

COMMISSION YOUNG LIVES

THEMATIC REPORT 3

All Together Now

Inclusion not exclusion: supporting all young people to succeed in school

APRIL 2022

THE COMMISSION ON YOUNG LIVES

The Commission on Young Lives, launched in September 2021. It is a year-long Commission that will propose a new settlement to prevent marginalised children and young people from falling into violence, exploitation and the criminal justice system, and supports them to flourish. Its national action plan will include ambitious practical and affordable proposals that government, councils, police, social services and communities can put into place. We are engaging with those in government and system leaders who have the power to create change, making the case for them to do so. Taking a public health approach focused on prevention, inclusion and supportive relationships, its work is steered by its commissioners, alongside panels of young people and practitioners.

The Commission is supported and hosted by Oasis Charitable Trust, a national charity that has been pioneering models of sustainable and holistic community development for 35 years, and now works in over 40 neighbourhoods in England, delivering schools, housing, health and a wide range of other projects with young people and their families. The Commission is also funded by the Passion Project Foundation, a charitable social impact aggregator and investor, which brings scaled investment to tackle perennial social problems.

This is our third thematic report, following our previous reports looking at the children's social care system and support for families. In this report on education in England, we also highlight numerous systemic shortcomings. We are particularly critical of the lack of flexibility in the way we respond to the needs of some vulnerable children or those many thousands of children – from all sorts of different backgrounds - who find school challenging or an unhappy place to be, or who do not attend at all. However, as in our previous reports, we also champion the brilliant work being done by those who dedicate themselves to supporting children and helping them to thrive. Time and again we have been inspired by those who go the extra mile for children – schools, headteachers and their staff, community groups and charities, parents' groups and volunteers. 'If only this was happening everywhere' is a common refrain.

The Commission is very grateful to the individuals and organisations who have provided examples of existing practice and emerging projects included in this report. We would particularly like to thank those parents and young people who agreed to speak to us and/or share their expertise and – often very difficult – experiences. Names and some details have been changed to protect people's identity.

We would also like to thank our practitioners' panel, Young Lives Panel, our expert witnesses, and everyone who responded to our call for evidence. We have drawn on all of this in this paper and will continue to use these valuable insights in future reports.

The Commission's final report, to be published towards the end of the year, will bring all of our themes together, setting out the policy framework and investment needed to support these children and their families. This process will build our case for change – including 'invest to save' approaches – and will present ambitious practical proposals for what this could look like and how it could be achieved.

- More information about our work and our expert Commissioners is available on our website: <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk>
- *Out of Harm's Way: A new care system to protect vulnerable teenagers at risk of exploitation and crime* can be found [here](#).
- *A New Partnership with Families: Supporting families to keep teenagers safe from gangs, exploitation and abuse* can be found [here](#).

1 FOREWORD ANNE LONGFIELD CBE, CHAIR OF THE COMMISSION ON YOUNG LIVES

This is the Commission on Young Lives' third thematic report, following on from our first two reports on children's social care and family support published in December 2021 and March 2022. This report looks at the education system. It sets out proposals for how schools, as an integrated part of their local community, can better divert teenagers away from crime and exploitation and enable them to thrive. It also highlights how some of the failures in the current system are putting thousands of children at greater risk not only of low attainment but also serious violence, grooming and harm.

We start with a very simple belief: every child has the right to a good education. This may seem an obvious statement to make, but it establishes the important principle that positive outcomes for every child must be at the heart of any successful education system – and the government's 'levelling up' agenda. It also speaks to the kind of inclusive society we should aspire to be, where everyone has a chance to succeed and is supported to do so.

We believe the high-performing education systems around the world are places where the gap is narrow between those children who do well and those children who do not. Yet currently, our attainment gaps are worryingly large again after a period of improvement, and our system is still leaving too many children behind. It is also failing to stop – and in fact sometimes encouraging – thousands of children from falling out of education altogether.

School is such an integral part of a child's life. It is a place where the world really opens and where friendships are formed, where they learn to manage relationships, and where they can work out who they are and what they might want to do with their future. A good school gives options and opportunities for children to flourish. It can be a place of security and safety and should be one of the cornerstones of a strong local community. For most children in England, despite a few inevitable bumps along the way, school is a rewarding experience that ends with good grades, a chance to go to university, into training or a job.

The Covid pandemic has reminded us of the complex challenges facing many children at home, but also the key role that schools play in the lives of children as they grow up. It showed how the impact of a good school can go far beyond what is taught in the classroom. I think of the teachers walking around their communities giving out food parcels to locked-down families, keeping an eye on them, making sure they were OK, and the school staff who kept schools open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, even when the pandemic was at its height. I think of the schools who were at the heart of their community during the pandemic and provided help, advice and support, and even food and money, at a time when it felt to some families that statutory services were not there for them. Many of these teachers wouldn't have had it any other way, but they are also living with the consequences - feeling burnt out, stressed and under-appreciated.

So, we should celebrate the important role schools and colleges play in the transition from childhood to adulthood and we should certainly celebrate the many brilliant schools and colleges we have, and the great outcomes that many children achieve in our education system.

However, we should also judge our system by what it provides to those children who need extra help or who are vulnerable - the children with Special Educational Needs, the children who are already struggling with communication or behavioural issues when they start school, the children whose families perhaps always don't see the value of education, the children who feel they don't fit in, the children with mental health problems, the children growing up in poverty, children from certain Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, or those children who are faced with serious difficulties at home.

In many schools, these children are cherished and valued, they are supported and looked after. But in others, they are sometimes viewed as a problem that can be pushed on to someone else to deal with, or a group that can be largely ignored by placing them outside the mainstream. The tactics some schools have employed when doing this are already well

known – managed moves, encouragement into ‘home education’, off-rolling or exclusion. We already know too that the results can be disastrous for children’s prospects, and sometimes their safety.

Recently, we met with a group of Mums whose children had been excluded from school. All of them felt a disconnect between the support they needed from schools and statutory services, and the support they received. They told us their children’s needs had often gone unidentified or misdiagnosed, labelled as ‘misbehaviour’ or ‘disruptive’ which had then led to exclusion.

One mother said: *“When my son was in reception class, he was excluded 17 times. And that doesn’t include all the unauthorised ‘you need to come and pick up your son’ times. The school said there was defiance and violence, but he was literally tiny. Five years old. The headteacher said in ten years of working, she’d never met a child like mine.”*

Her son was eventually referred for a psychiatric assessment and was diagnosed with autism, but her experience begs the question – what is happening in a system that excludes a five-year-old child 17 times in a year?

So, while it is right to celebrate the progress and the success of much of our education system over the last three decades, and the opportunities it provides to millions of children, we also need to admit and confront the fact that the system is also failing thousands of others.

It should already be a national scandal that almost one in five teenagers leave education without Level 2 qualifications.¹ But just as bad is the way thousands of children’s prospects are being hampered by factors like exclusion, persistent absence, or poor-quality Alternative Provision.

The consequences of a school system that does not always value inclusiveness and can go much further than just leaving school without decent grades.

At the time of his murder, aged 14, Jaden Moodie’s life in London bore little resemblance

to that of most teenagers his own age. He was homeless, out of school and three months before he was killed, he was found with an older boy in Bournemouth, 100 miles from home, carrying nine wraps of crack cocaine, a mobile phone and over £300 in cash. Incredibly, following his release by police, no contact was made with either Jaden’s school to inform them of the arrest or with the child exploitation team in his local authority.

Shortly afterwards, Jaden was excluded from school, and in the months before his death he had spent just three of the last 22 months in school. Half of his time out of school was while he was supposedly in ‘Elected Home Education’, a time when Jaden was out of the school system and out of contact with his teachers and peer group. Indeed, the Serious Case Review into his death says, *‘In [Jaden’s] case, the current arrangements governing home education contributed to his vulnerability to criminal exploitation.’*²

The links between school exclusion and involvement in criminal exploitation or serious violence have been the subject of much disagreement over recent years, some of it shaped by the ongoing behaviour policy debate, and the age-old tension between the rights of a group of children to learn without disruption, and the rights of every individual child to be provided with a good education. We do not focus specifically on behaviour policies in this report, although we are concerned about the impact ‘zero tolerance’ policies can have on some vulnerable children, particularly those who are or become vulnerable to exploitation or involvement with serious violence. However, we are choosing instead to look at whole-school and whole-community solutions and the need for a culture change in how we confront exclusion and promote inclusion and nurture.

We acknowledge that there is a prominent strand of opinion that does not accept that exclusion is a significant factor in involvement in the criminal justice system, and that those children who end up in the criminal justice system did not end up there because of what happened to them at school. However, while it would be ridiculous to claim that every exclusion

¹ [Almost one in five children left education at 18 last year without basic qualifications | Children’s Commissioner for England](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2023/03/21/almost-one-in-five-children-left-education-at-18-last-year-without-basic-qualifications/) ([childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk))

² [Serious Case Review – Jaden Moodie – Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board – Care Appointments](https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/childrens-safeguarding/serious-case-review-jaden-moodie-waltham-forest-safeguarding-children-board-care-appointments)

will lead to a child becoming involved in crime or serious violence, we have met so many school leaders, youth workers, social workers, victims and perpetrators of exploitation, parents and children who have recounted how school exclusion was a trigger point, and how being out of school was one of the reasons why a child became more vulnerable to involvement in county lines, gangs or criminal or sexual exploitation. Five teenagers have been murdered in one London borough in the last year, and all of them were killed by a teenager who had been excluded from school. Can this really be coincidental?

Just as we should not assume that every child excluded from school will become involved in serious violence or criminal exploitation, neither should we dismiss the fact that some of those children do. Some of those children will have been involved in gangs or crime before exclusion, but some will not, and they become exposed and endangered after falling through gaps in the education system.

In March 2022, the Department for Education and Ministry of Justice published important and very welcome new research which includes analysis of the links between serious violence, sentencing and exclusion. It is clear there is no perfect predictor for a child ending up with a conviction for serious violence. However, it does contain the shocking statistic that around one in five (22%) of children that had ever been permanently excluded were also cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence.³ This is an extraordinary finding, and one that should be deeply alarming to us all.

The research also shows a pronounced link between SEN and offending. 80% of those who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, and 87% of those cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence, had been recorded as ever having SEN. 95% of those whose offending had been prolific had been recorded as ever having SEN.⁴

While the data does not include children who are involved in county lines, criminal or sexual

exploitation, or children involved in serious violence who have never received a caution or conviction, it does bring home the central point of this report: children who are not in school or who have SEN needs that are not being met are in great danger of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, and keeping those children in school and supporting them to thrive should be at the heart of an inclusive and nurturing education system.

We know excluded children are already often the most vulnerable children. They are twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems.⁵ We know too the link between exclusion and those young people who end up involved in the criminal justice system. 86% of young men in YOIs have been excluded from school at some point.⁶ A study of UK prisoners found that 63% had been temporarily excluded while at school and 42% had been permanently excluded. Children who have been excluded are also more likely to be victims of serious violence.⁷

We have known for decades that exclusions almost always lead to poor academic outcomes for children. Yet the number of exclusions in England remains stubbornly high. Data prior to Covid suggested that exclusions rose by 5% in the autumn of 2019 compared to the same period the previous year. They also increased by 20 per cent in primary schools and by 3 per cent in secondary schools. Suspensions also increased by 14% in the autumn of 2019 with the largest increase at primary level (21%) and a further 12% at secondary level.⁸ Within exclusion figures, children with SEND, certain ethnic minority groups, those from poorer backgrounds and those in care are disproportionately excluded.

The most recent permanent exclusions and suspensions data in England, published in July 2021 also showed that there were racial disparities in exclusion rates, with Black

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ (Institute for Public Policy Research (October 2017). MAKING THE DIFFERENCE BREAKING THE LINK BETWEEN SCHOOL EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION. Kiran Gill, with Harry Quilter-Pinner and Danny Swift)

⁶ [Transforming Youth Custody \(justice.gov.uk\)](https://www.justice.gov.uk/news/youth-custody-reform)

⁷ MOJ cited in IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion.

⁸ [Permanent exclusions up 5% before Covid school closures | Tes Magazine](https://www.tes.com/news/education/permanent-exclusions-up-5-before-covid-school-closures)

Caribbean pupils being excluded at a rate of nearly three times their White British peers.⁹

We know too how poor the academic outcomes are for children who end up out of mainstream education and placed in Alternative Provision. A study in 2020 by the Centre for Social Justice show outcomes for AP pupils are far worse than their peers in mainstream education. Just 4% of pupils in AP passed English and Maths at GCSE, compared to 64% in mainstream.¹⁰

Meanwhile, all of this is extremely expensive. An exclusion has been estimated to cost £370,000 per young person across their lifetime in education, benefits, healthcare, and criminal justice costs.¹¹ Just think how some of this money could be so much better spent on introducing better systems, starting in the early years, that do much more to support children to learn, keep children in school and provide them with more specialist help and learning if they need it.

None of this will be news to anyone working with children or in the education sector. There have been numerous reports setting out the negative impact of exclusions, from think tanks, to Education Select Committees, to the Government-commissioned Edward Timpson Review. There is also a strong consensus that Alternative Provision is often poor quality and not meeting the needs of many children and desperately needs an overhaul, and that many children with SEN are being failed. The Government's recent Green Paper admits as much. The National Crime Agency has also identified children who are excluded from school as being vulnerable to county lines.¹²

Of course, inclusion and nurture are already at the heart of many schools, and not all schools exclude – in fact just 10% of schools are responsible for 88% of exclusions. It is clear too from our conversations with school leaders that many headteachers feel like they're stuck between a rock and a hard place on exclusions. Many feel that the way the system works, and a lack of resource and support, leaves them with limited options to be more inclusive.

So many schools, including those in areas with significant social and economic challenges, are doing all they can to avoid permanent exclusions. During one of the Commission's evidence sessions, we heard from Susan Tranter, CEO of Edmonton Academy Trust, which runs in a challenging area of Enfield who told us that her schools had not permanently excluded a pupil in nine years.

There should never have to be a trade-off between a school achieving good scores and providing an inclusive, nurturing environment that takes responsibility for every child. But so often it seems there is. This is partly driven by the narrow view some have of what a successful school means. As this report makes clear, we think the definition of a good or outstanding school should be widened so that high aspiration, high standards and high expectations should always go alongside a sense of responsibility for all children from, as the Reach Academy in Feltham puts it, 'cradle to career'. Indeed, a system that supports children from 'cradle to career' in continuum, is a philosophy we strongly support in our recommendations.

Some of the most inspiring visits and conversations we have had during the production of this report have been with schools who are an anchor in their community.

We visited Oasis Academy Hadley in Enfield and felt immediately the close bond between the school, with its bustling reception area open to parents to come in and chat or ask for advice, and the wider local community. Its youth centre, with its incredible after-school facilities and programmes, sitting right next to the school, and the family/community support centre across the road, were joined-up parts of an integrated offer to children and local families. Hadley is clearly a place of learning – one that is successfully steering most of its children into positive post-school outcomes - that clearly extends outwards beyond the classroom to become a key link between local partners, groups and services.

We believe that all schools should have this outward-looking focus, with a long-term vision, not just for academic achievement, but also for the inclusive role the school can play in its local

⁹ ([Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England, Academic Year 2019/20 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#))

¹⁰ [CSJJ8057-Cold-Spots-Report-200507-v1-WEB.pdf \(centreforsocialjustice.org.uk\)](#)

¹¹ ([the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf \(thersa.org\)](#)).

¹² [NCA Intelligence assessment \(2018\) County lines drug supply, vulnerability and harm.](#)

area. This means building relationships and trust over a long period of time, looking ahead a decade or more to where the school will sit in its community, how it will provide learning and support from the early years onwards, and how it can bring together different agencies and expertise to meet the needs of every child from birth to 18. A good school should be a place where not just children, but their families and the community are welcome, listened to, and supported.

It is clear from our conversations with those successfully delivering a more inclusive, nurturing, community-focused school, that success relies heavily on the entrepreneurship of the individuals involved in running the school. They work way beyond their hours and often rely on informal networks for support and funding. They are going far beyond what was asked of them when they became teachers. These school leaders need support and funding.

Currently, as expert witnesses who gave evidence to the Commission set out, some schools don't focus on vulnerable children because they don't feel they have an obligation or responsibility to do so. They can receive a good Ofsted rating while putting little emphasis on improving outcomes for those children who are really struggling for a range of reasons. Or worse, in a minority of schools, they do not feel it is in their interests to even have vulnerable children in their school at all, and they game the system to keep them off their roll. It can surely be no coincidence, as Alice Wilcocks from the Centre for Social Justice told us during an evidence session, that exclusions peak in year 10 and 11.

In the words of one senior school leader who gave evidence to the Commission, there is a view in some schools that *'for my school to do well, your school has to do more badly. It is not in the interest of certain schools to have certain children on their books because otherwise Ofsted will batter them'*.

We need to ask how the system has ended up providing plenty of incentives for schools to use exclusions and other off-rolling methods to game league tables and Ofsted inspections, when in fact it should be incentivising schools to help all children to achieve. We cannot afford to remain an education system hooked on the measurement of school and individual success by exam grades alone. That is why our

recommendations include rewarding inclusion in Ofsted inspections and why we believe school league tables should also include a measurement around wellbeing.

While we heard plenty of evidence explaining the significant problems there are around SEN identification and provision, exclusion and attendance, we also heard from school and college leaders who have made inclusion and nurture central to their vision, and who recognise that wellbeing and being trauma-informed and responsive is intrinsically linked to improving behaviour, learning, building trust in the community and, ultimately, improving children's outcomes.

We do not propose that one part of the school sector is failing children more than any other, and we recognise that there is good and bad practice in both academy schools and local authority schools. We recognise too that the innovative, hard work that many schools are doing to be more inclusive, and the enormous challenges facing teachers and school leaders to keep children in school. However, we pose the questions: why can't all schools put inclusion and nurture at the heart of their ethos, and how can we better create a national culture of inclusion and nurture?

The recent Government White Paper on education and the Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Green Paper suggest a welcome focus towards inclusion. We like this direction of travel, and we hope this will be the catalyst for a step change in education aspirations for vulnerable young people. But we also believe it could be more ambitious, and we would like to see the top of Government leading from the front to change the culture of schools to encourage them to be more inclusive. The Government's 2014 Children and Families Act contained many important proposals, but it was not properly backed with the funding to deliver them. As a result, its impact has been diluted.

Vulnerable young people need an education experience that invites them in and that is provided by people they trust— one that inspires, that understands their needs as individuals and supports and works with them and their families and local community to help them to succeed. An experience where learning is a part of a deep relationship lasting from cradle to career and not just a temporary transaction. We should not be afraid to intervene to help those children who

are struggling or to adapt when a child's circumstances change. Childhood comes in different waves, and so should support at school. It is not enough to just expect high-quality teaching – vital though that is - to solve every problem.

We believe our system has not been good enough overall in providing this support, particularly when it comes to alternative provision where it has often appeared complacent and casual towards the outcomes of children in AP. We recommend that reform should start with high quality individual support to those who need it as standard in school, by renaming AP as 'specialist support', focusing minds on the need to provide positive and aspirational learning and opportunity via schools and business, but also offering the therapeutic and trauma-informed care that many of the most vulnerable children desperately need but aren't receiving in mainstream schools. Education for them, and all children, should be a continuous through-journey, from their earliest years onwards, not a series of traumatic upheavals and transitions to mediocre institutions. We do not believe primary school children should be permanently excluded at all, and we would also like to see the end of the term 'Pupil Referral Unit', which feels like a throwback to a bygone age.

A trauma-responsive, inclusive, community-led continuous education system that provides support to all children, from cradle to career and ensures every child receives the good education to which they are entitled happens in so many schools and colleges already, so there are reasons to be positive: if it can be done in some schools, there is no reason to believe it can't be done in more. That is why we are proposing a five-year pilot that trials new community schools in each of the 55 education investment areas announced as part of the Government's levelling up strategy.

We do not believe that levelling up will ever succeed for as long as we accept that a sizeable minority of children leave school without basic qualifications, that many children will leave school feeling education and learning was never really for them, and that the needs and wellbeing of children, beyond exam results, are not a priority too. And we won't protect those children most in danger of becoming involved in criminal exploitation or gangs for as long as allow them to slip through gaps in an education

system that can sometimes seem indifferent to their welfare and prospects.

We have a moral responsibility to all children, particularly after Covid, to build a more inclusive education system that leaves no child behind or at risk and which encourages and nurtures every child to thrive and succeed. Until we do so, those ruthless and devious adults who rely on vulnerable children falling through the gaps for their own ends will continue to have the upper hand.

Anne Longfield CBE
Chair, the Commission on Young Lives

DEBORAH'S STORY

I should start my story by telling you that my son, who is in his teens, is a convicted murderer and that he is currently serving a very long sentence. Writing those words is not as hard as it may seem. The journey that has brought us to this point has toughened me up. It started when my son was diagnosed with his autism at the age of 5.

In Junior School we were supported by the SENCO to seek a diagnosis as my son really was struggling to settle, unlike his peers. So, we had the diagnosis, but still had issues with my son not fitting in with the expectations required at school. When he did not achieve them, he was given fixed term exclusions - so many I have lost count. We carried on like this for 5 years, though during this time we did manage to get him an Educational Health Care Plan, which gave me hope that we would get the support and input that he needed. My daughter was also diagnosed with autism at this time, and she also received an EHCP. I reduced my working hours so I could be around for the start of the school day, and we had the most amazing childminder who my two children adored. To me, my children are funny, clever, caring, kind and loving. But this isn't necessarily what others were seeing at school because they were struggling at their mainstream school.

Year 7 began and really this is where it became apparent that mainstream schooling was not for my son. He was constantly reminded that he wasn't fitting in with the daily tally of "behaviour points" and was receiving detentions for various reasons.

Then things escalated with the fixed term exclusions, and finally being permanently excluded. Year 8 started at a Pupil Referral Unit, where they identified my son as having low level behavioural problems when he had been in the mainstream school, which they seemed to think could have been better supported and the PRU potentially avoided. Now he also had high levels of anxiety. He initially enjoyed the calm one to one with teachers, but soon it was time to get him back to mainstream school. It was agreed that he could attend another mainstream with better SEN provision.

Commencing the new mainstream on a reduced timetable to help ease him back into school routine, he made new friends which I was warned by the school were not the most suitable. I reinforced my own rules of where, when and who for socialising, along with tracking on his phone, limiting access to certain websites, timed access on his phone, and agreed times to be home. For me these were security measures. I encouraged his friends to come round so that I knew where he was and what they were doing. I was also happy to be mum taxi service.

He remained at school on a modified timetable, and this was where it became a challenge. While I was at work, I tracked his movements and spoke to him throughout the day and agreed time to be home, but I was concerned about who he was with and what was he doing during the time I wasn't there. I felt I had no control.

The first Covid lockdown came, and I was worried. I rang children's services saying I was struggling with knowing where and what he was doing. I am a key worker, and I had to be at work. I explained what I was doing to check on my son, and they said I was doing all I should be. During this time, we had an annual review for his EHCP, and we had an agreement that mainstream was not the right school for him. I was delighted, but my son was angry. We got through the first lockdown, and he went to spend the summer with his Dad and other relatives.

Lockdown lifted and the new school year started, but my son had no school to attend as the mainstream said they could not meet his needs. No other provision was being offered. So now a new challenge - trying to get him into school and to stay out of trouble. I was concerned about the influence his friends were having on him. Again, I linked in with children services, raising my concerns that he was not in school and he had an EHCP stating his vulnerabilities to criminal exploitation. I was frank with him about the risks of drugs, of knives, and coercion, such as county

lines. I was well informed due to my job and friends, and I needed him to know the risks, although unsure if he would understand fully due to his autism.

We had good news after having a social worker assessment, and a taster for a non-mainstream school that could be the right place for my son. It went well and we were lucky that a place was offered after the October half term. He started at the new school, and it really was the best place for him. He was settling in well and he was receiving amazing understanding, insight, and support.

Christmas came and then one day our lives changed forever.

I have had to come to terms with what has happened. But I still struggle with how the school system let down my son. Our story is not one of the “red flags” of social concerns of deprivation or substance misuse, but of a system that failed a vulnerable child with autism and an EHCP.

I am awaiting a safeguarding report about my son to see where the learning can be made for the various agencies involved, although that won't change anything for him. Ironically my son is now in a place where the staff know how to support his needs, his EHCP is fulfilled meaningfully and he is sitting his GCSEs a year early, even with the limited amount of time in school he has had.

Had he received this kind of support back in Year 7, another boy may still be alive today.

2 OUT OF SCHOOL: FALLING THROUGH THE GAPS

Every year, tens of thousands of children in England are either not in school, or not receiving the support they need to thrive in school. While too many of these children will leave the education system without good qualifications, most will not become involved in serious violence or crime. However, there will be some who fall through gaps in the education system putting them at greater risk of coming into harms' way.

We know there are different ways and reasons why children can fall through the gaps, ranging from exclusion, off-rolling, elective home education, non-attendance, to poor Alternative Provision and undiagnosed Special Educational Needs. Many of these factors have been rocket-boostered by the Covid lockdowns. We know too that while school should be a protective, welcoming environment for all children to learn and develop, some children feel like they don't fit in. As the Commission's 'Young Lives panel' of current and former school pupils told us, for some children, school can be neither enjoyable nor fulfilling, and often feels an 'inadequate' place to prepare them for the next stages of their lives.

As recent research has shown, the high-stakes hoops and hurdles that many children feel need to be navigated to pass exams are 'now so intense for both teachers and pupils that little else really matters'.¹³ There is an argument that this treadmill of exams has created an environment for some children which has exacerbated the likelihood for them to switch off in class, be more unwilling to return to school post Covid lockdowns and has made some children feel as though school is 'not for them'.

As one teenager told the Commission, *'Exams are awful and there are too many of them. You are doing one and you are dreading the next one already. You can be fairly good at the one in the morning but bad in the afternoon, but if you are worried about the pm one you won't do as well in the am one. Exams are not designed to help young people do well. Exams should be more spread out, exams are 'terrifying'.*

This comment is a microcosm of the wider issues that can exist for some vulnerable children in school. While nobody should ever suggest that vulnerable children can't or shouldn't sit exams, it is sometimes the case that some vulnerable children can feel that school has not been designed for them, is more of an exclusionary process than an inclusive one and is not meeting their learning or emotional needs.

During our Commission evidence sessions, we heard from Ellie Costello, Chief Executive of Square Peg, a social enterprise founded three years ago to effect change for children who struggle to attend school and their families: *"We have pathologized children as bad and broken and behaviour policies have not developed with the way the world has developed. Increased levels of attainment, achievement, pressure, both parents working, children placed in care from a younger age, widening gaps caused by poverty and deprivation. Behaviourist thinking is that children can't be trusted and need a firm hand, which is incorrect ... we cannot expect children to tolerate increasing amounts of pressure and not look at their authentic needs. The narrative is so imbedded now, and it is all about getting tougher, but that isn't working if we look at the numbers in terms of attainment, behaviour and overall child wellbeing."*

Indeed, a 2019 inquiry by ASCL pointed towards this 'forgotten third'¹⁴ of children; around 30% of sixteen-year-olds fail to secure a standard pass (Grade 4) in each of English and maths, severely limiting their future life chances. It is often the same children that end up in this situation year on year - pupils (usually boys) that are socio-economically disadvantaged, have learning disabilities and are of a certain ethnic background and family background. These characteristics are not random and speak to a deeper issue within our education system that is 'forgetting', or worse, wilfully ignoring these children. It is clear from the number of children who are not in school, that the system itself is not always coping well with how it provides for some vulnerable children.

¹³ [Anatomy of learning. A rounded education builds on knowledge... | by The RSA | RSA Journal | Medium](#)

¹⁴ [The-Forgotten-Third-A-rapid-review-of-the-evidence.pdf \(ascl.org.uk\)](#)

Many of the challenges affecting how children behave in the classroom have their roots beyond the school gates. 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs) which include being the victim of child abuse or neglect, and living with parental mental ill health, parental substance abuse or domestic abuse are not only traumatic and dangerous for a child at the time, but can also predict poor outcomes in adulthood, particularly poor mental health, violent behaviour and problematic substance use.¹⁵ A child's likelihood of experiencing these ACEs is also increased by growing up in poverty. Poverty is linked not only to adversity and stress but also as one of the key drivers in overall educational outcomes and experiences. Indeed, 18% of children leave school with no GCSEs, and poor children are twice as likely to do so. In recent years, the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers has slightly widened, and, as our last thematic report set out, many of the vital services needed to make the difference for these families have dwindled.

Research by the Prison Reform Trust has shown that over 60% of children who offend have communication difficulties and, of this group, around half have poor or very poor communication skills and that it is generally acknowledged that between 5 and 10% of the adult offender population has a learning disability. Further to this, 43% of children on community orders have emotional and health needs, and the prevalence amongst children in custody is higher.¹⁶

In other words, a significant number of children - and subsequently adults - who end up in the criminal justice system went through an education system that did not meet their needs. Some of these children will have been on the receiving end of exclusion, suspension or off-rolling, and/or a lack of specialist care and support for children with SEND issues.

Different factors lead to these worse outcomes for certain children, which is why we need to ensure that practices that can create and cause vulnerability are replaced with a more inclusive, nurturing, holistic, therapeutic and wellbeing centred approach. For example, schools can act

as a protective factor if the environment is one which the child feels it can trust. This means having trusted relationships with adults, peers, a real sense of belonging and a referral process that children do not see as criminalising and negative. However, as of 2018/19, nationally the average Progress 8 score for White British children was -0.05, compared to -0.91 for Irish Traveller children, -0.70 for Gypsy/Roma children, -0.24 for White and Black Caribbean children and -0.23 for Black Caribbean children and the attainment gap for Black Caribbean children is widening.¹⁷ These statistics show how important it is to focus on bettering the outcomes and opportunities for all children and young people, and therefore the environments they find themselves within, and secondly, that there is also a specific job to be done for certain specific groups.

In February 2022, as part of the Government's Levelling Up white paper, the DfE announced that 55 cold spots of the country where school outcomes are the weakest will receive targeted investment, support and action to help children from all backgrounds to succeed. In these new 'Education Investment Areas', the DfE will offer retention payments to help schools keep the best teachers in the highest priority subjects and new specialist sixth-form free schools where there is limited provision, and schools will also be given 'support to address wider issues', though so far there is little detail on what this will entail or the level of funding that will go alongside it.

EXCLUSIONS

55% *The rise in the number of permanent exclusions of children between 2010/11 and 2017/18 (reaching 7,894).¹⁸*

20% *The rise of permanent exclusions of children in primary schools in the autumn term of 2019.¹⁹*

"In mainstream education the worst thing was they didn't listen. They isolate you and they only give you a few chances. They

¹⁵ [cco-best-beginnings-in-the-early-years.pdf](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/cco-best-beginnings-in-the-early-years.pdf) (childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)

¹⁶ ([Layout 1 \(prisonreformtrust.org.uk\)](https://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/)).

¹⁷ [Crest Inequalities and Serious Violence in West Yorkshire.pdf](https://www.wypartnership.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Crest-Inequalities-and-Serious-Violence-in-West-Yorkshire.pdf) (wypartnership.co.uk)

¹⁸ Partridge L. et al. (March 2020). [Pinball Kids: Preventing School Exclusions](https://www.rsa.org.uk/resources/publications/2020/pinball_kids). RSA.

¹⁹ Department of Education (29 July 2021). [Permanent Exclusions and Suspensions in England](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/94444/Permanent-Exclusions-and-Suspensions-in-England.pdf).

would punish me but that would make things worse...” (Teenager who has experienced exclusion)²⁰

Data prior to Covid suggested that exclusions in England rose by 5% in the autumn of 2019 compared to the same period the previous year. They also increased by 20% in primary schools and by 3% in secondary schools, while they remained stable in special schools. Suspensions also increased by 14% in the autumn of 2019 with the largest increase at primary level (21%) and a further 12% at secondary level²¹. Within these figures we find that children with SEND, certain ethnic minority groups, those from poorer backgrounds and those in care are disproportionately excluded.

As well as the links between exclusion and criminal justice, exclusions have a financial cost. Research carried out by the RSA found that exclusions are estimated to cost £370,000 per young person in lifetime education, benefits, healthcare, and criminal justice costs. Its report shows how in 2017/18 it was estimated that there was an average of 42 pupils expelled each school day, whilst there were 410,000 instances of school suspensions, equating to an average of two school days at a time. It concludes that such economic costs and wasted money could be better spent on ensuring that children either can stay in school or are provided with effective and correct alternative learning which is suited to their needs.²²

EXCLUSIONS DATA SNAPSHOT

Prior to stats becoming affected by Covid-19, permanent exclusion figures had seen a gradual rise from 5,082 in 2010/11 to 7,894 in 2018/19 (peaking in 2017/18 just below at 7,905). For the covid affected year of 2019/20 the figure stood at 5,057.

Across a 10-year span, from 2010-2020, children aged 12, 13 and 14 consistently have the highest numbers of exclusions. For example, in 2018/19 1,237 12-year-olds, 1,785

13-year-olds and 2,152 14-year-olds were permanently excluded.

The overall number of state-funded primary school children being excluded also rose between 2010-2019 from 606 in 2010/11 to 1,067 in 2018/19, peaking in 2016/17 at 1,253.

State-funded secondary school exclusions peaked in 2018/19 at 6,753, having stood at 4,368 in 2010/11. For exclusions at state-funded special schools, the figures dropped from 108 in 2010/11 to 74 in 2018/19.²³

A 2017 report from the IPPR argued that alongside the growing number of official exclusions, there are also significant issues with how unofficial exclusions are being used by schools. It also highlighted how excluded children are often the most vulnerable: “twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems.”²⁴

Further research carried out by the University of Exeter in 2020 also found that poor mental health was both the “cause and effect” of school exclusion. This research provided further evidence that poor mental health impacted those that were facing a wide range of challenges and needed both education and mental health practitioners to act quickly to prevent exclusions and improve educational and health outcomes now and later in life. Children included in the study that were excluded from school also often had poor mental health and faced early family adversity, reinforcing the fact that vulnerable children need tailored support throughout their schooling journey.²⁵

Whilst the above study took place prior to the pandemic, it is hard to see how this situation will not have worsened when looking at recent mental health statistics and taking in to account the conversations that the Commission has had with both young people and services targeted at

²⁰ Provided by AYJ in evidence submission

²¹ (Permanent exclusions up 5% before Covid school closures | Tes Magazine)

²² [the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf](https://www.thersa.org/the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf) (thersa.org)

²³ ['Permanent exclusions and suspensions - by characteristic \(2006-07 to 2019-20\)' from 'Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England](#)

²⁴ [Institute for Public Policy Research October 2017: Making the Difference. Kiran Gill, with Harry Quilter-Pinner and Danny Swift.](#)

²⁵ [\(Research news - Poor mental health “both cause and effect” of school exclusion - University of Exeter\).](#)

young people. The Mental Health of Children and Young People in England survey 2021 found that rates of probable mental disorders have increased since 2017; from one in nine (11.6%) for 6- to 16-year-olds to one in six (17.4%) in 2021. 39.2% of 6- to 16-year-olds had also experienced a deterioration in mental health since 2017 and 10.6% of 6- to 16-year-old having missed more than 15 days of school during the 2020 Autumn term. Finally, children with a probable mental health disorder were twice as likely to have missed this much school (18.2%) as those unlikely to have a mental disorder (8.8%).²⁶ Time will tell whether the growing numbers of adverse mental health problems amongst school children will further increase the number of exclusions and suspensions, but the prospects look challenging.

EXCLUSIONS DATA SNAPSHOT

Excluded children are:

- x 2 more likely to be in the care of the state
- x 4 more likely to be excluded if you are Black Caribbean boy than a white boy
- x 4 more likely to have grown up in poverty
- x 7 more likely to have a special educational need
- x 10 more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems.²⁷

86% of young men in YOIs have been excluded from school at some point.²⁸

63% had been temporarily excluded while at school

42% had been permanently excluded

60% of boys subject to court orders have been excluded from education.

The number of boys in Young Offender Institutions who have been excluded from school at some point is shockingly high – 86%, according to the Ministry of Justice. And over 50% of 15-17-year-olds in YOIs have literacy and/or numeracy levels that are expected of 7-11-year-olds²⁹.



Percentage of women in prison of all ages who were expelled or permanently excluded (13% for men in prison), compared to 1% of the national population.

The MoJ also found that the rate of fixed-term exclusions for looked after children – those with foster parents, in a residential care home or secure care home – is five times that of their peers. This is particularly disappointing as these children are in the care of the state. It also brings a significant cost to the taxpayer. 71% of young people released from detention go on to break the law again within 12 months, and this, on average, costs £100,000 per year for a place in youth custody, rising to £200,000 in some instances. However, the report notes that without government intervention the current high levels of re-offending, inconsistent education provision and high cost of youth custody are likely to continue.³⁰

A report carried out by EPI in 2022 found that pupils with certain characteristics are more likely than others to be excluded from school. This is particularly true for boys, those who live in disadvantaged areas, those with particular ethnicities, and those with special educational needs. For example, even after controlling for a range of factors such as gender, socio-economic status and special educational need, Black Caribbean boys are still 4 times more likely to be permanently excluded than White peers

Similarly, the report found that ‘around three quarters of unexplained exits in 2017 were experienced by vulnerable pupils, including about a third each of the populations of pupils who had also experienced a permanent exclusion, were in social care (looked after children) or had identified mental health needs’³¹.

However, evidence suggests that it is not only the characteristic of the child that is a factor. It is also the schools themselves. Around 88% of

²⁶ ([Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 - wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital](#)).

²⁷ ([Institute for Public Policy Research \(October 2017\). MAKING THE DIFFERENCE BREAKING THE LINK BETWEEN SCHOOL EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL](#)

[EXCLUSION](#). Kiran Gill, with Harry Quilter-Pinner and Danny Swift)

²⁸ ([Transforming Youth Custody \(justice.gov.uk\)](#)

²⁹ ([Transforming Youth Custody \(justice.gov.uk\)](#)

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ ([EPI-Pupil-Inclusion-Methodology-Paper.pdf](#))

exclusions take place in around 10% of schools.³²

FIVE OR MORE EXCLUSIONS FROM SCHOOL

In a recent series of Parliamentary Questions, the DfE was asked to publish the proportion of primary and secondary schools in England which excluded five or more children from state school over the last three years, revealing that in 2018/19 this stood at 5 state-funded primary schools (0.03%), with 5 or more permanent exclusions and no state funded primary schools with 5 or more permanent exclusions. However, for state funded secondary schools with 5 or more permanent exclusions, the figures stood at 482 schools (14%) in 2018/19 and 201 schools (6%) in 2019/20. The department said that the number of permanent exclusions in 2019/20 was affected by the COVID-19 outbreak and did not provide data on the figures for 2020/21.³³

During our evidence sessions, we were told by Susan Tranter, the Chief Executive of the Edmonton Trust that ‘we could eliminate permanent exclusions altogether’ if we wanted to. She told us that for example, *‘if a child is at risk of PE, we would create an education intervention plan, set out the child’s needs, what has gone wrong, what the child’s voice is and co-construct what that plan is so that the child parent and school work out what is going to happen’*. That could then be used to *‘facilitate a move to a PRU or different school. What would need to occur for a child to move back to mainstream, there needs to be therapeutic work done with the child. How can you PE exclude a 14-year-old and say you aren’t wanted? You cannot afford to have a child feel they are not wanted.’*

DISPROPORTIONATE EXCLUSION RATES

The data has consistently shown there are disproportionate exclusion rates for a variety of groups of children including certain ethnic minority groups, pupils with SEND and those on Free School Meals. The most recent permanent

exclusions and suspensions data in England, published in July 2021 showed that there were racial disparities in exclusion rates, with Black Caribbean pupils being excluded at a rate of nearly three times their White British peers.

Whilst the highest permanent exclusion rates were for White Gypsy and Roma pupils (0.39%, or 39 exclusions per 10,000 pupils) and Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils (0.27%, or 27 per 10,000 pupils), the permanent exclusion rate for White British pupils was 0.10%, or 10 per 10,000 pupils. The fact is that Black Caribbean children and GRT children remain the most likely to be excluded. Just as in our previous two reports, these statistics provide evidence of structural racism and the need for a more inclusive education system that proactively tackles racism.³⁴

Boys also have more than three times the number of permanent exclusions, with 3,900 exclusions, at a rate of 0.09, compared to 1,200 for girls (0.02). The permanent exclusion rate for pupils eligible for FSM is 0.16, compared to 0.04 for those not eligible and the suspension rate is also higher at 9.34 for pupils eligible for FSM, compared to 2.58 for those not eligible. The permanent exclusion rate for pupils with an EHCP is 0.10, and for pupils with SEN with no EHCP is 0.20, compared to 0.04 for those without SEN.

Particularly concerning is the fact that pupils from already disadvantaged groups are disproportionately excluded from school. Pupils with SEND are around six times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than their peers without SEND. The suspension rate is also higher: 11.70 for EHCP pupils and 10.98 for SEN support pupils, compared to 2.43 for those without SEN. The highest rates are amongst those with a primary type of need recorded as social, emotional, and mental health, at 0.61 for exclusions and 33.04 for suspensions.³⁵

For temporary exclusion rates the figures are similar. The highest temporary exclusion rates were for White Gypsy and Roma pupils (21.26%, or 2,126 exclusions per 10,000 pupils),

³² [Excluded teens are often the most vulnerable - and they're falling through the gap | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#).

³³ [Written questions and answers - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)

³⁴ ['Permanent exclusions and suspensions - by characteristic \(2006-07 to 2019-20\)' from 'Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England', Permanent data table – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

³⁵ *ibid*

and Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils (14.63%, or 1,463 per 10,000 pupils), the temporary exclusion rate for White British pupils was 6.01%, or 601 per 10,000 pupils. In years covered by the data, pupils from Black and Mixed backgrounds consistently had the highest rates out of all aggregated ethnic groups. Whilst in secondary schools, White Gypsy and Roma pupils had the highest temporary exclusion rates with 58.79% (equivalent to 5,879 exclusions per 10,000 pupils). This compared with 17.5% for Black Caribbean students, 21.51% for mixed White/Black Caribbean and 11.58% for white students.³⁶

LINKS BETWEEN EXCLUSION AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

There is much debate around the correlation between school exclusion and suspension and involvement in serious violence or criminal exploitation. However, there is no doubt that those in the criminal justice system are more likely than not to have been excluded from school at some point, and that there are clear links between poor educational engagement and exclusion from school and involvement in crime, exploitation, violence and gangs.

The charity Revolving Doors, which works with people trapped in the revolving door of homelessness, crime, and mental health problems, told us: *“Many of our New Generation Campaigners have had negative experiences of education, being excluded from school multiple times and some attending Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). One New Generation Campaigner spoke of continually getting into trouble in school due to him not being able to sit still during classes, due to his special educational needs which include autism and ADHD. When he would tell his teachers he needed to get up and move around because he was feeling overwhelmed, his teachers would refuse – when he did it anyway, he would be put in isolation. He described being in isolation at school ‘like being in a cell’ and felt he was penalised for having special educational needs. Had the school done more to cater for his special educational needs, he may have been able to*

complete his education. No longer able to attend school, he was eventually led into gang crime.”

A study of UK prisoners found that 63% had been temporarily excluded while at school and 42% had been permanently excluded. Children who have been excluded are also more likely to be victims of serious violence.³⁷ However, this issue does not simply become apparent once prisoners are adults and held in the adult estate. 60% of boys subject to court orders have been excluded from education, most of them permanently, and the impact of this on their life chances is significant. Again, Black and mixed heritage boys are consistently over-represented in custodial cohorts and in one service every child in custody was a Black or mixed heritage boy.³⁸

Recent research released by the DfE and the MoJ looked at the education and children’s social care background of children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence. This is very welcome ongoing work which should prove an important resource for better understanding the links between exclusion, poverty and other factors, and children becoming involved in serious violence.

22% Percentage of children that had ever been permanently excluded who were also cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence³⁹

59% Percentage of children that had ever been permanently excluded and had also been cautioned or sentenced for an offence⁴⁰

76% Percentage of children who had been cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence who have been eligible for free school meals⁴¹

The study looked at approximately 77,300 children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, which is equivalent to 5% of the total pupil cohort. It found that 76% of children

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ [MOJ cited in IPPR, 2017, Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion](#)

³⁸ [The experiences of black and mixed heritage boys in the youth justice system \(justiceinspectors.gov.uk\)](#)

³⁹ [Education, children's social care and offending \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴⁰ *ibid*

⁴¹ *ibid*

who had been cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence were known to have ever been eligible for free school meals. This reinforces the links between poverty and being cautioned or sentenced, and the importance of tackling poverty as part of any strategy for tackling serious violence and criminal exploitation.

The report also found that 71% of all children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence had ever received a suspension and that 44% of first permanent exclusions and 42% of closest permanent exclusions were received over a year before the first serious violence offence. This suggests there is some evidence between exclusions being a precursor to offending for some children.

“When someone gets kicked out of school [they are] pushed right into the groomers' hands. There's people out there looking to make a fast buck off someone's child. If you're not in school, what else are you doing? You're going to be on the street with other people...that was my situation. When you push a child outside of school straight away someone's going to find him. The groomer is going to buy them new trainers and other [gifts]. But it all comes at a price. They buy you things, then you owe them.” (Stefan, excluded from school)⁴²

Whilst not officially categorised as an ‘exclusion’, a suspension can often be one and the same thing. With this in mind, it is important to observe the pattern seen for suspensions in the data. 74% of children cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence received their first suspension over a year before their first serious violence offence, whilst 19% of those cautioned or sentenced for 4-6 offences had been permanently excluded.

For exclusions themselves, 59% of children that had ever been permanently excluded had also been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, while 22% of children that had ever been permanently excluded were also cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence. The data also shows evidence of some link between SEN and offending, reinforcing the many anecdotal stories we have heard from a range of experts and those with lived experience

who talk about a failure in SEN provision or undiagnosed SEN being one factor that exposed them to exclusion and the criminal justice system. The report found that 80% of those who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, and 87% of those cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence had been recorded as ever having SEN. A further 95% of those whose offending had been prolific had been recorded as ever having SEN.

The data suggests that 9% of those that had ever been persistently absent were cautioned or sentenced for an offence – demonstrating the need to keep children in some form of education wherever possible.

60% of those whose offending had been prolific had been a Child In Need. For children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, 47% of children were aged 14-16 years when they were cautioned or sentenced for their first offence and 55% of those cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence had received between 2-10 suspensions.

Overall, this data is welcome, though it has some limitations, for example it does not register children involved in serious violence who have never had a caution or conviction, and it does not spread wider to include children who are involved in criminal exploitation but not involved in serious violence. The data doesn't offer a set of easy predictors for a child becoming involved in serious violence, nor of course does it suggest that all permanently excluded children are involved in serious violence. However, it does suggest that not being in school and lacking the protection of the education system can be a factor in putting a child at risk of involvement in serious violence.⁴³ We should always remember that those who are seeking to exploit young people know that and do all they can to actively drive a wedge between them and their school, just as they do with their families. More children being suspending and excluded from school is good news for those who recruit and exploit children for crime or sexual abuse.

In April 2022, a coalition of 12 children's charities led by Just for Kids Law, including NSPCC, The Children's Society, and Barnardo's, wrote to the Education Secretary calling for the Statutory Guidance on Exclusions

⁴² [Coalition of children's charities demand better protection against child criminal exploitation | Just For Kids Law](#)

⁴³ [\(Education, children's social care and offending publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

and Guidance on Behaviour to better protect vulnerable children facing school exclusion from child criminal exploitation. These organisations argue that excluding children from school can often make them more vulnerable to exploitation, yet the current draft guidance for schools fails to include sufficient safeguards to protect them. The charities put forward a number of reasons why exclusions can entrench child criminal exploitation, including: exploiters engineering exclusions by coercing victims to⁴⁴ carry drugs or weapons into school; being out of school and on the streets increases children's risk of exploitation; Children are more likely to be exposed to CCE outside of mainstream school; being excluded often leaves children feeling rejected and unwanted by the education system; exploiters often prey on these feelings and on the reluctance of those children to seek support from the professionals around them.

PERSISTENT ABSENCE

Over recent years, there has been a particularly worrying increase in pupil absence, compounded by the Covid pandemic. The most recent statistics published in March 2022 show that the percentage of persistent absentees (10% or more missed) stands at 12.1%, up from 10.8% in 2018/19, whilst persistent absence of more than 50% has more than doubled since 2015/16. In relation to Covid, this means that some 270 million in-person school days were missed. In the Autumn term of 2020, pupils were recorded as not attending 7% of possible school sessions due to circumstances relating to coronavirus, the equivalent of over 33 million days. The numbers increased in Spring term of 2021 when 57.5% of sessions were recorded as not attending due to circumstances relating to coronavirus. This is the equivalent of almost 219 million days.

The statistics reinforce that those most at risk of vulnerability prior to Covid were often hit hardest by the realities of Covid. Lost learning was felt most keenly by those at the sharp end of the pandemic and the last 2 years have put increased strain on many of the children and

families who are least likely to be able to cope with it.

This level of lost learning is unprecedented in modern times and is likely to have hit the most vulnerable and disadvantaged the hardest. 4.6% of sessions in the 2020/21 academic year were missed due to absence, which represents over 58 million days on top of 270 million days where pupils were not attending in circumstances related to coronavirus.

A large increase in persistent absence was also seen in special schools, increasing from 28.8% in 2018/19 to 48.9% in 2020/21. The rate of pupil enrolments missing more than half of their possible sessions has also increased, from 0.8% of pupils to 1.1% of pupils in 2020/21. This equates to around 82,000 enrolments.

For those with SEN support, the overall rate for 2020/21 was 6.5%. This compares to 3.9% over the full year for pupils with no SEN. The overall absence rate for pupils eligible for FSM was 7.8% across the full year, more than double the rate for pupils who were not eligible for FSM at 3.7%. The persistent absence rate for FSM eligible pupils across the whole year was 24.4% compared to 8.3% for pupils who were not eligible for FSM and pupils in years 10 and 11 had the highest absence rates, at 6.4% and 6.8%⁴⁵.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England is undertaking an audit of how many children are regularly missing school, and why. Its interim findings estimate around 124,000 children were severely absent in the autumn 2021 term⁴⁶. The Centre for Social Justice estimated in January 2022 that over 100,000 children in England are absent from the classroom and that in about half of local authorities at least 500 children are regularly missing class.⁴⁷

Severe absence has consequences. Beyond the disruption to children's routine and education, it also takes away a protective environment for many children. There is also a link to crime

⁴⁴ [Coalition of children's charities demand better protection against child criminal exploitation | Just For Kids Law](#)

⁴⁵ [\(Pupil absence in schools in England, Academic Year 2020/21 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)\)](#)

⁴⁶ [cco-where-are-englands-children-interim-findings-mar-2022.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴⁷ [Lost but not forgotten: the reality of severe absence in schools post-lockdown \(centreforsocialjustice.org.uk\)](#)

rates. Analysis in 2016 found that 90% of young offenders sentenced to custody had a previous record of being persistently absent, with 59% reporting they had regularly truanted. Persistent absence inevitably also impacts on a child's chances of achieving key attainment outcomes at the end of KS2 and KS4. Every extra day a child misses from school lowers their chances of achieving 5 or more good GCSEs and increases their chance of becoming NEET. Children who miss school are also more likely to end up excluded from school. Analysis by the Centre for Social Justice shows how in both 2019 and 2020, the rate of severe absence started to increase between Years 5 and 6 and then continues to increase for each academic year group afterwards. Severe absence peaks in exam critical years. In Year 10, 2.1 per 100 pupils are severely absent but in Year 11 this figure rises to 2.3 per 100 pupils. Taken together, these year groups account for 27.4% of all severely absent pupils.⁴⁸

Anecdotally, we were told by our expert witnesses of the risks that are accompanied with absence. John Murphy, Chief Executive of Oasis Community Learning told us that 'persistent absence is an indicator of risk' and that 'more SEN children are now off in persistent absence as a result of all kids going back post pandemic'. Echoing this, Whitney Crenna-Jennings of the EPI told us that there is considerable 'overlap between additional unmet need and non-attendance'.

However, as ASCL's Geoff Barton told us, if we have an almost total focus on 'attendance' we will 'only alienate kids further'. This balance between ensuring pupils are in school and not overtly focusing on attendance can be seen through the work being done at Edmonton Academy Trust. The Chief Executive there, Susan Tranter, told us that *'there are two attendance officers in the trust, they get on the phone asking where the kids are and then provide that support for families and kids. We need the school environment to be a positive place for kids, don't make it a highly punitive environment that they don't enjoy'*.

Some councils, like Oxfordshire County Council, have a borough or county-wide absentee

strategy where they identify and target children who are absent to support them into school. During our evidence sessions, we heard about other successful interventions to tackle poor attendance, including a much greater focus on inclusion. John Murphy told us that Oasis Community Learning has appointed EDI posts, has a gender staff network and LGBT network, a representative recruitment processes and promotes global heritage leaders. OCL has 'decolonised' its curriculum, making sure children at OCL schools know about and are proud of where they come from. OCL believes this has had a positive impact on student attendance and participation.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES

There are roughly 1.4 million children with a special educational need (SEN) in England, around 15.5% of all pupils.⁴⁹ The number of pupils with an EHCP has risen by 10% to 325,600 in 2021, whilst the number of pupils with SEN support has increased by less than 0.5% to 1,083,100. 461,000 children with SEN have additional vulnerabilities: 3 in 10 (31%) children with SEN are also eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and 1 in 9 (11%) children with SEN have a social worker. Pupils with SEN have markedly worse attainment than their peers without SEN across all headline measures. For example, in 2019, just 26.7% of children with SEN passed English and Maths GCSEs compared to 71% of children without SEN.⁵⁰ Furthermore, 4 in 5 children (81%) in Alternative Provision (AP) have identified SEND – usually social, emotional and mental health needs⁵¹ and only 4 in 10 (41%) teachers agree that there is appropriate training in place for all teachers in supporting pupils with SEN.

Children with SEN generally have poorer outcomes, including those with less severe needs. This is especially true of those who are also vulnerable in other ways (those who have a social worker and/or are receiving free school meals).

The majority of children with SEN and additional vulnerabilities are educated in mainstream schools and receive SEN Support, with levels of

⁴⁸ [Lost but not forgotten: the reality of severe absence in schools post-lockdown \(centreforsocialjustice.org.uk\)](https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/lost-but-not-forgotten-the-reality-of-severe-absence-in-schools-post-lockdown)

⁴⁹ [Supporting SEND: a summary for children and young people - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/84444/Supporting_SEND_a_summary_for_children_and_young_people_-_GOV.UK.pdf)

⁵⁰ [cco-five-things-you-need-to-know-about-sen-in-schools.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/cco-five-things-you-need-to-know-about-sen-in-schools.pdf)

⁵¹ *ibid*

support varying enormously and it being a non-statutory requirement. For example, 38% of pupils with an EHCP and 34.3% of pupils with SEN support were eligible for free school meals in 2021. This compares to 20.8% of all pupils in all schools. Eligibility for free school meals (FSM) in England is used as an indicator of deprivation.

The data shows that for pupils eligible for free school meals: 27.8% received a grade 5 or above, compared with 54.1% of non-eligible pupils in every ethnic group, they were less likely to get a grade 5 or above than non-eligible pupils. 5.4% of White Gypsy and Roma pupils got a grade 5 or above – the lowest percentage out of all groups.⁵² Within these figures, 24.4% of pupils recorded as Traveller of Irish heritage ethnic group had SEN support in 2021, and a further 5.6% had an EHCP⁵³ The data also shows that, for pupils with special education needs: 16.8% got a grade 5 or above in GCSE English and maths, compared with 55.8% of pupils without special education needs and 12.6% of Black pupils got a grade 5 or above – the lowest percentage out of all groups.⁵⁴

The impacts of having SEN are also long-term. The Government's recent Green Paper on SEN and alternative provision states that: *'As young people with SEN move into adulthood, they find it more difficult to secure employment; at age 27 young people with SEN are 25% less likely to be in sustained employment than their peers with no identified SEN'*.⁵⁵

OFF-ROLLING AND HOME EDUCATION

Ofsted describes off-rolling as: "A pupil being taken off the school roll in order to try and manipulate reported exam results/league tables." It has been acknowledged for some time that off-rolling has been manipulated by a small number of schools to game league tables. It can be no coincidence that exclusions peak in Year 10. Given that schools do not record the reason why a pupil has been removed from a school roll (this is only a requirement in the case of a formal exclusion), it is difficult to quantify

the extent of 'off-rolling' that occurs in the system. However, a range of witnesses told us that some schools have found that permanent exclusion is one way of removing a child from their school-roll.⁵⁶

Added to this, research by the EPI suggests that cohorts of pupils can become more 'socially selective' as they make their way through school. This reinforces the idea that certain pupils of certain ethnic and social backgrounds and pupils with SEND and additional needs are more likely than others to be off-rolled or exit the school for unofficial reasons (as well as being more likely to be excluded). This can lead to a system that is more likely to exclude (both formally and informally) the very children that are already the most in need. A key policy recommendation from their research was for central data reporting which captures managed moves and moves into home schooling: *"Schools and school groups are operating within a culture and system that has come to normalise and promote pupil mobility and behaviour management policies such as managed moves, and so to abstain from such practices would be to go against the grain of the system"*.⁵⁷

In March 2019, pre-Covid, the number of children local authorities reported as being electively home educated was 60,544 compared to 52,770 as of 29 March 2018. This is an increase of 7,774 or 14.7 per cent.⁵⁸ This number has increased again since Covid, with the Association of Directors of Children's Services estimating in November 2021 that around 115,000 children had been in EHE across the previous year.⁵⁹

While there are parents who make a philosophical choice to teach their children at home, there is evidence to suggest some children are being pushed into home education because some schools cannot cope with a child's behaviour - or even under achievement - or they have special educational needs which have been not properly addressed or supported. There are also a significant number of examples of parents wanting to home educate but

⁵² ([GCSE English and maths results - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures \(ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/gcse-english-and-maths-results-ethnicity-facts-and-figures))

⁵³ ([Special educational needs in England, Academic Year 2020/21 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-academic-year-2020-21)).

⁵⁴ ([GCSE English and maths results - GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures \(ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/gcse-english-and-maths-results-ethnicity-facts-and-figures))

⁵⁵ ([SEND Review - right support, right place, right time \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/send-review-right-support-right-place-right-time))

⁵⁶ ([EPI-Pupil-Inclusion-Methodology-Paper.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92842/EPI-Pupil-Inclusion-Methodology-Paper.pdf)).

⁵⁷ *ibid*

⁵⁸ ([Department for Education \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/department-for-education))

⁵⁹ ([ADCS EHE Survey 2021 Report FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92842/ADCS_EHE_Survey_2021_Report_FINAL.pdf))

experiencing difficulties providing their child with a sufficient educational experience, resulting in them returning the child to school. This can be disruptive for child and school alike.

The DfE does not currently collect data on the number of electively home-educated children, including where they may have been previously educated as currently there is no statutory requirement for local authorities to maintain such information. However, the Government has committed to introducing a register of home-educated children. In their recent White Paper on Schools the government announced that they 'will also introduce legislation to establish a register for children not in school, exploring how this data should be used by local authorities and multi-agency teams to undertake their duties and support children's education'. This is a very welcome development and cannot come soon enough.⁶⁰

For too long though, some children with SEND have been managed out of mainstream education, formally or informally, because schools have failed to understand or support their behavioural and educational needs. The 2017/18 Ofsted annual report revealed a continuing trend of rising exclusions among children and young people with SEND⁶¹, and some children manifesting behaviours associated with ASD and ADHD but undiagnosed being excluded from mainstream school as a result of their behaviour.⁶²

This returns us to our earlier point, that some children are too often being excluded or off-rolled for reasons that are unjust and unnecessary, thus exposing them to greater risk. There is good reason to believe that a greater number of pupils than the figures suggest are leaving a school never to return. For example, pupils who have not gone through an official exclusion process and are therefore not captured in the statistics, even though they have in all intents and purposes been 'removed'

from the school. They may have moved to another mainstream school, into AP, to an independent school, a special school or into home education.⁶³ Indeed, according to the Education Policy Institute's analysis of the 603,705 pupils sitting GCSEs in 2017, an estimated 24,000 had exited to an unknown location, not to return to a state-funded school, between Year 7 and Year 11.⁶⁴

RACIAL DISPARITIES AND THE ADULTIFICATION OF BLACK CHILDREN

As the Commission set out in its first report, Black children, particularly teenage boys, are less likely to be seen as victims, and more likely to be viewed as 'offenders' and subject to 'adultification', where they are excluded from perception of the vulnerable and experience punitive responses.⁶⁵ The process of adultification is one which disproportionately harms Black children, presenting them as older than they really are and thus not treating them with the care and protection that should be afforded to minors. The recent abhorrent treatment of Child Q, a teenage girl who was left traumatised after being strip-searched at school by Met police officers while on her period, is a recent shocking example of how adultification can happen in educational settings. This case, and others like it, can only have a damaging impact on Black young people's confidence in both schools and the police.

Research has found that Black children can be viewed as both older and less innocent than their white peers, and also falsely perceived as angry in the classroom.⁶⁶ This is an issue for Black girls too, with Black girls being perceived as 'less innocent'⁶⁷. Viewing children as more adult-like than they are can lead to some receiving more punitive sanctions – such as being excluded from school. This process can also lead to a lack of safeguarding being afforded to these children, as was the case with

⁶⁰ ([Opportunity for all - Strong schools with great teachers for your child \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/611111/Opportunity_for_all_-_Strong_schools_with_great_teachers_for_your_child.pdf))

⁶¹ ([Ofsted Annual Report 2017/18 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/611111/Ofsted_Annual_Report_2017_18.pdf))

⁶² ([Exclusions-cover-merged.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/exclusions-cover-merged.pdf))

⁶³ ([Unexplained pupil exits from schools: Further analysis and data by multi-academy trust and local authority. \[PDF\] Education Policy Institute.: Hutchinson, J. & Crenna-Jennings, W. \(2019\)](https://www.educationpolicyinstitute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Unexplained-pupil-exits-from-schools-Further-analysis-and-data-by-multi-academy-trust-and-local-authority.pdf))

⁶⁴ ([the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf \(thersa.org\)](https://www.educationpolicyinstitute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf))

⁶⁵ (Davies J. and Marsh N. (2020) *Boys to men: the cost of 'adultification' in safeguarding responses to Black boys*, *Critical and Radical Social Work, Volume 8, Number 2, August 2020, pp. 255- 259*(5) Policy Press).

⁶⁶ ([Black boys viewed as older, less innocent than Whites, research finds \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org/press-releases/2020/08/black-boys-viewed-as-older-less-innocent-than-whites-research-finds) & [APA research: Black children falsely perceived as angry in classroom \(openaccessgovernment.org\)](https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/black-children-falsely-perceived-as-angry-in-classroom/)).

⁶⁷ ([Black girls 'perceived as less innocent by US adults' - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55888888))

Child Q. Indeed, the very presence of police in schools is one which has been called in to question. Some argue Black children can feel over-policed in schools, leading to them feeling unsafe, in some instances adultified, and creating an environment which does the opposite of keeping them safe.⁶⁸ In practice, this adultification can manifest itself by Black students being disproportionately targeted by “draconian” zero-tolerance behaviour and uniform policies in schools.⁶⁹ The education system as a whole must carefully consider how adultification is working in practice, and how schools and other safeguarding bodies can ensure that they safeguard all their children appropriately and fully.

In terms of exclusions themselves, as Professor David Gillborn told the Commission during an evidence session: *“Exclusion is the tip of an iceberg, there is a set of low expectations from teachers around what Black kids can achieve, which makes them get propelled through disciplinary systems much more quickly than other kids.”*

Research⁷⁰ has also found that some teachers may have higher expectations of white and Asian students’ academic potential, whilst non-black teachers can have lower expectations of black students and may be more likely to negatively judge (such as discipline or label) pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds. The Centre for Education and Youth found that this was something young people – and in particular Black Caribbean boys – talked about during their focus groups, where they felt teachers’ assumptions about them had marred their experiences at school.⁷¹

Further evidence from the Centre for Research in Race and Education has found that Black students are more likely to be placed in low ranked teaching groups, where they receive ‘poorer-quality teaching and are less likely to make good academic progress’. This means that, no matter how well the students perform, their placement in the lowest ‘foundation’ tier of GCSE examinations, they are unlikely exceed

their teachers’ low expectations and attain the best pass grades because these are formally restricted to those entered for the higher tier papers only.⁷² The report argues that initial teacher education courses, and school inspections, do not include any mandatory focus on race equality and, although minoritized students make up around a third of state school rolls, the teaching force is more than 90% White – a problem that is most acute in primary schools.⁷³ The overall lack of teacher training centred on equality policies, Ofsted having little to no regard for equality in its assessments and the rise in ‘zero-tolerance’ behaviour policies is creating school environments where pupils are punished and ultimately excluded for incidents that could and should be managed within the mainstream school environment.⁷⁴

The conclusion from Professor David Gillborn’s evidence to the Commission is that whatever the social class of Black children and parents, overall, their outcomes remain worse.

Black and other minority ethnic boys do not end up in the criminal justice estate through any innate fault of their own. It is instead patterned and formed through many causal factors. Indeed, exclusions for all children can and often do lead to a destination that is unforgiving and could often have been avoided. For example, campaigners and thinktanks have warned of school exclusions contributing to the criminalisation of children, while disproportionately affecting those from poorer backgrounds. A 2020 report by the Institute of Race Relations warned of a “PRU [pupil referral unit] to prison” pipeline for working-class black children.⁷⁵ Indeed, the schools to prison pipeline is a well-established theory, which whilst not an accurate depiction for all children it draws attention to the reality that many children will and do face.

The IRR report notes that 89% of children in detention in 2017/18 reported having been excluded from school, according to the HM chief inspector of prisons for England and Wales. Significantly, more than half (53%) of all children

⁶⁸ ([Home | No Police In Schools](#))

⁶⁹ ([Schools unfairly punish black students for hairstyles and for ‘kissing teeth’ amid racial bias, teachers say | The Independent | The Independent](#))

⁷⁰ ([Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016](#); [Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent and Ball, 2012](#))

⁷¹ ([LKMco and GLA - Boys on Track FINAL v12.docx \(cfey.org\)](#))

⁷² [CRRE | Research in Race and Education | University of Birmingham](#)

⁷³ ([CRRE Birm evidence to CRED2021.pdf](#)).

⁷⁴ [Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever-increasing exclusions \(parliament.uk\)](#).

⁷⁵ [Exclusion rates five times higher for black Caribbean pupils in parts of England | Race in education | The Guardian](#)

and young people held in secure training centres and youth offender institutions are from a Black and minority ethnic background, according to another HM Inspectorate of Prisons report which looked at Children in Custody 2018-19. It is worth pointing out that the proportion of 'imprisoned' BAME children and young people is almost four times the proportion of BAME people in the UK population, 14%⁷⁶. Again, these figures are not random, and they support the evidence given to us by Professor David Gillborn and others that points towards a deficit model for Black children, a curriculum that excludes some of them and systemic racism.

Indeed, a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons published in 2020, urged the Department for Education to 'make sure that the special educational needs of black and mixed heritage boys are assessed and responded to at the earliest opportunity and work with Ofsted to include this in their inspection framework. This is supported by the expert evidence the Commission on Young Lives received. HMIP also called on the DE to 'hold academy trust chains and local authorities to account for monitoring rates of racial disproportionality in the use of permanent exclusions and for taking action to tackle this'.⁷⁷

ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

"If I didn't go to PRU I would put money on it, I would not be in here in prison...I stopped playing football when I went to PRU and I lost my old friends from mainstream and made new ones that were negative influences. You have to fit in with them and put on a front." (Child in PRU)⁷⁸

Our data has shown that as of January 2019, the time of the school census, 16,134 pupils were being educated in state-supported alternative provision (PRUs, and alternative provision academies and free schools). The latest analysis from FFT Education Datalab - based on 2017 data - suggests that 45% of pupils educated in these settings were

permanently excluded. The remainder may have received "managed moved" or moved into an alternative provision school via an unofficial exclusion. This is also concerning as we know that as pupils go through their educational journey, they become increasingly unlikely to return to a mainstream school once they have been placed in AP. Research shows that only 46% of pupils who spend time in alternative provision in Year 11 return to a mainstream setting.⁷⁹

As of January 2021, around 22,000 pupils were taught in 348 state place-funded AP schools (197 LA-run Pupil Referral Units and 151 AP academies and free schools). There were also 32,000 pupils attending LA funded placements in non-state-place-funded settings.⁸⁰

As the Government's recent SEND Green Paper states, children in AP 'are also often vulnerable, including to criminal exploitation'. Of the pupil cohort which had ever been registered at a state or non-state place-funded alternative provision setting, 41% had ever been cautioned or sentenced for an offence (this rises to 45% for those that were registered at state place-funded alternative provision). These challenges often coincide with SEN, with around 80% of children and young people in state place-funded alternative provision having some need, primarily Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) needs.

For the number of children by ethnicity attending pupil referral units (including academy and free school alternative provision) the figures generally trended upwards between 2018/19 to 2020/21. For all but two of the recorded ethnicities, figures rose during this time period for the number of children by ethnicity attending pupil referral units (including academy and free school alternative provision), bringing in to question the quality of provision that these children will have received.⁸¹ By contrast, the number of children attending local authority funded alternative provision during the same time scale dropped dramatically from 16,134 in

⁷⁶ ([How-Black-Working-Class-Youth-are-Criminalised-and-Excluded-in-the-English-School-System.pdf](https://www.irr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/How-Black-Working-Class-Youth-are-Criminalised-and-Excluded-in-the-English-School-System.pdf) ([irr.org.uk](https://www.irr.org.uk)))

⁷⁷ [The experiences of black and mixed heritage boys in the youth justice system](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/youth-justice/system/the-experiences-of-black-and-mixed-heritage-boys-in-the-youth-justice-system/) ([justiceinspectorates.gov.uk](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk))

⁷⁸ Evidence submission to the Commission from AYJ.

⁷⁹ ([the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf](https://www.thersa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/the-rsa-pinball-kids-preventing-school-exclusions.pdf) ([thersa.org](https://www.thersa.org)))

⁸⁰ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Department for Education, 2021](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523222/Schools_pupils_and_their_characteristics_Department_for_Education_2021.pdf)

⁸¹ ('Alternative provision - gender, age, free school meals and ethnicity' from 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', Permanent data table – [Explore education statistics](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/explore-education-statistics) – GOV.UK ([explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/explore-education-statistics)))

2018/19 to 12,785 in 2020/21, with only the 'unclassified' group seeing a rise in figures⁸².

The recent Green Paper on SEN and alternative provision suggested that 55% of pupils from state place-funded alternative provision sustained an education, training, or employment destination after key stage 4 in 2019/20, compared with 89% and 94% from state-funded special and mainstream schools respectively. This pronounced gap is of real concern and is another reason why AP needs to be reformed.⁸³

Attendance rates for children attending AP shows an increase between 2016/17 and 2017/18 from 33.94% to 35.30% and then staying almost stagnant in 2018/19 at 35.29% - with figures for later years not yet provided.⁸⁴

Data also reveals that 35% of excluded students who finish education in alternative provision (PRUs, alternative provision academies, alternative provision free schools and hospital schools) go on to become NEET (not in education, employment or training), compared with only 5% of students leaving mainstream schools⁸⁵.

In 2020, the Centre for Social Justice conducted an analysis to 'identify where in the country pupils educated in alternative provision (AP) have a poor-to-zero chance of receiving a quality education'. They found that in 13 LAs not a single child in AP has passed their English and maths GCSE in the past three years. In three, not a single teacher in AP is qualified. And there is no area in the country where the rate of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) after leaving AP 'equals even the very worst-performing area for children from mainstream'. The report also found that pupils on free school meals are over-represented, at 43% in state-maintained AP compared to 15% in mainstream. There is a strong correlation between areas of high deprivation and areas where a high proportion of the school population is educated full-time in AP.

⁸² (['Pupil characteristics - Ethnicity and Language' from 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics', Permanent data table – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#))

⁸³ [SEND review: right support, right place, right time - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Research by the CSJ shows pupils in AP are nearly six times as likely to have SEND than children in 'mainstream' schools with '81 per cent on the SEND register compared to 14 per cent in mainstream'. Certain ethnic groups are also over-represented in state-maintained AP, with 3.3 per cent of pupils being Black-Caribbean, 4.0 per cent being White and Black Caribbean, and 1.2 per cent being Gypsy Roma. This compares to 1.1 per cent, 1.5 per cent and 0.3 per cent of pupils in mainstream respectively.⁸⁶

The average academic results are also worse for pupils who sit their maths and English GCSEs in AP compared to their peers in mainstream. In recent years, only '4 per cent of pupils educated in state-maintained AP have achieved a grade 9–4 in maths and English. This compares with 64 per cent of pupils across all state-funded schools (special and AP included)'. In sum, the report found that pupils in AP are less likely to sustain a 'positive destination than their peers in mainstream', in every part of the country.⁸⁷

There is a consensus that in the past too much of alternative provision is low quality and that PRUs and AP could have been seen as a 'dumping ground'. Criticism of the quality of alternative provision has been a common feature of our discussions with children, parents and professionals alike. We recognise too that some alternative provision is good and that some children are able to thrive in an environment with a broader content base, higher levels of pastoral care and support and a skilled staff team who are able to help young people learn and gain qualifications. Our criticisms of alternative provision should not be seen as a judgement on the professionals who work in them. As one witness told the Commission, working in AP can be among the most professionally rewarding experience, when a child does thrive in the environment.

One alternative school we visited in inner London is doing remarkable things with a group of 50 of some of the most vulnerable young

⁸⁴ (['Absence in Pupil Referral Units' from 'Pupil absence in schools in England', Permanent data table – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)).

⁸⁵ (IPPR (2017) [Making the Difference](#))

⁸⁶ ([CSJJ8057-Cold-Spots-Report-200507-v1-WEB.pdf \(centreforsocialjustice.org.uk\)](#)).

⁸⁷ Ibid

people. Coming to the school from a series of other institutions, many of whom are at high risk of becoming involved in violence or the criminal justice system, the staff say they are 'able to get the teenagers to stand up again and get them ready to learn'.

We know that there are good people doing their utmost to run good alternative provision in challenging circumstances. But these are still too few and far between. Alternative provision is highly inconsistent, and it is not organised or funded adequately to set children up to succeed. The outcomes for most children in alternative provision is just not good enough and there has been no real vision of excellence. The deep relationships that need to be built to support particularly vulnerable children through their school life are rarely built in AP, and there is a consistent lack of pastoral care in many institutions. We hope that the recent government green paper will bring the focus and priority to change this.

AP has not been structured to help children back into mainstream school. As one witness told us, too much of alternative provision has been a one-way street – taking children out of school but not returning them to the classroom as the policy intended. Children are put onto reduced timetables – sometimes of just a few hours a week, taxied in and out – sometimes to avoid rival gang members - and at worst spend hours being organised into lessons or waiting for their sessions with tutors. Inevitably, some of these most vulnerable children will not thrive in this kind of environment.

Many of those in the criminal justice system have talked about their experience of links between Pupil Referral Units and crime. Martin Hewitt, Chair of the Police Chiefs and Commission member has called some PRUs "job centres for criminals" – serving up vulnerable young people in one place for those that wish to wait around to exploit them. During our Commission visits we have also visited PRUs that felt like prisons.

Kendra Houseman, one of our Commission expert panellists attended PRUs in the 1990s – she describes herself as a once being 'a PRU kid', a badge of honour at the time. Now she works with young people who attend or have recently attended PRUs, and she feels little has changed over the last 20 years. She also describes some PRUs as feeling like a prison.

Too often they are institutions that are unstructured, understaffed, under-qualified to deal with children there who are affected by trauma, and unaccountable. Many PRUs have children with undiagnosed SEN being placed into an environment with little structure, and which leaves them vulnerable to grooming and exploitation. Exposing children who have no involvement with criminal exploitation to children who have experience of or are involved in crime is an enormous risk.

Kendra believes children in PRUs are largely being set up to fail and that usually their problems stem not from school but from what is happening at home. While learning in smaller classes in a PRU will benefit some children, aspirations for achievement are low – almost no child who attends a PRU will go on to university, other than perhaps later in life, as Kendra herself has done.

She believes that PRUs should be small specialist hubs, each one tailored to specific needs because, as she rightly points out, a child with autism and a child who has suffered trauma at home will need different support. She also questions why victims of trauma are being sent to the same establishment as perpetrators. Why, she asks, are we putting a 14-year-old teenage mum in with a child who has a conviction for knife crime?

All of this is as far away as imaginable from a system which identifies vulnerable children with additional needs and provides the timely nurture and support, they need to enable them to learn and succeed in school alongside their peers.

THE IMPACT OF COVID

Two years on from the first lockdown, there are already numerous publications setting out the worrying impact Covid has had on many children in England. There is no doubt that the pandemic has added another pressure on to vulnerable children and families. In one of our young panel sessions, we were told by children of the deep, negative impact that Covid had had on their experiences of school, including, their ability to learn, their desire to be at school, the likelihood of returning to school and a severe decline in their mental health because of the lockdowns. Indeed, 76% of families who had previously been receiving support from social services before lockdown (such as respite care and summer play schemes) saw it stop during

the crisis and nearly half of parents (45%) said their child's physical health had declined. Added to this, a considerable number of parents have struggled to teach their children from home and for parents of children with SEND this was particularly challenging. This has increased the disadvantage gap, caused burnout for parents and sped up lost learning time. In total, some 79% of parents, in one study, stated that their own mental health had declined over the course of lockdown.⁸⁸

10%

*During the Covid pandemic, the number of children in alternative provision increased 10% between the academic year 2019/20 and 2020/21.*⁸⁹

A report by MIND in 2021 found that before the pandemic, many young people experiencing mental health problems were finding secondary school a significant challenge. They were more likely to be excluded, to be absent, and to have poorer outcomes at GCSE. The report stated the pandemic had particularly impacted young people, exacerbating the existing pressures of school and difficulties in accessing support. It goes on to suggest that 'school closures and lockdown restrictions have left many young people feeling lonely, socially isolated and lacking routine. In England, an estimated 1.5 million young people under 18 will need new or increased mental health support as a direct result of the pandemic. Those from low-income backgrounds without access to technology have particularly struggled to take part in their education'. Of the school staff that MIND surveyed, they found that nine in ten (88%) of the school staff said that the mental health of students had got worse due to the pandemic. Reasons given for this included a loss of routine, social isolation and difficulties accessing support.⁹⁰

School children the Commission has spoken with also told us of the impact that Covid had had on them and their schooling experience. Some young people felt that they 'weren't listened to and were ignored'. Some year 9 and

10 students also told us that they felt like they have 'missed out on education' and they feel like they 'should be doing year 7 work because they feel like they don't know what they are talking about. It feels like no one cares, get sent work and no one actually checks if you're OK'. The rising levels of poorer mental health associated with the pandemic and lockdowns is inevitably significant when it comes to children falling through the gaps in the education system. Research shows that a child having a psychiatric disorder is a strong predictor for them being excluded from school. Therefore, it is possible that rising levels of mental ill-health are contributing to rising school exclusions.⁹¹

Numerous personal stories recounted to the Commission, as well as an increasing number of studies have demonstrated the severe, lasting, and negative impact of the pandemic on some young people's mental health. If, as the study above states, rising levels of mental health contribute to school exclusions, it would not be surprising if there is an upturn in behaviour that would currently result in suspension or exclusion under existing behavioural policies, emphasising the need to adapt to challenging behaviour in a trauma-informed and therapeutic way and to put early intervention measures in place around and within schools and the community to tackle problems as soon as possible.

61%

*Percentage of children who were persistently absent from school in Autumn term 2020 who were either eligible for FSM, had previous or current contact with children's services or had SEND.*⁹²

A report in 2021 found that 61% of those who were persistently absent in the Autumn term of 2020 were either eligible for free school meals, with previous or current contact with children's services or with SEND. Whilst pupils experiencing these same disadvantages were also disproportionately missing more than 20% of school, or one day a week during this time. Pupils living in the most deprived areas also suffered, with almost 1 in 10 pupils living in the

⁸⁸ ([Supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities to return to school | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)).

⁸⁹ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic Year 2020/21 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹⁰ ([not-making-the-grade.pdf \(mind.org.uk\)](#))

⁹¹ ([Ford, T.J; Paget, A; Parker, C; et al. 'Which children and young people are excluded from school? Findings from a large British birth cohort study, the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children \(ALSPAC\)'. Child: Care, Health and Development. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/29521>](#)).

⁹² ([its time to act.pdf \(socialfinance.org.uk\)](#))

most deprived areas and a quarter of pupils with previous fixed term exclusions missing the equivalent of 1 day per week or more.

Furthermore, in the autumn period of 2020, 54% of pupils receiving fixed term exclusions had not received one previously, whilst those who had previously experienced this type of exclusion received fewer than previous years.⁹³

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated already entrenched inequalities for many of the most disadvantaged students. It made access to school and the necessary materials for learning harder for those with the least. Lost learning has always been a risk factor in childhood vulnerability and eventual exploitation, criminal or other. Whilst not the ultimate panacea it is a good indicator of inequality and risk. Covid has meant that pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils with previous or current contact with

children's services and pupils with SEND were often the most impacted, alongside pupils from areas of high deprivation and who had previous fixed term exclusions. Almost every single conversation we have had with school professionals, parents, children, family and youth workers, the police and NHS practitioners has referred to the negative impact Covid has had on children, particularly vulnerable children. It is clear from almost all of those conversations too that many children have not recovered from traumas experienced during lockdown and that this is manifesting itself in non-attendance, behavioural problems at school, mental health issues, and sadly in more extreme and violent behaviour in those involved in gangs or crime.

The need for a more inclusive, trauma-informed and trauma-responsive school system is more necessary than ever.

⁹³ ([its_time_to_act.pdf](https://socialfinance.org.uk/its_time_to_act.pdf) (socialfinance.org.uk))

LOUIE'S STORY

Mary-Ann is the mother of 10-year-old Louie.

"Louie was just five years old when he was expelled from his first school. This was before we had an ADHD diagnosis and the first I knew that there were any issues was when he started to play out. Typically, he would wreck the room he was in, and I would get a call to go and get him. Often, I would only just have got home from drop-off in the morning and my phone would go and I'd have to go back to school again. It was exhausting. At first the school dealt with it by excluding him for a few days. However, after one incident when he climbed a steep staircase and threatened to jump off, they decided to expel Louie.

I was devastated and was constantly ringing up to try and get Louie a new school place. He's my only child and I wanted him to do well at school. After a few weeks I was told that there was a place for Louie at a Pupil Referral Unit. When we visited there had been an incident that day, so every door was locked behind us. I thought, 'I can't send my son here, he's only five years old. So, I refused the place and Louie spent a whole term being home schooled.

Eventually another school place was found for him, and things went really well, but after a few weeks, Louie started to play up again. Over the next year he was excluded many times for his behaviour. I'd dread hearing the words 'can we just have a moment'.

Finally, we got referral to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Louie had a weekly session. This was the start of a much better time, and I was able to get a job and wasn't worrying all the time. The school put in place an educational plan giving Louie one-to-one support.

When Louie was nine years old there was another episode at school. I arrived and Louie was in the reflection room with the Headteacher and Deputy Head. He was still smashing it up when I walked in. I went to my GP in tears and asked for help and that's when Louie was diagnosed with ADHD.

I thought everything would be wonderful after this and we'd get the support we needed but the issues at school continued. By this time, Louie was on reduced hours. At first it was four hours a day and then more recently it went down to just two hours. He's hardly at school before I have to pick him up again. I can't work and it's very stressful. We've had lots of issues with other boys winding him up because they know he will get angry but it's Louie that ends up getting excluded.

My relationship with the school has really gone downhill. At the start I was very quiet and respectful, but I've realised over the years that you have to fight and be loud if you want to get the support you need. Sometimes I feel I want to scream and I'm so tired of fighting for things that he should have because of his educational plan.

I am worried about what will happen at secondary school. Louie says to me 'what if I can't get into school', I know he's scared. I don't want them to look at his past and think about that rather than his future. He loves art and I want him to enjoy his education and want more for himself, not for me, but for himself. I look forward to the day that he goes to school, says goodbye and I can get on with my day without worrying that I'm going to get a call."

3 INCLUSION AND NURTURE

From our evidence gathering and witness sessions, it is clear to us that the school and college has a central role in the life chances of a child which goes far beyond the academic learning within the classroom. This has become even more apparent during the pandemic as many schools took on a central role in identifying and supporting vulnerable children in the community. Ask most of us as adults about our childhood and we will talk about the schools we attended and the experiences we had there. A good school experience helps us achieve academically but it also helps us define our identity, shape our values, provides a sense of belonging and community and build our skills and confidence to succeed throughout life. For those children who fall out of the school system, the effect can be devastating and can often be the tipping point into crisis and harm. All four of the teenagers who murdered other teenagers in Croydon in 2021 were excluded from school – a statistic that is replicated many times in tragic cases around the country. It should set alarm bells ringing and drive a determination for change.

As we have reported, our youth justice system is full of young people who have been excluded, suspended, or have fallen out of the education system – many with no regular schooling since their primary years. It is difficult to believe how this can happen so often with such regular patterns and consequence. Our witnesses have told us how being excluded or moved out of school will often trigger a downward spiral for the child – stuck in a twilight world of slow referral processes, occasional home tutoring, two hour a week timetables and isolation from friends.

Many of these children have special educational needs, mental health conditions and learning disabilities. Without the routine, the relationships, the protective factors of school, they are out on a limb, and often, sadly, highly visible and vulnerable to those who wish to exploit them. The challenge is to make these children highly visible to the education system again. We have been encouraged by the school leaders, teachers and organisations who have told us how they have built a positive and inclusive school environment that is supporting vulnerable young people to succeed. We believe that a school or college rooted firmly in its local

community, that has built up trust with families and children over many years and which works hand in glove with other local services and organisations, is a model for a more inclusive, nurturing and ultimately successful education.

This chapter looks at how we can improve the education experience of the group of young people who are at risk of missing out, and so improve their life chances. The evidence tells us what can work to support these young people. Our focus is what it will take to make it happen across the education system.

We should celebrate the hundreds of excellent schools throughout the country delivering remarkable educational opportunities and support for some of the most vulnerable young people. We know that teaching and school staff care deeply about the children they teach and that the support and inspiration that many vulnerable children receive from their school enables them to go on and progress well in life – for some preventing potential problems occurring and escalating.

In many schools, these children are cherished and valued, they are supported and looked after. However, we must also be true to those young people we are focusing on, many of whom have not had a positive experience of school and are unlikely to progress into adulthood with the qualifications and skills that they need to be able to fulfil their potential. Too often these children have been viewed as a problem that can be pushed on to someone else to deal with.

These children are the focus of our Commission, and it is their success in education that we will be focusing on. We have looked at a number of programmes and interventions that have been established to enable some vulnerable children to have a more positive learning experience and have based our interim recommendations on what we have seen and heard. We are clear that the education system should be inclusive - for all children - and that all children will develop and learn in different ways and that some will need support. Our proposals are made with these aims in mind. We know from some of the great examples of good practice we have seen that it is possible, and we want to see it happening for all young people everywhere.

REACH ACADEMY'S 'CRADLE TO CAREER' MODEL

Reach Academy opened in 2012 to improve choice and opportunity for children and young people in Feltham. Compared to children in other parts of the borough, children growing up in Feltham are disproportionately affected by risk factors including parental stress, poor housing, multiple ACEs, exclusion, poverty, poor mental health, poor diet, being academically behind more advantaged peers, lack of progress to a top university, living in an area lacking Early Years support, and fewer opportunities to enter the job market.

Reach has set out to address these disadvantages by opening a school that puts inclusivity, a rigorous curriculum, excellent teaching and strong relationships at its heart. This is designed to ensure that all children be safe and well supported, be healthy, achieve well academically, build strong relationships and social networks. Over the last ten years, Reach has achieved a 70% progress to higher education, 0% NEET, excellent GCSE results, a 20% uplift in EYFS results and is set to open a second school.

In 2018, Reach created a Children's Hub to complete its "cradle-to-career" model, a pipeline of support for babies, children, young people and their families that complements the work of the school and builds capacity within the local community. Reach believes that children do best when they grow up in an environment of nurturing relationships invested in their healthy development, and they build trusted relationships through partnership across the community, providing strategic leadership to ensure children and their families receive the best possible support.

In 2021, Reach launched the Feltham Convening Partnership, inspired by collective impact initiatives like 'StriveTogether' in the US, which harness expertise, insight and ideas of different organisations to share information, make better decisions and achieve system change.

StriveTogether is a movement developed initially in Cincinnati. Its stated purpose is to help every child succeed in school and in life. In partnership with communities across the US, they provide resources, best practices and tools to create opportunities and to close gaps in education. Its

cornerstone is an approach they call their "Theory of Action". This model helps communities build and sustain the community infrastructure necessary to improve outcomes and close gaps from cradle to career.

Cradle-to-career partnerships are formal groups consisting of cross-sector organisational and system leaders from education, business, government and third sector, as well as grassroots organisations, community leaders and individuals from the local area. Members of the local community, particularly young people and their families, come together around a shared community vision. With support from "backbone staff", the partnership group works together to define local challenges, develop and implement strategies to address those challenges, and hold systems accountable for results. StriveTogether puts great emphasis on a shared community vision, evidence-based decision making, collaborate action, investment and sustainability, and outcomes.

A MORE INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

While the majority of children enjoy school and do well, through our own 'Young Lives panel', we have heard that for some young people school is neither enjoyable or fulfilling and is sometimes inadequate in preparing them for the next stages of their lives. This has created an environment for some children which makes them more likely to switch off in class and has made them less willing to return to school post lockdown. These are the children who feel school is 'not for them'. It is not within the scope of this review to critique all aspects of the education system in minute detail. However, we believe there are two broad and fundamental aspects of the system that need to change.

Firstly, it is very clear to us that the 'failure rate' of the current system is far too high and the way it drives some school priorities can be very apparent to many of the children who are most likely to struggle. Some of the most distressing conversations we have had with children are when they describe their experiences of education and schools as being unwelcoming or not there for them. The phenomenon of the 'forgotten third' of children who leave school at 19 without a basic level of qualification is well established and should continue to shock us all.

DESIGNING SCHOOLS FOR ALL CHILDREN

This report has highlighted the impact of disadvantage and vulnerability on some children's experience of education. It has shown the high levels of children who fall out of the education system and how poverty is linked not only to adversity and stress but also as one of the key drivers in overall educational outcomes and experiences. Almost one in five children leave school with no GCSEs, and poor children are twice as likely to do so. It is also important to recognise that in recent years, the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers did narrow, but has now widened again, and many of the vital services needed to make the difference for these families have dwindled.

As we have highlighted, there are many factors that lead to children falling through the gaps in education including SEND, off-rolling, EHE, non-attendance, exclusions, and others. It is important to note that these practices can lead to an increased chance of exploitation, risk and vulnerability outside of the home. Research by the Prison Reform Trust has shown that over 60% of children who offend have communication difficulties and, of this group, around half have poor or very poor communication skills, and that it is generally acknowledged that between 5 and 10% of the adult offender population has a learning disability.

Further to this, 43% of children on community orders have emotional and health needs, and the prevalence amongst children in custody is higher with 39% of adult offenders under supervision in one probation area had a current mental illness, and 49% had a past/lifetime mental illness.¹⁰² The relevance of these figures is that a large number of children and subsequently adults who end up in the criminal justice system were let down by an education system that did not serve their needs. Some were on the receiving end of exclusions, moves, off-rolling and a lack of specialist care and support for SEND issues.

Our witnesses have described a system that has too often moved children who are deemed to be an inconvenience - troublesome in the classroom or unlikely to achieve academically - out of the way, be it through a move to 'home

education', off-rolling, suspension or exclusion. As the previous chapter makes clear, we are concerned that the number of exclusions in England rose by 5% in the autumn of 2019 compared to the same period the previous year, and we are concerned how the impact of Covid on exclusions will play out in the next few years.¹⁰³

Yet we have also heard from schools who are bucking these trends and providing inclusive supportive schools that are supporting vulnerable children to succeed. It has not been difficult to find school leaders who are delivering a very different experience for our group of young people with very different outcomes for young people at risk of harm. Each one of those – from Maureen McKenna, the former Education Director who led the transformation of school inclusion as a core part of the violence reduction programme in Glasgow to the leaders of academies committed to social justice such as Enfield, Passmore Academy, Big Education, Reach and Oasis.

Leaders of these schools have told us how their pursuit of support to help all children succeed has not only improved educational achievement but has also reduced exclusions to single figures. Maureen McKenna's drive to change the culture and practice in schools in Glasgow saw the introduction of programmes that kept children engaged in school and strong support for headteachers saw exclusions reduce by 81% and violence fall by 48% over the past decade. Schools were, she said, excluding pupils out of habit. *"Some children were on a revolving door – in school, an incident happens and out they go again. How were we ever going to improve outcomes and change lives if they aren't in school?"* It was her job to push back against the status quo and help find a different approach.

Our question, learning of these correlations between supporting vulnerable pupils and a fall in exclusions, is why all schools aren't doing the same? The answer given most often by our witnesses was that many schools don't think they have to. It's not been encouraged as part of behaviour policies. It's not part of what is measured by the regulator (despite the broadened assessment framework) and it has often been viewed as a school being distracted

¹⁰² ([Layout 1 \(prisonreformtrust.org.uk\)](https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk))

¹⁰³ [Permanent exclusions up 5% before Covid school closures | Tes Magazine](#)

from achieving academic results. *“Why would other schools make life difficult for themselves,”* one school leader told us.

We hope that the Government’s 2022 Education White Paper offers the start of a change in priorities that will result in a culture shift for those schools who do not yet fully embrace inclusion.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN TO GO TO SCHOOL

We have heard much evidence about how many children with SEND, autism, learning disabilities and additional needs can struggle in the classroom with some falling out of school as a result. This report has highlighted how children with SEN generally have poor outcomes, including those with less severe needs. This is especially true of those who are also vulnerable in other ways (those who have a social worker and/or are receiving free school meals). A key theme from the views of one group of parents we met is the disconnect they felt between the support their children needed and that received: additional needs had gone unidentified or misdiagnosed, labelled as ‘misbehaviour’ and ‘disruptive’, which had led to suspension or exclusion.

As with our previous themes, parents often said that they feel unheard by schools and other statutory services when it comes to the support they need for their child and family. Parents were also acutely aware that exclusions have repercussions not only for the child who is missing out on education but also on the parent, whose work and daily routines are disrupted due to regular calls from the school asking them to collect their child. Ultimately, some parents have to give up work if their children are not attending school, something that can have serious financial and other consequences for the whole family.

Many parents told us how their children had additional needs, some of which had been assessed and diagnosed, but there were other instances where this hadn’t happened. In these instances, parents felt that their children’s schools were unable to provide adequate support to their children, which meant situations around behaviour escalated and often resulted in suspension or exclusion. For example, some parents told us that schools labelled their children as ‘unmanageable’ or ‘disruptive’, when

in reality the child had an additional need such as ADHD or Autism and they needed additional support, which schools were not meeting.

There was a dreadful inevitability in many of the stories we heard as parents told us how their children with special educational needs had fallen out of the school system. Suspension and exclusions were commonplace, and some parents of children with special educational needs we have talked to have had to make the difficult decision to take their children out of school to educate them at home. Far from a positive decision to educate their children in a family-based environment, these parents typically described how months of problems and anxiety at school had come to a head when the child reached crisis point, unable to bear the battle with the rough and tumble of school life, behaviour regimes or bullying from their peers.

The illegal practice of off-rolling, where parents are encouraged to take their children out of school because the school can’t meet their needs, has been under the spotlight over recent years and is no longer practised in quite as blatant a manner as it once was. However, discussions about a child’s future that lead up to a decision to remove a child from the school roll can happen over many weeks and the process can be a subtle one. Whilst no school will say that they off roll children, some parents still have a very different opinion.

The number of children who are home educated has increased dramatically over recent year and has increased again since the pandemic. Whilst many will move on eventually to a school which has a more supportive environment to meet the child’s needs, this is likely to take months if not years and will take further time for them to catch up on lost time in school.

We have heard from schools who say some children have such chronic anxiety that they are unable to attend school, others who may have got out of the habit of school and disengaged. The Children’s Commissioner for England is currently undertaking a very welcome investigation of the extent of the problem and is developing proposals to return these children back into school.

Robert Halfon MP, the chair of the Education Committee also told us of his deep concern about this group of children who have not returned to school. He is backing calls from the

Centre for Social Justice to use some of the catch-up tutoring funds to fund 2,000 Attendance Officers to work with the schools which have high numbers of children who haven't returned (800 schools have the equivalent of a classroom of children still absent). We also support the proposal and believe that Government should also fund 2,000 family workers to work alongside families, from the same funding stream.

We are not in any way suggesting that all children who are home schooled or have not returned to regular schooling are involved in violence or likely to end up in the criminal justice system, but all the data shows that some children who are out of the school system will be more vulnerable to those that wish to exploit them.

The organisation Square Peg, set up to improve support for children with school anxiety, argues that we cannot expect our children to tolerate increasing amounts of pressure and not look at their authentic needs. They believe we need a wider conversation about how to be more inclusive. Their CEO Ellie Costello told us: *'That means smaller class sizes, more resources, different ways to learn, and more relational approach to learning ... We are all likely to have additional needs at some point, so we need services that are reactive and proactive and are designed for all levels of needs and inclusive – at the moment we have a very narrow idea of what disability and disadvantage is.'*

Ellie believes that if we are going to start breaking cycles it starts with compassion, care, support and understanding. Trauma-informed practice, access to appropriate, individualised person-centred support in good time. There are, she argues, too many negative opinions about parents, including assuming many have unrealistic demands. Instead, schools need to establish a partnership with parents which *'demonstrates that the school understands that the child's needs are normal and expected and that the school has the systems, knowledge, and resources to respond'*.

Vic Goddard, the headteacher of Passmore Academy in Essex has built one of those schools - inclusive and responsive to children with special educational needs for many years. He told us that for some young people the normal school rules don't apply and they can't: *"The rules don't need to be a one size fits all*

and you make better rounded human beings because of that. What do you have as standard in your school that means these children get the environment they need? he reflected. *"You start with SEN kids"*.

Susan Tranter, CEO of the Edmonton Academy in north London is also putting a focus on children with additional needs and is planning to open a new school in September 2022. Prioritising autistic children and children with SEND, she says that partnership with children and parents is a priority. There is a renewed focus on mental health, a focus on identification of need. The trust employs their own educational psychologist as well as attendance officers to follow up and provide support for families and children who aren't attending school.

The NHS is also keen to see the development of school approaches which provide a sympathetic environment to autistic children and in 2018, North Cumbria and the North East region were selected to be one of six Transforming Care Accelerator Sites for Children and Young People. The focus was to support autistic children and young people and their families in school, although in practice, much of the programme's work was relevant for a wider group of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The NHS Long-Term Plan 2019 commits to increase access to support for children and young people with an autism diagnosis.

AUTISM IN SCHOOLS PROJECT

We visited the autism in schools project which aims to help reduce inappropriate education exclusions for autistic children. Working with children and their families, the schools have aimed to raise awareness of the needs of autistic children and young people, to listen to the voice of children, young people and their families, and to model and implement practical ways schools could improve the experience for autistic children and young people. This has involved bringing together health and education expertise to take steps to support children who were finding school a challenge.

Key elements of the project include working with mainstream and special schools to improve knowledge and understanding of how to support autistic students and their families. They have promoted a person centred approach to

working with autistic students in mainstream school – so that teaching staff understand the challenges faced by individual students and can put reasonable adjustments in place where needed, enabling autistic children, young people and their families to understand their own strengths and challenges – increasing confidence and self-awareness through and improved working relationships between families and schools, and by the creation of school based support groups offering peer to peer support and reducing isolation.

Described by one very experienced senior teacher as ‘the best thing they had ever been involved with in their career’, the project also wins support from children and parents who describe their experience as transformed.

The recent Government SEND review is consulting on a number of proposals to improve the education experience and outcomes for children with SEND. This includes a list of twenty-two questions that the Government is consulting on. These include: consulting on the introduction of a new SENCo National Professional Qualification (NPQ) for school SENCos, and increasing the number of staff with an accredited Level 3 SENCo qualification in early years settings to improve SEND expertise; publishing a national SEND and alternative provision delivery plan setting out how change will be implemented in detail and by whom to deliver better outcomes for children and young people; what needs to be in place in order to distribute existing funding more effectively to alternative provision schools to ensure they have the financial stability required to deliver our vision for more early intervention and reintegration; what are the key metrics to capture and use to measure local and national performance; what support do local systems and delivery partners need to successfully transition and deliver the new national system.

The Government has said that following their consultation, they will work with partners to design a delivery plan that recognises the context of the ongoing response to and recovery from the pandemic.

The 2014 Children and Families Act had good intentions for children with SEND requiring education, health and social care agencies to work together more closely than they had in the past. This included integrated practices in

identification and assessment of needs, and integrated planning to meet needs. It also included joint commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND and their families. However, the focus it has put on Education, Health and Care plans as the key statutory route to help children, has driven support towards those who have higher level of needs. This has meant that children with lower level SEND often received little support, leaving problems to develop and escalate. It has also driven a high-cost system, access to which is often contested through litigation and appeals.

However, the limited access to such support with little else available, means that some children with lower-level SEND are left without the support they need putting them at further risk. We have also been told how some children are not being considered for an EHCP because the process is so onerous for parents. One parent who had successfully secured a plan for her child said it was like trying to get a PhD.

With such a complex process, it is easy to see why some parents give up. At one Alternative Provision school we visited in east London where children had been successively excluded from schools, APs and PRUs, an independent assessor judged that 85% of the children attending should be eligible for an EHCP. Unfortunately, just 15% had a plan, leaving most children at the school to struggle and become more vulnerable to violence and crime. If the EHCP is going to be more than a middle class offer, it needs to become more accessible, and support needs to be available for children much earlier to prevent crisis. Robert Halfon MP told us he backed a change in the system: *“Money is being spent very badly with government spending £100 million on tribunals that they will mostly lose ... it should be spent on advocates to help parents navigate the SEND system and get the right plan, and it should be spent on training staff, with more funding going into SEND schools”*.

TACKLING THE EXCLUSIONS CULTURE

Throughout our evidence gathering, children have told us of the feeling of rejection and marginalisation that exclusion can bring. Excluding a child from their school, their peer group, trusted adults and their daily routine and structures is a tough sanction. Children have told us how they feel cast aside, unimportant and forgotten with little hope for their future

education or their life chances. Parents too have given us powerful testimonials of their increasing concern and despair as their children slip further and further away from the mainstream school system.

Whilst our data shows that children aged 12, 13 and 14 consistently have the highest numbers of exclusions, it is the growth of primary school exclusions over recent years which is particularly worrying. Though numbers are still relatively low when seen as part of the wider population of young children in school, the fact that they are taking place at all - and growing - should be of concern to us all.

Earlier this year, the Commission met with a group of parents and primary school children in north London – all of the children had been excluded. We wanted to understand what had led to the exclusions so early in their education journey, what the impact on those children and parents had been, and what help could have been given to support children at risk of exclusion. Of the children in the group, 7 children had experienced either a fixed-term or permanent exclusion in the past; 6 had a diagnosed SEN; 4 were known to have an EHCP in place and six were known to be in receipt of Free School Meals.

References to frustrating and difficult relationships with the schools ran through these conversations, with many parents saying they felt blamed as children struggled with their behaviour in school without support. Their experiences were littered with what they considered to be a litany of under and misdiagnosis with unclear processes and an over eagerness to exclude. Some parents put this down to a lack of understanding about the individual child. Some children were described as very smart completing work quickly. But *“then they then become bored and distracted, which the school views as misbehaving”*. Some families were referred to social care as part of the process – something that most of the parents involved felt had been largely inappropriate and unhelpful.

“I had no-one on my side ... I felt I was on my own.” (Parent of primary school child excluded from school).

One parent told us how their child had been suspended 17 times between easter and

Christmas. Staggeringly, the child was just 5 years old at the time.

What was very striking about these conversations was the lack of apparent purpose and clarity in the response to the way these young children were behaving in school. Rather than seeing these difficulties as warning signs that triggered specialist support in school, they had been dealt with through an endless carousel of referrals and assessments – sometimes taking many months and even years disrupting their education just as they were beginning their school life.

Some of the children had been sent to alternative provision - and one child to a pupil referral unit - where they were the youngest children in the school – often isolated and alone in a class. Unsurprisingly, parents did not think that this kind of environment was going to help their child or keep them safe, even more so when they visited and found police and high security on site.

Of course, schools need to be able to respond to children who are disrupting a classroom and even on some occasions putting other children and/or staff at risk. All parents would expect this to be the case. But excluding a child from school when they are so young is a short-sighted and in our view harmful decision. Being taken out of the environment where their friends were learning and growing up together had a huge impact on these children that has affected very many aspects of their life.

The children that had been excluded from school in their first years of primary school we met were now being supported through one-to-one support in a mentoring scheme and were flourishing. They were setting their sights high with ambitions to become doctors, teachers, social workers and an engineer. These children have real talent and a bright future ahead of them but the schools they were excluded from didn't seem able to see it or harness it. With access to better support and a more inclusive, nurturing approach across the school they may have been able to.

TACKLING RACIAL DISPARITIES

We have already highlighted how pupils with certain characteristics are more likely to be excluded from school. As we have shown, Government data highlights particular

disproportionality for certain ethnic minority groups, pupils with SEND and those on Free School Meals. It is also clear that these groups are more likely to be at risk of harm, violence and of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

It is our view that immediate action that must be taken to address this. We agree with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation who has suggested that the DfE should make sure that schools monitor disproportionality in rates of fixed and permanent exclusions and consider the impact of adverse childhood experiences, racism and personal circumstances in their response to Black and mixed heritage boys. He went on to say that work should begin with Ofsted to capture this in its inspection framework – something that was echoed by evidence to our Commission, suggesting a deeper and wider conversation around the role of Ofsted is needed.¹⁰⁴

Further to this, and in line with their public service equality duty and the 'Lammy' principle of 'explain or reform', the Department for Education should hold academy trust chains and local authorities to account for monitoring rates of racial disproportionality in the use of permanent exclusions and for taking action to tackle this.

As we have highlighted, there is also evidence of low expectations from some teachers and a bias to negative judgements towards certain ethnic groups. This racial bias has been put sharply into the public domain over recent weeks in the case of Child Q, the 15-year-old girl who was strip-searched by police at school. Race-equality training should be a core aspect of all teacher training and should be included as a core module at the new Teacher Training Institute.

A report by Power The Fight, a charity tackling violence that affects young people, published in 2020 makes a strong argument that effective therapeutic interventions to end youth violence are reliant on applied cultural competency. It argues that marginalised groups are often deeply distrustful of organisations and institutions due to their own negative experiences in the health care, education, and the criminal justice system. For many Black

people, trusting relationships with professionals rely on representation and cultural competency, with young people and families much more likely to engage with those who share or understand their ethnic background and culture.¹⁰⁵

IMPROVING EFFECTIVENESS AND RAISING STANDARDS IN ALTERNATIVE AND SPECIALIST PROVISION

Criticism of alternative provision, including PRUs has been a common feature of our discussions with children, parents and professionals alike. We do recognise that some alternative provision is good and that some children are able to thrive in an environment with a broader content base, high levels of pastoral care and support and a skilled staff team who are able to help young people learn and gain qualifications. One alternative school we visited in inner London is doing remarkable things with a group of 50 of the most vulnerable young people. Coming to the school from a series of other institutions, many of whom are at high risk of becoming involved in violence or the criminal justice system, the staff say they are 'able to get the teenagers to stand up again and get them ready to learn'.

Government plans for AP

The recent Government SEND review is proposing to 'make alternative provision an integral part of local SEND systems', 'give alternative provision schools the funding stability to deliver a service focused on early intervention' and 'deliver greater oversight and transparency of pupil movements'. It says this proposed new national framework for alternative provision will be delivered by an integrated SEND and alternative provision system with clear national standards.

These proposals would establish a new delivery model based on 'a three-tier system of support'. These are (1) 'targeted support in mainstream schools for children and young people whose needs lead to behaviour that disrupts theirs or others' learning, but for whom a strong school behaviour culture is alone not sufficient'; (2) 'time-limited placements in alternative provision for those who need more intensive support to address behaviour or anxiety and re-engage in learning'; and, (3) 'transitional placements for

¹⁰⁴ ([The experiences of black and mixed heritage boys in the youth justice system \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](#))

¹⁰⁵ [tip-report.pdf \(powerthefight.org.uk\)](#)

those children and young people who will not return to their previous school but will be supported to make the transition to a different 60 school when they are ready, or to a suitable post-16 destination'

These commitments have also come alongside a pledge to 'invest £2.6 billion, over the next three years, to deliver new places and improve existing provision for children and young people with SEND or who require alternative provision'.

We know that there are good people doing their utmost to run good alternative provision in challenging circumstances. But these are still too few and far between. Alternative provision is highly inconsistent, it is not organised or funded adequately to set children up to succeed and its outcomes for children are so often very poor. That 35% of excluded students who finish education in alternative provision go on to become NEET, compared with only 5% of students leaving mainstream schools, says it all.

Too much alternative provision is a one-way street – taking children out of school but not returning them to the classroom as the policy intended. Children are put onto reduced timetables – often of just a few hours a week. Some young people are being taxed in and out to avoid rival gang members. Others can spend hours being organised into lessons or waiting for their sessions with tutors. Inevitably, some of these most vulnerable children will not thrive in this kind of environment and can become more vulnerable to violence and exploitation as a result.

However, we are also aware that those that are delivering high quality provision are having a positive impact on young people's lives and that their experience and expertise will be invaluable in leading and supporting schools to become more inclusive and in providing internal support for children when they need it. An inclusive school will honour its responsibilities to support all children's learning, wellbeing and safeguarding and those with experience in alternative provision can help schools develop their practice to deliver this. Training teachers to have the confidence to respond to children as individuals and to learn how to intervene to deescalate situations when they occur will all be part of the move to a school that is proactive in

preventing problems rather than just reacting to them when they occur.

New models of internal AP

Mohammed Abdallah, who works at The Difference, set up an internal alternative provision in his mainstream school. This internal AP unit was named 'The Base', somewhere they could take the time to speak with and understand the realities of student's needs.

Having an integrated internal AP gives the chance for students to share their experiences of family, school and community life and push external agencies to share information they have too. Young people can be experiencing harm and have a safeguarding need, but schools often do not know this.

The focus of deeper attention, conversations with trusted adults and inclusive practices allowed the school to operate in a non-siloed way, with the integration of the AP forming a key part of that.

Mohammed explains that 'relationships are so important for learning. Learning can only happen when we feel safe so our brains can recall, process, sequence and make links'. By improving these relationships with students, it is possible to make them feel safer in school(s). The Difference assume that all children, at some point in their lives will have a learning, wellbeing and/or safeguarding need. They believe that if we can practice in a way that assumes all children have wellbeing, learning and safeguarding needs, it means that those who have unidentified needs are going to be better supported, much sooner.¹⁰⁶

Government has set out its ambition to move away from disparate alternative provision to focus on internal specialist support to enable children to stay in school. We support these proposed changes and believe that Government should take a strong leadership and intervention role to ensure that it takes place. We also support the creation of more specialist alternative providers, with the potential for a name re-brand, to make them more inclusive and appealing to potential students. This should be accompanied with a focus on an ability to meet the diverse needs of these pupils.

¹⁰⁶ [Internal AP: Scratching the Surface - IntegratED](#)

Teachers could be asked to undertake mandatory training outside of a mainstream education setting to ensure that they have experience and an understanding of dealing with the variety of needs of children.

As the Education Select Committee has recommended, Government must allocate resources to ensure that local authorities and providers can provide post-16 support to pupils, either in the form of outreach and support to colleges or by providing their own post-16 alternative provision.¹⁰⁷

We want to see a system where inclusion runs through the culture of the school like a stick of rock. This is the way forward but will take leadership, guidance, funding, and accountability to deliver on the ambition.

The Zaian Centre Oasis model

Last year was the worst on record for teenage murders in London. There were 30 in total and five of them happened in Croydon - more than any other borough in the capital. The fifth was the fatal stabbing of 15-year-old Zaian Aimable-Lina, a student at Oasis Academy Shirley Park, on 30th December 2021.

Oasis has since committed to creating a living, life transforming, legacy in Zaian's memory, to tackle the borough's reputation as 'London's knife crime capital', and to create a model of that can be applied across the UK. The charity will establish a new 'Zaian Centre' in the park where Zaian was murdered and establish a new Croydon-wide collaborative integrated education and youth service to support children to succeed in education and life.

The ambition is for the Zaian Centre to create a revolutionary preventative approach to stem Croydon's epidemic of youth violence by working to keep young people in – and engaged with – mainstream education.

The centre will help keep vulnerable children safe, but also help them to achieve their full potential. Oasis hopes to roll out this model in other parts of the country over the next few years. Its aims are to provide peripatetic support to students (and staff) in mainstream schools, in order to keep children on roll and flourishing; to

support students through short term/temporary, intensive placements which offer them therapeutic time out of their mainstream school, in order for them to return to it as soon as possible; provide a smaller number of long-term places, in order to support those students who are unable to continue their education in a mainstream school, but again with the long-term goal of return, if possible; and offer services to meet not only their own needs, but also those of other schools around them.

Many of these approaches are featured in the Government's SEND review, and Oasis wants to play a leadership role in field-testing this approach. It believes that navigation is essential to the battle to end youth violence - ongoing, one-to-one personal support and mentoring for every young person at risk of school exclusion.

They will do this by coordinating, and partnering with, the large range of small and local 'grass-roots' youth work, youth mentoring, and parent support organisations, that have grown up in Croydon, often out of a particular tragedy. The aim is to offer high-quality, holistic and integrated, community-based education, youth and parental support in a joined-up approach.

NURTURE NOT REJECTION

It is clear from the data and from our evidence sessions that exclusions are dependent not only of the characteristic of the child but also that of the school. Almost 90% of exclusions take place in 10% of schools. The exact nature of the 10% of schools is not known and should, we believe be the subject of investigation by the Department for Education in conjunction with Ofsted. Our witnesses believe that these are likely to be schools with lower levels of support for children with special educational needs and those with stricter behaviour policies. We do not have the data that allows us to interrogate whether this is true or to know how these schools are rated by Ofsted. We do not believe that a school should be judged to be high quality whilst excluding large number of its pupils on a regular basis.

We have found a broad landscape of interventions that can help prevent children from falling out of school and into harm. Some are

¹⁰⁷ ([Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever-increasing exclusions \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-select-committee/publications/2020/for-gotten-children-alternative-provision-and-the-scandal-of-ever-increasing-exclusions/))

run by small community organisation or individuals who have felt the effect of violence themselves. Some are supported by Violence Reduction Units, local authorities or schools themselves.

The Violence Reduction Units are rightly putting a strong emphasis on keeping young people in school to prevent harm. The Manchester VRU is supporting School Engagement Officers to provide training and safety advice, make better use of diversion schemes to lead young people away from criminality and onto positive pathways to help prevent them from entering the criminal justice system, and develop activities that help build positive relationships between police and young people. They are also supporting the Football Without Borders scheme in schools which uses football coaching and teamwork as a way to building positive behaviour and engagement with school as well as mentoring and group work.

There was also a range of training delivered to help better equip teachers and parents with the skills needed to address violence and its causes. In the West Midlands, the Unit is supporting training to help teachers better identify and help them keep pupils caught up in gangs and violence safe, including understanding the risks faced by vulnerable girls. They are also supporting online safety workshops which enable primary and secondary schools, teachers and parents to work together to keep young people safe online.

We have been impressed by the ambition and dedication of many organisations we have met who are setting out to make a big difference, like BoxUpCrime, a London youth organisation which works with young people to develop a life skills curriculum which is now being piloted in schools, PRUs and community centres across London. Earlier this year we met with SHiFT who work with vulnerable children and young people caught up in or at risk of cycles of harm. SHiFT's long-term intensive one-to-one support often includes helping and supporting young people who are not in school or college to attend again.

Both are examples of the many organisations working tirelessly around the country to help children have a better future - sometimes with little recognition and uncertain funding. Our communities are richer for them, and some young people undoubtedly owe their success

and in some cases their life to their dedication and support. However, there is no getting away from the fact that these organisations have a mountain to climb. Every child who is suspended, off rolled or excluded makes their job harder and for those children who are not getting the support they need, their job more vital. The key is to encourage a culture change in our schools, alongside financial support, to replicate the amazing work that is being done by small organisations and charities who are often helping children to succeed in a system that is often incentivising schools to exclude.

There are encouraging signs that some local areas are beginning to work more strategically. VRUs and Police and Crime Commissioners are using their coordinating and brokering role to bring partners together. In London, the VRU has put a focus on reducing school exclusions and has invested in Nurture – an inclusive schools' charity – delivering a programme in 30 schools across 13 London boroughs. It builds on work that schools are already doing to be inclusive and nurturing to support the reduction in the number of children who are excluded from school.

In Thames Valley, the VRU has told us how they seek to knit together local community sector partners around a group of schools. With lots of agencies in a room they are able to discuss cases and problems that are emerging contextually, with partners able to offer support or try and help with wider offer of support. They try, they say to help schools understand the wider support available and how they can help children stay in school and access help rather than excluding them. Most recently, Government has also taken steps to introduce pilot taskforces in some areas of high violence to bring agencies together, and work with young people in schools in SAFE taskforces which start this year. In London, this will work alongside the new VRU inclusive Schools programme which is also running in the capital.

SAFE ('Support, Attend, Fulfil, Exceed') Taskforces

A programme of Government funded SAFE taskforces is being rolled out in 10 serious violence hotspots areas this year. This 3-year initiative will be led by local schools to protect young people at risk of absenteeism and from being permanently excluded. The SAFE programme will deliver targeted interventions to

reduce truancy, improve behaviours, and reduce the risk of individuals failing to enter education, employment or training. This builds on work over the last year in 21 areas through Alternative Provision Taskforces which were established to run over 2 years to work directly with young people in alternative provision settings to offer intensive support from experts, including mental health professionals, family workers, and speech and language therapists. The areas include Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Croydon, Liverpool, Leeds, Tower Hamlets, Hackney, Nottingham, Leicester, Haringey, Newham, Bristol, Doncaster, Enfield, Southwark, Brent, Bradford, Salford, Lambeth and Sandwell.

Research published in 2021 by Royal Holloway University¹⁰⁸ focusing on children and young people permanently excluded from school in Surrey, considered how systems and services might work together to support school inclusion and the right of all young people to education. They found that there was evidence to support the positive impact of whole-school approaches in reducing exclusions. This drew on 'attachment and nurture-based frameworks, restorative approaches, school-wide positive behavioural interventions and supports, and developing pupil academic skills'. They state that the promotion of inclusive cultures and targeting interventions towards children and young people most at risk of exclusion can decrease the likelihood of escalation of behaviours that lead to exclusion. The report praises the 'Short Stay Schools approach' as providing excellent support for pupils with SEMH and SEN. It also found a number of other solutions-based approaches, including the importance of early years and primary to secondary school transitions as being key developmental milestones/periods for intervention, a greater variety and availability of alternative options to exclusion such as pupil-centred, personalised interventions, short-term breaks at an alternative learning provision and improved support for school staff in understanding the underlying causes of behaviour which might support a child-centred approach to supporting inclusion and reducing exclusion. Surrey County Council has since renewed its commitment to inclusion,

commissioning mentoring support as part of their support system.

Mentors in Violence Prevention

Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) is Scotland's largest anti-violence schools programme operating in 25 local authority areas from Shetland to the Scottish borders. MVP aims to empower students to safely speak out against all forms of violence from rape and sexual harassment to bullying and abusive behaviour.

The programme was first developed in America where it has become one of the country's longest running and most influential violence prevention initiatives operating in high schools, colleges and within the military. Seeing the potential of the scheme the SVRU decided to adapt the programme and bring it to Scotland in 2011. Working in partnership with Education Scotland, it is now operating in 130 secondary schools.

MVP motivates everyone to get involved in safely challenging abuse.

The programme sees students as a school's greatest resource in achieving this and trains senior pupils to act as peer mentors who then deliver sessions to younger students in the school. Since 2014 more than 10,500 mentors have been trained, with around 3,500 sessions delivered by mentors in 2018/19. Sessions target issues such as bullying, gender norms, domestic violence, knife crime and harmful sexual behaviour.

Evidence of the impact of MVP in schools has been gathered through staff feedback, attitude questionnaires and focus groups. MVP schools say pupils often feel more comfortable reporting safety concerns, pupils who have undergone training are also more likely to safely intervene in situations. Improved pupil confidence and leadership skills are also reported.

BUILDING INCLUSION

It is clear to us that the best route to inclusion is a whole school and whole community approach, and we have been encouraged by those schools

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[Glorney Rhoden 2021 Permanent school exclusions in Surrey full report.pdf \(royalholloway.ac.uk\)](#)

who are putting inclusion at the heart of their ethos.

A Whole-School Approach to Mental Health

The children's mental health charity Place2Be has three decades experience of working with pupils, families and staff in schools. Its model takes a Whole School Approach by supporting not only pupils, but their families and school staff. They provide therapeutic mental health support in schools through one-to-one and group work and also offer expert training and professional qualifications in child counselling.

Place2Be provides an embedded mental health service in almost 400 UK primary and secondary schools, supporting a school community of around 225,000 children and young people. Its frontline work reaches some of the most vulnerable children and young people: 47% received free school meals, 27% were involved with social care, 8% were the subject of a child protection plan, 38% had four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences such as abuse, domestic violence or loss of a parent and 93% of children had at least one Adverse Childhood Experience.

Research by Place2Be shows that 81% of the children with severe difficulties who have their counselling show an improvement in mental health. Analysis of Place2Be's counselling service suggests that every £1 invested in the service results in a £6.20 benefit in terms of improved long-term outcomes. While pupils received Place2Be's one-to-one counselling, 74% of pupils were less likely to be excluded for a fixed term.

Susan Tranter, CEO of the Edmonton Academy told us how high a priority the school has made positivity and success. She believes that the school needs to work with the child to show them the value of school, show them what success can look like and help show the parents what the opportunities for their kids can look like. *"We chose to make the school environment a positive place for kids, don't make it a highly punitive environment that they don't enjoy."* She believes schools could eliminate permanent exclusions altogether. If a child is at risk of exclusion they create an education intervention plan, set out what the child's needs are, what has gone wrong, and co-construct what that plan is so that the child, parent, and the school

work out what is going to happen. Edmonton has been doing it for 11 years and haven't had a permanent exclusion in 9 years.

Passmore Academy in Essex has an impressive track record of inclusion which is well recognised by professionals and parents alike. Headteacher Vic Goddard told us his school does not have a rigid approach to behaviour and curriculum: *"I could make different choices about how we deal with families, and we would get a better Ofsted outcome, but I couldn't look myself in the eye. If I don't protect this school, the community loses a resource."* Passmore has an access centre which opens at 6.30am and closes at 6pm, with adult supervision. It is a safe space for vulnerable children who don't enjoy the hullabaloo of school, somewhere they can feel comfortable. Vic says any young person who doesn't get a family start to the start, receives one at school. They have washing machines, microwave, fridge freezer, they teach children how to wash their own clothes. The key, he told us, is not to make children feel they are labelled as different or vulnerable.

Oasis Community Learning has increasingly been moving towards a trauma-informed practice approach, coming to recognise that the level of adversity their students and their families experience is often impeding their learning, and requiring a great deal of energy on the part of the family to manage.

Oasis has a robust mental health and child protection system within the organisation. However, in poor neighbourhoods they are increasingly struggling to access mental health and social work provision for their students. Demand outweighs resources locally. They are now running a pilot programme of support in one of their primary schools to help 600 children and families, with a wraparound service of therapy, social work, provision of practical resources, advice, and joyful experiences. The pilot is called *Oasis Nurture* because at the heart of it they intend to strengthen family resilience.

The trauma-informed approach runs throughout secondary schools where family workers, youth workers and specialist teams provide intensive support for children and their parents through a community hub wrapped around the school.

Research shows that more than 60% of young people in the youth justice system can have

Developing a system where children feel more included, being more tolerant of challenging behaviour, which is often because of unmet need(s) and shifting away from punitive and punishing behaviour policies would all aid in helping pupils.

The report also concluded that barriers to inclusive practice include lack of support available for pupils' social and emotional needs, pressure on resources, some schools' zero tolerance approaches to behaviour management, insufficient teacher training and unconscious bias.

Crest Advisory¹¹² partnered with the West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health & Care Partnership and the Violence Reduction Unit to investigate the root causes of serious violence in West Yorkshire and how best to address them. Several of their findings matched the national picture experienced by many children, that, 'meaningful engagement in rewarding education is consistently found to be a protective factor against violence, exploitation, and other negative health outcomes' and that 'poor educational outcomes are disproportionately suffered by children already impacted by inequality, this disproportionality is mirrored in the criminal justice system'.

Stakeholders that took part in the research told them that feeling inadequate at school could start the process leading young people to violence. The report also stated that providing alternative routes to success may help to minimise the notable West Yorkshire NEET cohort who are especially vulnerable to violence.

As we have seen above, poor educational inclusion can lead to the worsening of a young person's self-worth and the constant surveillance that vulnerable children find themselves under from punitive behavioural approaches to constantly underachieving can alter a young person's sense of self-worth and exacerbate problems.

The report found that the instability brought by Covid-19 is an emerging issue for young people's education. This is impacting their behaviour, their attainment, and their aspirations for the future. Their work also found that

programmes 'aimed at increasing educational inclusion for children in deprived areas reduce violence and exploitation because attainment, attendance, and good educational outcomes are well established protective factors against short- and long-term of violence and deprivation. For the general population of children from disadvantaged areas, school-wide and universal programmes for wellbeing have the potential to have a great impact on school experience'. Further to this, better mental health support, extracurricular activities, stable accommodation, accurate diversion schemes, access to youth focused safe spaces and other initiatives can help to protect young people from violence and exploitation. There is also good evidence to support relationship-based schemes. We met with parents and children working with the organisation Chance UK. One parent said that her child's Mentor at Chance UK began the process of getting him to open up, identify and speak about his feelings not just with his Mentor but also with his mum and he is "doing so well now". Working with children in this way from an early age can reduce behavioural and emotional difficulties and prevent the need for exclusion.

Winning in the Game of Life is a primary schools' curriculum-based programme that is designed to build young people's social and emotional intelligence aiming to lead to lifelong good relationships and improved self-esteem. A pilot has been well received by teachers and pupils alike, with the results showing a high overall satisfaction with the programme and its materials. Over 85% of participating schools surveyed expressed they were either 'happy' or 'very happy' with the pilot. There were also marked improvements exhibited by the pupils, specifically their overall learning and behaviour and in their ability to relate to others, work co-operatively, resolve conflicts, demonstrate their appreciation of responsibilities and respect for others.

THE EARLY YEARS

The importance of the early years of childhood is a constant throughout all our discussions. Children and their families do not fall into crisis overnight and those children who struggle and fall behind before they start school are more likely to stay behind throughout childhood – and into and throughout adulthood.

¹¹² [The best way to tackle youth violence? Ask young people | Crest Advisory](#)

Our first thematic reports have stressed the importance of establishing early attachments and healthy relationships as well as address parent stress, poor mental health, violent behaviour, and problematic substance use. Poor attachment and early exposure to trauma and high levels of anxiety affect the developing brain, particularly in those areas involved in emotions and learning. 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' including being the victim of child abuse or neglect, and living with parental mental ill health, parental substance abuse or domestic abuse are not only traumatic and dangerous for a child at the time, but can also predict poor outcomes in adulthood, particularly poor mental health, violent behaviour, and problematic substance use.

The education impact of difficulties and trauma in early life are also significant. Children who are speaking and communicating well, who are curious and exploring the world and making sense of numbers before school do better later in life. We also know that the educational attainment gaps between richer and poorer teenagers are already present at a very young age, with low-income children on average over a year behind their peers at school entry. Children with poor vocabulary skills are twice as likely to be unemployed when they grow up, and as we have previously noted, over 60% of children in Young Offender Institutions have communication difficulties. We know that children who at an early age can manage their own emotions and behaviour go on to have much better outcomes later in life. Babies and very young children cannot regulate their emotions alone, and so need help from parents and carers to do so, which in turn helps them learn to regulate their emotions independently. Evidence shows that children who are less able to control their feelings and behaviour in the early years are more likely to have worse long-term outcomes, for example they are more likely to struggle in education and in managing relationships with their peers.

The development check at 30 months is an opportunity to identify additional need and respond with help. But the information is often not systematically collected or strategically considered and responded to. Whilst some children may get help as a result of checks many will not. Many will miss out on the assessment altogether. Our previous thematic reports have shown how children who fail to

reach their development goals at five are more likely to have a social worker, more likely to be excluded from school and more likely to struggle with reading and writing at 11. It is astounding to learn that 40% of the education disadvantage gap at 16 is already in place by five.

These gloomy predictions of future success are easily visible and clearly measured, yet they remain unseen and unacted on for many, leaving some children with a foundation of problems that will play out over years to come. As is so often the case, disadvantaged children and children with special educational needs are most likely to experience these setbacks in the early years of life. Support in the early years can be transformational, helping families find solutions to the difficulties they are experiencing and providing children with the springboard they need to start school and the life ahead of them with a bounce.

The new Start for Life programme, now being established aims to help establish the building blocks for lifelong emotional and physical health in the period from conception to the age of two. It is, it says a supportive policy framework to truly change our society for the better, while saving billions for taxpayers – improving school readiness and preventing later problems from bullying to poor mental health to addictions, criminality, and poor health. Its founder Dame Andrea Leadsom MP argues that securely attached infants are much more likely to go on to become adults who cope well with life's ups and downs, build strong relationships at work and at home, and are better equipped to raise their own children. 75 local authorities with disproportionately poor health and educational outcomes will be eligible for funding to support families through the programme

The Early Intervention Foundation concurs that access to early childhood education and care (before the start of official schooling) can maximise the life chances of children, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, by equipping children with essential skills, including cognitive, self-regulatory and social and emotional skills, which impact on school readiness and later life outcomes. Longitudinal studies have consistently found a strong association between the use of early education and care and both

short and long-term outcomes, including attainment and future earnings.¹¹³

However, they also stress that even more crucial than simply the provision of these services is the quality of the care. Previous research has found strong evidence that high-quality formal provision, including for those as young as two as well as disadvantaged children, improves outcomes for children.¹¹⁴ Preliminary analysis EIF undertook showed limited association between the 2-year-entitlement and a substantial increase in early years outcomes.¹¹⁵ Other research suggests¹¹⁶ this is driven by the lack of quality in provision, especially in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector which most two-year-olds, and many disadvantaged three-and-four-year-olds attend.¹¹⁷

In their evidence to the Commission, the EIF say it is also important to note that efforts to improve school readiness and close the disadvantage gap cannot be achieved through early education and care alone – something that has been reiterated through all our evidence sessions – arguing that a number of other demographic factors, such as maternal education and family size, as well as the parent-child relationship and home environment, have a (relatively larger) impact than early education and care.¹¹⁸ They propose focusing on other activities and services, such as parenting programmes, that have evidence of improving the parent-child relationship and the home learning environment, to further improve child outcomes.

¹¹³ Department for Education (2015): 'Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education (EPPSE) project' - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf; Melhuish, E., Ereky-Stevens, K., Petrogiannis, K., Ariescu, A., Penderi, E., Rentzou, K., Tawell, A., Slot, P., Broekhuizen, M., & Leseman, P. (2015). *A review of research on the effects of early childhood Education and Care (ECEC) upon child development. CARE project; Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)*. <http://ecec-care.org/resources/publications/>

¹¹⁴ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart B. (2004). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical Paper 12: The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education*, London, Department for Education and Skills.; Cattan, S., Crawford, C., & Dearden, L.

The EIF also recommends the DfE should extend the support for quality early childhood education and care especially through PVIs which provide for disadvantaged 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds, via training and support to EY practitioners; that local areas should be supported to increase the uptake of early childhood education and care for disadvantaged children (Family Hubs could be a vehicle for this); money that is committed through the Spending Review to support families should also be used to support early education and care settings and support parents with the home learning environment.

TRANSITION

As we have highlighted in our previous reports, young people and parents often say how the move from primary to secondary school was the period when problems escalated. Moving from the small, intimate primary school, where there are strong links to families and the community, to a larger secondary and growing independence can be overwhelming for some. The size and scale of the new school can increase pressure as children struggle to find their own identity, develop social skills, and make friends. Children often talk of the pressure to be popular and to fit in. This is often amplified by social media and its own sense of success. Some children, especially those with special education needs, can struggle with the growing requirement for independence and the busy school timetable. "It was OK at primary school," a 13-year-old boy who had been taken off the school roll to be educated at home told us. "It was small, and people knew me and how I was."

(2014). *The economic effects of pre-school education and quality* (No. R99). IFS Reports, Institute for Fiscal Studies.

¹¹⁵ Early Intervention Foundation (2018), 'An initial assessment of the 2-year-old free childcare entitlement: drivers of take-up and impact on early years outcomes' - <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/an-initial-assessment-of-the-2-year-old-free-childcare-entitlement>

¹¹⁶ Mathers, SJ, Smees, R (2014) *Quality and Inequality: do three-and four-year-olds in deprived areas experience lower quality early years provision*. London: Nuffield Foundation.

Mathers, S, Eisenstadt, N, Sylva, K, Soukakou, E, Ereky-Stevens, K (2014) *Sound Foundations: A review of the research evidence on quality for early childhood education and care for children under three. Implications for policy and practice*. London:

¹¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-childcare-and-early-years>

¹¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-education-and-outcomes-to-age-4>

There are good examples of transition programmes which support children from their final primary school years through the first years of secondary school. We want to encourage these programmes at this crucial stage of development for children. However, we also want to reduce the disruption and cliff edges of transition by achieving a continuum of education that follows the child with a clear understanding of their needs and the help available to support them wherever they are in the school system.

COLLEGES

The Education Policy Institute¹¹⁹ has suggested that government could work with the Higher Education sector to ensure that students who take alternatives to A-levels do not lose out when applying for university places. This is particularly critical for already disadvantaged students and the post 18 'transition'. This would also help the Government in taking forwards its Levelling Up strategy. The report suggests a number of 'aspiration lifting programmes' that could including vocational training in crafts and trades, technology, coding, languages, healthcare with meaningful work experience and apprenticeships supported by empathetic people to help them take up the opportunities on offer.

With over 60% of 16 – 19-year-olds attending a local college, the importance and potential of a college focus and lead on interventions and support for teenagers is self-evident. This is even more so given the disproportionate number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attending, including children in care. We are struck by how many young people who have been outside school and regular mainstream education during the secondary school years see going to college as a positive choice at 16. Many talked of going to college as a new phase of their life – one that was more accessible, more about them as individuals, more about supporting their aspirations and more about learning that will help them succeed in life. The potential for colleges to provide a springboard to success in adult life for the young people who have struggled in school is enormous.

The individual colleges we have spoken to are doing much to realise these ambitions and are

working hard to identify young people in need and to provide support. There is a definite change in tone – what Eddie Playfair from the Association of Colleges calls inclusion by default. Colleges are more likely to have a wellbeing team, be very aware of contextual safeguarding and will often be providing proactive education and information about staying safe. Some colleges told us of their trauma informed approach, backed up by staff training. Others of their anti-racism work – a key part of their inclusion policies.

Colleges also told us of the importance of local partnerships in supporting young people at risk. Many of the colleges in the areas of high violence are working with the Violence Reduction Units which they say is showing potential. Many others are seeking to build good relationships with children's services and the police – in some cases having onsite officers to build relationships with students. But these are very much work in progress, college health and wellbeing teams focus on early interventions, but they say the challenge is support from external services. The lack of availability of CAHMS and good AP is something that colleges felt needs addressing urgently. The issue of data sharing between schools and colleges was also raised as a major concern with some schools reticent to provide information on a student's previous progress at school as they thought they deserved a fresh start. Whilst well intended, this practice had little truck with the college leaders. Having information about a student's past is essential to be able to meet their needs, one said, you wouldn't think twice about sharing a safeguarding issue and you shouldn't for this.

However, it is also clear from our conversations that the college sector feels that is often an afterthought in national policy discussion and that opportunities to support their students though national initiatives are not at the forefront. Major initiatives such as mental health teams in schools have scant presence in the college sector. The same is the case for the development of youth facilities. "Why spend Youth Investment money on new shiny buildings when colleges have many sports and arts facilities that could be open for longer," one college leader told us. With national initiatives comes funding and focus – two things the

¹¹⁹ [Covid-19 and Disadvantage gaps in England 2020 - Education Policy Institute \(epi.org.uk\)](https://www.epi.org.uk)

college sector says their students would really benefit from.

As we have heard so often during our evidence sessions, college staff say that students feel more off the radar and withdrawn since the Covid pandemic, with staff reporting more frequent and more extreme incidents of concern. We were impressed by the strategic information that was being gathered in some colleges to map students in terms of conduct, those at risk, non-attendance and how they see their link into exploitation. Not all colleges will be achieving these levels of inclusion and intervention, but the potential for more college focused work to protect and support young people at risk to achieve is clear. For this to happen, helping these young people to succeed needs to become a priority.

BETTER EDUCATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CUSTODY

In its evidence submission to the Commission, the Prisoners' Education Trust highlighted the pervasive links between educational exclusion, social exclusion, and criminalisation. Many people in prison were labelled 'troublemakers' and 'poor learners' by teachers and subjected to interrupted learning while children. Almost nine out of ten boys (88%) in custody said that they have been excluded from school, and almost two in five said that they were younger than 14 years-old when last at school.

PET argues that further damage is caused to children's education by the youth custody environment, traumatising vulnerable children further and preventing them from receiving meaningful education. Young people in secure children's homes usually provide better outcomes for those in their care, creating a safer and supportive environment for children. PET calls for a national strategy for the children's custodial estate, including trauma-informed teaching, with more initiatives that involve participation of families; embedded education outside traditional classroom settings as the norm, such as the use of digital technology, sports and the arts as 'hooks' for learning; regular publishing of data relating to educational progression and achievement; education/training or employment on release; and a curriculum of material that is racially and culturally responsive.

The Ministry of Justice is committed to opening the first Secure School in Kent, which the sponsor of this Commission, the Oasis Charitable Trust, has been appointed to develop and run. The secure school has a vision focused on restoration rather than retribution and creating a safe environment with a holistic approach to education, care and health. It will place therapeutic, integrated and bespoke support for children, along with pathways for successful transition that are designed to enable them to make different choices and lead positive, productive lives. Working with NHS England, Oasis will ensure that the delivery of primary health care, health education and therapeutic interventions are fully integrated into the daily provision and culture of the secure school, creating holistic and inter-disciplinary care that meets each young person's needs. The secure school will offer learning that is practical, multi-sensory, person-centred, and aspirational. There will be a balanced and differentiated vocational and enrichment curriculum designed to equip students with a sense of purpose and the necessary work-life skills and qualifications for pro-social functioning.

WRAP AROUND ACTIVITIES

Whilst afterschool and extra-curricular activities will take place in most schools, the move to extend the school day has largely stalled since the demise of the extended school programme over a decade ago. Over the last year, Holiday and Food Programmes have run in school holidays for school age children in receipt of free school meals from reception to Year 11. Whilst welcome, these are limited in range and use. Research has demonstrated that children from disadvantaged families benefit most from extracurricular activities but are much less likely to have access to sport, arts or cultural pursuits, yet Sport England estimate that 39% of sports facilities in England sit behind school gates¹²⁰. Alongside, a shortage of creative spaces for dance, arts and music for young people, and the decrease in funding for youth activities, the argument to do much more with school facilities

¹²⁰ [Sport England](#)

beyond the traditional school day is compelling.¹²¹

We have heard from expert witnesses how levels of violence peak after schools close causing a surge in demand on police time. Providing safe and stimulating places for children and young people to spend their time out of school offers protection, builds social networks and relationships with trusted adults and gives them fun, stretching and enjoyable things to do and take part in.

We have been impressed by the schools who are opening their doors before and after school, for some weekends and during school holidays. Funding is essential but we also heard how this could be possible within existing budgets. Whilst school staff would be able to work in the programmes if they wished, there is also the potential to bring in coaches, youth workers, specialists and volunteers. There is a chance for Government to be bold and open up new opportunities for young people in every community at what we believe would be a relatively modest cost. We think they should take it.

BUILDING LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

We have been impressed and inspired by schools that are not just places of learning, but a cornerstone of providing support to children and their families outside of core school hours.

The Oasis Academy Hadley in Enfield has spent many years building relationships and trust with the local community, so that there is a close bond between the school, with its bustling reception area open to parents to come in and chat or ask for advice, and the wider local community. Hadley's youth centre, with its incredible after-school facilities including sport, music, discussion groups, sits geographically next to the school but it is also emotionally connected. Across the road is the Oasis family/community support centre, which provides help and advice to local families, including food, help with paying bills, advice and support with services, and community activities from early years onwards.

This joined up, integrated offer to children and local families is a model for others to follow.

¹²¹ [Opening up school sports facilities would give every child a healthy summer | Tanni Grey-Thompson and Lawrence Dallaglio](#)

Hadley Academy is providing a good education to children, not only through high academic and vocational ambitions and standards in the classroom, but by extending outwards beyond the classroom to become a key link between local partners, groups and services. We believe that all schools should have this outward-looking focus, with a long-term vision, not just for academic achievement, but also for the inclusive role the school can play in its local area. This means building relationships and trust over a long period of time, looking ahead a decade or more to where the school will sit in its community, how it will provide learning and support from the early years onwards, and how it can bring together different agencies and expertise to meet the needs of every child from birth to 18.

We would like to see the Government examining how to build on models like that in Oasis Academy Hadley where community trust is built by making a school a key leader in bringing local support and services together, and the more formally recognised 'cradle-to-career' StriveTogether model.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The proposals Government have set out to reform the SEND and Alternative Provision are welcome in their aspiration and could provide a valuable new framework for delivery if they were to be fully implemented. But the young people that we are focusing on need a system that is clear and consistent. They need schools to be inclusive and supportive to their needs as a matter of priority and a matter of course. To achieve this, our witnesses believed that inclusion and supporting vulnerable young people to succeed needs to become a core measure for the regulator Ofsted.

We heard from our expert evidence givers that the main thrust through which pupil 'success' is currently measured is based around progress and attainment. Most have strongly argued that focusing solely on these measures has serious limitations and can lead to exclusionary practices, such as not admitting vulnerable children, excluding them or "off-rolling" them before they sit their GCSEs. Instead, schools should be assessed on wider practices including but not limited to school wide inclusion, effective

and integrated alternative provision within school and pupil wellbeing. The Education Select Committee's 2018 report on AP and exclusions has already recommended that *'The Government and Ofsted should introduce an inclusion measure or criteria that sits within schools to incentivise schools to be more inclusive'*. We agree with this proposal. The EPI told us they are developing a set of such inclusion measures. "These measures are not intended to be used for accountability purposes, but rather to inform the system on where areas of best practice currently are, so we can learn how most inclusive trusts and local authorities achieve their results." The Commission welcomes this move towards informing an

accountability measure on inclusion. In addition, we believe that every school should publish their permanent and fixed term exclusion rates every term, including for pupils with SEND and looked-after children, as well as the number of pupils who leave the school, to give us a more accurate understanding of the real number of 'excluded' children.

The pandemic required Ofsted to operate in a more collaborative way and this should be built upon. It is time to bring these children into view and time for the education system to deliver the changes necessary.

THE GLASGOW EXPERIENCE

Until recently, Maureen McKee was Director of Education at Glasgow City Council, a role she held for 14 years. When Maureen took up her post, exclusions in Glasgow were at an all-time high. She recalls one secondary school where there were 770 exclusion incidents in one year and described some schools as having a revolving door where children were in school, an incident happened, and then they were straight out the door again. She felt it was an approach that was doing nothing to improve outcomes or life chances for a significant number of teenage children. Maureen's determination to reduce exclusions ran alongside the work of the Violence Reduction Unit in Glasgow. Its focus on tackling crime as a public health issue and tackling its root causes has been pioneering, and its ethos is now being followed by VRUs. In Glasgow there has been an 88% reduction in school exclusions over the last decade, while youth crime has dropped 50% over the same period.

Glasgow City Council changed its local guidance to schools so that exclusion was no longer seen a 'final sanction', which it argues is incompatible with promoting inclusion, learning, development, and wellbeing. While there is no 'zero exclusions' policy, the guidance states that children have an inalienable right to an education and that it is the duty of the local authority, each school and every member of staff to create the relationships and environment within which prevention and early intervention can support every child. The principles of a whole-school ethos of prevention, early intervention and support are key to the promotion of positive relationships, learning and behaviour. The guidance says exclusion should be the last resort, for as short as possible, always have a positive and purposeful intention for the learning and wellbeing of a child and should not be viewed as punitive. It should be a proportionate response where there is no appropriate alternative and the time during and after the exclusion period should be used constructively to ensure positive support is in place.

"Our aim is to nurture," Maureen told us during an evidence session. "A lot of what we were doing before was 'deficit' led – there wasn't a culture of inclusion and our structures and processes sent out a message that children needed to be fixed. Often children had to go out of school and do intensive work elsewhere, then be brought back to school. There was a range of provision outside the city – so we were transporting children outside the boundaries. It wasn't child-centred and there was a lack of compassion and care for families. It was all about staff, and structures and processes - not children."

Maureen and her team began by defining the principle and meaning of nurture explicitly, including forming a nurture steering group led by a psychologist. It was science-led. She told us, "Nurturing is about how we talk, the language used, how we relate to families." The focus in schools changed to provide support to children in school, with specialists working alongside teachers, rather than spending money on taxis to ferry them miles away. This in turn grew the capacity and knowledge of teachers. Maureen's ethos was that, while some children do need specialist provision, every child has a right to learn alongside their peers.

She argues that if you can give a high-quality offer to children, they will respond positively, but when sparks fly it is often because children are having to conform to the way teachers teach. She believes that because children are all different, teachers need to change their approach and reflect on how they approach learning. That should mean investing in the craft of teaching and empowering headteachers.

She continues: "This isn't about money, it's about what you do with what you have. It's about repurposing. Stop doing the fluff in schools. If something doesn't impact on what happens in the classroom, stop doing it ... our young people need a curriculum that meets their needs, things to spark their interest that make them want to come into school – politics, psychology, photography – we need to focus on what works for children ... When kids aren't learning in school, they won't go to school, because school isn't working for them."

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All professionals in and around schools want children to succeed and most children progress well in their education and have a positive experience of their school days. But many don't and that should be a concern for us all. This report has shown how a third of children leave school every year without basic qualifications. It has shown how thousands of children fall out of the education system every year through suspensions and permanent exclusions, and how a growing number of children, often children who need additional help that has not been provided, are being taken off the school roll to be educated at home without any adequate oversight of their safety or education outcomes.

Whilst the illegal practice of off rolling is less apparent than it may have been five years ago, 'managed moves' are now more commonplace, with some children experiencing a conveyor belt of moves as they are passed from one school to another – sometimes with good outcomes and sometimes to be simply moved again. Many of these children have special educational needs and disabilities or are autistic. The disproportionality of Black children who are outside the mainstream, particularly Black boys, is a shocking indictment of a system that is failing too many vulnerable children.

We have been horrified to hear how children as young as five have experienced multiple exclusions and are being taken out of the mainstream system. It is hard for us to understand how exclusion is the only resource a small number of primary schools believe they have to respond to young children who are not settling in school, or how they can possibly justify their actions are in the best interests of those children.

We have also been dismayed by some of the accounts that we have heard from young people who have fallen out of mainstream education. Children have talked of their feeling of rejection, of disappointment, embarrassment and often of isolation. Many children are clearly frustrated and angry with a system that they feel can't or doesn't want to help them. Some children feel that school just isn't for people like them. They feel that they are failures. Falling out of school can be the start of years of disruption and lost

learning, and as our opening case study shows, can end in catastrophe.

However, it is also very clear too, that this does not have to be the case. We have been bowled over by the schools who are working hard to help all their pupils succeed, with increasingly well evidenced models. These schools start early, working with children and their parents at the earliest opportunity to identify need and strengthen support. Strong relationships are key - they stick with children, offering a continuum of education and support as they grow up. They work with parents to support children's needs beyond the school gate and help support them in class. They set sights high while understanding that many children need support at some stage of their school or college life, and so provide a focus on wellbeing and nurture as a standard for all children. These schools work proactively to understand and respond to the causes of problems rather than just reacting to the symptoms of problems they are presented with. They have built strong relationships with local services in the community so that waves of specialist help and support is available to children when it is needed. They hold on to and advocate for their children, understanding the importance of the school in their lives and the protective factors it brings.

These schools are achieving remarkable things and their leaders and teachers should be proud. For many of these schools, exclusions and children going off the roll just aren't part of their school ethos. If a child is struggling and needs help, the school will work with partners and the family to meet those needs. One headteacher said she hadn't excluded a child for almost a decade.

We have been struck by how many have told us that they have taken this approach because they know it is the right thing to do for their children not because it is national policy. Some even told us that they risked being marked down by an accountability system that still puts the academic achievement of the majority above everything else. There is a sense that these schools offer this inclusive approach despite a system which often seems incentivised to achieve the opposite. Achieve for these children and you will achieve for all.

The recent Education White Paper and SEND Green Paper give some signs that Government wants to do more for all children. Where children are struggling, they should get help, and where children have SEND, they should receive the support they need, backed up by a national framework and Parents' Charter. We welcome these sentiments but think that Government will need to do more, and with much more ambition to make it happen. It will also not happen without ambitious funding, something we will set out in more detail in our final Commission report.

To conclude, we think that there needs to be a dramatic culture change in our education system which incentivises inclusion in our schools and

provides school leaders with the resources and support they need to deliver it. We all want children to achieve academically, but there shouldn't be a trade-off between success for most and a significant proportionate of children underachieving. The talents of hundreds of thousands of children are being wasted in the current system and some children are paying a very high price. We need a new era of inclusivity.

These recommendations set out how the education system should be reformed to support all our children to succeed and protect those who are currently most at risk of diminished life chances, exploitation, and criminality.

Recommendations

1. A new culture of inclusivity, support and accountability for inclusion in all schools

We want to see a system which encourages and rewards the success of all children. This does not mean that ambitions for academic achievement should be lowered – far from it. We want more children to succeed in school. Inclusive schools around the country show how it can be done, but too often they are the exception because the system does not provide schools with the direction, support, and resources to deliver. We want to see all schools have high expectations for all children alongside an expectation of support for those who need it. To achieve this, we would like to see the proposals in the SEND Green Paper fully implemented and extended.

We recommend:

- Clear expectations backed up by guidance of inclusive practice in all schools in the form of a framework, setting out standards for inclusion and criteria describing what it means to be an inclusive school. This standard should be incentivised.
- A new national team of regional development advisors to work with schools, local authorities and health agencies to support the implementation of inclusive schools in every area.
- A new transitional fund to pump prime local authority area wide inclusion strategies and support packages for schools including therapeutic support, educational psychologists, family workers, youth workers and mental health support.
- Greater accountability between the school and its pupils including during periods of additional support.
- A new inclusion measure to be introduced by Ofsted as a key measure to inform judgement. No school should achieve good or outstanding rating that is not an inclusive school.
- School league tables to include an agreed measurement of pupil wellbeing, as well as exam results.
- A new requirement for every school to publish their inclusive ‘education for all’ strategy and report annually on any children who have been excluded or moved from the school roll.

2. Additional support for those children who need more specialist help, and an end to habitual exclusions

The new inclusive education system would understand that all children may need support at some time in their education journey. The system will work hard to identify when children need help and will have the support, knowledge and support built into everyday practice. But we also recognise that some children will need additional help and that children may need to be in a different setting for a period of time or on a permanent basis. It should go without saying that these specialist settings for those with the greatest needs should be of the highest quality with therapeutic support and the highly qualified staff. We believe our proposals for refocused specialist provision to support children to remain and succeed in mainstream school would remove the majority of concerns about children being moved off the school roll for accountability purposes. However, for the avoidance of doubt, we believe children should remain on the mainstream school roll and be reported on whilst they are receiving specialist support, including attending any specialist provision.

We recommend:

- Specialist nurture programmes for primary and secondary schools to replace in school ‘alternative provision’ that prevent crisis and support children to remain and succeed in school, returning to their classroom as soon as possible.
- Alternative provision is renamed ‘specialist provision’ and is available to support struggling pupils to progress with their learning in school. The use of the label ‘Pupil Referral Unit’ is scrapped.
- An end to ‘twilight’ timetables of just a few hours a week, unless it is in the best interests of the child and is then surrounded by a full package of support
- An extension of the pupil premium - the extra funding given to disadvantaged pupils - to 16–19-year-olds.

We are not proposing to outlaw school exclusions or recommend financial sanctions and fines for schools, as we believe these punishments can become a thing of the past with a new culture of inclusivity and accountability. We believe these changes can significantly reduce the number of children who are not able to remain in their school to a very small number. However, for transparency and the avoidance of doubt we recommend:

- That the exclusion from school of primary school age children is ended within the next four years, and that schools are supported with the necessary resources to achieve this.
- Removal of a child from secondary school becomes a genuine last resort and is only possible following a programme of support and when signed off by the CEO of an academy school or MAT, or the DCS in a local authority school.

3. New local community partnerships in and out of school to support children to succeed

Schools cannot solve all social problems by themselves, but they can be the catalyst and gateway for support for vulnerable children. The inclusive schools that are supporting all children are successfully building a local, community-based systems of support for their children – including children’s services, health, youth, police and housing. We have heard of local inclusion strategies that support a local exploitation and reduction of harm plan as part of community safety and as part of a wider wellbeing plan. We would like all areas to build inclusive schools into their health and wellbeing plans and wider community safety initiatives. In turn, we would like support agencies to work alongside local charities and community organisations to deliver support in and around schools. Vulnerable children are more likely to fall through the gaps in all these services. Only by services working together can this be prevented, improving outcomes for children, and improving the effectiveness of services.

We recommend:

- A new requirement for schools to be part of the local child safeguarding partnership and a new responsibility for local child safeguarding partnerships to publish an annual school inclusion and prevention plan focusing on children at risk of violence or crime.
- New local partnerships between education, children’s services, and health to ensure that children who need support to learn get the help they need at the right time. This would include support which is delivered as part of an EHCP but also support for children with lower-level special educational needs and/or autism. An enhanced Designated Health Officer would work in every local authority ensuring the system was operating effectively and that schools and pupils had the support they need to ensure children remained in their school and are able to learn. Health teams would work with schools to deliver education psychologists and therapeutic support as well as mental health support.
- Every school in England should have an embedded mental health service, to provide direct support for children and young people, and promote the development of a whole-school approach to mental wellbeing. We will develop this thinking in our next thematic report on mental health.
- Local partnerships with youth services and youth organisations to engage and support young people at risk of crisis. We would like to see teams of youth and community workers in all schools to build relationships and support young people. These would be vital in supporting children back into school who are not attending.
- An expectation of partnership with parents to help parents support their children’s learning and work with the school to help their children succeed.
- A key role for school-based family workers, working alongside and as part of the supporting families’ teams and liaising with children’s centres, family hubs and children’s services to support and strengthen families to help their children stay safe and succeed.

4. A continuum of learning from cradle to career

Just as we want to reduce the chance of vulnerable children falling through the gaps in services by building strong local partnerships, we want to reduce the chance of children falling behind or out of their

education as the system changes through transitions. There are excellent examples of work to support children at this time, especially during the transition to secondary school which we know can be a time when many children currently experience difficulties. These can be invaluable to vulnerable children. But we want to go much further. The evidence we have seen supports a continuum of learning from the earliest days of life through school to career. This personalised learning, would allow for the education journey to follow the development of the children, informed by an early identification of needs and supported by a continuum of support from trusted organisation and services, backed up by a consistent personal identification number.

We recommend:

- **Support from the start of life.** We would like to see an extension of the start for life programme in every area of the country to identify and respond to additional needs of children and their families from conception into the first years of life – delivered through family hubs building on children’s centres. This would have a particular emphasis on family vulnerability – parental mental health, domestic violence and addictions as well as wider issues of poor housing and poverty. Support in the first years of life would form the basis of a continuum of support throughout the childhood.
- **A new school readiness programme** bringing together education and health in a combined programme to improve the number of children starting school meeting their development goals. This would include the provision of speech and language support for every child that needs it.
- **Personalised and family support** throughout primary and secondary years around the inclusive school.
- **Early career and employment education** and support with employment tasters and skills and employment pathways for all children.
- **Continued support for ambitious post-16 learning** through colleges and schools

We have been deeply impressed by the cradle to career approach of some schools we have seen and learnt about in this inquiry, and this is a model which we believe Government should further encourage, examine and evidence.

We recommend:

- The new Education Investment Areas become testbeds for new models of delivery, new innovations, new community partnerships and new data initiatives to nurture excellence in support for children with special educational needs, for children at risk of falling out of school and for ambitious new approaches from the cradle to careers. The Government should invite bids to pilot 55 ‘Cradle to Career’ schools following principles in the new Education Investment Areas to be evaluated and evidence in a five-year programme. Cradle to career partnerships should be formal groups that include a cross-sector of organisational and system leaders from education, business, government, grassroots and community organisations, community leaders and the third sector working together to define local challenges, develop ten-year strategies to address those challenges and a shared-community vision with the school at the centre.

5. An end to racial bias and discrimination

Racial bias within the school system was raised by many of our witnesses. The shocking statistics speak for themselves, and they are consistently backed-up by young people’s own experiences. Some witnesses have told us about low expectations from some teachers around what Black pupils can achieve, which can propel them through disciplinary systems much more quickly than other children. This was compounded for some when Black children are viewed as both older and less innocent than their white peers and are perceived as “angry” in the classroom, again leading to more punitive sanctions. Some witnesses have told us how they feel Black students are being disproportionately targeted by

“draconian” zero-tolerance behaviour and uniform policies in schools. Initial teacher education courses, and school inspections, do not include any mandatory focus on race equality and, although minoritised students make up around a third of state school rolls, the teaching force is more than 90% White - a problem that is most acute in primary schools. As the recent Inclusive Britain report has acknowledged there are deficits in the current curriculum for black and ethnic minority children with a particular problem with regards to ‘belonging’. We heard how the school curriculum as it is currently made up feels out-dated and partial for many children. Being able to see and hear yourself in what you are learning can make the difference between wanting to be in school and not and ultimately achievement. Developing a curriculum that is inclusive will be vital if we are to support all children to reach their potential. We want to see an education system that dismantles, rather than reinforces, racism.

We recommend:

- Government extends its commitment to provide new guidance and curriculum content for history in its response to the recent race and ethnic disparities report to the wider curriculum to develop positive, inclusive, antiracist approaches and content to all areas.
- That the Department for Education works with school leaders and parents to carefully consider how pedagogical approaches in schools can impact on Black children, including how adultification is working in practice, and how schools and other safeguarding bodies can ensure that they safeguard all their children appropriately and fully.
- A national campaign led by the DfE and schools themselves to encourage more Governors, school board members and those in a position of school leadership from Black, Brown and minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as transparency about the ethnic diversity of those involved in senior decision-making.
- Workforce strategies are devised and implemented to increase the number of Black teachers in our classrooms and in leadership roles. Race-equality training should be a core aspect of all teacher training and should be included as a core module at the new Teacher Training Institute.
- The Department for Education ensures that the special educational needs of Black and mixed heritage boys are assessed and responded to at the earliest opportunity and work with Ofsted to include this in their inspection framework.
- Academy trust chains and local authorities are held to account for monitoring rates of racial disproportionality in the use of permanent exclusions and for taking action to tackle this.

6. Creative and inspirational opportunities to create a new generation of high achievers.

While the majority of children enjoy school and do well, it is clear through talking to some young people that school is neither enjoyable or fulfilling for them and is sometimes inadequate in preparing them for the next stages of their lives. This has created an environment for some children which makes them more likely to switch off in class and has made them less willing to return to school post lockdown. These are the children who feel that a school system and curriculum that focus on the goal of passing exams is ‘not for them’ – no matter how important it may be. We all want children to do well in school and leaving with the skills and qualifications they need to have great options in life should be our major priority. But the fact of the matter is that this is not being achieved for a large proportion of young people. We want to encourage and support schools to embrace arts, design, music, communication, digital, AI, publishing, and making - new creative content and approaches that can engage and inspire young people in a way that reflects the creativity they enjoy as standard outside classroom and in their digital world. The country is losing the talents of the millions of young people. We want to harness those talents to create a new generation of high achievers.

We recommend:

- The development of a new ‘Creating to Achieve’ curriculum programme to embrace and engage and inspire young people to gain the skills needed in the workforce of tomorrow.
- A levy on tech companies to fund Specialist Creative Programmes backed and designed in partnership with the creative industries to run in schools and specialist schools.
- A new focus on pathways to employment through primary and secondary school of education, tasters with a guarantee of high-quality internships for disadvantaged students – funded and

supported by a partnership between business and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

- A guarantee of an apprenticeship for all young people in need.
- Opening up schools before and after school and during weekends and holidays to give access to sports, arts and new experiences - safe places to have fun, good for mental health and for the affordable childcare that so many families need to escape poverty.

