

# Scrutiny Review of School Exclusions

## Report by the Review Board:

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# The report of the Scrutiny Review of School Exclusions

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## Recommendations

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1	The Department should utilise area-based teams to identify and support schools and trusts to provide a graduated response to behaviour.	14
2	The Department should continue to encourage schools and trusts to attend training on whole school relational approaches and develop trauma informed practices so pupils feel safe at school and develop positive relationships. This training should include how to communicate key aspects of these approaches with parents and carers to ensure continuity and support at home.	15
3	<p>The Department should work with schools and trusts to review and make use of available data to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) identify pupils who are at risk of permanent exclusion and identify available support at Inclusion Partnership meetings; and</li> <li>b) monitor pupils identified by the Attendance Support Team who are absent from mainstream education, either through part-time timetables or internal exclusions, and assess what alternative support could be put in place.</li> </ul>	16
4	The Department should develop training for schools and trusts to share best practice on how adaptive teaching can deliver the curriculum to support needs of all pupils, including SEND pupils and pupils facing additional external challenges. This should include developing guidance on assessment to ensure the use of Additional Needs Plans and Personal Education Plans support and address the needs that have been identified.	18
5	<p>The Department should work with schools and trusts to promote the benefits of extracurricular activities, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) where provided through Early Help, the Holiday and Food Activity Programme, Family Hubs, and Youth Centres, activities which engage pupils throughout the year and incorporate support for families; and</li> <li>b) summer programmes which support transition.</li> </ul>	18
6	<p>The Department should work with schools and trusts to support pupils transitioning into Early Years in primary and Key Stage 3 in secondary by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) working with pre-school settings and primary schools to identify pupils who may need additional support when transitioning to primary/secondary school and referring them to appropriate support and programmes; and</li> <li>b) communicating successful approaches and support at the point of transition at all phases to ensure continuity of provision.</li> </ul>	23

7	The Department should encourage schools and trusts to increase the use of youth voice in preventive strategies and responses to children at risk of permanent exclusion by providing training and guidance for schools and governors on how to embed youth voice into all areas of school policy.	24
8	The Department should work with schools and trusts to further develop and embed parental engagement to ensure all stakeholders understand how and why a child is at risk of permanent exclusion, including the parent/carer and the child, and include parents and carers with decisions around alternative provision, including all available options.	26
9	The Department should embed its multi-agency response, including the use of the new level 2 keywork team in Early Help focused on supporting attendance to: a) promote targeted support, including wider family-based issues, to pupils and families who have been identified as at risk of permanent exclusion and multiple suspensions due to a lack of engagement with the school as a result of persistent absence; and b) promote to schools and families parenting programmes that support interventions and preventative measures in schools.	26
10	To accompany the Alternative Provision Directory, which is to be shared with schools and trusts, the Department should develop guidance on: a) how to make best use of alternative provision, including good communication and ways to provide consistent support once a child reintegrates; and b) how alternative provision, including onsite alternative provision, can be used to prevent permanent exclusion and support pupils with additional needs, including those facing additional external challenges.	28
11	The Department should continue to provide ongoing support and training for governors including whole school training on SEND needs, mental health issues and inclusive behaviour policies, and produce guidance on how to conduct inclusive Governor Disciplinary Committee meetings that prioritise youth voice.	29
12	The Department should develop clear and consistent guidance to share with schools and trusts on the benefits of reducing school exclusions, and the support available, including: a) key findings from the RSA 'Rethinking Exclusions' and ISOS projects; b) using Primary and Secondary Boards to communicate to schools and trusts the benefits of inclusive policies and share best practice for reducing exclusions and agree to a shared responsibility to reducing exclusions; and c) on the appropriate use of part time timetables to ensure these are not being used to manage behaviour. Part-time timetables that are in place must be for the shortest time necessary and reviewed regularly with the pupil and their parents.	31

## Introduction

1. In 2019 the People Scrutiny Committee examined the key issues relating to school exclusions in East Sussex, including that East Sussex was an outlier in terms of the proportion of pupils who were excluded from school and that reducing the number of permanent exclusions was a key target for the County Council. A Scoping Board concluded that there was scope to develop effective recommendations to help reduce school exclusions in East Sussex, however delivery of the review was subsequently paused due to the coronavirus pandemic and the limitations this placed on the capacity of the Children's Services Department, schools, and school leaders to engage with the Review.
2. A further Scoping Board was held in January 2023 to consider the latest position on school exclusions in East Sussex. Data showed that whilst there had been an improvement in county-level data for permanent exclusions, with a reduction in the rate of permanent exclusions for all schools combined (primary, secondary, and special) to below the national average, suspension rates (previously called fixed term exclusions) for all schools combined remained above the national average.
3. The Board concluded that whilst they were encouraged by the work underway, there were current concerns, including that vulnerable pupils, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those eligible for Free School Meals, remained more likely to be suspended than their peers; and that there had been an increasing number of decisions to exclude very young children at primary phase; and these issues could benefit from closer examination by scrutiny through a review.
4. The Board agreed to focus on the following lines of enquiry:
  - a) Could the Council do more to develop levels of understanding amongst school leaders of preventative strategies, such as Therapeutic Thinking, to help reduce the likelihood of exclusion?
  - b) Could the Council do more to join up early help and education services as a preventative approach to support reduction in school exclusions?
  - c) Could the Council do more to help develop a better understanding amongst schools of what constitutes an appropriate response to a child who is at risk of exclusion? This line of enquiry to include consideration of:
    - the role and status of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and their involvement in developing appropriate responses to a child who is at risk of exclusion
    - appropriate responses to very young pupils at risk of exclusion in primary school

- appropriate responses to vulnerable pupils at risk of exclusion at secondary phase
- d) Could the Council develop its training and advice for governors around, for example, providing effective challenge in the circumstance where a headteacher has taken a decision to exclude, and the Governing Board are required to consider reinstatement. This line of enquiry could also explore the role of Governors in helping to develop best practice at the school.
  - e) Within consideration of each of the above lines of enquiry, is the Council's messaging clear on the need to reduce, and benefits of reducing, school exclusions?

5. The Board carefully considered a number of limiting factors, including that the decision to exclude is a school one and that academies are wholly outside of the remit of the local authority. However, the local authority retains important responsibilities, including a duty to ensure a child is provided full-time education from the sixth day after a permanent exclusion; ensuring that children with SEN are identified in a timely manner and have their needs met appropriately, especially if they have Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs); and more generally, as a provider of advice and guidance and a facilitator of partnership working with and between schools.

6. The Review looked at a range of evidence including information provided by the Department, internal data, external reports, school visits and case studies, and heard from a range of witnesses. The Board was keen to include youth voice as part of the Review and spoke to two young people (and received written responses from one other) who had been, or were going through the process of being, permanently excluded.

7. In exploring the third line of enquiry in relation to the role and status of the SENCO, the Board focussed on the wider support offered to SEND pupils in schools, as well as examples of whole school policies and practices that incorporated the needs of SEND pupils.

8. The Review identified, through national research and local examples, areas of best practice in reducing exclusions and the report addresses these through three key themes: prevention, appropriate responses to children at risk of permanent exclusion, and council messaging and support.

9. The Review looked at data and approaches in local maintained schools and academies and recommendations put forward in this report are recommended to be shared with all schools in East Sussex to encourage a county wide approach.

## Background

### *Local and National Context*

#### National guidance

10. The Department for Education (DfE) [\*Suspension and Permanent Exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England, including pupil movement September 2022\*](#) provides national statutory guidance to schools in England on permanently and temporarily excluding pupils, including the responsibility of headteachers, governors, independent review panels and local authorities. This accompanies the [\*Behaviour in Schools\*](#) guidance which provides advice to schools on implementing a behaviour policy to create a school culture with high expectations of behaviour. The guidance stresses that permanent exclusion should be a last resort and only used when other approaches towards behaviour management have been exhausted. However, the guidance does recognise that school exclusion is sometimes necessary to safeguard pupils and staff and establish high standards of behaviour in schools.

#### *Duties under the Equality Act 2010*

11. Under the *Equality Act 2010 (the Equality Act)* and the *Equality Act 2010: advice for schools*, schools must not discriminate against, harass, or victimise pupils because of: sex; race; disability; religion or belief; sexual orientation; pregnancy/maternity; or gender reassignment. For disabled children, this includes a duty to make reasonable adjustments to any provision, criterion or practice which puts them at a substantial disadvantage.

12. These duties need to be complied with when deciding whether to exclude a pupil and schools must ensure that any provision, criterion, or practice does not discriminate against pupils by unfairly increasing their risk of exclusion.

#### *Other relevant DfE guidance:*

- [\*Alternative Provision: Statutory guidance for local authorities, headteachers and governing bodies\*](#)
- [\*Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school\*](#)

#### National statistics and research on school exclusions

13. Nationally there were 6,500 permanent exclusions in the 2021/22 academic year. This was the equivalent of 8 permanent exclusions for every 10,000 pupils. The most common reason across all permanent exclusions was persistent disruptive behaviour, recorded 3,050 times (against 47% of permanent exclusions).

14. The *Timpson Review of School Exclusion* was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education and presented to Parliament in 2019. It identified areas of best practice in schools and made recommendations to government to ensure that ‘exclusion is used consistently and appropriately, and that enable our schools system to create the best possible conditions for every child to thrive and progress’. Recommendations included statutory national guidance that is accessible, clear and consistent; local authorities playing a key role in advocating for vulnerable children and facilitating local forums to share best practice and identify appropriate support; training for staff and governors on a range of issues including equality and diversity, behaviour management, and SEND; development of alternative provision; strong governance; and using data to identify local trends and patterns.

15. The Royal Society of Arts (RSA) report *Pinball Kids - preventing school exclusions - 2020* claims that school exclusions are a social justice issue with a disproportionate number of pupils with SEND, who have grown up in poverty, who have a social worker, and from certain ethnic minority groups being permanently excluded compared with their peers. The report focussed on wider societal issues contributing to increasing exclusion rates including poverty, the rise of mental health and special educational needs, and the consequences of policy decisions, including curriculum and exam changes.

16. The report identified five conditions necessary for change including children having a strong relationship with a trusted adult; parent/carer engagement; schools having an inclusive ethos; assessment and support for additional needs; and robust data collection.

17. Data from the Department for Education (DfE) and Ministry of Justice in *Education, children's social care and offending* found that children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence were more likely to have been both suspended and permanently excluded than the all-pupil cohort. The data also showed that the majority of children who had been cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence, who had received a suspension or permanent exclusion, received their first suspension or permanent exclusion before the offence.

18. The Children’s Society *Youth Voice on School Exclusions* interviewed young people across England on their experiences of exclusion and concluded that:

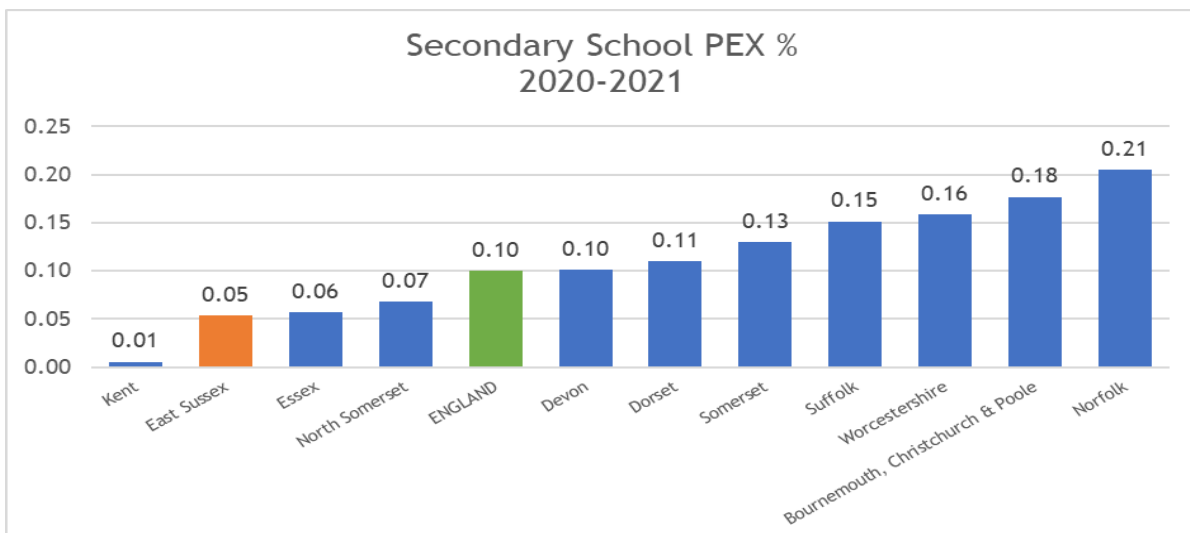
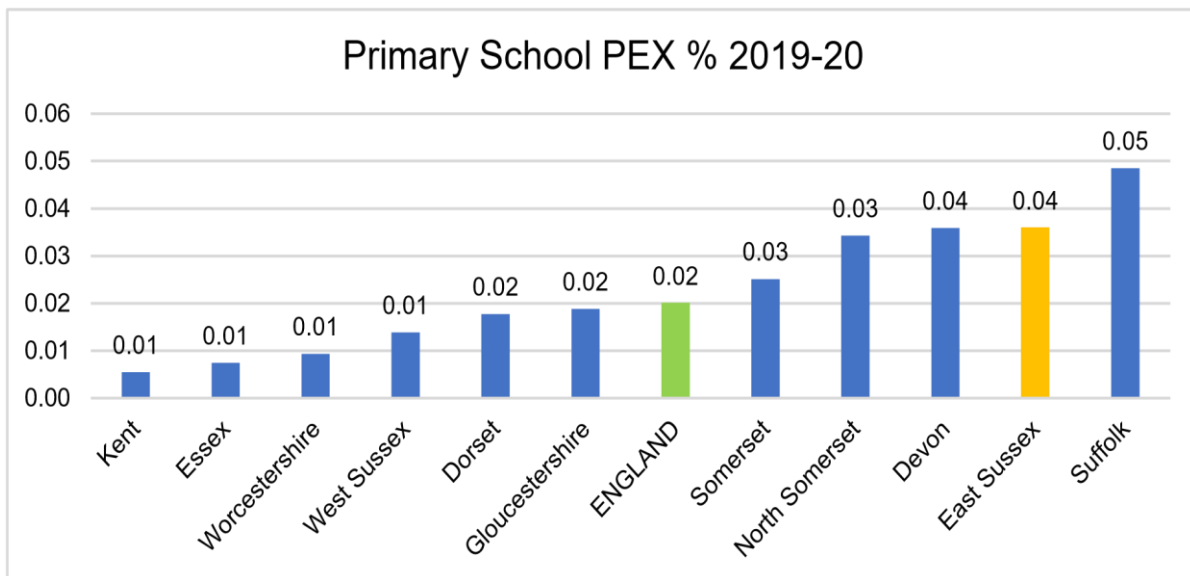
*“The impact of school exclusions has a profound effect on young people’s sense of identity, both in the present and their hopes for the future and its reach goes beyond what happens in school itself and into the wider contexts of their lives.”*



## Context in East Sussex

19. East Sussex County Council (ESCC) supports 189 schools including 135 schools in the primary phase, 23 secondary schools, and 13 special schools. Of these, there are 79 academy schools.

20. In recent years East Sussex experienced a rise in the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions across primary and secondary schools. Most recent data<sup>1</sup> showed East Sussex was above the national average for the number of suspensions and although 2020-21 data showed it fell below the national average for permanent exclusions for secondary schools, East Sussex remained high in permanent exclusions for primary schools compared with statistical neighbours.



<sup>1</sup> 2020-2021 data for Primary Schools was not available at the time of publication.

21. Exploring this comparative data further, the Board heard that there were multiple approaches being used by other local authorities to manage behaviour which would impact on comparisons, including processes such as school to school moves. The Department had explored some of these approaches and concluded that short term placements at other schools made reintegration to a pupil's original school difficult. Without a fuller understanding of strategies and approaches taken in other local authorities, and in recognition of the national challenges facing most areas, the Review focussed on what could be achieved locally to prevent school exclusions.

22. Data from the DfE for suspensions and permanent exclusions for special schools, secondary and primary schools in East Sussex identified several groups of children at increased risk of permanent exclusion, including pupils who were:

- in receipt of Free School Meals in the last 6 years (FSM6);
- on an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP);
- from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities;
- in Years 8, 9 and 10, with a higher risk for females in Year 8;
- on the SEND register of the school and not in receipt of an EHCP.

23. Data also showed an increase in the number of pupils in Early Years being permanently excluded.

24. These findings align with national evidence that SEND pupils are disproportionately affected by permanent exclusion<sup>2</sup>.

25. The key challenges identified locally by the Department included reducing exclusions for children in receipt on an EHCP, increasing opportunities for schools to access multi agency support, and making sure that there was appropriate alternative provision for children to receive bespoke support. Staffing and recruitment issues across all schools were also highlighted.

26. At the time of the review, the Department was involved in in two projects to support work in reducing exclusions:

- *RSA Reducing Exclusions Project*, focused on reducing exclusions in primary schools (at the time of the review the project was going into its third year and the implementation stage).
- *ISOS Rethinking Exclusions Project*, focused on reducing exclusions in secondary schools through Inclusion Partnership meetings (at the time of this Review the project was transitioning from the implementation phase into the embedding phase).

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<sup>2</sup> [HM Government, SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time, 2022](#)

# Review Board Findings

## ***1. Prevention***

27. In order to understand how schools could reduce the number of permanent exclusions and suspensions, the Board sought to understand how preventative strategies could be implemented and developed. The Board found that a combination of whole school approaches, as well as targeted support and intervention was key to keeping pupils engaged in learning and at school.

### **i) Preventative strategies and whole school approaches**

28. Through the Department's work with the RSA and ISOS projects, a range of interventions and strategies were being developed to prevent pupil behaviour escalating to a permanent exclusion. The ISOS Rethinking Exclusions project promoted a model which identified the first step for addressing challenging behaviour as 'mainstream level of support' which reinforced consistent expectations, quality first teaching, and in class support as tools to prevent many pupils needing more targeted support.

29. The Board heard from the ISEND Engagement and Participation Officer who acknowledged the pressure schools were under to deliver bespoke, complex provision, but advocated whole school relational approaches which would benefit all pupils and could reduce the number of pupils being permanently excluded.

30. The Board agreed that intervention and support at the earliest opportunity would not only benefit pupils and schools but could save costly interventions at a later stage and explored several strategies and approaches including the use of programmes, policies, and data.

### ***Preventative programmes***

31. Officers presented information to the Board on 'Therapeutic Thinking', an agreed approach in East Sussex to support behaviour, which focuses on supporting children and responding to need. Schools in East Sussex had been offered free training for their senior leadership team, with the intention they would embed this ethos throughout the school. Additional training and support, including network meetings, was also provided.

32. There had been very positive feedback from schools which had adopted this approach, with many reporting increased staff wellbeing and happiness amongst pupils, and reduced levels of suspensions and permanent exclusion. However, the Board heard that not all schools had engaged with this due to various pressures, including Ofsted and staff capacity. In response the Department was continuing to adapt its offer through bespoke support and training to ensure Therapeutic Thinking was accessible to all schools.

33. The Vice Principal at The St Leonard’s Academy outlined to the Board a number of interventions the school had implemented in order to reduce exclusions, including the use of mental health support and short term intervention programmes such as ‘Believe in You’ and ‘Nurture’ (support for social, emotional and behavioural difficulties) which had supported over 700 students. The Vice Principal stated that 84% of those who had taken part had shown an improvement in their behaviour and, although these programmes were costly, they should be prioritised to help prevent exclusions.

34. Good mental health support was also identified as a key factor in supporting all pupils in schools and crucial to reducing exclusions. The Strategic Lead for Safeguarding and Emotional Wellbeing told the Board that increasing mental health needs since the pandemic were having a significant impact on the capacity of schools and external mental health providers to meet this need. Increased mental health issues, including anxiety, were also having a direct impact on school attendance and in some cases resulting in pupils being permanently excluded. Increased mental health needs amongst school staff were also cited as detrimental to staff and pupil relationships, as well as an additional challenge to staff retention.

35. The Board heard that the Department was providing Mental Health Support Teams and Mental Health and Wellbeing Advisers to work in schools to directly support students as well as develop whole school approaches to meet this need.

### ***Inclusive behaviour policies***

36. Behaviour policies and procedures that focused on being inclusive were noted as key preventative strategies by witnesses and evidence considered by the Board. *Youth Voice on School Exclusions*, a report by The Children’s Society, highlighted the negative impact school exclusions had on young people and their mental health. In their interviews with young people, rigid behaviour policies and approaches were often cited, and there was frustration at what young people saw as an inflexible education system which many did not feel met their needs.

37. Inclusive policies respond to and support all children’s needs and strive to provide a sense of belonging; inclusive policies are cited in national research as being key to improving behaviour across schools and reducing permanent exclusions. Examples of inclusive behaviour policies reviewed by the Board included a focus on

“A child who is fully ‘included’ - given a sense of belonging and opportunities for success - is far less likely to behave in a way that would lead to an official exclusion from school”

RSA Pinball Kids

recognising behaviour as communicating underlying need and encouraged staff to identify and respond to these needs rather than focusing on the presenting behaviour.

38. The Board visited Ore Village Primary Academy to gain insights into how they had reduced the number of permanent exclusions. The school faced a number of local challenges, including having one of the highest numbers of pupils receiving Pupil Premium in the county, and some pupils attending school with additional external challenges at home. A new behaviour policy was developed to be more inclusive. The focus shifted from public rewards and sanctions to having clear expectations of how everyone should behave and pupils being self-motivated to behave positively. The Headteacher reported that hearing that a member of staff was proud of them had a huge impact on pupils' self-esteem and behaviour. The school had worked to embed a cultural change around behaviour and the Headteacher reported having a very supportive and dedicated team of staff who were committed to this, with greatly improved behaviour as a result.

39. The St Leonard's Academy had also created a new behaviour policy which focused on inclusion and positive relationships between pupils and staff. Although there were clear consequences for poor behaviour, the policy outlined the need to identify additional needs when presented with challenging behaviour.

40. The ESCC Senior Educational Psychologist and the SEND CYP Participation Lead, who carried out a number of interviews with young people on their experiences of being permanently excluded, or who were at risk of permanent exclusion, told the Board that many young people cited a sense of belonging as a significant factor in their engagement with education. However, many young people expressed frustration at inconsistent school sanctions with some pupils appearing to be treated differently to others. The Participation Team was supporting inclusion advisers with managing behaviour and working with schools to develop whole school approaches which were needed to ensure good relationships for all pupils.

41. Peacehaven Community School, which from 2018 to 2023 had seen a 100% reduction in permanent exclusions and a significant decrease in suspensions, told the Board it had adopted a more inclusive behaviour policy, moving away from sanctions, such as isolation and suspensions, and towards restorative conversations about behaviour. The Assistant Headteacher noted that suspensions were not only viewed as lost learning, but a potential safeguarding risk for pupils, so a more holistic approach to identifying and supporting needs had been adopted.

42. The Head of Virtual School also advocated the development of inclusive practice and behaviour policies which were trauma informed and supported all pupils, and commented that these policies, as well as programmes such as Therapeutic Thinking, offered alternative responses to pupils at risk of multiple suspensions and permanent exclusion.

43. The Board concluded that behaviour policies which support inclusive practices across the school were effective in supporting all pupils in schools and could reduce behaviour escalating to the point of multiple suspensions or permanent exclusion.

## Recommendation 1

**The Department should utilise area-based teams to identify and support schools and trusts to provide a graduated response to behaviour.**

### *Building and nurturing positive relationships*

44. Many whole school approaches explored by the Board emphasised the importance of building positive relationships between staff and pupils. A key recommendation from the *RSA Pinball Kids Report* was that ‘every child has a strong relationship with a trusted adult in school’ and the report argues that strong relationships are shown to have a positive impact on classroom behaviour.

45. Interviews with young people highlighted the impact of these positive relationships; all of the young people interviewed were able to cite one member of staff they had had a good relationship with and spoke about the positive impact this had on them. However, they also noted the difficulty in using these relationships for ongoing support due to staff capacity. Kara told the Board that schools should make the most of these positive relationships when a pupil is at risk of exclusion, with the trusted member of staff supporting ‘the student to talk to the member of staff who may have been involved and see if they can come to a resolution’. The Board reflected that these relationships had been key to providing a positive and supportive influence in the young people’s lives.

46. This was reiterated by the Senior Educational Psychologist and SEND CYP Participation Lead who informed the Board about the work they were doing to support schools with whole school relational approaches to increase a sense of belonging amongst all pupils. They argued that when pupils were listened to and had positive relationships with adults there is increased motivation and self-efficacy.

47. The St Leonard’s Academy reported seeing an improvement in teacher/student relationships with the adoption of their new behaviour policy and stressed the importance of staff communicating with pupils in a positive way. Staff were trained and carried cards to help with de-escalation, especially for children with SEND, and learnt how their body language could increase their approachability to students. The new behaviour policy encouraged strong relationships between staff and pupils, based on respect, kindness, honesty, resilience and self-discipline. The policy includes guidance for staff to provide pupils with the opportunity for a fresh start at every lesson to enable ‘students [to] reflect on their actions and meet with the staff before the next lesson where practical, to repair relationships’.

48. Ore Village Primary Academy also told that Board that they were prioritising these relationships, ensuring that every child was greeted at the gates each morning.

49. During a visit to Peacehaven Community School the Board heard about the school’s strong ethos of belonging and community, with a focus on pupils building

positive relationships at school and in their local area; the Assistant Headteacher reported this was key to increasing positive behaviour in the school.

## **Recommendation 2**

**The Department should continue to encourage schools and trusts to attend training on whole school relational approaches and develop trauma informed practices so pupils feel safe at school and develop positive relationships. This training should include how to communicate key aspects of these approaches with parents and carers to ensure continuity and support at home.**

### *Using data to identify pupils who need support*

50. National research highlighted the vital importance of using data to identify pupils needing additional support, as well as the risk of pupils regularly missing education if schools did not monitor pupils who were placed in isolation.

51. The Director of ISOS advocated the use of Inclusion Partnership meetings to analyse data and identify pupils who were most at risk of permanent exclusion, as well as monitoring wider trends to identify key vulnerable groups (for example, certain year groups, and children with very low attendance) so that targeted interventions could be put in place.

52. The Board found that the Department was regularly looking at data to identify pupils who were at risk, including national data from the DfE and local schools' data, comparing this with data from geographical areas and statistical neighbours to identify trends and patterns.

53. The Attendance Lead Manager informed the Board that from September 2023 all schools in East Sussex had signed up to provide daily attendance data. This would enable the Department to look at a full data set which could be used to spot patterns, help to safeguard children, and increase attendance.

54. There were also plans for the Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Team to offer an audit tool and strategic visit to all schools with improved data and information sharing about children being excluded with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, with an aim to provide focused work with those pupils.

55. The Board explored how data could be used further within schools; Peacehaven Community School had analysed student data to identify students needing additional support, including those whose attendance was low, pupils on Pupil Premium and Free School Meals and those at risk of permanent exclusion, to raise achievement. The school had looked at barriers facing those pupils and focused on ensuring equity and equality in the school; information on identified pupils was shared with all staff and intensive bespoke support, including for literacy, attendance, and wider family support was provided, with detailed records of successful strategies and approaches for each child.

56. The Board concluded that effective use of data was key to identifying vulnerable groups and students and relevant information should be reviewed regularly at Primary and Secondary Boards and Inclusion Partnership meetings. The Board was concerned about the number of pupils potentially missing education, either through isolation or through inappropriate use of part-time timetables (addressed more in the second half of the report) and data on this should be monitored to identify where alternative support could be put in place.

### **Recommendation 3**

**The Department should work with schools and trusts to review and make use of available data to:**

- a) identify pupils who are at risk of permanent exclusion and identify available support at Inclusion Partnership meetings; and**
- b) monitor pupils identified by the Attendance Support Team who are absent from mainstream education, either through part-time timetables or internal exclusions and assess what alternative support could be put in place.**

### ***Adaptive teaching to deliver the curriculum and extracurricular activities***

57. The RSA *Pinball Kids Report* highlighted that young people studying vocational courses were less likely to be excluded from school, but noted there were now fewer opportunities to study vocational qualifications. It also reported the findings of the Education Select Committee's review of exclusions<sup>3</sup> which 'suggested that curriculum narrowing may be contributing to rising school exclusions'. The RSA report also suggested that a 'rigorous' curriculum introduced in 2010 had resulted in pupils becoming disengaged with education and promoted the use of extracurricular opportunities to engage pupils.

58. The Board concluded that although the current curriculum worked for most pupils, there were a significant number of children who were not able to engage with learning in this way. Although schools were limited with the content of the curriculum, appropriate alternative curriculum activities could help pupils to access this learning in different ways.

59. The Senior Manager, Lewes, Coastal and Wealden ISEND told the Board that schools needed to be creative with engaging children with the curriculum and should consider challenging traditional ways of teaching. Therapeutic Thinking, for example, enabled teachers to develop different group dynamics and challenge conventional larger teaching group sizes by delivering focussed work with smaller groups. The Board heard that, for Therapeutic Thinking to work well, it needed to be embedded

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<sup>3</sup> House of Commons (2018) *Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions*. Report of the Education Select Committee. Available at: [Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/education-select-committee/committees-reports-and-publications/2018-19/forgotten-children/)



into the school culture and influence how staff communicated with young people; when this worked well, staff were better equipped to deliver the curriculum.

60. Interviews with young people also highlighted the challenge larger class sizes presented to some pupils; one young person told Members they did not want to return to mainstream education because the classes were too big and there was too much noise.

61. The Head of Virtual School told the Board about pupils who had thrived in alternative provision where they were able to access vocational courses, and this had had a positive impact on their behaviour. However, due to the costs of external alternative provision, it was important for schools to consider a range of provisions in their own settings.

62. The Board explored this further through visits to Ore Village Primary Academy and Peacehaven Community School which had both adapted how they delivered the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils and improve behaviour in the school. The Headteacher at Ore Village Primary explained how they had done this to suit the needs of the pupils locally, recognising that their cultural, language, and memory needs were unique - for example, many of the children's cultural experiences were only offered through school. The school prioritised activities, including school trips, to enhance cultural experiences. To support very young pupils in their learning and development, the school focused heavily on speech and language, recognising that this was a development need for many of their pupils, and prioritised embedding this throughout school. Funding was also used to bring in specialist teachers, including for PE, dance and music, and sensory circuits were used to support children with additional needs, including those with ADHD and anxiety.

63. Peacehaven Community School told the Board they had adapted their teaching of the curriculum by rearranging the school timetable to offer elected subjects at Key Stage 4 on days when they were seeing higher rates of absence. The school also advocated the use of community enrichment activities outside of the school day to further pupil and family engagement with learning.

64. The Board reflected on the broad range of needs of pupils in schools, including those with SEND, as well as pupils with a lack of stimulating experiences, often due to poverty and other external challenges, and how these could impact on their ability to access the curriculum. The Board recognised the needs of very young pupils who may be starting school with additional needs, including language and memory processing needs. The Board noted the benefits of appropriate alternative activities to support all pupils to access the curriculum, including those who were not engaged with more structured learning, and were impressed with the results of local schools who had achieved this.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**The Department should develop training for schools and trusts and share best practice on how adaptive teaching can deliver the curriculum to support needs of all pupils, including SEND pupils and pupils facing additional external challenges. This should include developing guidance on assessment to ensure the use of Additional Needs Plans and Personal Education Plans support and address the needs that have been identified.**

65. The Board explored how extracurricular activities could also engage pupils with learning and heard that the Department provided a range of extracurricular activities and support which could benefit pupils and families, including through the Early Help Team, the Holiday and Food Activity Programme, Family Hubs and through Youth Centres, and that successfully promoting these to schools and families could encourage greater engagement with education. The Board agreed that these activities could increase engagement and provide vital support for pupils and families, however there was concern about the ongoing sustainability of funding of these activities.

#### **Recommendation 5**

**The Department should work with schools and trusts to promote the benefits of extracurricular activities, including:**

- a) where provided through Early Help, the Holiday and Food Activity Programme, Family Hubs, and Youth Centres, activities which engage pupils throughout the year and incorporate support for families; and**
- b) summer programmes which support transition.**

66. The Board concluded that whilst preventive measures could be expensive, they were a necessary strategy to improve behaviour in schools and reduce permanent exclusions. Moreover, early investment could prevent more costly intervention later on.

#### **ii) Targeted support and intervention**

67. When a child is identified as at risk of permanent exclusion the Board heard it was important for targeted and timely support and intervention to be provided. Moreover, the *Timpson Review* identified local authorities as playing a key role in advocating for children with additional needs and those at risk of exclusion. The Board learned that this support included timely assessment and support for additional needs, including SEND and SEMH, as well as identifying external issues and circumstances which may be affecting the child at school. Support should involve,

where necessary, cross-team working between different professionals to support the pupil and the family. Responses to poor behaviour should also be graduated and appropriate.

68. The Senior Manager for Targeted Support Services informed the Board that the RSA Reducing Exclusions Project was focussed on enabling early identification of needs and support through regular joint working between multiagency partners.

69. The Board also heard that the ISOS Rethinking Exclusions Project identified a model of graduated and appropriate response to all pupils, including those who are vulnerable to multiple suspensions and permanent exclusion, including in-class support, additional in-school support, targeted support, and alternative provision. The model focused on understanding behaviour and identifying the needs of the child.

70. The Head of Virtual School provided insights into her work with Looked After Children to ensure that pupils from this cohort were rarely excluded from school. When a Looked After Child was at risk of exclusion, the Virtual School worked with education settings to provide additional support, including with the East Sussex Behaviour and Support Service (ESBAS), Communication Learning and Autism Support Service (CLASS), and the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) to provide early and targeted support. The Head of Virtual School commented that Personal Education Plans for Looked After Children enabled school staff and social workers to focus and tailor support to the child's needs. She advocated the need to bring in support services at the earliest opportunity, however also acknowledged the limited capacity of these services.

71. 2023 data from the DfE showed an increase of 87,000 pupils nationally with SEN from 2022<sup>4</sup>. The HM Government, *SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time* concluded that outcomes for children and young people with SEN or in alternative provision were poor and that seeking support was difficult for children and their families, often due to late intervention and insufficient resources.

72. The Board heard from interviews, written responses and a discussion with the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services (SENDIASS) Manager that some parents and carers felt a permanent exclusion could have been avoided if additional needs were identified and supported in school, including through Additional Needs Plans and Personal Education Plans. However, he also noted that there was a wide range of specialist services available to schools and when these had been brought in, parents and carers commented on the positive outcomes they had achieved.

73. The Senior Educational Psychologist reiterated that SEND needs were often not understood, which could lead to an exclusion, and it was crucial for schools to involve supporting services earlier to provide positive intervention and avoid permanent

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<sup>4</sup> National Statistics Academic year 2022/23 [Special educational needs in England](#)

exclusions. Discussions with school governors also suggested that a lack of resources to support SEND needs was a contributing factor to some pupils being permanently excluded.

74. The Department agreed that schools were running on tight staffing, but schools which were achieving good outcomes and low exclusion rates were adopting inclusive practices and investing in pastoral support staff to meet needs. This was demonstrated, for example, by Peacehaven Community School which had recruited a strong pastoral team and effective SEND support across all school years.

75. The Board concluded that although the Review was not able to explore SEND assessment and support in detail, evidence considered did show that ensuring SEND needs were assessed and identified early, and putting appropriate support in place, could reduce the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions for SEND pupils; moreover, schools that were prioritising support for SEND needs were achieving good outcomes for those pupils. This is further addressed in recommendation 4.

### ***Pupils facing additional external challenges***

76. The Board heard that it was not only important to identify and address needs in school, but external issues and circumstances should also be taken into consideration when responding to behaviour issues. In the Board's interview with young people, they heard from Sonny who explained that at the time of his permanent exclusion he was dealing with a family death and had lost motivation at school; Sonny said he felt unsupported in this and believed this contributed to escalating poor behaviour. Moreover, Sonny felt this was not taken into consideration when deciding to permanently exclude or in subsequent appeals. National research also noted challenges outside of school, including relationships and emotional health, which can contribute towards exclusion.

77. The Board reflected that supporting pupils' increasing complexity of needs with limited resources was an increasing challenge facing schools, however schools who had invested in this were seeing positive outcomes in their suspension and permanent exclusion rates, for example noting that Ore Village Primary had taken significant steps to address local challenges and were seeing increased engagement as a result.

### ***Work with key partners***

78. The Board heard that appropriate and effective support for pupils at risk of exclusion often required working with key partners and professionals.

79. The Director of ISOS Partnership explained to the Board that a key component of the Rethinking Exclusion Project was the creation of Inclusion Partnerships where 'school and service leaders meet and work together to take a holistic approach to supporting young people, fostering inclusion, building capacity for improvement, driving innovation and, ultimately, ensuring the best education for all children and young people'. This multi-agency approach included ESBAS, Early Help, Connected

Families, the Virtual School, and CLASS and allowed schools to identify and access the right support for pupils at risk of permanent exclusion.

80. The Board heard about similar work with the use of collaborative partnerships through the RSA Preventing School Exclusions Project. This project used support networks, representatives, and referrals to share knowledge and support for pupils at risk of permanent exclusion and included a focus on supporting pupils to transition from primary to secondary school. The Department also made use of Primary and Secondary Boards to identify pupils who may need additional support. The project interim report highlighted the success of this work:

*“The project is making really good progress and has already created strong links across local authority teams, schools and external agencies. Our local headteachers are working closely together to learn from each other about the best ways to support positive relationships and behaviour. At the recent conference for primary school leaders, headteachers gave an inspiring account of their work to date and the positive difference that the project is starting to make for children in their schools”.*

(Assistant Director, Education, ESCC)

81. The Board heard that the Virtual School successfully worked with a range of partners to develop an understanding of the needs of Looked After Children and put in place the right support such as programmes, key worker provision, resources, and toolkits provided by the local authority and specialist teams. The Virtual School also sat within the Inclusion Partnership to look at alternatives to permanent exclusion and welcomed the effective partnership work across the services.

82. The success of partnership working was demonstrated by Ore Village Primary School; the Headteacher had facilitated a Behaviour Support Network with other primary schools in Hastings to identify children at risk of permanent exclusion. The meeting included a round table discussion and schools were given strategies to support these pupils. This was very positive, and feedback showed this had an impact very quickly, however the Headteacher noted she had little capacity to support these meetings on a regular basis and would support a co-ordinated approach to facilitate professionals working together to improve behaviour in schools.

83. The Board were impressed by the development of support networks for schools, including through Inclusion Partnerships and Primary and Secondary Boards and concluded that through these, key guidance and support could be shared with schools across the county.

### ***Transition from primary to secondary school***

84. National research noted that transition from primary to secondary school could increase a pupil’s risk of exclusion, especially if there were unmet needs, or if successful strategies put in place in primary school were not continued when a pupil moved onto secondary school.

85. The Senior Manager, Lewes, Coastal and Wealden ISEND and the Director of ISOS informed the Board that post pandemic many pupils were not ready for secondary school in year 7 and Inclusion Partnership meetings had identified a pattern of poor behaviour in year 8 which has been triggered by pupils' experiences in year 7. Issues identified in primary school needed to be supported when a pupil transitions between phases.

86. The Headteacher at Ore Village Primary Academy told the Board she was concerned that the positive impact on behaviour from preventative strategies and targeted support could be lost when pupils moved to secondary school and noted that more work was needed with local secondary schools to ensure continuity of support. The school did have strong links and good communication however with local pre-school settings and had successfully supported young pupils transitioning into Reception. Peacehaven Community School told the Board that although they worked with local primary schools to support transition, including with issues on attendance, there was not currently a consistent behaviour policy between the local primary schools and Peacehaven Community School; instead, expectations would be communicated to pupils before they joined the school and that they would aim to continue provisions established in primary school such as Lego Therapy and Time to Talk.

87. The Board discussed that this was a wider issue within East Sussex and reflected that with children attending different secondary schools to some of their peers, their experience was often dependent on the school's policy, and it appeared there was not enough learning from schools about the strategies put in place by their feeder school. The Board concluded that it was important for secondary schools to see what preventative strategies primary schools were putting in place, including using case studies at Inclusion Partnership meetings, and explore opportunities to continue these. Support from the local authority, including through summer programmes and one to one SEND support, was identified as playing a vital role in supporting pupils to transition, however the Board concluded that a consistent approach to transition across schools would be beneficial.

88. The Board noted the ongoing work of the Department in this area, including the focus in the RSA Preventing School Exclusions Project which was exploring investment in transitions. The interim report noted that across all three localities, including East Sussex, they had found 'primary and secondary schools working individually to support pupils with transition rather than working together'. In the project's Group 3 pilot, a working group of representatives from primary, secondary, and special schools, the local authority and the Parent Carer Forum had been formed to address suspensions and permanent exclusions in years 7 and 8 and create a consistent transition offer.

89. It was agreed that findings of the project should shape this offer in the county. The Board also concluded that successful transition from pre-school settings, with

consistent support and strategies in place to support need, could prevent the risk of exclusion in very young pupils.

#### **Recommendation 6**

**The Department should work with schools and trusts to support pupils transitioning into Early Years in primary and Key Stage 3 in secondary by:**

- a) working with pre-school settings and primary schools to identify pupils who may need additional support when transitioning to primary/secondary school and referring them to appropriate support and programmes; and**
- b) communicating successful approaches and support at the point of transition at all phases to ensure continuity of provision.**

## ***2. Appropriate responses to children at risk of permanent exclusion***

90. Having explored broader preventative strategies, the Board went on to consider appropriate responses to a child who had been identified as at specific risk of permanent exclusion. Research and witnesses identified key factors to consider when responding to pupils at risk, including the use of youth voice, engagement with families and the effective use of alternative provision.

### **i) Youth voice**

91. The national statutory guidance on exclusions states that:

*‘Headteachers should...take the pupil’s views into account, considering these in light of their age and understanding, before deciding to exclude, unless it would not be appropriate to do so. They should inform the pupil about how their views have been factored into any decision made.’*

92. Witnesses and evidence suggested that listening to the voice of young people, including when making decisions about their education, produced better outcomes for them. The Board heard directly from young people about the need to feel listened to and given the opportunity to advocate for themselves.

“Ever since I’ve been excluded my anger has got worse. I would like to be listened to more”

Young person interview with Ella

93. However, young people interviewed all reported not feeling listened to, or given the appropriate opportunity to advocate for themselves or be involved in decisions around their education. Two of the young people spoke of multiple challenges they were facing outside of school, including bereavement and

mental health issues, but did not feel these were supported or considered in the decision to permanently exclude them. All the young people did, however, comment on the good support they had received from ESBAS and spoke positively of relationships with staff at alternative provision sites. The Board reflected that the young people they had spoken to had been forthcoming and genuine, with recognition and understanding of how their behaviour had led to a permanent exclusion, but the process had not been fully explained to them.

94. The Board heard about wider engagement work with young people who had been, or were at risk of being, excluded from the Educational Psychologist and ISEND Engagement Participation Officer who had spoken to 40 young people in six different settings across East Sussex, including alternative provisions, about their experiences. The interviews demonstrated the importance of positive relationships between pupils and staff, as well as the need for young people to feel listened to and part of conversations about decisions. The Educational Psychologist shared with the Board that giving young people the opportunity to have an equal weight given to their voice led to improved outcomes including effort and motivation and a reduction in power imbalances.

95. The Assistant Headteacher at Peacehaven Community School explained how youth voice had been successful in developing a number of strategies and policies in the school, including the new behaviour policy, profiles on students identified as needing additional support, SEND support, and safeguarding concerns. The school had invested in training for staff to encourage positive communication between staff and pupils and, in a recent survey, 91% of students reported feeling listened to when speaking to a teacher.

96. The Board acknowledged that, whilst young people should feel listened to in school, teachers were under increasing pressures and capacity was often a barrier to this. However, it was clear that youth voice should be incorporated into school policy where possible, including in meetings about the decision to exclude.

97. It was also noted that youth voice was a key component in the ISOS Rethinking Exclusions Project and would inform the commissioning of targeted provision in schools and of external alternative provision.

#### **Recommendation 7**

**The Department should encourage schools and trusts to increase the use of youth voice in preventive strategies and responses to children at risk of permanent exclusion by providing training and guidance for schools and governors on how to embed youth voice into all areas of school policy.**



## ii) Engagement with parents and carers and family support

98. The Board found that parental engagement was key to preventing pupils from being permanently excluded, but that this was a challenge for many schools, especially with their most vulnerable pupils. However, evidence from parent interviews also showed that many parents and carers did not feel communicated with about decisions to permanently exclude their child.

99. The Board looked at national research which considered the support provided to parents and carers and recommended that engagement from parents and carers with their child's education was a key contributor to preventing exclusion. The *Timpson Review of School Exclusions* recommended that 'local authorities should include information about support services for parents and carers of children who have been, or are at risk of, exclusion, or have been placed in Alternative Provision'.

100. The Board explored what support was available to parents and carers and heard from the Parenting Coordinator from the Early Help Service about a variety of parenting programmes available to parents and carers in East Sussex, including for support with child development, behavioural issues, SEND needs and mental health needs. Although these courses were well attended and gained very positive feedback, there was still work to do to reach the most vulnerable families in need of support and to de-stigmatise parenting support.

101. Although a wide range of support was available to parents and carers across East Sussex, the Board heard of the importance of schools communicating regularly and openly with parents and carers, in an accessible way. The Board explored this through interviews with parents and carers, written responses through the East Sussex Parent Carer Forum (ESPCF) and with the SENDIASS Manager who spoke of the experiences of parents and carers who have accessed the SENDIASS support line. The SENDIASS Manager told the Board one of the most common reasons for calls from parents and carers was not feeling listened to, with poor communication from the school and many reporting that they felt issues could have been addressed at an earlier stage if there had been communication. The Board also heard that when communication was received, it was often not in an accessible or clear format, so parents and carers found it difficult to understand. One parent told the ESPCF 'I had had to make my own way through the appeal process and secure my own support'. Other parents and carers reported having little communication from key staff and if communication was offered, there was little flexibility to adapt to parent/carer needs, including work commitments.

102. The Headteacher at Ore Village Primary Academy noted that despite a focus on supporting families, a lack of parental engagement was one of the biggest challenges to reducing exclusions, and the school was investing significant staff time to build positive relationships and sustained communication, particularly around attendance. This was also noted by Peacehaven Community School who used clear, accessible and regular communication, community events, and enrichment evenings to increase

parental engagement. Both schools acknowledged that key barriers to parents and carers engaging were personal negative experiences with education and school, as well as the need for wider support, including with cost of living and mental health issues. The Headteacher at Ore Village Primary, for example, noted her concern about increasing parental anxiety which was affecting transition for some pupils.

103. The Board concluded that it was important for parents and carers to be able to seek support and advocate for their child when there were issues with behaviour and especially when there were conversations around decisions to permanently exclude. They also noted that for this to work well, there needed to be positive communication and engagement with parents and carers at all stages of education.

#### **Recommendation 8**

**The Department should work with schools and trusts to further develop and embed parental engagement to ensure all stakeholders understand how and why a child is at risk of permanent exclusion, including the parent/carer and the child, and include parents and carers with decisions around alternative provision, including all available options.**

104. The Board also reflected on the concerning increase of parental anxiety and how this was impacting on children's behaviour and engagement with learning. Although there was good support available across the county for parents and carers, there was a need to further develop clear signposting and targeted promotions to ensure schools and parents and carers were aware of this support.

#### **Recommendation 9**

**The Department should embed its multi-agency response, including the use of the new level 2 keywork team in Early Help focused on supporting attendance to:**

- a) promote targeted support, including wider family-based issues, to pupils and families who have been identified as at risk of permanent exclusion and multiple suspensions due to a lack of engagement with the school as a result of persistent absence; and**
- b) promote to schools and families parenting programmes that support interventions and preventative measures in schools.**

#### **iii) Effective use of alternative provision**

105. Alternative provision offers alternative education to children and young people who are not able to be in mainstream education, either due to a suspension or permanent exclusion, or due to identified additional needs. The Board explored how alternative provision was being used locally to respond to pupils who have been

permanently excluded, to prevent exclusion, and/or support children and young people to successfully reintegrate into mainstream education.

106. The Board heard that the Virtual School worked closely with alternative provision providers to support pupil's health and wellbeing, based on the interests of the child, with a focus on returning to mainstream school. The Head of Virtual School told the Board that when children engaged in activities they enjoyed, even for a short time, this had a significant impact. Moreover, positive engagement with alternative provision improved outcomes, including educational and relationships with family members, which in turn, put less pressure on other services and had wider positive impacts on the community and at home. However, there was not sufficient funding to access this long term.

107. The Head also noted that alternative provision worked best when a child could see the school was arranging it and when there were good links and communication between the provider and school, both of which improved the relationship between the child and their school. The Virtual School worked with providers to capture positive experiences and created passports which went back into schools to demonstrate what the children had been doing and successful strategies. This message had been shared by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) who gave a presentation to the Inclusion Partnerships Conference on the importance of schools maintaining strong relationships with alternative provision providers.

108. In interviews with young people, the Board heard about the positive experiences they had had with alternative provision, including feeling more included, treated as adults and able to explore a range of activities.

109. The Board reflected on the positive impact alternative provision had had on many young people and considered that many children might have benefitted from an early option of alternative provision as a preventive measure, supporting them before they reached the stage of exclusion.

110. The use of alternative provision as a preventative strategy was being developed in several schools. The Board heard from The St Leonard's Academy which had created an alternative provision 'Reboot' on site to support pupils who were struggling to engage in mainstream education. The site was staffed and equipped to support up to 20 students at a time and offered bespoke intervention programmes including sensory circuits, self-regulation, Lego therapy, Therapeutic Thinking, and cooking. The Vice and Assistant Principal told the Board that allowing these students to step out of classrooms and providing them with bespoke support and ongoing strategies, including using passports identifying their triggers and ways to manage feelings and behaviour, enabled them to return to and engage with mainstream education and ultimately prevent permanent exclusion.

111. The Board also visited the onsite alternative provision at Ore Village Primary School. Pupils were supported for varying portions of the school day by a range of staff with their wellbeing, SEND needs and academic learning, with all pupils having

their needs assessed and, when necessary, referrals made to supporting professionals. The focus was on transitioning pupils back into mainstream classrooms and parents and carers were kept informed about their child's attendance at this provision. The Director of the Academy Trust informed the Board that 'appropriate provision' to support children who were at risk of permanent exclusion could prevent more costly intervention later on and help pupils to gain the tools they needed to reintegrate into and engage with mainstream education.

112. This aligns with the national *SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time*, which sets out plans to develop the alternative provision offer to support the needs of SEND pupils. The proposed new model focuses on using alternative provision to tackle barriers to learning, with the aim of reintegrating pupils into mainstream education. It claims, 'over time, this new system will reduce the number of preventable exclusions and expensive long-term placements, as needs will be identified and supported early'. Locally the Department has responded to this by creating an Alternative Provision Directory to enable schools to commission high quality provision.

113. The Board concluded that alternative provision could significantly reduce the risk for some pupils of being permanently excluded and that guidance on options, as well as how to make best use of alternative provision, could support pupils and schools with increased engagement in learning and provide pupils with tools to succeed in mainstream education.

#### **Recommendation 10**

**To accompany the Alternative Provision Directory, which is to be shared with schools and trusts, the Department should develop guidance on:**

- a) how to make best use of alternative provision, including good communication and ways to provide consistent support once a child reintegrates; and**
- b) how alternative provision, including onsite alternative provision, can be used to prevent permanent exclusion and support pupils with additional needs, including those facing additional external challenges.**

#### **iv) Role of governors**

114. The Board explored the role governors play in both supporting schools to adopt whole school approaches and preventative strategies to reduce the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions, and in their response to children who are at risk of exclusion, including decisions to permanently exclude.

115. Once a headteacher has decided to permanently exclude a pupil, Governor Disciplinary Committee (GDC) meetings are held to further investigate reasons for exclusion and governors consider any evidence presented to them. Parents/carers and children can attend these meetings and if the governors disagree with the headteacher's decision, the exclusion does not go ahead.

116. The Board heard from five school governors (representing primary and secondary schools) that a key part of their role was relationship building with pupils, school staff, and parents and carers. All governors were keen to identify alternative support rather than permanently excluding a child, however one governor reported that relationships between governors and the school could be damaged if governors disagreed with the headteacher's decision to exclude.

117. Interviews with young people suggested that GDC meetings were intimidating, and often young people were unable to advocate for themselves. In the discussion with governors, this was acknowledged, with one governor noting that sometimes it would not be suitable to have a young person at the formal meeting because they would be unable to cope with the situation. Moreover, there was concern that there was not always enough of the child's voice when deciding to permanently exclude and although this was covered in governor training, this could be explored further.

118. The Board heard that governors would like to play more of a role in the prevention of exclusion by meeting with the headteacher at an earlier stage to explore alternative options and support. However, as governors on GDC need to remain independent of cases, this was difficult, especially for smaller primary schools.

119. The Board were impressed by the commitment shown from the governors they spoke to and agreed that governors not only play a crucial role in decisions to permanently exclude, but also had an opportunity to influence wider school policy, including supporting schools to become more inclusive and advocating for the needs of pupils, it was therefore vital they could access quality training and guidance to fulfil their role.

#### **Recommendation 11**

**The Department should continue to provide ongoing support and training for governors including whole school training on SEND needs, mental health issues and inclusive behaviour policies, and produce guidance on how to conduct inclusive Governor Disciplinary Committee meetings that prioritise youth voice.**

#### **v) The use of part-time timetables**

120. A part-time or reduced timetable means that, by agreement with the pupil, parent/carer, and school, the number of hours spent in education are reduced. National and local guidance states that this should only be for a time limited period of no more than six weeks and should only be in exceptional circumstances such as for medical reasons, reintegration into school following a trauma, or a family bereavement.

121. The Board were concerned about the reported use of part-time tables in some schools to unofficially exclude pupils for poor behaviour. Officers informed the Board that there were very clear guidelines from the DfE and local guidance from ESCC which stated that part-time timetables should not be used to manage behaviour and should only be used in consultation with parents and carers to support pupils who were unable to attend school full time.

122. This approach was being used effectively by Ore Village Primary Academy; the Inclusion Lead told the Board that pupils who struggled to attend school full time, often due to mental health issues, were supported through the use of alternative provision and part-time timetables to gradually transition into full time education. He reiterated that this had to be in agreement with the parents/carers and it was kept under constant review.

123. However, the Board heard from the SENDIASS Manager that they often received reports from parents and carers with children with SEND needs that schools were placing children on part-time timetables in response to behaviour issues as the school was unable to cope with their needs.

124. The Attendance Lead Manager informed the Board that the use of part-time timetables should be closely monitored, with wider support for the pupils considered, especially in the case of vulnerable pupils, including talking to supporting teams and services. Although schools did not currently report their use of part-time timetables, they were included in wider reporting on unauthorised absences. The Board heard that from September 2023, the Department would be able to monitor this more closely and planned to analyse data which would highlight schools showing a high number of pupils on part-time timetables.

125. The Board concluded that, although guidance from the DfE and ESCC was clear on the appropriate use of part-time timetables, it was not consistently being followed at a local level, with some schools using these inappropriately. There would therefore be benefit in more support, guidance, and monitoring as proposed in recommendations 3b and 12c.

### ***3. Council messaging and support***

126. All witnesses the Board spoke to reported that the Council's messaging around the need to reduce exclusions was clear and that schools were working hard to achieve this. However, there was evidence that schools needed support to achieve this.

127. The Board reflected that although overall intention was clear, the decision to exclude remained with the school, and messaging also needed to focus on what support was available to schools, successful approaches to reducing permanent exclusions through case studies and shared learning, and the benefits to schools of adopting inclusive behaviour policies and support. The Board agreed that consistency in language, for example advocating graduated responses to pupil behaviour, would

encourage more schools to adopt consistent and collaborative approaches to behaviour.

128. The Board also concluded that clear and consistent messaging on appropriate responses to pupils at risk of permanent exclusion could also reduce the use of inappropriate part-time timetables which the Board were concerned were being used to manage behaviour in some cases.

#### **Recommendation 12**

**The Department should develop clear and consistent guidance to share with schools and trusts on the benefits of reducing school exclusions, and the support available, including:**

- a) key findings from the RSA ‘Rethinking Exclusions’ and ISOS projects;**
- b) using Primary and Secondary Boards to communicate to schools and trusts the benefits of inclusive policies and share best practice for reducing exclusions and agree to a shared responsibility to reducing exclusions; and**
- c) on the appropriate use of part-time timetables to ensure these are not being used to manage behaviour. Part-time timetables that are in place must be for the shortest time necessary and reviewed regularly with the pupil and their parents/carers.**

## **Conclusions**

129. The Review Board has considered a broad range of evidence, including listening to the views of young people which has been vital to gaining key insights and forming recommendations. Members concluded that there was a strong commitment from the Department and most schools in East Sussex to reduce the number of permanent exclusions. The Department continues to prioritise this in its work which is reflected in the recent restructure of the Education division.

130. The Board scrutinised a number of ongoing projects and initiatives to address this issue and recognised that some of this work was still at early stages. The impacts of these projects, as well as the emerging complexity of needs of children and their families post pandemic, needed to be measured regularly to identify successful approaches and areas of focus.

131. The Board recognised the limitations of this Review; recommendations focus on how the Council can work with schools and, although they will be shared with schools across the county, the decision to exclude is a school one and academies are wholly outside of the remit of the local authority. However, this Review aims to support schools in East Sussex by making recommendations to help the ongoing development of a consistent, evidence-based approach to reducing permanent exclusion and improving outcomes for all pupils.

132. The Board heard that a range of preventative measures, including inclusive policies, could benefit *all* pupils, including those who are very young and those that are vulnerable, including SEND pupils and those facing additional external challenges. When children are identified as at specific risk of permanent exclusion, appropriate timely support and interventions could offer alternative options.

133. The Board learned that pupils who are persistently absent are at higher risk of permanent exclusion than their peers. The Board concluded that findings from this Review should be considered in the Committee's upcoming scrutiny review of School Attendance.



# Appendix

## Scope and terms of reference of the review

### Terms of Reference

On the recommendation of the Scoping Board, the People Scrutiny Committee agreed that this review should explore what can be done to help reduce the levels of school exclusion in East Sussex and will have particular regard to vulnerable children and young people (as this group are disproportionately at risk of exclusion).

Members agreed that this would be explored through the following **key lines of enquiry**:

- 1) Could the Council do more to develop levels of understanding amongst school leaders of **preventative** strategies, such as therapeutic thinking, to help reduce the likelihood of exclusion?
- 2) Could the Council do more to join up **early help** and education services as a preventative approach to support reduction in school exclusions?
- 3) Could the Council do more to help develop a better understanding amongst schools of what constitutes an appropriate **response** to a child who is at risk of exclusion?  
This line of enquiry to include consideration of:
  - the role and status of the SENCO and their involvement in developing appropriate responses to a child who is at risk of exclusion;
  - appropriate responses to very young pupils at risk of exclusion in primary school; and
  - appropriate responses to vulnerable pupils at risk of exclusion at secondary phase.
- 4) Could the Council develop its training and advice for governors around, for example, providing effective **challenge** in the circumstance where a Head teacher has taken a decision to exclude and the Governing Board are required to consider reinstatement. This line of enquiry could also explore the role of Governors in helping to develop best practice at the school.
- 5) Within consideration of each of the above lines of enquiry, is the Council's **messaging** clear on the need to reduce, and benefits of reducing, school exclusions?

## **Board Membership and project support**

Review Board Members: Councillors Sam Adeniji (Chair), Kathryn Field, Johanna Howell, Wendy Maples and John Hayling (Parent Governor Representative).

The Project Manager was Rachel Sweeney, Senior Policy and Scrutiny Adviser with additional support provided by Rachel Joseph, Strategic Lead: Inclusion and AP, Katie Ridgway, Head of Education: Inclusion and Partnerships and Lucy Owen, Policy Development Intern.

## **Review Board meeting dates**

Scoping Board meeting - 12 January 2023

First Review Board meeting - 12 May 2023

Second Review Board meeting - 09 June 2023

Third Review Board meeting - 20 July 2023

Fourth Review Board meeting - 21 September 2023

Final Review Board meeting - 16 October 2023

## **Witnesses providing evidence**

The Board would like to thank all the witnesses who provided evidence:

### ESCC officers \*

Clare Cornford, Project Co-ordinator: Governor Services

Catherine Dooley, Strategic Lead, Safeguarding and Emotional Wellbeing, Education East Sussex

Liz Eyre, Parenting Co-Ordinator, Early Help Service

Dr Sam Kelly, Senior Educational Psychologist

Mandy Lewis, Head of Virtual School

Vidyulatha Narayan, Area Manager, Education East Sussex

Sallie Thompsett, Practice Manager, Early Help Service

Alice Tigwell, SEND CYP Participation Lead

Vicky Wells, Senior Manager, Lewes, Coastal and Wealden ISEND

Iona Wooderson, Senior Manager Targeted Support Services

### External witnesses

Ella, young person

Kara, young person

Sonny, young person

Ben Bryant, Director, ISOS Partnership

Drew Greenall, Vice Principal, the St Leonard's Academy

Nick Hart, Assistant Principal and Designated Safeguarding Lead, the St Leonard's Academy

Liam Ryan, AMAZE

Nicola Smith, Parent

Michael Smith, Parent

### Site visits

Ore Village Primary Academy

Peacehaven Community School

\*At the start of the Review, the Standards and Learning Effectiveness Service (SLES), within the Children's Services Department, provided support to staff and governors of East Sussex Schools, including guidance, training and support to help schools reduce the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions. This work included governor training and supporting schools with DfE guidance on suspensions and permanent exclusions.

During the Review, the Department launched a re-structured education division, 'Education East Sussex'. The rebranded service combined the teams of the former SLES and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (ISEND) with a focus on:

- supporting schools with low rates of attendance and high levels of exclusion
- working to help underperforming areas of the county and specific groups
- meeting the challenge of increased pressure on places to meet special educational needs and demand for statutory assessments.

The East Sussex Behaviour and Attendance Support Service (ESBAS) ceased to exist from September 2023; the work of this team was included in the new Education Outcomes and Inclusion and Alternative Provision teams.

Job titles and teams listed in this report are correct at the time of interviews.

## Evidence papers

Item	Date considered
Local data on East Sussex suspensions and permanent exclusions rates	12 May 2023
DfE, <i>Suspension and Permanent Exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England, including pupils movement, 2022</i>	12 May 2023
DfE, <i>Behaviour in Schools, Advice for headteachers and school staff, 2022</i>	12 May 2023
Bonner CE Primary School & Nursery, <i>Behaviour Policy, 2022</i>	12 May 2023
RSA, <i>Pinball Kids Preventing school exclusions, 2020</i>	20 July 2023
RSA, <i>Preventing school exclusions: collaboration for change, Interim report, 2023</i>	20 July 2023
The Children's Society, <i>Youth Voice on School Exclusions, 2021</i>	20 July 2023
ESCC, <i>ISEND Reduced timetable guidance for schools, academies and settings in East Sussex, 2021</i>	20 July 2023
<i>Timpson Review of School Exclusions</i>	20 July 2023
Minutes from interview with young people	20 July 2023
The St Leonard's Academy, <i>Behaviour Policy,</i>	21 September 2023
DfE, <i>SEND Review, Right support, right place, right time, 2022</i>	21 September 2023
DfE, <i>Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan, 2023</i>	21 September 2023

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