

Consultation on the school year

Consultation response form

Your name: UNISON Cymru Wales (contact Alastair Gittins)

Organisation (if applicable):

email/telephone number: a.gittins@unison.co.uk 07816 53 83 97

Your address:

UNISON Cymru Wales
UNISON House
Custom House Street
Cardiff CF10 1AP

Responses should be returned by **12 February 2024** to:

School Time Branch
The Education Directorate
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff CF10 3NQ

or completed electronically and sent to:

email: ExploringUseOfSchoolTime@gov.wales

Select all that apply to you from the following.

- ☐ Age 17 years and under
- ☐ Age 18 years and older
- ☒ Education workforce
- ☐ Tourism sector
- ☐ Childcare sector
- ☐ Full-time work (please specify)
- ☐ Part-time work (please specify)
- ☐ Parent or carer (the term 'parent' has been used as a shorthand to include mothers, fathers, foster carers, adoptive parents, stepparents, 'kinship' parents, grandparents and guardians)
- ☒ Other

Supporting comments

UNISON is the UK's largest trade union organising and representing 1.3 million public sector workers UK wide, including 100,000 public sector workers across Wales.

UNISON Cymru Wales represents thousands of school support staff including teaching and learning support assistants, reception and office staff, kitchen and catering staff, midday supervisors, caretakers, pastoral care, technicians and librarians. These school staff are predominantly female. This submission is shaped by their experience.

UNISON is opposed to Welsh government's proposals to change the school year. The narrowness of this response form does not allow for expanded answers and so we provide here a summary of our response, data from a survey of school support staff created especially to inform our submission, and a rebuttal of each of the reasons Welsh government has listed as promoting the need for change.

Summary of UNISON Cymru Wales position

Schools face very significant challenges, insufficient staff, a recruitment and retention crisis, impossible workloads, reduced budgets, pupil attendance and pupil behaviour.

All negatively impact on pupil attainment and welfare, and staff well-being. We cannot understand why Welsh government has prioritised changing the school year over addressing these things that would really improve children's education.

Invest in the whole educational workforce and pupil educational attainment and happiness will automatically rise as additional numbers of staff and more reasonable workloads, allow for greater time and support of students, particularly those students in need.

When nearly 3,000 school support staff were asked to rank the most urgent issues in school in a survey UNISON created specially to inform this response, they placed changing the school year in last position (sixth), judging each of the issues listed above to be more pressing.

Similarly, when asked how improved staff well-being can best be achieved, school support staff placed changing the school year in last position (sixth), well behind higher pay, paying school staff through the year and not term-time only, recruiting sufficient numbers of school support staff, tackling high workload and training.

Welsh government is right to be concerned about educational standards, pupil welfare and helping those from deprived backgrounds receive all they help they need. Many school support staff entered the profession specifically because they care passionately about all these things and want to help children in their community. It is correct that their opinion should be accounted for by Welsh government. They are by far the biggest group of workers within schools.

There is no urgent hunger for change from the *entire* school workforce, as evidenced in the joint approach from the education unions and the phrase used by this coalition is, Welsh government is 'trying to fix a problem that doesn't exist'. UNISON was a signatory to the joint letter from organisations representing education, farming and tourism to the Minister for Education and Welsh Language opposing the proposed reforms and we support all the arguments it advanced.

We are perplexed that Welsh government has decided to forge ahead with a public consultation despite the opposition to its proposals when first suggested in 2022 and the little evidence produced by the Beaufort report to support the need for change.

We told the Welsh government the education workforce is feeling bruised coming out of covid and already under enormous pressure dealing with the changes of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill, and to the curriculum, as well as a rise in school violence. They haven't received an above inflation pay rise for 15 years and have been badly affected by the cost-of-living crisis. We said it was not the right time to propose changing the school year.

We disagree with Welsh Government's assertion there is proof that tackling disadvantage and boosting attainment is best served by changing the school year. As the trade unions have already pointed out in the joint letter to the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, the international evidence does not stand up to scrutiny. Wales has the shortest summer break in Europe, yet those countries outperforming Wales in the PISA league tables, with longer holidays, do not have an issue with learning loss.

The proposed changes to the school year are likely to have many negative consequences for school support staff, which Welsh government has overlooked and worryingly, could drive many of them out of the profession. Our survey shows the low salary and term time only pay means nearly 40% are forced to take a second job during the holidays to make ends meet. Half of those working a second job said it would be more difficult for them to find employment if the summer holidays were shorter.

Deprived of the potential of a second job and the vital earnings it would deliver over the summer, life would become much more of a struggle for these low paid women and their families, many of whom are trapped in in-work poverty.

These low paid workers would then face a double financial hit under Welsh government proposals to increase the length of the autumn half term break. Many school support staff are parents of young children and 44% of survey respondents felt their families would suffer increased heating bills or higher spending on entertaining.

With this evidence it should be sobering, but not surprising for Welsh government to read nearly a third of school support staff would quit the profession if the school summer holiday was reduced, according to our survey.

We call upon Welsh government to scrap its proposals to change the structure of the school year and to work with the education unions to tackle the very urgent issues that matter to the whole education workforce.

Lastly, in our discussions with Welsh government and in our formal written responses, UNISON has described that school support staff suffer an institutional discrimination that belittles their vital role. It is very frustrating, that ‘teacher fatigue’ is mentioned in the consultation document omitting the contribution of school staff who will also be experiencing fatigue and we know it is the whole of the school education workforce that makes schools a success.

UNISON survey data

UNISON school support staff were surveyed between 30 November 2023 – 15 December 2023 in a poll designed to inform this submission. We received 2824 responses.

At the outset, a slight majority of respondents said they favoured changes to the school year, 46% in favour, 40% against with 14% not sure. The proportion in favour may well have been influenced by the extensive media attention given to the comments of the First Minister at that time on the subject. We don’t believe these figures provide a groundswell of opinion that there should be change, particularly because when asked for much greater detail, it was clear school support staff did not identify changing the school year as a priority issue in their school or one that would improve their well-being.

Given a list of six issues, school staff identified insufficient staff numbers, workload and reduced school budget as the top three priorities for their school. 70% of respondents ranked changing the school year in last position.

Given a list of six ways improved staff well-being can best be achieved, school staff identified higher pay, paying school staff through the year and not term time only and recruiting sufficient numbers of school support staff as their top three priorities. 77% of respondents ranked changing the school year in last position.

As has been discussed above, our survey reveals that because of low pay and term time only pay 38% of school support staff have second jobs during the summer holiday to make ends meet. 50% of those respondents said it would be more difficult for them to find employment if the school summer holidays were shorter.

44% said if the school holidays were changed it would result in additional costs for their family such as increased heating bills or higher spending on entertaining during the autumn half term break.

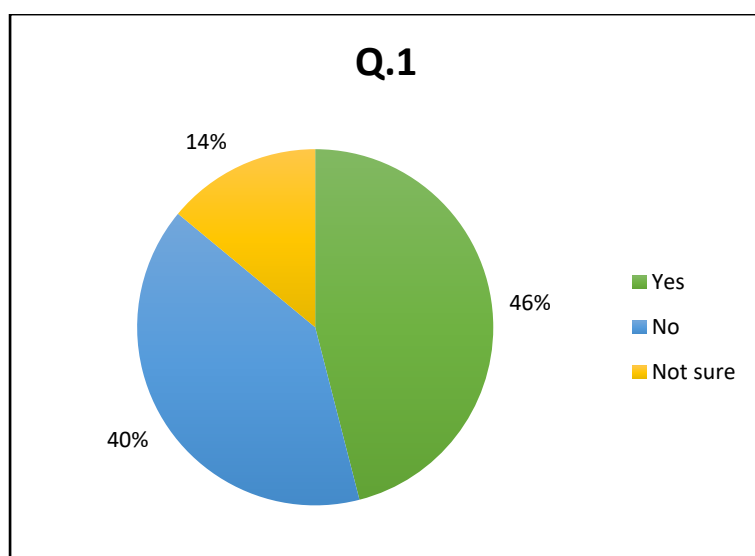
27% said they would think about looking for a different job if the school summer holiday was reduced.

Survey results

UNISON surveyed school support staff between 30 November 2023 – 15 December 2023 last year and we received 2824 responses.

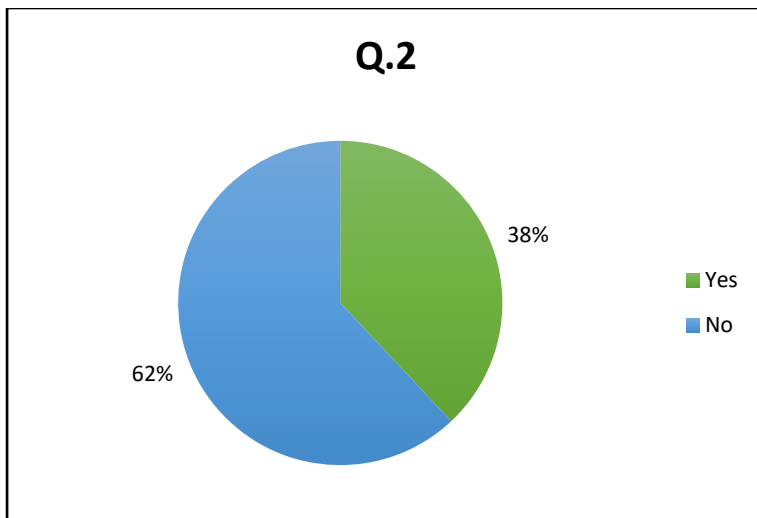
1. Do you think the school year needs to be changed as Welsh government proposes, taking a week off the summer holiday and adding it to the October/November half term break, and other possible changes?

Answer	Number of respondents	As a percentage
Yes	1308	46%
No	1114	40%
Not sure	394	14%



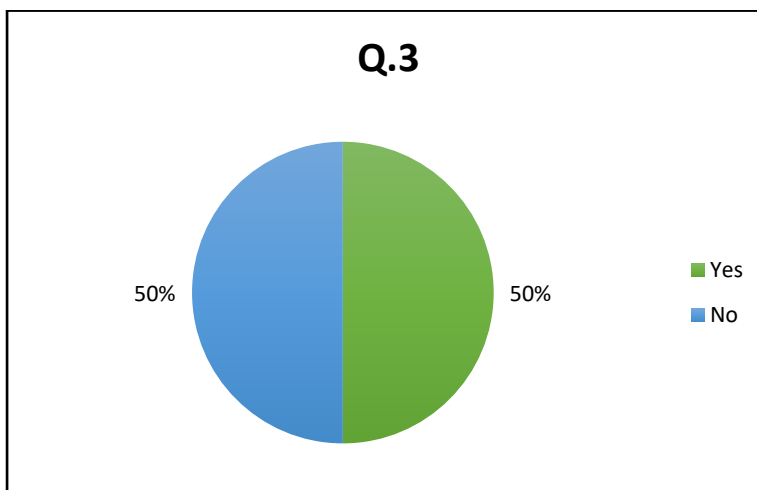
2. Does the low salary and term time only pay mean you have a second job during the holidays to make ends meet?

Answer	Number of respondents	As a percentage
Yes	1061	38%
No	1749	62%



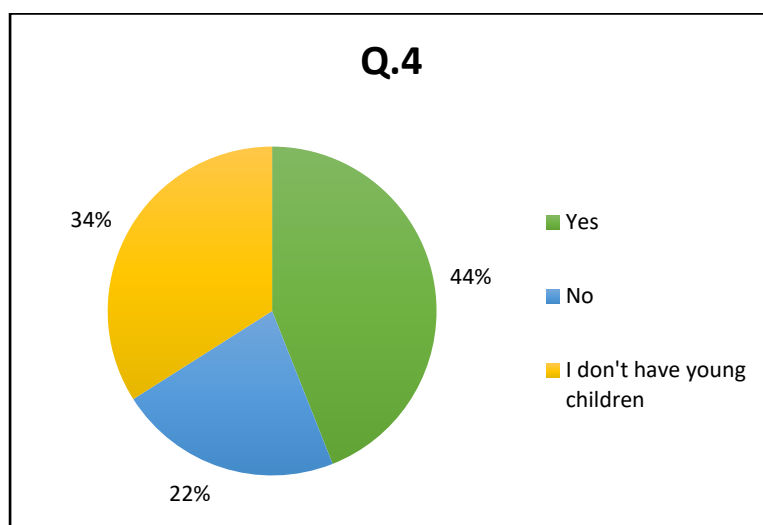
3. Would it be more difficult for you to find employment if the school summer holidays were shorter?

Answer	Number of respondents	As a percentage
Yes	528	50%
No	524	50%



4. If the school holidays were changed, would that result in additional costs for your family such as increased heating bills or higher spending on entertaining during the Autumn half term break?

Answer	Number of respondents	As a percentage
Yes	1224	44%
No	622	22%
I don't have young children	954	34%



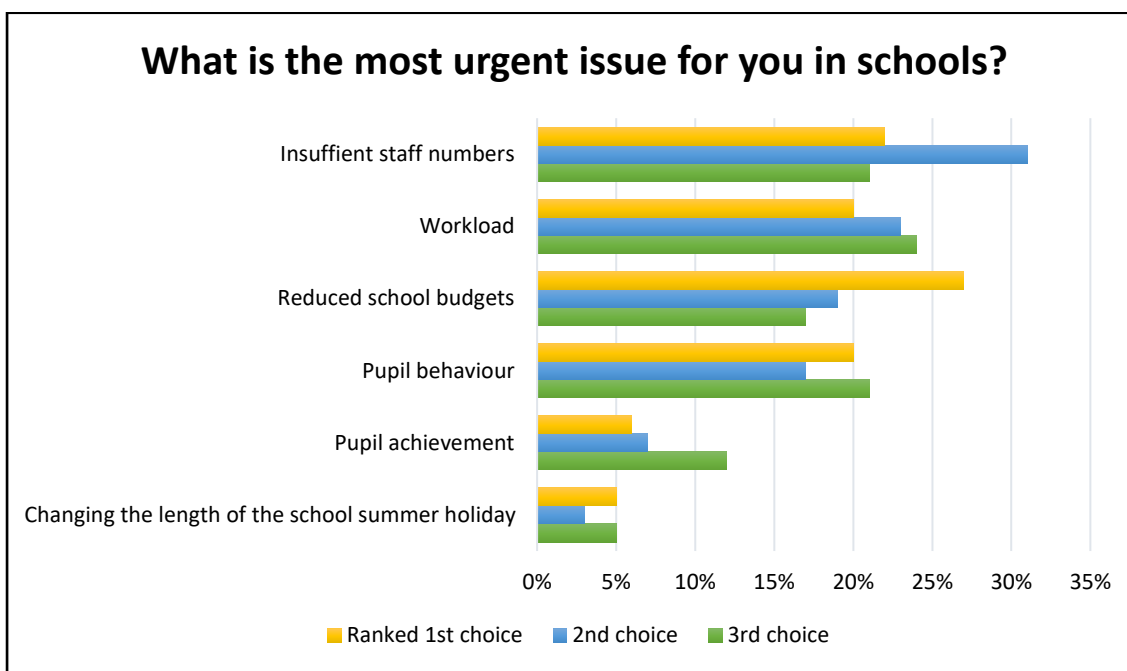
5. What is the most urgent issue for you in schools?

Rank in order of priority (1=most important...)

- Workload
- Insufficient staff numbers
- Pupil behaviour
- Pupil achievement
- Reduced school budgets
- Changing the length of the school summer holiday

(Only first three rankings of the six are displayed in the table)

Answer	Ranked 1 st choice by	Ranked 2 nd choice by	Ranked 3 rd choice by
1. Insufficient staff numbers	594 people (22%)	856 people (31%)	570 people (21%)
2. Workload	556 (20%)	614 (23%)	657 (24%)
3. Reduced school budgets	772 (27%)	511 (19%)	453 (17%)
4. Pupil behaviour	532 (20%)	467 (17%)	577 (21%)
5. Pupil achievement	170 (6%)	177 (7%)	324 (12%)
6. Changing the length of the school summer holiday	146 (5%)	95 (3%)	139 (5%) Ranked 6th choice by 1901 (70%)
Answered by	2,770 people	2,720 people	2,720 people



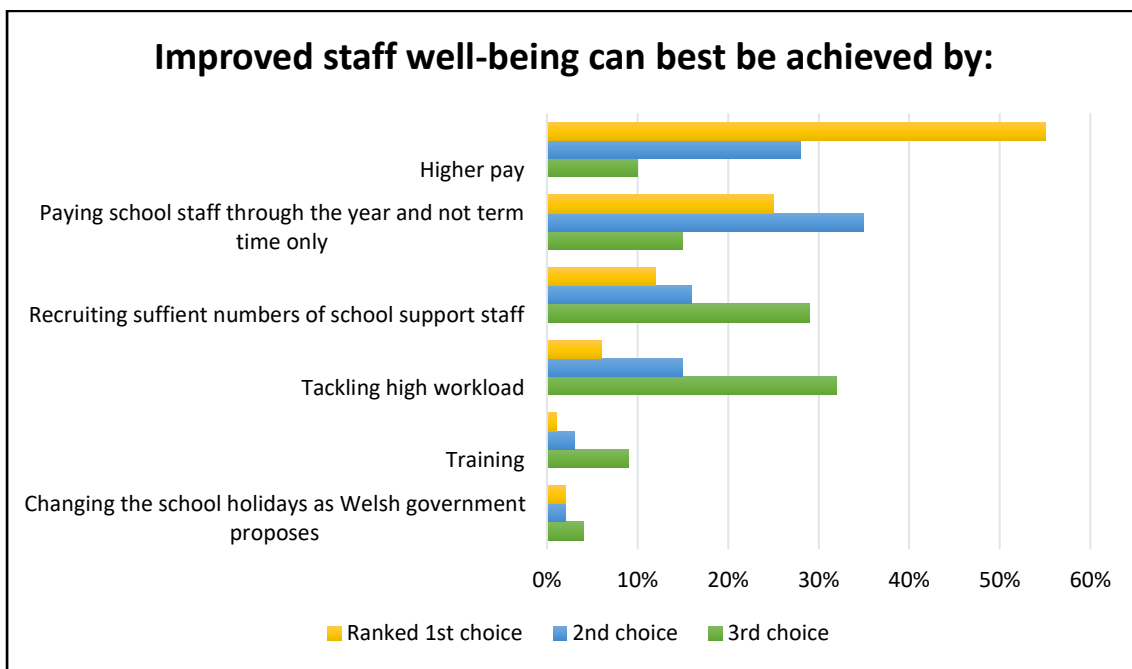
NB. Only respondents' first three rankings are displayed in this table.

6. Improved staff well-being can best be achieved by:

Please rank in order of priority (1=most important...)

- Higher pay
- Paying school staff through the year and not term time only
- Tackling high workload
- Recruiting sufficient numbers of school support staff
- Training
- Changing the school holidays as Welsh government proposes

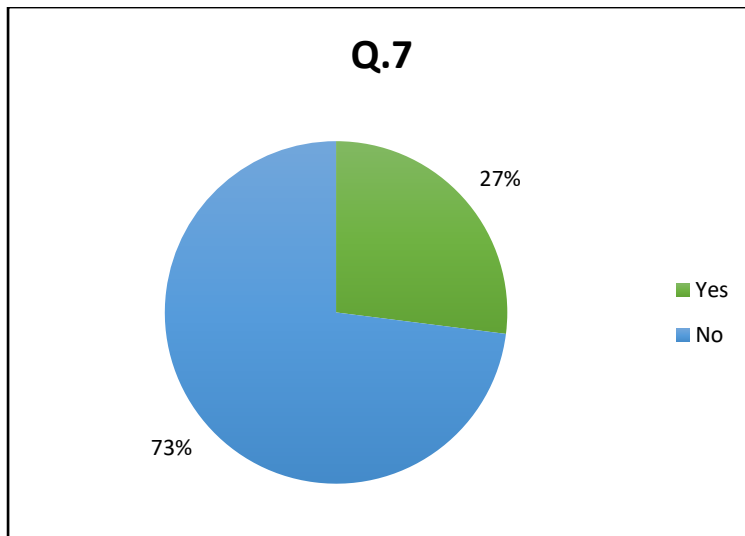
Answer	Ranked 1 st choice by	Ranked 2 nd choice by	Ranked 3 rd choice by
1. Higher pay	1413 people (55%)	732 people (28%)	270 people (10%)
2. Paying school staff through the year and not term time only	639 (25%)	903 (35%)	401 (15%)
3. Recruiting sufficient numbers of school support staff	315 (12%)	427 (16%)	748 (29%)
4. Tackling high workload	155 (6%)	385 (15%)	833 (32%)
5. Training	27 (1%)	90 (3%)	223 (9%)
6. Changing the school holidays as Welsh government proposes	39 (2%)	51 (2%)	113 (4%) Ranked 6th choice by 1991 (77%)
Answered by	2,588 people	2,588 people	2,588 people



NB. Only respondents' first three rankings are displayed in this table.

7. Would you think about looking for a different job if the school summer holiday was reduced?

Answer	Number of respondents	As a percentage
Yes	761	27%
No	2019	73%



Rebuttal of Welsh government's reasons promoting reform

School support workers have a public service ethos and like Welsh government, we too want to tackle disadvantage, reduce educational inequalities and support learner and staff well-being. However, we challenge some of the arguments advanced in favour of changing the structure of the school year.

Rebuttal of reason 1: A changed school calendar to better support the needs of disadvantaged learners and their families.

There are numerous issues that impact on children and their welfare to a much greater degree than the length of the school holidays.

Disadvantaged children will remain disadvantaged whether or not the school year changes. Education is not social services and government should provide a much better infrastructure of support and anti-poverty initiatives to those in need.

It is wrong for Welsh government to suggest that serious financial pressures on families and food insecurity could be adequately addressed by changes to the school year alone. What is proposed is a sticking plaster on a deep-rooted societal problem.

There is a lot of provision supporting looked after children and vulnerable children during the summer holidays. Colleagues in Blaenau Gwent for instance, identify the outreach work with Barnardo's and the Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) scheme of summer clubs, meal provision and the checking lessons for vulnerable children.

Funding is allocated to these schemes for the summer holidays and under Welsh government proposals, this would need to be rearranged.

Rebuttal of reason 2: A changed school calendar to better support the well-being of learners and teachers and reduce fatigue

All school staff (not just teachers) are greatly impacted by fatigue and experience it throughout the school year because there are not enough staff and workloads are impossible. If Welsh government was to deal with this effectively, as well as making the job more attractive by stopping term time only pay and boosting rates of pay, recruitment and retention and staff well-being would improve and with it, the quality of children's education.

It is exactly because staff are exhausted that a long summer break is needed. School support staff talk about it taking a week for them to switch off they are so tired. They say it is common for no-one to book a holiday away in that first week of the summer break because they are lying out 'zombified' recovering from work.

Importantly though, no teaching assistant or teacher sits at home for entire 6 weeks summer holiday idle. They are dedicated and return to school early, during holiday time to prepare for the new term.

Some school support staff work 1 or 2 weeks during the school holiday with the exam period, so if the summer holiday was shrunk, they would have much less time to recover from a very demanding job.

Many school support staff cite the hours and holidays (and certainly not the rate of pay), as one of the reasons they were attracted to the profession because it was a good fit around their own family's childcare and gave these women a way of working that matches their child's education year.

This is, however, a precarious working environment already with an annual threat of redundancy hanging over many as schools face cuts. The largest group of registered teaching assistants are under the age of 30, but this is also the group that leaves after just a few years, worn down by low pay and high workloads.

The retention of school staff is at an all-time low and the proposal to change the school year could have a very negative impact.

Has Welsh government considered how school support staff's terms and conditions will be amended if the changes to the school year proceed?

Teaching assistants are already worried they might be fired and rehired on the new contract or face being re-interviewed for the job they already perform. Confronted with this, they may decide redundancy is a simpler option and the profession will lose them forever.

Additionally, mass contract changes are likely to result in a legal challenge and an enormous headache for local authorities.

School support workers living on the border have pointed out how difficult things might be for their families if they work in Wales, but their children go to school in England, with now completely different school holidays.

Lastly, in UNISON focus groups, some school staff have expressed anxiety that colleagues could have already booked holidays for 2026 when changes are due to take place.

Rebuttal of reason 3: A changed school calendar to better support learning and teaching

We would repeat there is no international evidence to support the idea that children in countries with shorter summer holidays have a higher educational attainment.

In fact, Wales has amongst the lowest amount of holiday time in Europe and countries with higher PISA results have longer holidays.

The proposed changes around Easter would grant two extra bank holidays for two years in every 10-year period. The re-distribution of learning time required would create even more disruption for pupils, the opposite to what Welsh government intends.

Rebuttal of reason 4: A changed school calendar to better support modern patterns of living and working

Under the proposals, there will still be the same amount of holiday time across the year and therefore the same required amount of childcare across the year that will have to be met by families.

Welsh government could effectively tackle childcare costs in other ways to alleviate heavy pressures on families, rather than change the school year.

Would parents really agree that another week's holiday in October is better or more cost-effective? In summertime, children can run around in the park for free. In autumn when it is colder and wetter, they will either be at home or parents will have to pay for entertainment.

Public consideration of this point is likely to mirror the reaction of school support staff, who felt heating bills would increase and there would be higher spending on entertaining if the school holiday was changed in this way.

Single parents are likely to start to budget for Christmas much earlier and if they are focused on saving money, they won't want to spend during a longer October half-term.

An argument has been advanced that lengthening the autumn half term, will make it cheaper for families to get away, who otherwise might be restricted by the price of breaks during the summer. We feel it is likely travel companies will increase the prices in October.

Welsh tourist attractions including those of an educational nature, have told education unions they fear they will lose money if the summer break is shortened and there would be an adverse effect on Welsh coastal towns reliant on tourism. It is likely visitors would be less keen to stay when the weather is miserable in autumn.

Question 1 – To what extent do you agree or disagree that the school calendar could be better designed to support the way we live, learn and work today?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	-------------------------------------	-------------------	--------------------------

Question 2 – To what extent do you agree or disagree that the school calendar could be better designed to support socio-economically disadvantaged learners?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	-------------------------------------

Question 3 – To what extent do you agree or disagree that the school calendar could be better designed to support learners with additional learning needs (ALN)?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	-------------------------------------

Question 4 – To what extent do you agree or disagree that the school calendar could be better designed to support teacher or learner wellbeing and ease fatigue?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	-------------------------------------	-------------------	--------------------------

Question 5 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with an additional break week (taken from the summer break) dividing the longest term (autumn)?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	-------------------------------------

Question 6 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with having the flexibility to de-couple (separate) the spring break from the Easter public holiday?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	-------------------------------------

Question 7 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with an additional break week in May or June (taken from the summer break and added to the existing May break) to even up term lengths?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	-------------------------------------

Question 8 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with holding A level, AS level and GCSE results days in the same week?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	--------------------------

UNISON offers no view on this question.

Question 9 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 1: maintaining the existing school calendar?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	-------------------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	--------------------------

Question 10 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 2 and the proposed draft direction: a school calendar with a 2-week October break, a spring break at broadly the same time each year (despite when Easter falls) and a 5-week summer break?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	-------------------------------------	-------------------	--------------------------

Question 11 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 3: a school calendar with a 2-week October break, a spring break at broadly the same time each year (despite when Easter falls), a 2-week May break and a 4-week summer break?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	-------------------------------------

Question 12 – For 2025 to 2026, do you agree or disagree with the proposed term dates as set out for Options 2 and 3?

Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
----------------	--------------------------	-------	--------------------------	----------	--------------------------	-------------------	-------------------------------------

Question 13 – What, in your opinion, would be the likely effects of the proposals on the Welsh language? We are particularly interested in any likely effects on opportunities to use the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English

Do you think that there are opportunities to promote any positive effects?

Do you think that there are opportunities to mitigate any adverse effects?

Supporting comments

-

Question 14 – In your opinion, could the proposals be formulated or changed so as to:

- have positive effects or more positive effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English; or
- mitigate any negative effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English?

Supporting comments

-

Question 15 – We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

Supporting comments

-

Responses to consultations are likely to be made public, on the internet or in a report. If you would prefer your response to remain anonymous, please tick here:

☐