

Education otherwise than at school: Note of committee visits on 28 November 2019

Thursday 28 November 2019

On 28 November 2019, Committee members visited three settings supporting children and young people receiving education otherwise than at school (EOTAS). These settings were located in Bridgend, Cardiff and Caernarfon.

Pupils had a mixture of needs and abilities, some relating to mental health (including significant self-harm and suicidal ideation at times) and others to social, emotional and regulation of behaviours.

The primary purpose of the visits was to enable face-to-face discussions with pupils, to gain an understanding of their experiences of receiving education outside their mainstream school. Members also spoke with staff, parents and carers. The Committee undertook the visits at the beginning of the inquiry to ensure that the first-hand experiences of those engaged in EOTAS are at the forefront Members' thinking as the Committee explores this area in more detail.

This note has been prepared with the permission of all the settings visited. Its purpose is to inform oral evidence sessions, and the Committee's final report and recommendations. In order to maintain the privacy of those with whom Members spoke, comments have not attributed to individuals.

The Committee would like to thank all the children, young people, staff, parents and carers who enabled these visits to take place and gave their time to help Members with this work.



Support in mainstream school

1. The majority of learners and parents/carers reported that **little or no support was available** in their mainstream school to enable children and young people with difficulties to remain there. Comments included:

“There was no support structure.”

“I was out of lessons 24/7. I wasn’t learning.”

“Teachers didn’t pay attention – I didn’t learn.”

“I was made to feel naughty.”

“I was scared to ask for help.”

“Teachers need to better understand how to help us.”

“The teachers didn’t like me so they kicked me out.”

“They lose their tempers so quickly [...] They think we’re trying to get attention. But we just want someone to listen.”

“Ro’n i’n cael help ond yn hapus i ddod yma i osgoi cael bai ar gam.”
[“I was getting help but I was happy to come here to avoid being blamed unfairly.”]

2. Issues learners and parents/carers reported at mainstream schools included distress caused by:

- bigger class sizes;
- the use of isolation;
- withdrawal of break/lunchtimes and school trips, concerts, and sports days;
- their needs not being listened to/understood;
- little or no connection being built between pupils and teachers;
- frequent changes of approach within the school to behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) and mental health;

- being labelled and stigmatised, leading to further deterioration in behaviour; and
- having to move mainstream schools/provision, becoming “lost” in the system.

3. The small number of learners and parents/carers who stated that they had received some support in their mainstream school referred to the following as important tools:

- **time out cards** - to show to get permission to leave the classroom when they felt the need;
- **“learning houses” / “restorative zones”** – to visit when they were unable to remain in their mainstream class;
- **reduced timetables** – to increase the manageability of time spent in the formal school environment.

4. Learners explained, however, that there were a **number of challenges in relation to these tools**. These included being too afraid at time to show their time out card, feeling “naughty” or isolated when they left their mainstream classes to go to learning houses/restorative zones, and feeling that they were not learning particularly well despite these mechanisms being in place. The majority of those who commented positively about their mainstream schools referred to the **importance of particular staff** who had listened to them, understood their issues, and provided tailored support.

5. Asked **what could have been better** in their experience, the learners and some parents/carers suggested:

- teachers should be **better trained** to improve their understanding of BESD, neurodevelopmental and mental health needs, and to enable them to be better able to handle positive/negative feelings. Learners felt that their challenges were regularly mislabelled as misbehaving. Parents/carers felt that this would be a good investment given the growing prevalence of mental illness and suicide into adulthood;
- **more warning** should be given / steps should be taken before a learner is “kicked out” of a class;

- school staff should **take more time to understand learners' needs** – patience and understanding are needed to help them overcome the issues they are facing;
- a **more proportionate approach to exclusion** – learners felt that they were being excluded because of a number of small incidents that built up rather than serious matters warranting such action; and
- greater **parity between the importance placed on wellbeing and attainment** – some parents/carers feared that schools did not engage for fear of damaging performance measures, particularly exam results.

Alternative options to mainstream and the level of choice

6. Mixed experiences were reported in relation to the **options and choices available beyond mainstream school**.

7. Learners in the Bridgend setting felt that they had alternative options close to their homes. As well as the unit itself, they were aware of options for home schooling. They also highlighted the fact that they were able to access provision in further education colleges during years 10 and 11, in combination with their attendance at the PRU. They felt that these were very helpful in enabling them to consider and prepare for their post-16 education options. In contrast, learners in the Cardiff setting reported that they were presented with only one option, rather than a range.

8. Most learners across the three settings reported feeling **nervous before entering EOTAS** about what would happen after leaving mainstream provision. Concerns included:

- missing friends;
- missing out on learning;
- the stigma of being in EOTAS, including being considered “naughty”; and
- struggling to return to mainstream school.

9. Some parents/carers felt that there was a **lack of information** about the alternative options available to them and their children. They felt this affected their ability to make an informed choice, and in one case delayed their decision to move their child from the mainstream school for fear of limiting their future prospects and attainment.

10. While a number praised the mainstream school and local authority staff, they commented that it had been a “long struggle” to identify the right people. Some also felt that securing EOTAS could hinge on the **level of parental support/knowledge**, and their **proximity to a town/city** with a population sufficient in size to maintain such provision.

Time to secure alternative provision

11. Mixed experiences were reported in relation to the time it took to secure provision otherwise than at school, and the nature of support that was provided during the interim period. Waits reported ranged from very little to 16-18 months.

12. In the cases of delay, interim support ranged from “some home tuition” (for the individual waiting 16-18 months) to “nothing” (for another waiting 6-7 months). In contrast, another learner reported a much shorter gap of 2-3 months in her education, during which a range of support, activities and time with youth workers was provided. There was a consensus among those who commented about the time it takes to secure alternative that any gap was unhelpful and could affected mental health, wellbeing and attainment.

13. Some parents/carers reported that their child remaining in a mainstream school without the necessary level of support had **impacted the wider family unit**. They commented that other siblings were affected and at risk of mirroring behaviours. They also explained that their own jobs were being affected due to the number of times they had to leave work to collect their children early following a request from school.

Support in EOTAS provision

14. The majority of learners across the three settings reported feeling **very well supported once they joined their EOTAS provision**. Many added that their experience had made a **significant and positive difference to their education**.

Benefits of EOTAS

15. The main aspects learners and their parents/carers emphasised as being better in EOTAS were:

- **teaching and support staff** taking the time to listen to them and being more experienced in dealing with and understanding their needs;

“The staff don’t have short tempers here.”

“There is understanding and trust between the pupils and staff. We fit in here.”

“The staff have all had training in mental health.”

“We all get along here. We’re like a family.”

- smaller number of learners, particularly in terms of **small class sizes**, meaning that they were given the attention they needed, were not so anxious to ask for help, and did not feel overcrowded by others;

“Staff can get to know children much more because it’s smaller than a mainstream school.”

“It’s not as noisy as my other school.”

- the **flexibility and nature of support** being more conducive to learning;

“They explain things here.”

“It’s easier to ask for help.”

“It helps to have shared experiences. We can open up here.”

- the **pace of learning** being much more tailored to their individual needs;

“Teachers don’t rush us here.”

“Mainstream is focused on grades.”

- **parents/carers being involved and well-informed** about their child’s education.

“I can ask for a chat at any time...the communication is excellent.”

16. They reported that the support they received at **the unit improved their learning**. Comments included:

“It’s improved my learning because I actually come to school now. I used to have weeks off in my other school.”

“I’m doing more work here.”

“I’m back to a full day of learning here, rather than a reduced timetable.”

“It’s more relaxed here so I’m more engaged.”

“I’m no longer scared to ask for help. I talk more and I’m less anxious,”

“My confidence has increased.”

“I’m more confident and more independent.”

“My behaviour has improved.”

“She’s flourished here.”

“I’ve not had to pick him up early once from here.”

“Dwi’n canolbwyntio ac yn gwrando’n fwy ar yr athrawon.”

[“I concentrate and listen to the teachers more.”]

“Dwi’n llai hyper a dwi ddim yn codi ffrae na chwffio cymaint.”

[“I’m less hyper and I don’t argue or fight as much.”]

Range of subjects and support

17. The range of subjects available to learners ranged from setting to setting, however all three delivered **core subjects** (English/Welsh and Maths, including GCSE qualifications where appropriate). In certain cases, core subjects were delivered through more practical tasks (for example mathematics being picked up in cookery sessions through weighing ingredients), and **a much greater emphasis placed on nurture, behaviours and emotions** than on the formal curriculum.

18. A **more limited curriculum** was cited by some pupils/parents as a concern which had initially deterred them from wanting to enter EOTAS provision (and a factor that would attract them back to their mainstream school). Nevertheless, some young people and their parents/carers felt that the support provided in EOTAS enabled them to be **more likely to succeed in learning and/or gaining qualifications**, even if more limited in scope or number. One pupil commented, however, that he was concerned about returning to mainstream and needing to “catch up” with work:

“Be’ sy’n weindio fi fyny yw dal fyny efo gwaith ysgol.”
[“What winds me up is catching up with school work.”]

19. Much emphasis was placed in the three settings on:

- the pupils’ **wellbeing, resilience, and nurture**;
- **work-related education and life skills** for young people, especially those nearing the school leaving age;
- **good links with other services** such as CAMHS and ALN support for those with specific needs – one parent described the EOTAS provision as
“...the anchor to everything”
- **good links with parents/carers** to ensure that they are involved where possible/appropriate and able to learn more about BESD. The availability of a Family Engagement Officer in Bridgend to support parents/carers was given as an example of good practice in this regard;
- the **facilities** available, including features such as breakout areas with bean bags/quiet areas, kitchens for learners, the library and sports facilities that enabled their wider development; and
- **providing protected time** at the beginning and the end of each day to celebrate successes, or to speak about anything that had happened or was concerning the children and young people, to ensure that worries or issues did not escalate.

20. Many pupils and their parents/carers emphasised the **value of this wider support**, explaining that it was not available in their mainstream schools. Examples included mandatory “well-being and skills interventions” such as cooking and mindfulness, “enrichment sessions” which included forest walks and sport, and voluntary work in the community which helped develop their people skills. It was felt that all of these aspects **helped bridge an important gap between the EOTAS provision and future learning settings/work**.

Length of time in EOTAS

21. All three settings aimed to ensure that the children and young people were **enabled to return to mainstream school**.

22. In the Caernarfon setting, pupils attended from a number of local primary and secondary mainstream schools for a temporary 6-week period, to focus on

wellbeing and social/emotional needs. As they largely had time away from the curriculum to concentrate on nurture and behaviour, re-integration into mainstream school is done slowly, first visiting the previous school with EOTAS staff.

23. In Bridgend, while learners in year 10 and 11 could be in EOTAS on a permanent, full-time basis, younger age groups were first put on a **“revolving door” programme**. While parents/carers recognised that the aim of this approach was to act as early intervention, they were **not confident that the necessary adjustments would be made in mainstream schools** in preparation for their child’s return. They questioned how effective programmes could be if staff, as well as learners, were not changing their behaviours and approaches.

24. In Cardiff, although all learners reported that they enjoyed their EOTAS provision, they were **unanimous in their desire to return to their mainstream schools**. Their reasons varied, with some missing their friends and others believing they would achieve more GCSEs putting them in a better position for later life.

25. There was a view that **starting afresh in a new school, rather than returning to the previous mainstream school, could often be preferable**. This was based on the fact that many learners had reputations in their previous schools which made starting from a clean slate very difficult. Staff and parents/carers explained that while some learners’ behaviour was not overly problematic by the time they left EOTAS returning to their old mainstream school could on occasion see the return of challenging behaviours.

Transport

26. Arrangements for transport ranged across settings, but included **taxis and buses** funded by local authorities, and support from parents/carers. Learners in Caernarfon and Bridgend spoke warmly about their drivers and chaperons, explaining that they often lifted their mood in the morning when they arrived to take them to school.

27. Some learners in the Cardiff setting reported a journey by car of 30-40 minutes each way, but no significant concerns were raised about transport to/from any of the settings. Some parents/carers noted that they had been concerned about transport initially, but no problems had emerged in reality.