjects]: English, maths, and science. So ideally [that] would leave me with English and the SWEET…we would progress then to perhaps humanities, because with a humanities teacher again you could offer history, geography and RE. The scope of this is huge because obviously if you can employ more specialists, you could open the doors continuously until you can offer a fuller curriculum or as close as you can get it."

<div align="right">Tutor</div>

As the quote demonstrated, the more teachers available the broader and the learning opportunities can be. For students not in mainstream education, this model could represent a pathway back into a full and more complete form of alternative structured learning.

In recognition of the changing nature of society and education, headteachers also believe that more should be done to promote or facilitate the development of provisions such as this across the wider sector including additional support through funding to local authorities and schools.

> "Society has changed… it's recognising through policy that this is a different way of children being schooled, and, you know, of tackling attendance…[More] support

<div align="center">32</div>

could be put in place then for different programmes and qualifications that could be run in this way."

<div align="right">Headteacher 2</div>

The headteachers are strong advocates for a network approach where, amongst other things, schools can collaborate to share information and develop provisions to support children who are disengaging from school. They have already taken the steps to support another group of three schools in outside of their immediate region in Wales who are working with their local authority and aiming to create an online school as a pilot project.

4. Conclusions

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a rise in the rate of general and persistent school absenteeism in Wales, with many learners experiencing difficulties re-integrating back into mainstream schooling. There are numerous reasons for this, ranging from an exacerbation of existing problems and unmet needs to changes in attitudes.

It is well known in the available research that those who have good attendance and attend school regularly develop stronger skills, receive higher grades, and have better long-term academic success and future outcomes than those who do not. As such, school attendance is an important issue for the Welsh Government who established a National Attendance Taskforce (NAT) with the aim of understanding the ongoing problem developing solutions.

From this taskforce, the use of alternative school based interventions such as online lessons have emerged as a potential way of supporting learners who struggle to engage with and attend mainstream schooling. This study aimed to provide initial insights into an online school programme that has been implemented in five schools belonging to the South Wales Secondary Schools Network (SWSSN) across Swansea, Port talbot and Neath.

This study explored the establishment and the design of the programme and found most learners are on the programme because of issues with mental health and anxiety. The programme is intended to help mitigate certain aspects of learning that prove challenging for them to deal with, such as noise levels, class sizes and a fast-paced workload.

The programme has led to increased engagement from the learners who are now attending the online lessons at a far greater rate than they previously were at school. From the interviews and learner survey, it is clear that it has benefited their learning, with pupils on the programme saying they feel more confident to participate in class, have better concentration levels and improvements in their knowledge/understanding and school work.

The overall positive experience of the programme has not, at least among the current cohort, translated to a desire to return to school in-person, with over two thirds saying that they would prefer online lessons only. This was not the sole intention of those who developed the programme and since learners are receiving continuity of education with numerous benefits it should not be regarded as an inherent shortcoming of the provision.

Beyond this, however, a quarter did state that they would like a mixture of both in-person and online lessons as they continue their educational journey and, indeed, some are already doing so. Moreover, interviews suggested that some learners have already fully returned to in-person schooling. Together, this seems to indicate that the online programme is instilling confidence in learners capable of supporting their re-integration.

A majority of learners gave insights into the aspects of online lessons that they enjoyed, suggesting they liked the fact that they are less stressful, they can be at home, and they could work at their own pace. This indicates that the learners valued the way in which the programme has removed some of the pressures associated with in-person schooling. Although learners were overall satisfied with the delivery of the programme, a smaller number reported facing some challenges, particularly those in relation to technical issues.

Whilst learners felt the programme of online lessons met their needs, a sizable proportion do not feel supported by their school. Nevertheless, learners overwhelmingly said that they would recommend the programme to other learners with who face similar issues to them.

In line with the purpose of this report, it is important to highlight that there is learning to be drawn from the challenges learners themselves have identified. These insights offer a critical perspective on what supports and/or may hinders the success of online schooling.

Online lessons should be recognised as a useful tool or targeted intervention that can serve a broad range of needs among learners who may not thrive in mainstream school due to issues such as mental health concerns, additional learning needs, or other social and emotional factors. In these cases, the stability, flexibility, and reduced pressures of online environments can act as enablers for educational re-engagement and continuity of learning.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study that should be noted. Although, the virtual online school has received a very positive response from learners in terms of their views on different learning related outcomes, there is a lack of baseline test scores or assessment data to see whether being on the programme has resulted in better learner understanding and schoolwork by comparing the situation before and after being on the programme.

Additionally, there some potential for bias among survey response since it was distributed to learners and administered by the tutor during an online lesson. This could lead to learners feeling pressured to fill out the form and to include answers that may not align with their actual view. However, it is important to note that learners were informed that their responses would be anonymous and, as such, there is no possibility of negative repercussions such as their position on the programme being held in jeopardy.

A further limitation is the absence of parental involvement in the research. Whilst the perspective of the learners is an invaluable part of this study, it would have also been beneficial to have parental views on the effectiveness of virtual online schooling for their children. This is especially important as it comes at a time where there is evidence in the wider literature of a deterioration in parental and mainstream school relationships.

Nonetheless, despite these limitations the findings of the research can be used as initial steps into the understanding of learner experiences of virtual online schooling.

5. Next steps

The study conducted was of a small scale, and though it provides useful insights, there is scope for additional research to provide deeper understanding of the SWSSN's virtual online school programme. This might include the following:

- Further monitoring and evaluation of the expansion of the programme This would give a greater understanding of how the provisions can respond to learner needs and their value in addressing the attendance concerns. It would be beneficial if further research of this nature could collect in-depth quantitative and qualitative information from all relevant parties including headteachers, tutors learners and parents.

- A longitudinal study into the long-term impacts of the virtual school programme and outcomes of learners who have completed their GCSEs, especially as a large proportion of students said that the online school had improved their future options.

In addition to this, Welsh Government and key stakeholders such as local authorities should also consider other more general next steps which include the following:

- Keeping informed about new developments and progress in online programmes across the country and giving consideration to the value in supporting such provisions as an intervention for those learners with attendance issues.

- Exploring how online teaching, as a standalone role or incorporated into existing timetables, could help to address issues such as teacher recruitment, retention and well-being by offering homework opportunities and better work-life balance.

- Seek to understand the impact that programmes of this nature have on the mainstream school and teaching environment or ecosystem. If there are fewer learners in in-person lessons, or if the numbers are changeable due to pupils working on a hybrid basis, this may have important effects on classroom dynamics.

Annex A

Virtual Online School – Learner Survey

Introduction

Welsh Government is interested in understanding more about the online lessons that you take part in and would like you to complete a short survey so we can gather your thoughts and feelings. It should only take a few minutes. Your answers would help to make the online lessons better for you and for other learners across the country.

We won't ask for any personal information such as your name or the name of your school, and you don't have to do this survey if you don't want to. If you choose not to, it won't change anything about your future involvement in the lessons.

We won't share your individual answers with anybody. If you would like to know more about how we collect and store data, you can find out more information here.

About You

1. What gender do you identify as?

Male, Female, Other *(open),* Prefer not to say,

2. Are you eligible for free school meals?

Yes, No, I Don't know, Prefer not to say

3. What is your current year group?

Year 7, Year 8, Year 9, Year 10, Year 11

4. Do you consider yourself to be disabled or have additional learning needs?

Yes, please specify *(open)*, No, Prefer not to say

5. Why don't you want to attend school in-person or feel unable to do so? Please tick all that apply

It makes me feel anxious

It does not meet my needs

I don't like what we're taught

I don't like my teachers

I have experienced bullying

I have issues with transport

I don't think it's that important

I have other responsibilities at home

Other - please specify *(open)*

Experiences of Online Learning

In this section we want to know about your experiences of the online lessons so far and whether or not they have helped you.

6. How long have you taken part in the online school programme?

Less than 3 months, 3 to 6 months, 6 months to 1 year, More than 1 year

7. How do you feel the online lessons have affected your…

	Improved	Stayed the same	Worsened	Don't know
Concentration in lessons (i.e. how focused you are)				
Participation in lessons				
Knowledge and understanding				
School work (i.e. your grades)				
Social skills and communicating with others				
Physical health				
Mental health and wellbeing (i.e. your mood or how anxious you feel day to day)				
Future prospects (i.e. your plans after finishing school or preparing you for your future goals)				

8. If you could choose, which of the following would you prefer?

Online lessons only

In-person lessons only

Mixture of the two

Your views on the online lessons and levels of support

In this section we would like to know about what you like or might find difficult about the online lessons and the level of support you receive.

9. What do you enjoy about the online lessons? Tick all that apply:

Number of lessons

Timing of lessons

Content of lessons

Can work at my own pace

Being at home

Less distractions

Less stressful

Something else? – please tell us *(open)*

10. Is there anything you find difficult or challenging about the online lessons? Tick all that apply:

Number of lessons

Timing of lessons

Content of lessons

Technical issues

Internet connection

Difficulty understanding

Distractions at home

Limited interaction with classmates

Feeling isolated

Something else? – please tell us *(open)*

11. How supported do you feel in your learning by…

	Very supported	Somewhat supported	Unsupported	Don't know
Your online tutor				
Your online classmates				
Your parent(s) and family				
Your school (e.g. other teachers and support staff such as learning coaches and counsellors etc)				

12. What do you think would make the online lessons better?

(Open)

13. Would you recommend online lessons like yours to other learners who may have difficulties with attending school in-person?

Yes, No, Don't Know

14. If you have any other thoughts, please share them below:

(Open)

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.