

THE USE OF FLEXIBLE EDUCATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE: EXPLORING PRACTICE IN FIFE

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June 2020

This report presents key findings from a small-scale exploratory research project with young people, parents, education and third sector practitioners on the use of Flexible Educational Arrangements in Fife.

Published by:

The Poverty Alliance

94 Hope Street

Glasgow

G2 6PH

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The Poverty Alliance is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue.
Reference No: SCO19926

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the families and practitioners who gave up their time and participated in this research as well as colleagues at the Poverty Alliance for their input.

Please cite as: Robertson, L., and McHardy, F. (2020) The Use of Flexible Educational Arrangements for Young People: Exploring Practice in Fife. Glasgow: The Poverty Alliance.

KEY FINDINGS

The Poverty Alliance conducted a small-scale exploratory research project on the use of Flexible Educational Arrangements in Fife between July and November 2019. Based on a sample of six families, five third sector practitioners and three education representatives, this research found that:

- There is some evidence that young people are not following their Flexible Educational Arrangements and, as a result, are receiving no educational provision.
- The experiences of each young person and their parents are unique with Flexible Educational Arrangements being put in place in response to varied issues.
- Parents lack an understanding about whether their children's school timetable is a formal Approved Flexible Package or another form of Flexible Educational Arrangement. Parents mentioned not having any paperwork in relation to their child's Flexible Educational Arrangement.
- Challenges for education services include a lack of communication from parents and/or young people, young people not following the timetables they are given and a lack of resources in schools.
- Support provided by third sector organisations is key to supporting communication between parents/young people and schools.
- There is evidence that Flexible Educational Arrangements can negatively impact on young people's educational attainment. There are not always enough resources available to support young people inside and outwith school who are on Flexible Educational Arrangements.
- There is evidence that Flexible Educational Arrangements can have negative consequences on family circumstances including extra pressures to care for children who are not in school and financial implications because of not being able to work.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

This report is based on findings from a small-scale exploratory research project conducted by the Poverty Alliance between July and November 2019 exploring the use of Flexible Educational Arrangements (FEAs) for young people.

This research explored the experiences of a small number of young people, their parents and practitioners in Fife and was not intended to be representative of all experiences of FEAs in Fife. Instead, the aim of this research was to provide in-depth, reflective accounts of a small number of families. Families were recruited for this research via a service in Fife and were all receiving additional levels of support available to Fife pupils based on their individual needs.

This research included:

- interviews with five young people on FEAs
- interviews with six parents with one or more children on FEAs (the young people interviewed were the children of five of the parents interviewed)
- five reflective logs with third sector practitioners (reflective logs were given to practitioners to provide them with a template to record a specific practice example of working with a young person on a FEA)
- three interviews with education representatives in Fife.

Aim of research

This research was conducted as part of a wider project on systems change funded by the Corra Foundation. Systems change approaches have been developed in the social sector to explore the complexity of systems that surround a social problem and seek to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make a system operate in a particular way (New Philanthropy Capital, 2015). Facilitated by Poverty Alliance, this work sought to identify system issues and problems identified by practitioners (both statutory and voluntary) working with families in Fife. The usage and implementation of FEAs was identified by this project as an issue to try and address through a systems change approach.

This research was undertaken to explore the use of FEAs in Fife. Speaking to young people on FEAs and their parents, practitioners and education representatives, the aims of this research were to:

- Explore young people's and their parents' views and experiences of FEAs
- Explore practitioners' and education representatives' perceptions and experiences of supporting young people on FEAs
- Identify opportunities for positive changes to both policy and practice in the delivery of FEAs in Fife.

Defining the usage and application of Flexible Educational Arrangements

Fife Council's Flexible Educational Arrangements guidance brings together guidance on (i) Approved Flexible Packages and (ii) Flexi-schooling arrangements. It states:

Approved Flexible Packages are aimed at supporting those pupils who are being educated at school but who need adjustments to the breadth and nature of the demands set out in mainstream schools. In these circumstances, it is in the best interests of the pupil to be provided with an educational plan with elements outwith the normal timetable, or from the school as location. An Approved Flexible Package may be most appropriate in the following circumstances (these exemplars are not exhaustive):

- where the pupil has experienced ongoing difficulties with accessing the mainstream school curriculum despite appropriate supports being put in place to meet their learning, behaviour and social needs;
- where there is a likelihood of interrupted attendance for whatever reason;
- where school attendance has proved difficult despite intervention and support from Pupil Support services and others.

Flexi Schooling is intended to address situations where the pupil is registered at school in the usual way but attends school part time. There are a number of reasons where this arrangement may be considered (these exemplars are not exhaustive):

- parental desire to home educate while retaining the link to school for some subjects/ activities;
- poor school attendance, related to anxiety and/or emotional issues;
- a staged return to school after extended absence. Illness which may have a long-term impact on school attendance.

The guidance outlines the general principles which should underpin the use of FEAs as well as factors that should be considered during key stages of the FEA process including: appropriateness of flexible educational arrangements (part 5), planning and documenting (part 6), the approval process (part 7) and attendance recording (part 8).

Both Approved Flexible Packages and Flexi-schooling Arrangements are recorded using a procedural checklist/form.

Context

Based on a Freedom of Information request, Fife Council reported that there were 353 Approved Flexible Packages across 18 secondary schools in Fife in December 2019 (see table 1). It is not possible to report the data on the numbers of FEAs that are not Approved Flexible Packages.

Table 1: Approved Flexible Packages in Fife (December 2019)

School	No. of AFPs
Auchmuty	4
Balwearie	9
Beath	29
Bell Baxter	36
Dunfermline	30
Glenrothes	11
Glenwood	15
Inverkeithing	19
Kirkcaldy	15
Levenmouth	93
Lochgelly	9
Madras	16
Queen Anne	8
St Andrew's	11
St. Columba's	10
Viewforth	12
Waid	10
Woodmill	16

Overview of research sample

Table 2 provides a summary of parents' descriptions of their children's FEAs. The five young people interviewed included two young people who were following their reduced timetable as part of a FEA and three young people who had FEAs in place but were rarely attending school.

Table 2: Parents' summary of FEAs

Parent	No. of children on FEA	Summary of FEA	Approved Flexible Package?
Parent 1	2	Young person 1: - not attended school for several years - timetable: 3 days a week for 1.5 hours - nature of support: 1:1 provision in school, no work given out of school	Parent did not say whether these were Approved Flexible Packages.
		Young person 2: - attending school part-time for one year - timetable: 3 half days and 2 full days - nature of support: 1:1 provision in school and class-based	
Parent 2	2	Young person 1: - attending school part-time - timetable: mixture of full days and half days - nature of support: largely class-based	Parent referred to both children's timetables as Approved Flexible Packages but said no paperwork had been received in relation to either.
		Young person 2: - attending school on long-term part-time timetable - timetable: mornings only - nature of support: pupil support base	
Parent 3	1	-not attended school for over a year. In first six months had no communication from school. - timetable: new part-time timetable agreed for post-summer - nature of support: weekly home visits from guidance teacher and some after school support from teachers. New timetable will be mainly class-based.	Parent did not say if this was an Approved Flexible Package.
Parent 4	2	Young person 1: - Not attended school regularly for several years - timetable: no new part-time agreed for post summer - nature of support: mixture of support base, class-based and home. No work sent home by school.	Parent did not say whether these were Approved Flexible Packages.
		Young person 2: - not attended school regularly for several years - timetable: no new part-time timetable agreed for post summer - nature of support: mixture of support base, class-based and home. No work sent home by school.	
Parent 5	1	- attending school part-time for a short period of time - timetable: mixture of full days and half days. Returning to school full-time post summer. - nature of support: mixture of class-based and pupil support base.	Parent did not say if this was an Approved Flexible Package.
Parent 6	1	- not attended school regularly long-term - timetable: various different timetables had been put in place over several years - nature of support: young person not attending school at time of research.	Parent did not say whether this was an Approved Flexible Package.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Why are Flexible Educational Arrangements used?

The reasons why young people were on a FEA varied. However, whilst each young person's circumstances were different, for young people and parents, anxiety about an aspect of school was a significant factor. Specifically, bullying or negative experiences with peers were mentioned by several young people and/or their parents. A few parents also said that behavioural issues had led to their child's FEA. Truancy was also mentioned. Three of the young people interviewed had been placed on a FEA from the point of not attending school at all. For these cases, a key issue was trying to engage young people in some form of education, either in or outwith school.

The reasons why young people were on FEAs were often complex and education service representatives emphasised the need to address wider issues at an earlier stage. The cases varied in the degree to which young people were attending school. Several of the parents felt that FEAs had been put in place because their children were not attending school (reasons given included anxiety, family issues, drugs and problems with peers) and that the school did not know how to deal with this.

"You know for the school...him not being able to socialise is more important than him being, picking up on education. But they're not saying that to me. If that's the case, they should turn around and go 'socialising is part of the curriculum'. But they're not but they make it such an issue. I got laughed at for I said (young person) would thrive on a one to one because they'll not fund it..." (Parent 6)

Education representatives described how flexible arrangements can work well to give young people the 'correct balance' between traditional schooling and other alternatives to education:

"We know that for some of our young people, they are a very effective tool, in order to get the balance of coming into school and having a bit of time at home or on work placements, as examples, where that is the correct balance for that young person and they work really well. I've got a number of people just now on flexible timetables who are flagged as having a hundred percent attendance based on their timetable. Because it's just, it's the correct balance for them. It's got the correct subjects that they want to come and attend. It's got a mixture of some of our alternatives." (Education P3)

"The benefits are for the pupil are that it keeps them in touch with education. Where some of them would've totally disengaged. It means that we can make sure that they've got their maths and English, we can actually look at pathways on leaving school because we've still got that contact. So those are some of the benefits. For the ones that are anxious, ... They build up their confidence. So it means they're more able to come into school and sustain school. So it can be a benefit for them as well. Raises their self-esteem." (Education P2)

Overall perceptions of flexible timetables

For young people and their parents, views of FEAs were mixed:

- A few of the young people said that their flexible timetable did not work for them. Reasons included feeling that attending school for short periods at a time was not worthwhile and that they were not able to keep up with their school work.
- On the whole, parents felt frustrated with their children's reduced timetables due to a perceived lack of communication from the school, struggles managing their children's attendance at school and the pressure of potential social work intervention.

On the whole, education representatives felt that FEAs, when delivered effectively, work as a short-term measure. However, concerns were raised regarding young people missing out on education and the lack of routine for young people not following their part-time timetable and irregularly attending school.

Planning and reviewing Flexible Educational Arrangements

Planning meetings and communication between schools and families

With a couple of exceptions, most of the parents interviewed said that they currently had regular meetings at school to discuss their child's timetable and that their child's guidance or head teacher had been in contact with them in-between times. For a couple of the parents, their relationship with the school had recently improved due to a new guidance teacher/year head. Support from third sector organisations was also identified as central to parents' communication with schools. A couple of the parents interviewed were uncertain of what the current plan was for their children's timetable after the school holidays and said they had struggled to find this out.

"I've not heard from anybody. Not heard from anybody since well before the holidays. So, I'm not really sure what to expect myself when come the 21st of August. I mean, they're going to be in school but where do [young person] and [young person] go? I mean, I don't want to throw them in at the deep end, but nothing was in place for after the holidays. So I just expect them to turn up and find their... What do they do when they get there?" (Parent 4)

One parent, whose child had rarely attended school for a couple of years, expressed her frustration during the first six months of her child's non-attendance, during which time she struggled to communicate with the school and get a plan in place. Since then, things had improved when her child was given a new guidance teacher.

Parent 3: *Whereas a meeting every four or five weeks in the last couple of months when she's not been at school for a year and a half, in my opinion, has not been anywhere near enough.*

Researcher: *What would have been better, do you think?*

Parent 3: *In the first six months, had the meetings started.*

Researcher: *There was no meetings for the first six months?*

Parent 3: *There was nothing done for the first six months.*

One of the parents interviewed had two children on FEAs and another who had long disengaged from school, but no formal arrangement had been put in place. For this child, she said that she had struggled to contact his guidance teacher for several months. After a meeting had not been able to go ahead, she mentioned trying to chase down the guidance teacher every time she was in the school attending a meeting for her other child. She said:

“Eventually I came across, his guidance teacher had changed to somebody else because of the class sizes or something, and he managed to phone me back the week they broke off and just said that they were basically going to, he was going back for fifth year, everything else was in the past sort of thing, and they were just going to keep an eye on his attendance and that was basically it.

So basically, he’s gone back for fifth year, like a fresh start sort of thing, and they would just keep an eye on attendance, which you would expect them to do anyway.” (Parent 2)

Changes in staff at schools was identified as a challenge. Parents were not clear about key factors of their child’s timetable including: (i) how often the timetable would be reviewed; (ii) how long the timetable would last; and (iii) how their child would be supported to do work outside of school. Several stated that they did not have something in writing. When asked in what ways the arrangements were communicated with them, one parent said:

“...because I was at a meeting by...on the last Tuesday of the week they broke off, but I got told something different from what [support worker] did, with what [support worker] said, [young person] had been given a choice to start back full days after the holidays on the Wednesday, and if she didn’t, then that’s like they gave her the choice, but I’ve not been made aware of that, through the school.” (Parent 2)

When asked what information it would be good to have on paper, this parent said:

“Ideally, one, for you on the flexible package, two, like obviously, she’s going to be in school, three, I don’t know, just how long they expect it to last for her, how long it’s going to be, and when it’s going to be up for review.” (Parent 2)

Another parent said that communication by the school could be improved:

“Yes more like interaction even if it’s through e-mails. You know it doesn’t have to be phone calls because I know sometimes they’ve got hundreds of other children that they have to deal... A quick e-mail or even a voice mail, first thing in the morning or last thing at night. Just something... There’s no point in sending letters because they can get to the letters before I can sometimes. They intercept the mail, so if it’s coming to my email they can’t intercept it. You know because I can access my e-mail on many devices.” (Parent 1)

In the reflective logs with practitioners, who act in a supportive role to the young person/parent, there were mixed perceptions regarding how clearly a young person’s FEA had been explained to the parent. In two case examples, the practitioners stated that the package had been clearly related to the parent. In another case example, the practitioner stated that there was no Approved Flexible Package in place but instead an informal agreement between the parent and school which seemed to be working well at that time, after support had been put in place to improve the parent’s relationship with the school. In two of the case examples, the young people were not following their reduced timetable at all, despite measures put in place. There were several examples given in reflective logs where practitioners had had to check in regularly with schools “to give clarity to the family” about a young person’s FEA.

Reviewing arrangements over time

Education representatives stated the aim was to have a FEA review meeting every six weeks which would include the young person, the parent, the education representative, social work or a third sector agency and an educational psychologist where appropriate. FEAs are also discussed in schools at child wellbeing meetings which do not directly involve young people and parents. Education representatives said that it was often difficult to reach parents and young people in order to arrange a review meeting.

Meetings appeared to be more frequent where young people were following the FEA. One parent whose child had not been attending school for a year and a half felt that there should have been more meetings at the school:

“There’s, in my opinion, not been enough meetings at the school. I genuinely think had there been more pressure on [young person] from the school, I think it maybe would have helped. Because I can only say to her till I’m blue in the face so many times. I’m just her mum. You know what I mean? They only listen so much to their parents. Whereas a meeting every four or five weeks in the last couple of months when she’s not been at school for a year and a half, in my opinion, has not been anywhere near enough.” (Parent 3)

Another parent whose two children had been infrequently attending school said that a meeting had not taken place for a few months. She described how the last meeting she attended focused on ways to encourage the young person to go back to school but that, after the meeting, the young person went in for a couple of days before not attending again. She said:

“A lot of the school blamed him having the computers because they’ve both got Xboxes. Right? The school blamed it on that, that the minute they got them that’s when they noticed a change in them attending school. But I’ve had the computers off them, I’ve given them consequences for not going. I’ve had every bit of technology possible and they still won’t go. So, I don’t think it’s anything to do with their computers or their tablets or their tablets or their phones or anything. They’re still not wanting to go.” (Parent 4)

Approving arrangements

Education representatives stated that approving a FEA should involve two representatives from education, including an educational psychologist where appropriate. The length of time to complete the Approved Flexible Package/Flexi-Schooling Arrangement Form & Procedural Checklist was commented on by one of the education interviewees:

“...if you had to do it thoroughly, it takes a bit of time for a member of staff to do it and we’ve got members of the team, myself included, that have maybe got maybe ten people on AFPs and that, if you’re ‘timesing’ that by sort of minimum of an hour and a half to two hours, there’s twenty hours of your time away just doing paperwork.” (Education P3)

Including the views of young people and their parents

A key issue identified in the research was the difficulty of trying to include young people in the planning and review process of their FEAs, encapsulated here:

“But I do appreciate that for some of the guidance team, having been in that role, it can be quite difficult, especially if they’re not engaging with school to gather a young person’s views. So, we’re kinda relying on the partners or the parents/carers to give us that as well.” (Education P3)

A couple of the young people specifically said that they struggled to attend these meetings due to anxiety. Difficulties getting in touch with parents was also mentioned:

“Sometimes it’s difficult to get in touch with parents. So, it can make it quite difficult to get feedback from the parent as to what’s happening. Again, it just depends on the need of the pupil. ‘Cause some pupils that, even although they’re on a flexible package, don’t turn up, and trying to get in touch with parents can be very difficult.” (Education P2)

Whilst, on the whole, the young people interviewed felt that someone from the school had kept in contact with them and that they had been able to have a say with regards to options given to them for their timetable, a couple felt that there was a lack of choice about the options available. For example, one young person said she had been given five or six options for her timetable but commented:

“I didn’t really engage on it because even though it was my choice to be on that type of part-time timetable, and that’s how much school work I felt I could manage, I didn’t see the point in getting up to go to do that hour and a half.” (Young person 1)

In the reflective logs, practitioners all identified their role as acting as an advocate for the young person and as a go-between between the school and parents to “*help the family feel empowered*”. There were several examples of practitioners trying to gain clarity from education on behalf of a parent and frequently attending meetings. For example, in a case where a young person had stopped attending school, and communication had deteriorated between the school and the parent, the support worker had arranged a meeting between the parent and headteacher and checked to see if an Approved Flexible Timetable was in place.

Case study: a young person's experience of a FEA

Nicola had been on a flexible timetable for a couple of years but had mostly not been able to follow her timetable due to anxiety.

After initially not receiving any support from her school, she was given a new guidance teacher which improved her communication with the school. The support she received from a support worker at a charity was significant to her maintaining contact with the school. Nicola was asked what kind of options she was given to do her school work when her new guidance teacher was put in place. She said:

“Well, to start with, we tried her coming out with schoolwork every week and tutoring me for a couple of hours after school time, like on a Monday...And she would leave me work to do and that, but I was. The home situation was never really good at that point either so it was. I never even touched it. So that never really worked. So we spoke about doing, maybe going in for three periods one day and then would be it. And then trying to build that up, to get me in a few days a week and then more periods and more days and eventually build up to a full day. But I couldn't take [it]. [name of support worker] just drew me in, she managed to sort it out. I am surprised I've been kept at that school, to be honest with you. Because at some point I was doing a transfer as well. And that didn't work out.”

Nicola clearly said she felt that the school had tried to support her, for example, by arranging meetings in locations away from her peer group. She also felt well supported to attend the meeting with her support worker but the anxiety of going to school was too much. A turning point for Nicola had been the help of her support worker to build up more of a routine and encouraging her to go out. She was hopeful of returning to school.

Case study: a parent's experience of a FEA

Joe's child had been on various FEAs over several years and had stopped attending school. Joe described how his child had done well in primary school before being bullied in secondary school and truanting and becoming involved in drugs. A key outcome had been the loss of education along the way.

“He was put on a part-time timetable to try and get him to go to school because he wasn't going. He wasn't put on it because he was excluded or in any trouble it was cause they were trying to get him to go to school...It got to the point where that they'd cut all his subjects where he didn't have the four subjects that they had.”

“And they're trying to tell me he's got a learning difficulty...Primary school not one single issue. Loved going to school. High school. Boom. But that's cause you're dealing with the social aspect of it...And that's the reason for him not going to school...Second year, the truanting started and during that process we ended up going homeless.”

There were several key life events and specific issues that had acted as barriers to his child going to school:

- Issues in the school and local area meant that the young person had to move schools. During this period there was no education provision.
- Issues with drugs and peers. Joe said that he had had to contact social work himself frequently as well as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) but received little communication or advice.
- A lack of one to one support in school. Joe said that the young person spent most of their time in the school's learning support unit on their phone and was not learning anything.
- Joe felt that the lack of support in and outwith school comes down to funding. His child had had a psychological assessment and Joe had hoped a diagnosis might mean more support would be put in place but had not heard from CAMHS. Joe said he had asked to home school his child but was given no work by the school.

“Soon as he got to fourth year subjects dropped like flies cause he's not going there to do it whereas if they'd been giving me that work he'd been getting some sort of education from me. He wasn't getting anything at this point.”

Joe described the stress he had experienced and how he had had to give up work due to the constant phone calls from the school.

Managing resources and support provided to young people

For education representatives, wider issues around school practice were highlighted. It was argued that family issues need to be identified at an earlier stage, work with families needed to happen earlier on, and that responses should be collective between education, social work and other agencies.

For education, the key issue identified was a lack of adequate resource to work with young people who are on FEAs including a lack of guidance teachers and a lack of time allocated for guidance teachers. The education representatives interviewed felt that this would lead to more time to build relationships between young people/parents and teachers.

“I think have more guidance teachers or give guidance teachers more time to be a guidance teacher. Because I think I’m right in saying, every guidance teacher in Fife secondary schools also has a teaching commitment. I don’t think we’ve got any guidance staff who are just fulfilling the guidance role. It’s a question of time, and I think people in general want to dedicate more time to individual young people and families, but struggle to do it, because of the level of demand.” (Education P1)

“Yeah, I would say that another facility nearer to the school, so there’s that—not that geographical distance. Perhaps staffed by members of the school. So, there’s still that link, would be an ideal solution. But the staffing issue is the biggest barrier, I think. In order to keep these young people in. We have lots of spaces in pupil support, as an example, but we don’t have a suitable level of staff in order to be able to do something.” (Education P3)

The Approved Flexible Package/Flexi-Schooling Arrangement Form specifically states that an Approved Flexible Timetable or Flexi-Schooling Arrangement should contain ‘evidence of resources, work and support to be provided out of school’ and ‘an indication of the location of the programme outwith school’. The five young people interviewed for this research had timetables which included one-to-one support in a separate space in the school, time spent in school/college, support from statutory or third sector agencies and time spent at home.

Education representatives identified several key challenges providing support in schools. Challenges included:

- Being able to support pupils to keep up with work for specific subjects in a pupil support base without specialist subject knowledge
- Young people not attending pupil support sessions and resources being moved elsewhere

“So, the challenge is to try and get work from the class teacher. But because we are not English, maths, biology, physics specialists, it’s very hard to be able to deliver or for class teachers to give a level of work without it being taught by a specialist in order for it to make sense for a young person. So, where we can, we try and give pupil support assistant time, PSA time to young people. But, again, there’s a bit of a staffing issue there just now in that, just for a lot of our young people, you mentioned about not engaging with a timetable. PSAs can be put in a space waiting for young people on AFPs, flexible timetables to come in and then they don’t come in. And therefore, I put them somewhere else.” (Education P3)

Working with other services to support the young person

Working with external statutory and third sector agencies in Fife was highlighted as a key aspect of developing a FEA to meet the individual needs of young people. Good practice highlighted by interviewees included being creative about the 'learning experiences and activities' provided to young people in schools and also outside of school in the local community.

Education representatives stated that a classroom environment does not always meet a young person's needs and gave positive examples of the use of alternatives including: Clued Up (a substance use support and information service for young people under-25 in the Fife area), Community Learning Development Centre, the Intadem mentoring programme run by YMCA, Natural Connections (an outdoor learning programme), LinkLiving resilience packages and working with local colleges, churches and care homes.

Education representatives highlighted examples of alternative options provided in some schools in Fife including:

“So, we have Elmwood College that come in, they run a rural skills award. It’s worked really successfully over the last two years to engage some of our young people who had very poor attendance. So, they came in, they managed to get an SQA award through it. And Elmwood are really, really super at, if these young people engage really well with that course, even though they might not have the qualification standard that they ask for from people elsewhere. They would try and create a pathway into a course at Elmwood. So that’s worked really well.” (Education P3)

This interviewee then went on to highlight how engaging young people on FEAs in these alternative options can lead to a way in to further engage them in education:

“and that’s led to other things as well as young people on our approved flexible packages where, when they were in last year, doing the rural skills award, because they were accessible, we’d be saying to them, “Right, when you’re finished this—” we’d literally be down grabbing them and taking them up to an English classroom and doing a bit of English work with them to get that qualification before they left us. So that worked really well.” (Education P3)

One representative shared their perception that there are different levels of engagement between schools with other services:

“There’s some really positive and creative work goes on in partnership between some schools and some services. A lot of it depends on the school’s relationship with these services. Whether they are actively engaged with them or not. I know that some of these services can at times become quite frustrated that while some schools engage with them really successfully, other schools can be reluctant to, for whatever reason.” (Education P1)

Impacts on third sector

In the reflective logs, third sector practitioners described the nature and the extent of support they provide to young people and their families to manage flexible timetables. Each reflective log provided a record of the practitioner's work with one young person and their family. Key aspects of their role in supporting young people and families included: (i) providing a range of flexible support to a young person and (ii) liaising with the school on behalf of the parent and young person.

Reflective logs highlighted the range of support third sector practitioners put in place to support young people on FEAs. This included providing transport to help children attend school; spending time with young people on a 1:1 basis when they are not in school, either at home in school or in the community; and supporting young people to do school work. Encouraging young people to take up opportunities to do group work was also mentioned. One practitioner highlighted the importance of their support for a young person who was on a flexible timetable to *"provide a safe environment to access support, information and advocacy around a range of areas from health and wellbeing, education, and employability skills"*. The challenges of working with individual young people to support their development was a key theme, particularly where supports put in place were unsuccessful.

Across the reflective logs, practitioners highlighted key aspects of their role in working with education including acting as an advocate at school meetings where the young person does not attend; checking in regularly with schools to find out information and relating this back to parents; and liaising at school meetings between family and staff. A few of the reflective logs highlighted challenges contacting education with the practitioner often making contact on behalf of the parent(s). Other examples of practitioners' roles included: supporting parents emotionally, explaining the education and social work systems and protocols to the family and helping formulate plans of action for the family when engaging with the school. Practitioners described their actions as being based on empowering families who lacked confidence to speak with the school. For example, one practitioner said: *"In supporting her [the parent] to do this and attending meetings this encouraged the parent to challenge and discuss issues with the school and also know that she had support to continue pushing things."* Practitioners described how their support improved the confidence of young people and parents to speak to the school independently. However, there was also a sense of frustration in practitioners' accounts that issues had not improved and the family was still in the same position despite their role in helping them communicate with education.

IMPACTS OF FLEXIBLE EDUCATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

Educational outcomes

On the whole, young people and their parents felt that their educational needs were not being met. Young people were generally anxious that they had fallen behind with their school work and this was a significant concern for two of the young people planning to go back to school on a more full-time basis.

Rhiannon, who had not attended school for a few years, felt that alternative options were not open to her:

“Not very many options because I’m old enough now to get a college course through the school, but because of my attendance and my previous record and behaviour at this school, they’re not very willing to give me a college course. And because of my non-attendance at school, I’d have to [unclear] to show up.” (Young person 1)

This was reinforced by education representatives we spoke to who stressed the damaging impacts of young people missing out on gaining qualifications particularly in English and maths.

“I think it disrupts their education, so there’s a challenge in trying to cover all their subjects. And it’s about trying to get a balance between getting them to engage in something compared to totally disengaging. So, we need to look at - we need to look at that because some kids will not come in if they’ve got a certain subject it’s, “Well, I’m no’ coming in.” So, they’re missing all their other subjects as well. Whereas if we avoid that, we’re more likely to get them in for some subjects.” (Education P2)

Case study: Impacts on educational outcomes

Carla's experience of her flexible timetable had affected her education. At the time of the interview, she was returning to school full-time and worried how she would keep up with school work.

Researcher: *So do you feel like you've managed to keep up by yourself without having that like extra support to keep up in your schoolwork or how do you feel like now going back into being fulltime about going back into your class is full time that you haven't been in?*

Carla: *Oh I'm behind.*

Researcher: *But do you think you'll cope, you'll manage...*

Carla: *I've [been] put down from top classes to bottom so...*

She and her parent said that the decision that she should go onto a reduced timetable had been made by the school. Carla stated that she had not wanted to go onto the reduced timetable and found it 'annoying' going into school for short periods. Carla's timetable was a mixture of attending normal classes, going to the school pupil support base and time at home.

When she was in school, she had spent some classes in the pupil support base where she described working from a text book and not having a choice on what she worked on. She said she could not speak to individual teachers about keeping up with course work. She commented that she would have liked to have been able to do 'normal' school work rather than working through the same books.

She was positive about the option she had been given to do a course at college as part of her timetable which she preferred.

Stress on families

A key aspect of FEAs is that the young person spends some of the time they would have otherwise spent in school at home. Four of the parents interviewed had more than one child on a FEA and this meant managing the arrangements of taking each child to and from, sometimes different schools, difficult as well as trying to look after the child whilst they were at home. Financial implications of having a child at home was also mentioned by several of the parents. One education representative highlighted some of these issues:

“I think it can increase stress. It can be challenging for them. Some of these families, some of these parents need time without their children. Sometimes that’s to do with needing to work. Because if kids aren’t in school, some families will feel like they can’t work, because they are going to have to look after their kids. Sometimes the families can’t keep their kids at home and the kids choose to leave the house anyway. And the families can become additionally stressed by not knowing what their kids are up to.” (Education P1)

Parents frequently described how having their child/children on FEAs was stressful with examples given of increased tensions at home and the pressure of expectations/responsibilities put on parents. For several families, their child’s non-attendance at school had led to social work involvement. For a parent with two young people who were not following their FEA and rarely attending school, she described the constant anxiety of trying to find out the reasons why they were not going in and what would happen in the future:

“Why don’t you go to school and save me all the grief? Because at the end of the day it’s me that’s getting it all. And it worries me because now that social work’s involved, purely because of their attendance which is really low.” (Parent 4)

Parents all mentioned the financial impact of having their children at home more, largely because of the costs of food. A couple of parents also specifically mentioned the impacts of having to manage their children’s timetables whilst also looking for a job:

“It’s hard. Especially if the two of them are arguing and like fighting and things or one’s wanting one device and one’s playing on the and I can get [unclear] it frustrates me. Because I’m like you should be in school, I could be working for ten until two every day. Ten if you were in school. Then that would get the dole off my back and I would take a part-time job and use it, but life’s not perfectly that and it gets frustrating, it gets annoying.” (Parent 1)

Case study: Impacts on families

Jodie (a parent with two children on a FEA), had been sanctioned on Jobseeker's Allowance for missing appointments at the Jobcentre due to looking after her children whilst they were not in school. She described her caring responsibilities as 'constant' between going to and from the school and attending various meetings. She said:

"But he was going to maybe lunchtime, then I was having to go out and pick him up and that was him down the road, and this went on for a year and a half and obviously because I just happened for him during school hours, because I'm a single parent, I was having to be there for him during school hours, which meant I couldn't attend Jobcentre appointments and things like that, so I was getting sanctioned for this.

So, for a year and a half I was sanctioned basically, then the Benefits Office decided that the best thing for me to do would be to claim income support.."

During this time, she described the negative impacts of not being able to do anything as a family and 'being stuck in the house'. At the time of her interview, Jodie's eligibility for Income Support had been affected by the recent end of her child's Disability Living Allowance. She was anxious about having to reclaim Jobseeker's Allowance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research highlights the complexity of FEAs and that there is no effective one size fits all approach. Drawing on this small-scale research, there is evidence that young people and their families are not always being consistently supported and, as a result, young people are missing key stages of their education.

Following the evidence presented in this report, this research has identified *principles and factors for consideration* that should underpin the delivery of FEAs. Some of these principles and factors are already included in Fife Council's Flexible Educational Arrangements guidance, but the evidence in this report suggests that these are not always followed in practice. Recommendations include:

Section 3 – General principles of FEAs

- The young person's voice should be central to the planning and review process. Support should be put in place to either support young people to attend school meetings or to ensure their views are included in discussions through a representative where they are not able to attend.
- Parents should have a single point of contact (e.g. the guidance teacher) at their child's school who communicates with them regularly and communication should be flexible (via phone or email).
- Multi-agency support should be built in at the initial stages of a young person's FEA.

Section 4 – Choosing the most appropriate FEA

- FEAs should be considered as a short-term measure in the first instance. The option to return to school full-time or a mixture of alternatives should always remain open.

Section 5/6 – Factors for consideration and Planning and documenting

- Planning
 - The rationale for the plan around a young person's timetable should be agreed by the young person, parent and relevant practitioners and documented.
 - Clear information on the school timetable (including who is responsible for what and when) and the plan for review should be provided to parents and young people.
 - Resources should be made available in schools to adequately support young people on FEAs (i.e. through one to one support where needed). Specifically, more guidance teachers and more time allocated to guidance teachers is needed.
 - Relevant partner agencies (e.g. third sector organisations) involved in supporting a young person should be involved in the planning process from the beginning.
- Educational content
 - Education content of a young person's timetable should be orientated towards a young person's interests.
 - Creative approaches should be delivered by schools in partnership with local agencies to support young people to engage in education opportunities within and outwith school.
 - Parents should be supported to undertake school work with their child at home where appropriate.