

In partnership



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PREVENTING SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS IN TOWER HAMLETS

Strengthening relationships between schools and families.
RSA policy briefing for the borough of Tower Hamlets

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October 2023

60 second summary

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Strong relationships between schools and families are recognised as a crucial factor in preventing school exclusions, mitigating risks to ensure a young person stays and thrives in education. However, there are barriers to doing this vital relationship-building work effectively and too often families do not feel involved as equal partners in their children's education, particularly when it comes to school exclusions or managed moves.

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Building on their established practice in this area, the RSA has worked with Tower Hamlets to understand what relationships between schools and families in the borough look like when communicating about behaviour, attendance, and exclusions. Our shared aim is to inform Tower Hamlets' established and ongoing work in supporting the experiences of pupils who go through the managed move process, and their reintegration back into mainstream schools.

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Through our research, we found that where schools engage young people and their families as active partners before, during, and after exclusions and managed moves, this is found to be highly valuable and leads to positive outcomes for young people in Tower Hamlets. We also saw areas where this good practice was not being replicated consistently across schools in the borough.

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Our recommendations focus on ensuring consistency in inclusive practice, early intervention, and other appropriate provision for pupils vulnerable to exclusion, building on a renewed focus and commitment from those working across education, health, and social care to engage with local and national government to ensure the potential of all children is fulfilled, and parents' trust and investment in the system is restored.

Introduction

Strong relationships between schools and families are recognised as a crucial factor in preventing school exclusions, mitigating risks to ensure a young person stays and thrives in education. Successful relationships allow schools to better understand the needs of a child, while families feel valued as active partners in their child's education and wellbeing. Effective, two-way communication is also crucial in improving the experiences of families and young people during exclusion processes when they do occur. However, there are barriers to doing this vital relationship-building work effectively, and too often families do not feel involved as equal partners in their children's education, particularly when it comes to school exclusions or managed moves.¹

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has been working to engage parents and carers in children's learning and development for many years, largely delivered by family support and engagement practitioners. Their evidence-informed approach is based on the understanding that when families have a good relationship with their child's school and are engaged in their learning, young peoples' life chances and outcomes improve.² Tower Hamlets has also been working to improve exclusion practices and processes by developing a consistent and transparent approach to managed moves, through their Behaviour and Attendance partnership between schools and the local authority. The RSA's 2020 [report Pinball Kids](#), conceived of school exclusions primarily as a social justice issue. Through our research, we found that a range of systemic factors had created the perfect storm for rising exclusions. We also found that strong, trusting relationships at all levels of the education system were at the heart of solutions.

As part of Pinball Kids, the RSA worked with Tower Hamlets Council to understand what innovative practice was already in place to prevent exclusions. Continuing our partnership, this work has sought to understand what relationships between schools and families in the borough look like when communicating about behaviour, attendance, and exclusions. Our shared aim is to inform Tower Hamlets' established and ongoing work in supporting the experiences of pupils who go through the managed move process, and their reintegration back into mainstream schools.

- 1 A managed move is defined as a coordinated, direct transfer from one school to another. These are often used as a 'fresh start' which avoids a permanent exclusion from the student's original school. Tower Hamlets monitors these kinds of arrangements, but doesn't broker them, and they happen in a minority of cases. More often, pupils will move from one school to another via placements in alternative provision (AP), known as 'transitional placements'.
- 2 Tower Hamlets Council (2020) Parental Engagement Team (PET) [webpage]. Available at: www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ign/education_and_learning/parental_support/parental_engagement.aspx

Key findings

This briefing captures key insights and recommendations developed through a literature review and qualitative research conducted with young people, families, and practitioners between 2020-23, aiming to inform future practice to strengthen relationships between families and schools to prevent school exclusions. The full report was produced for internal use by Tower Hamlets to inform their ongoing work in this area. The RSA and Tower Hamlets agreed to publish the key findings in order to share insights and support broader ongoing efforts to improve the experiences of young people and their families undergoing exclusions and/or managed moves.

Through our research, we found instances of what the literature indicated to be good practice in working to prevent exclusions across Tower Hamlets, delivered by professionals who care about the young people and families they encounter daily. Despite this, our research indicates that there continues to be barriers to school-family communication around behaviour, attendance, and exclusions. Though the case studies should not be viewed as generalisable experiences across Tower Hamlets, they contain important examples of where improved relationships between schools and families, and a more consistent approach to inclusion across the borough, could improve outcomes for pupils.

Where schools engage young people and their families as active partners before, during, and after exclusions and managed moves, this is found to be highly valuable leading to positive outcomes for young people in the borough. Through interviews, parents, pupils, and staff provided examples of specific practices such as:

- Proactive, positive, two-way communication about behaviour, involving parents as active partners, and leading to families feeling comfortable enough to be open and truthful about the challenges they or their child are facing, without fear of professional judgement.
- Trained key workers providing close, targeted support and building relationships with pupils, leading to reflection and an understanding of what they can do to manage their behaviour better.
- Thorough involvement of families and pupils in managed move processes, from the point of referral, throughout the pupil's time in their new setting, and during the transition back to mainstream school.
- Robust pastoral structures and thorough induction processes for pupils reintegrating into mainstream school.

Interviews also indicated areas where this good practice was not being replicated consistently across schools in Tower Hamlets, such as:

- Teachers not communicating effectively enough with parents about issues related to a child's behaviour and attendance, and missed opportunities for school-family collaboration to identify practical support.
- Unclear/lack of information and advice for families about what managed moves entail, what their rights as parents are, and how to appeal decisions for those who lack resources or support networks.
- Pupils and families not being or feeling fully involved in decisions that affect their education.
- Exclusions being used as a threat to coerce families into agreeing to managed moves.
- An imbalance of power between schools and families, whereby parents find it difficult to understand their rights and/or participate fully in exclusions processes. The literature and our interviews suggest this is particularly difficult for parents less likely to have the material resources and social networks possessed by their more advantaged peers.
- Misinformation or misunderstandings among parents and pupils about managed moves.
- Negative perceptions of alternative provision from pupils and families, sometimes propagated by schools, even in cases where it has been beneficial as part of a managed move.

Through the literature, and corroborated in interviews, we found evidence of factors beyond an individual school's control, but where appropriate support is necessary to mitigate their effects, such as:

- Barriers to parental engagement exacerbated by challenging circumstances in families' home lives, previous negative experiences of school among parents, and language barriers.
- Budget pressures leading to under-resourcing of pastoral structures in schools, and inadequate information-sharing between schools and other services surrounding young people and families.

Next steps

Building on insights from this research, and the RSA's research with other local authorities across England, we have developed the following recommendations for Tower Hamlets Council, focusing on ensuring consistency in inclusive practice, early intervention, and other appropriate provision for pupils vulnerable to exclusion. We recognise that schools are at different stages along their path to inclusion, and that wholesale improvement cannot be implemented overnight. We also recognise that much good practice is already underway in Tower Hamlets, as highlighted in Pinball Kids.

However, there is momentum to build upon following the publication of the government's SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) and alternative provision improvement plan, as well as new statutory guidance around behaviour. There is renewed focus and commitment from those working across education, health and care to work with local and national government to ensure all children's potential is fulfilled, and parents' trust and investment in the system is restored. Our recommendations seek to contribute to this turning tide, to build stronger, more collaborative environments within and between schools, and between schools, families and young people, and enabling Tower Hamlets to build on this established practice to prevent exclusions and ensure excellent outcomes for all young people.

Recommendations for the Tower Hamlets Behaviour and Attendance Partnership (BAP)



To ensure consistency of inclusive practice, the Behaviour Attendance Partnership (BAP) should further develop peer-to-peer work and partnerships between schools.

There is evidence to suggest that partnerships involving high-performing schools supporting lower-performing schools can lead to improvements in pupil outcomes in the contexts of school federations and multi-academy trusts³ The BAP should encourage schools 'further along the path' to inclusion and parental engagement to work with those who may require more support.

When used appropriately, self-evaluation can have a positive impact on: 1) institutional practice (schools become learning organisations, engaging in evidence-informed teaching and learning), 2) student learning and achievement (more effective consideration of students' needs and enhanced student support), and 3) community outcomes (improved school culture and community involvement).⁴ The BAP should support schools to use evidence-based self-evaluation tools to identify their own strengths and weaknesses around inclusive practice, with a particular focus on parental engagement and the managed move process. The results of self-evaluation can help create clusters of good practice on different aspects of inclusive practice, enabling schools to learn and partner with one another.

In consideration of school leaders' time, the local authority should continue to provide administrative support in all existing panels and partnership meetings (eg fair access protocol (FAP), strategic panel, school forum), and support school leaders in organising themselves for peer-to-peer work.

3 Mujs, D (2015) Improving schools through collaboration: a mixed methods study of school-to-school partnerships in the primary sector. *Oxford Review of Education*: Volume 41, Issue 5, pp563–586.

4 Welsh Government (2022) Self-evaluation for school improvement: an evidence review. Education Research Policy Branch, Pedagogy, Leadership and Professional Learning Division, The Education Directorate. [PDF] Available at: hwb.gov.wales/professional-development/thenational-strategy-for-educational-research-and-enquiry-nser/nser-evidence-reviews/

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To tackle consistency in how needs are identified and supported, the BAP should work with schools, practitioners, and families to co-produce and codify effective early intervention processes.

As part of the development of the government's new national standards for SEND provision, Tower Hamlets should explore opportunities for co-production with young people and their families, ensuring the perspectives and concerns of key beneficiaries are built into any framework around early intervention.

Working closely with early help and parental engagement/advice teams, the BAP could establish working groups with young people vulnerable to exclusion and/or their family members to explore effective early intervention practice, including more informed parental voice and feedback.

Understanding that parental engagement is influenced by the quality of previous relationships between families and schools/services, and parents' own experiences of education, particular attention should be paid to creative approaches to participation, such as time and location of meetings, to support parents to overcome any mistrust or negative feelings towards services.

3

To support parents of young people most vulnerable to exclusion, and to mitigate negative perceptions of alternative provision among families, Tower Hamlets should strengthen partnership working between mainstream schools and alternative provision settings.

Alternative provision settings like LEAP in Tower Hamlets, are sources of innovative, inclusive practice related to understanding and addressing pupil needs as well as effective reintegration. The BAP should find ways to encourage for cross-collaboration between mainstream and alternative provision settings around these themes.

Where funding arrangements allow, an outreach offer by the alternative provision could complement and extend the outreach offer of central services.

Building on the requirements of the new SEND/AP improvement plan as well as the work of Tower Hamlets' own Family Information Service (FIS), the BAP should also prioritise improving and continuously updated the information available to families, providing a tailored list of suitable alternative provision settings informed by evidence-based local inclusion plans (LIPs).

4

To ensure the best outcome for the pupil, the BAP should build on the existing pupil-movement monitoring systems by developing mechanisms for peer-to-peer monitoring and support, including re-introducing the school-based FAP advisor role.

Tower Hamlets have a well-established process for managed moves, but we found examples where this wasn't being applied or translated properly. The FAP is clear and consistent but needs to account for high staff turnover and ensure training is in place for all new staff to role, so messages are delivered continuously and consistently.

The BAP could also support schools to collaborate locally around monitoring and accountability, to embed collective ownership over the wellbeing and outcomes of the most vulnerable pupils.

The re-introduction of a school-based FAP advisor role would help with pupil movement-related data analysis, improved evaluation of managed moves, and support for both mainstream and alternative provision settings in best practice.

5

To ensure that families have clarity over the managed move process, including the aspects they can and cannot inform, Tower Hamlets should make sure that guidance is easily, readily available and accessible.

The BAP should make a concerted effort to address the power imbalance between parents and schools (power skewing towards the latter) by ensuring that families and pupils know where and how to access confidential and reliable support. This support includes ensuring that parents are fully aware of their rights, fully understand schools' formal complaints procedures, are signposted to financial information, citizens' advice, and counselling services, and have had their and their children's views fully considered.

For this, the BAP should develop an accessible leaflet (considering language and digital barriers) that outlines, in simple language, things like:

- What is a managed move and why might it be the most suitable option at this stage?
- What does the process look like?
- Which stakeholders are involved in the process (outgoing school, local authority, LEAP, new school)?
- What is the role/expectation from each stakeholder in ensuring the success of the managed move?

To ensure consistency of the managed move process, the BAP should add to the existing guidance a suggested agenda and script for speaking to parents about the possibility of a managed move for their child. This can be co-produced with schools.

Methodology

The research explored the following questions:

1. How do schools and families in Tower Hamlets communicate about changes in behaviour and attendance in Tower Hamlets (early indicators of exclusion)?

2. How do schools and families communicate about the exclusion process in Tower Hamlets?

3. What does best practice in building strong school-family relationships that contribute to improved attendance and behaviour look like in Tower Hamlets?

To answer these questions, the following research activities were undertaken:

1. Literature review

Using the literature consulted for the Pinball Kids report as a starting point, we searched Google Scholar for key terms related to each of the research questions above. We snowballed from this initial set of sources to find and review further relevant literature. In total, 127 articles were reviewed. Of these, 67 were relevant to, and have informed, the findings of our review.

Crucially, we found that relatively few studies explored exclusion processes from the perspective of families and fewer still took the perspective of children and young people on board. Interviews conducted with families and young people were undertaken to begin to address that gap.

2. Semi-structured interviews

The insights from the literature review informed interviews undertaken with school staff, families, and young people. In total we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with young people (n=8), their families (n=4), school staff (n=10), and with staff at Tower Hamlets local authority (n=3). Interviews lasted on average around 45 minutes to an hour, some in-person and some via video call.

Interviews with young people and their families explored their experiences leading up to, during, and after the managed move process, with a focus on what kinds of communication and support they received from educational settings and the local authority. We also asked for their recommendations for future practice.

With the help of London East Alternative Provision (LEAP), we identified eight pupils and their families for interview. To provide a range of experiences, we asked LEAP to introduce us to pupils who have had experience of the managed move process. To gather a range of experiences, we asked them to identify pupils with more and less success with reintegration into mainstream school through their managed move, and those who have been in alternative provision long-term.

Interviews with school staff explored how they work with families around attendance and behaviour issues, how they communicate with families about exclusion processes (fixed-term exclusions, permanent exclusions, managed moves, and reintegration programmes), any challenges they face in these processes, and what support they felt they might need to improve their communications with families.

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ISBN 978-1-911532-62-0