# From school struggles to new hope: how Cardiff City FC helped Alex turn his life around



Alex Chichester's educational journey reflects the challenges faced by many young people struggling with school attendance and engagement in Wales. Two years after leaving secondary school with no GCSE qualifications and his confidence at a low ebb, the 18-year-old from Cardiff is now on track to achieve the equivalent of three A levels, thanks to support from Cardiff City Football Club’s Community Foundation.

Alex’s difficulties with school attendance began early, around year three of primary school at Trelai Primary, where he admitted to deliberately getting himself sent home due to not enjoying school. This pattern continued and worsened as he progressed through school, and by secondary school at Cardiff West Community High, he was attending only two or three days per week. He expressed embarrassment in asking for help with his work and would skip lessons, which eventually led to frequent placements in isolation—a disciplinary measure where he was confined to a quiet room without interaction, intended as punishment but which made him "hate school even more." He described, "I was in isolation almost every other day I went in from year seven, sometimes for a whole day."

Despite liking art and physical education, Alex found the removal from PE classes as a form of punishment further diminished his motivation. By year 10, he was placed in a special class aimed at persistent absentees, offering one-to-one support, but by then, his attendance had dropped to roughly one day a week. He left secondary school at 16, having never completed a full week of school and leaving with no formal qualifications.

Alex revealed that low confidence and a lack of self-belief compounded his challenges. "I had the lowest confidence and no belief in myself. I never spent a whole week in school the whole time in secondary," he said. He was also reluctant to be seen as a student who needed help, saying, "I did not want to be the kid that needed help. I was embarrassed to ask for help."

Concerned about his future but unsure of how to improve his circumstances, Alex feared he might end up homeless. However, with encouragement from his family, particularly his mother and older brother, he explored new educational opportunities. A turning point came when he attended an open day at Cardiff City Football Club’s Community Foundation’s education programme, which offers BTEC Level 2 qualifications and degree courses focused on sports education.

Enrolling in September 2022 in the BTEC Level 2 sport qualification at the House of Sport, Alex found a supportive environment different from his previous experiences. He noted, "I thought this would be the exact same as school. But they give you more respect than teachers at school and there is a lot of physical exercise." The smaller class sizes, interactive teaching methods, and opportunities such as daily futsal matches helped him feel more engaged and confident. Alex highlighted, "The teachers here explain what you need to do and it was not embarrassing to ask."

Since starting the course, Alex has significantly improved his attendance, missing only two days due to illness. His new-found confidence is influencing his aspirations; he now hopes to become a personal trainer, pursue work in construction, or even join the army. To demonstrate his reliability, he balances his studies with a part-time job at the Cardiff City superstore.

Aneurin Britton, Employability and Skills Officer at the Cardiff City FC Community Foundation, emphasised that traditional schools’ one-size-fits-all approach may not cater effectively to all students, particularly those facing engagement challenges. He explained, "Behaviour issues are usually a reaction coming from a different place. It's about trying to get to the bottom of why someone is communicating in the wrong way." Britton added that their programme treats students individually, helping them engage in education and develop dependability.

Regarding wider attendance trends in Wales, official data for the 2024/25 academic year reveals that school attendance has improved slightly post-pandemic but remains below pre-pandemic levels. Attendance from September 2024 to April 2025 averaged 91%, up from 90.3% in the previous academic year but still short of earlier figures.

Pupils eligible for free school meals had an average attendance of 85.2%, compared to 92.8% for others, with attendance rates declining as students move into higher year groups. Notably, year 11 pupils had an average attendance of 87%, the lowest among the groups measured.

Persistent absenteeism, defined as missing more than 10% of school sessions, affected 18.9% of pupils overall, a slight improvement from 20.2% the previous year. The percentage was higher for pupils eligible for free school meals (38.2%) compared with others. A small proportion—2.5%—of pupils missed 50% or more of school sessions, highlighting ongoing challenges in certain cohorts.

Alex's story, as reported by Wales Online, illustrates both the difficulties that some young people face within conventional education systems and the potential for alternative approaches to reengage them in learning, offering pathways to qualifications and personal development.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://cardiffcityfcfoundation.org.uk/case-studies/alexs-story> - This URL supports Alex's story of re-engagement with education through Cardiff City FC Community Foundation's programs, highlighting his transformation from struggling with attendance to achieving BTEC qualifications.
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england> - Although not specifically about Wales, this link generally relates to attendance trends that might be mirrored in Wales, including challenges faced by pupils in maintaining consistent school attendance.
3. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0186-190X> - This URL is not directly relevant to Alex’s story but can provide context on research methodologies that might be applied in studying student engagement and attendance issues in academic environments.
4. <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/> - This link to Wales Online can provide updates on education trends and challenges in Wales, including attendance issues and alternative education pathways.
5. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmeduc/729/72902.htm> - Although not specific to Wales, this UK Parliament publication discusses the broader issue of attendance and engagement in schools, which is relevant to Alex’s struggles.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education> - The BBC News education section can offer insights into national and regional trends in education, including attendance rates and innovative educational programs like those offered by Cardiff City FC.
7. <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/i-never-managed-whole-week-31501988> - Please view link - unable to able to access data