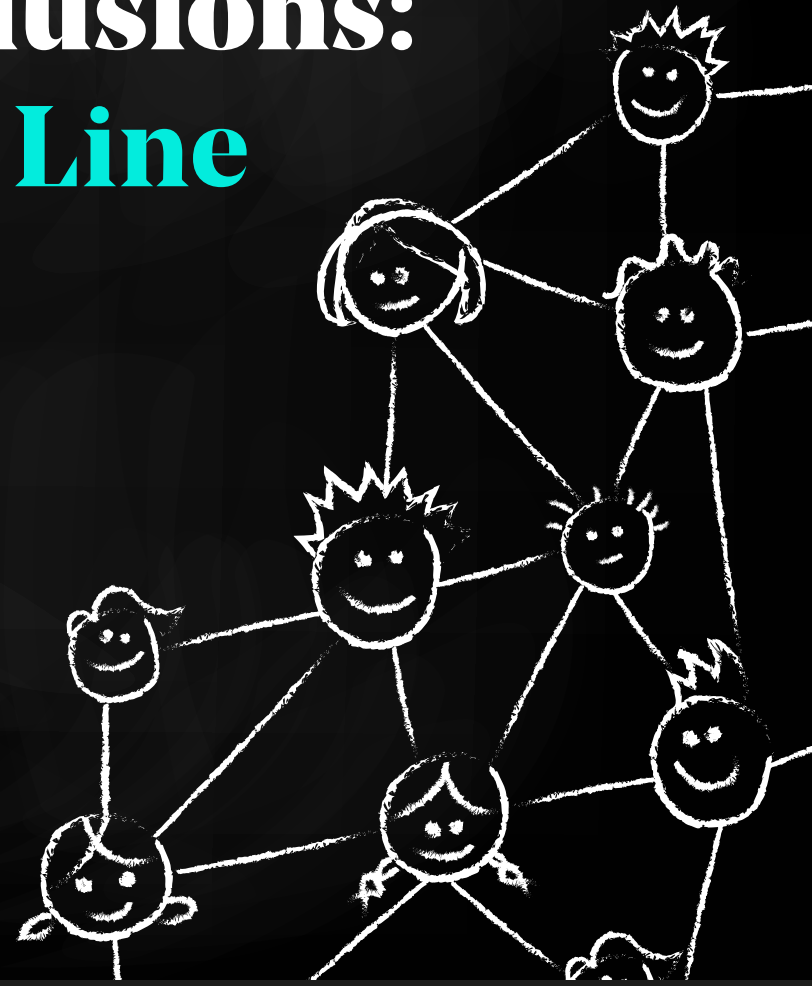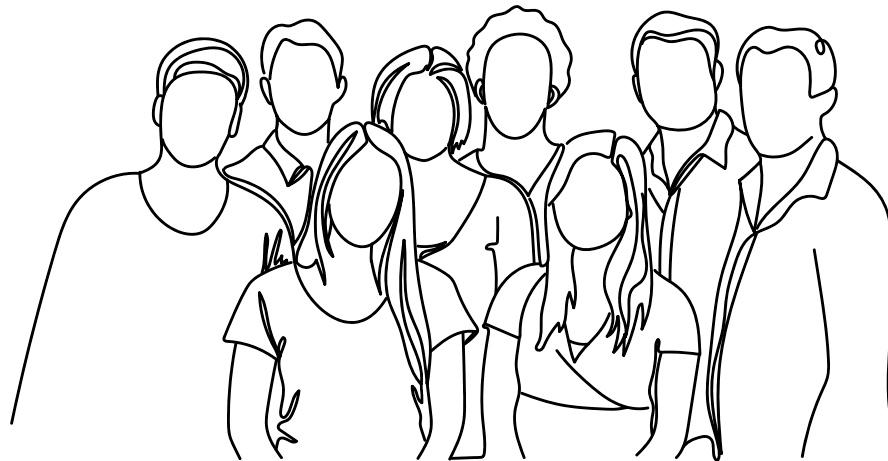# Preventing School Exclusions:
Lessons from the Front Line

RSA

We are the RSA

Our mission

To enable people, places and the planet to flourish in harmony.

Our vision

A world where everyone can fulfil their potential and contribute to more resilient, rebalanced and regenerative futures.

How we deliver our work

We do this by uniting people ideas in collective action to unlock opportunities to regenerate our world.

A collaboration of changemakers

Executive summary

School exclusions are a social justice issue, disproportionately affecting vulnerable pupils and limiting their life chances.

The RSA's _Pinball Kids report (2020)_ revealed that wider societal factors, combined with direct and indirect consequences of policymaking, had severed relationships at all levels within the education system. This "perfect storm" was behind the rise and persistence of exclusions.

To address this, in 2021, we embarked on a three-year journey alongside three English local authorities with the aims of:

• Improving multi-agency working
• Reducing exclusions
• Making local education systems more inclusive.

This report presents our process, what we learned about the "elements" needed to facilitate deeper collaborative approaches – both from their presence, and in some cases their absence – and the signs of change we have seen as courageous local leaders have worked together to tackle the complex issue of school exclusions.

The "elements" for sustainable collaborative action

1
Strong foundations
take time to research and map all the systems at play so the right priorities are identified from the outset

Sf

5
Defined expectations
consider the impact of funding, roles, and accountability structures

De

2
Diverse membership
bring together a range of perspectives and expertise for more inclusive design

Dm

3
Neutral facilitation
ensure equal participation, build foundational relationships, and provide administrative support

Nf

4
Managed membership
actively work on continuity and sustainability over multi-year partnerships

Mm

Outcomes

The Preventing School Exclusions (PSE) programme has contributed to significant changes in collaborative working at a local level:

Stronger relationships: enhanced trust and communication between agencies is leading to improved collaboration and unified approaches

Inclusive practices: tailored and coordinated interventions are better meeting children's needs, reducing the risk of exclusion

Systems change: disjointed working (and in some cases mistrust) is giving way to cultures of open communication focussed on preventing exclusion

Contents

Glossary of terms

AP – Alternative Provision	Educational settings outside of mainstream schools that cater to students not attending traditional school environments for various reasons (includes PRUs – Pupil Referral Units)	SEMH – Social, Emotional and Mental Health	SEMH support often involves tailored interventions to help individuals develop coping strategies and improve their emotional and social functioning.
CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services	Regional NHS service that provides mental health assessment, support, and treatment for children and young people up to the age of 18	SENCO – Special Educational Needs Coordinator	School staff members responsible for overseeing the provision and support for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
FAP – Fair Access Protocols	Guidelines designed to ensure that vulnerable and hard-to-place children, including those who have been excluded, are given a priority in school admissions	Virtual school	A statutory service that supports the educational progress of children in care. Does not function as a physical school but acts as an advocacy and coordination service to ensure that looked-after children receive the best possible education.
Managed move	Allows a student to transfer from one school to another as an alternative to permanent exclusion. It is a collaborative arrangement between the current school, the receiving school, the student, and their parents or carers, often facilitated by the local authority		

Context & Methodology

A crisis of exclusion

An inclusive education system is one where every child matters and can access everything they need to thrive.

Yet the education system in England is not delivering on its duty to provide this. At the outset of this programme in 2021, school exclusions in England were already at alarmingly high levels, but have continued to rise, with *Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, Academic year 2022/23* figures showing 9,376 children permanently excluded from school (up from 6,495 in 2021/22) at a rate of 0.11% (up from 0.08% in 2021/22). This is the highest ever recorded annual number of permanent exclusions.

Excluding children from school has a long term negative impact on their health and wellbeing, future educational opportunities and life outcomes.

Combined with this is an ongoing disproportionality in experiences of exclusion. Suspensions and exclusions are most likely to impact children from low-income backgrounds, students from some minority ethnic backgrounds, children known to social services, pupils with special educational needs (SEN), and students with mental health issues.[1]

The system is failing children, and urgent reform is needed.

Why collaborative working?

Exclusion is a complex issue, with persistent disruptive behaviour playing a significant role. But there are other compounding factors at play.

The RSA's report *Pinball Kids (2020)*[2] revealed that wider societal factors, combined with direct and indirect consequences of policymaking, had severed relationships at all levels within the education system. It was our belief that this "perfect storm" was behind the rise and persistence of exclusions, and we set out to explore a roadmap for a more inclusive future.

The Preventing School Exclusions project was designed to deliver the following outcomes in three localities experiencing high levels of exclusions:

- Improved quality of relationships between local partners

- Increased commitment from local partners to multi-agency approaches to reducing preventable exclusions

- Sustainable improvements in mechanisms for early identification and timely response to risk/need

We wanted to explore whether improved local multi-agency working "upstream" could lead to an ongoing reduction in preventable exclusions.

90% of excluded pupils do not achieve a pass in GCSE Maths or English.

The Institute for Public Policy Research, *'Who is Losing Learning?'*, September 2024

1 Gill, K., Brown, S., O'Brien, C., Graham, J., and Poku-Amanfo, E., (2024) Who is losing learning?: The case for reducing exclusions across mainstream schools, IPPR and The Difference..

2 Partridge, L., Landreth Strong, F., Lobley, E., and Mason, D., (2020) Pinball Kids: Preventing School Exclusions. The RSA

Local contexts

Three local authorities experiencing above average levels of permanent exclusions made a shared commitment with the RSA to journey towards inclusion by building stronger multi-agency relationships:

The 2nd highest rate of permanent exclusions, twice the national average
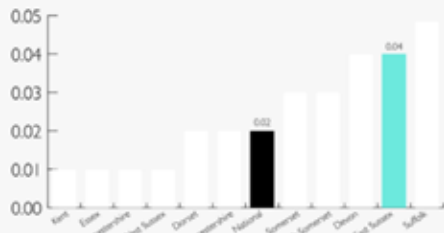
2019/20 PEX% (across statistical neighbours)

East Sussex

In 2019/20 East Sussex had the 4th highest rate of suspensions, and the 2nd highest rate of permanent exclusions (twice the national average) compared to its statistical neighbours.

Exclusions compared to statistical neighbours
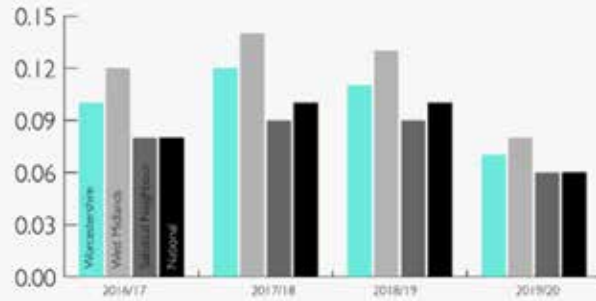
PEX% (across statistical neighbours)

Worcestershire

In 2019/20 Worcestershire's rates of permanent exclusions remained higher than statistical neighbours and the national average, although the gap had reduced from the previous year.

Rate of Permanent Exclusions, PEX (primary)
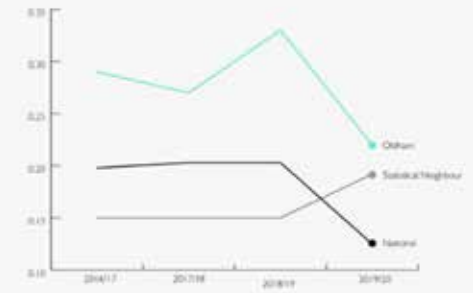
Rate of Permanent Exclusions, PEX (Secondary)

Oldham

In 2019/20, exclusions at primary were low, but rising, while the rate of permanent exclusions at secondary was dropping but remained substantially greater than the national and statistical neighbour average.

Collaborations for change

A roadmap to sustainability

The RSA's interim report, _Collaborations for Change (2023)_, lays out the full theory of change and methodology for the PSE programme. Here we outline how the functions of the RSA's role as a facilitator evolved over the course of the three year intervention to support place-based change.

Convening (2021 – 22)

Working with Anchor organisations in each locality (in all three cases this was the local authority Education service), the RSA delivered a programme of consultation and research in each area, drawing together information into three local system maps.

At the same time we supported a member of staff from the Anchor organisation who acted as the local lead to establish a local 'Collaborative' made of partners from schools, health, social care, and parent carer representatives, all of whom were considered as having a role in preventing school exclusion.

As part of this 'Convening' phase of the programme, the RSA ran five workshops with each collaborative group to explore issues arising from the systems maps and to develop a joint vision and shared action plan to reduce preventable exclusions.

Coaching (2022 – 24)

Each locality's action plan consisted of 3 – 6 individual activities designed to reduce exclusions – each managed by a sub-group of the Collaborative. These activities were designed for the specific contexts of each locality, but common approaches included peer-to-peer learning and support groups for professionals, improved methods for information sharing, and the development of tools to help identify and support children at risk of exclusion.

During Years 2 and 3 of the programme, the RSA's role was to support each of the sub-groups and the overall Collaborative to deliver their action plan, and to support the local projects at a strategic level through work with the Anchor local authority.

Coaching support for the collaboratives consisted of in-person workshops, online cross-locality workshops, and individual sessions with sub-group chairs.

Culmination (2024 +)

Throughout the programme, responsibility for the delivery of activity in each locality has rested with members of each Collaborative. The RSA staged a careful withdrawal of direct support over the months leading up to August 2024 to ensure that work had the best chance of continuing when the funded period came to an end.

Over the following pages we outline the activities delivered in each locality, key learnings and outcomes, and highlight the aspects of the work which now show signs of long-term sustainability

"We now have some very exciting new systems in place which are making a real difference to children."

Iona Wooderson

Senior Manager: Targeted Support Services, East Sussex County Council

Photo by Laura Aziz

East Sussex

The East Sussex Collaborative

Following the System Mapping and Convening process, the East Sussex Collaborative agreed on three priorities:

1. Improving inclusive practice in primary settings
2. Better understanding and alignment of available support across health and children's services
3. mproved transitions from primary to secondary school

Stronger relationships between health and children's services

One of the key organisational outcomes outlined in the PSE's theory of change was "Improved alignment and coordination of services and agencies supporting schools, children and young people, and families, so that there is greater coherence in the locality's support offer."

A new East Sussex Inclusion Helpline and Therapy One Point service has been established, which has created a more joined-up approach to training provision across multiple partners and a remodelled East Sussex Children website, featuring engaging videos with advice and "top tips" for professionals and parents. Analysis has identified **23,000 different visitors to the website over the last 12 months**.

This has resulted in an improved understanding of the work of colleagues in partner organisations; generating new ideas and solutions, freeing up resources, and improving the coherence of the local "offer" from universal to targeted support.

The training sessions delivered to SENCOs and staff in schools have had positive feedback:

"The advisor is always approachable and willing to support, help and locate/provide new strategies and resources."

Changing practice around transitions

A working group of teachers and parents came together with support from the RSA to develop best practice guidance on effective transition from primary to secondary school. The aims are to ensure all children and families experience a positive transition and feel a sense of belonging and welcome at secondary school, and that staff are well informed about the needs of children joining them so that the numbers of suspensions and exclusions in Year 7 are reduced.

4 secondary schools together with some of their feeder primaries have been involved in piloting the new approach. Joint Personal, Social, Health, and Economic training for staff has been delivered in all 4 secondaries and children have been trained as Transition Ambassadors to provide peer support and mentoring to children arriving from primary school.

A best practice document was produced outlining to schools 'What Good Transition Looks Like'. This has been shared with the pilot schools and will be further developed through collaboration with those schools as they put the elements into practice.

The pupils who received Transition Ambassador training found it helpful:

"The thing that I liked most about today was how we all got to talk and how difficult some of us found moving to secondary school. I lost some of my old friends, but I haven't talked about it much and it still makes me feel upset." – Year 7 child

Improving inclusive practice in primary settings

3 primary headteachers, with the support of a local authority manager, developed a peer-led support and challenge network for East Sussex primary schools. The aim was to create a safe space for school staff to share concerns and identify solutions which secure a positive impact for the pupils concerned.

Schools were organised by existing geographic areas into four networks. Regular peer-led workshops were hosted by Headteachers and attended by SENCOs, educational psychologists, and inclusion specialists to explore alternative approaches and get practical advice where a school is struggling to meet the needs of children or groups of children with difficult and/or dangerous behaviours.

There is a strong emphasis on identifying strategies that work in engaging individual children and families early and enable a more inclusive environment for all. Participants valued the provision of advice and professional expertise in a non-judgemental way and welcomed the solution-focused approach. Those involved have also welcomed the creation of informal peer networks for ongoing support and improved understanding of the wider support available.

87.5% felt they received helpful advice on the case they put forward,

75% said they had implemented their learning beyond the case they had discussed,

75% said they had been able to advise other staff on meeting pupil needs.

"It has been a great experience being involved in this project. The RSA has skilfully led us through a process of considering the barriers to inclusion and working with our partners to face them head-on. By keeping us focused on this agenda, they have facilitated significant work in the area, and as a result we have some very exciting new systems in place which are making a real difference to children and school staff."

– Iona Wooderson, Senior Manager: Targeted Support Services, East Sussex County Council

"Sometimes professionals telling you you have done a good job is just what we need to help you feel more revived to keep going. Essentially the meeting increased my resilience rather than giving me anything new. This however was beyond useful."

– Peer workshop participant

> "A whole culture shift has happened and everyone supports one another very clearly."

Adrian McLean

Director of Secondary Education, Severn Academies Educational Trust

Worcestershire

The Worcestershire Collaborative

Worcestershire's Education and Skills Strategy 2019-24 had highlighted the need for a more joined-up local approach, with key priorities of:

- Supporting mainstream schools to be more inclusive.
- Agreeing on the role and approach of alternative provision in preventing school exclusions.
- Strengthening multi-agency working to prevent exclusions.

The initial action plan for the Worcestershire collaborative detailed 6 workstreams but others were added through the course of the programme. Here we summarise some of the highlights and learnings emerging across the county.

Co-designed primary inclusion offer

A local Pupil Referral Unit – The Beacon Centre – has worked with a network of primary headteachers to design an outreach support service towards which participating schools pay a small annual fee. The service aims to improve outcomes for pupils with SEMH needs and support schools in their mission to prevent permanent exclusions. In the first year, 28 primary schools signed up, and headteachers report positively on their experience:

**"I feel like I can now handle more difficult situations and I know what to do when he dysregulates."
– Teaching Assistant**

97% of children referred to the programme during the academic year 2023-24 were still enrolled in their mainstream school placements by the end of the summer term.

Health and education partnerships

Early intervention for children in Worcestershire has improved through a range of initiatives, including Trauma Informed Schools (led and funded by Worcestershire Virtual School), an associated professional development network for lead school practitioners.

The pupils who received Transition Ambassador training found it enjoyable and helpful:

**"Initially all I wanted from it was to be able to talk to the most vulnerable children in my school without saying the wrong thing, but now I am full of ideas for how all staff can help to make these children less combative and feeling unloved and give them a firmer foundation in which to heal."
Headteacher feedback (anon)**

During the course of the PSE programme, an existing SENCO network was substantially expanded by the local authority Educational Psychologist and is now attended by over 200 practitioners. It helps those working with the county's most vulnerable children to learn about local CAMHS and health offers, for example, occupational therapy. It is clear that this is providing earlier opportunities for behaviour leads to provide interventions for children with challenging behaviour.

In another workstream, Worcestershire's Virtual Schools Headteacher and Education Engagement Lead produced a graduated response to preventing exclusions. Headteachers were supported to explore all avenues prior to exclusion by following a process which sets out the help on offer from all services in the county. Communication has improved over the course of the collaborative through conferences, and highlighting best practice in inclusion in newsletters for schools.

Inclusion is a shared responsibility

One of the key systems change outcomes outlined in the PSE's theory of change was "A more equitable distribution of burdens, risks, and opportunities to reduce preventable exclusions, and ways to ensure equity is sustained."

Fair Access Protocols have been a focus in Worcestershire.

Here the PSE project has directly supported work on the Mainstream FAP, and also influenced work on an Alternative Provision FAP. The Mainstream FAP in particular has been perceived as encouraging fairness in how children at risk of exclusions are served through managed moves, with schools more likely to 'take their turn' than was previously felt.

This reflects not only a sense that moves are being allocated more quickly, but also that inclusion is a shared responsibility. "No names" case consultations have provided support to headteachers around inclusion and opportunities for peer coaching.

"Educationalists have a responsibility to share any inclusive practice that allows pupils to succeed. This collaboration has linked multi disciplinary agencies in a way that has developed structural support for disadvantaged young people in Worcestershire."

– Sara Devo, Head Teacher, Continu Plus Academy

"I think it's been really about being transparent and open, but also having quite honest conversations with people… it hasn't been a 'done to' process, it's been collaborative."

– Adrian McLean, FAP Chair and Executive Director, Severn Academy Education Trust

> **"This project gave us the stepping stones in terms of the workstreams that we do now."**
>
> Vicki Harold
>
> Principal Educational Psychologist & Preventative Lead, Oldham Council

Oldham

Oldham Action Plan

At the Systems Mapping and Convening stage, Collaborative members from Oldham highlighted the need for improved partnership working to help reduce preventable exclusions. Specifically, the vision described a commitment to:

• A local culture that maintains high standards of inclusion, while offering support and nurture to those that may be struggling

• Understand and engage with young people as whole persons (why is the behaviour happening? What else is happening outside of school?)

• More alignment and shared understanding between schools, services, and families, particularly around identification of need

Information sharing and peer-learning between schools

Two workstreams explored ways in which schools could share information and learning more effectively to help prevent exclusions:

An inclusion network of secondary headteachers and senior staff meets for anonymous discussion of cases and peer-led problem solving. They also share and examine their inclusion-related data, and examples of practice that are working well as a basis for development and learning. This network meets termly, has been well attended, and is actively committed to engaging with new schools.

There was also a pilot to explore the usefulness of an early identification toolkit which would allow teachers in Years 5 and 6 to identify pupils at risk of exclusion and give them additional support in the lead-up to secondary transition. School engagement was limited, but the local authority Educational Psychology service and SENCOs around the borough have been using the tool instead.

Both workstreams have shone a spotlight on the spike in exclusions around the Year 6/7 transition and have contributed to a renewed sense of focus on supporting children through this period:

"When I'm doing other areas of work, kids in Years 5 and 6, I will now always ask about transition – ask what's in place so it's successful.' – Grace Walsh, Emotional Wellbeing Specialist Nurse, Oldham CAMHS

Coordinated inclusion support and referral routes

In a collaboration between the local authority Education and Early Help services, as well as primary and secondary schools around Oldham, a new system of Social and Emotional Need and Disability (SEND) and Inclusion reviews and drop-in clinics was developed.

Virtual inclusion clinics revised the scope of existing SENCO clinics to incorporate all inclusion-related discussions and allowed non-SENCOs to bring questions or concerns related to inclusion. In a new piece of work arising directly from the PSE Oldham Collaborative, there are also now half-termly in-person clinics hosted at two secondary schools, and supported by Early Help.

In addition, the local authority has extended its SEND and Inclusion Review process. The Council has carried out around 10 SEND reviews this year.

Another workstream set out to build a single point of information to help staff working with children understand all services available, and when and how to make a referral. It also intended to make information available to parents of children and young people at risk of being excluded. This work has since been subsumed into a larger piece on mapping and there is work planned on a communication strategy which will support eventual dissemination of this.

Ongoing funding to deliver outcomes for children

One of the key organisational outcomes outlined in the PSE's theory of change was "The release/securing of (joint) funding for enhanced access to preventative or other appropriate support provision."

During the course of the PSE programme, Oldham were offered the opportunity to be part of the Delivering Better Value (DBV) programme, which carried with it funding. As part of the DBV analysis, transitions were identified as an area of need. This was reinforced by a SEND Local Area inspection from Ofsted and in combination led to the investment of DBV funding into a member of staff to provide further development of this workstream.

As a result, 3 of the 4 Collaborative sub-groups have been subsumed into the local authority's ongoing SEND strategy.

Whilst funding was not given specifically to advance the work of the PSE programme, in both Worcestershire and Oldham, other national funding like this was noted by Collaborative members as having been a significant vehicle for delivering on the PSE priorities.

"We all have different management and different ways of working, but… it's taken us down other paths of different things. It builds relationships, just seeing people face-to-face. 'What do you do? Oh we could work together on that.' For me that's one of the big impacts, of the RSA work – it's opened a lot of doors in promoting multi-agency working."
– Dr Vicki Harold, Head of Specialist Services, Oldham Council

"Delivering Better Value and Change Partnership Programme is all in that one group,… they have all been into one workstream now and have a lead for everything so that people aren't duplicating work. [The PSE project] gave us the stepping stones in terms of the workstreams that we do now. And some of the partnership working, which wasn't there."
– Dr Vicki Harold, Head of Specialist Services, Oldham Council

Programme Evaluation

The evaluation of the Preventing School Exclusions project was designed, delivered, and reported by Vivien Niblett, an independent researcher and evaluator. The full report can be found here.

Over the course of the project, a mixed method evaluation methodology sought to explore the following question to test our original hypothesis that collaborative working was key to reducing exclusions long-term:

"How and to what extent has the PSE project contributed to improved multi-agency working in the Collaboratives and their localities?"

Outputs

All of the sub-group projects identified in the collaborative action plans have progressed, with many being delivered and now becoming well established new practices, offers, or services in the three localities.

Programme Outcomes

The PSE's long term aim was to reduce preventable exclusions by improving the quality of relationships, organisational working practices, and features of local systems.

Whilst it was outside the scope of this programme to try and create a measurable reduction in exclusions short-term, there is strong consensus across all three localities that the quality of the RSA's facilitation process meant the right priorities were identified by this work, ensuring that the subsequent two years of delivery have focused on delivering targeted activities matched to local needs.

Relationships Outcomes	Organisations Outcomes	Systems Outcomes
Members felt more empathy and understanding of others' roles, perspectives, and the constraints they work within.	Evidence that organisations were beginning to work towards more coherent local offers focussed on the needs of children.	Shifting attitudes on inclusive education, collaborative working, and the highlighting of under explored areas (e.g. primary to secondary transition).

Lessons for the future

Over the course of a 3-year intervention, the Preventing School Exclusions programme has delivered significant changes in collaborative working at a local level.

We are encouraged by the changes evidenced in all three localities to foster stronger relationships, more inclusive practices, and a shared commitment to reducing preventable exclusions. Based on our previous research *(Pinball Kids, 2020)* and other evidence, we expect these changes to contribute to reduced exclusions down the line.

Here we present our final reflections on what were observed to be the "active ingredients" in fostering effective multi-agency working on a complex challenge.

It is our hope that this work will inspire, inform, and guide other changemakers as they take collective action to prevent exclusions and champion every child's right to education.

Join the conversation

For 270 years Fellows of the RSA have rolled their sleeves up and helped to solve some of society's greatest challenges. We welcome you to join our inclusive global community seeking better ways to deliver change.

Explore Fellowship

We also host The Innovative Education Network, which seeks to support the development of a more inclusive, equitable, and adaptive learning society for all. This network is open to everyone interested in learning and education, whatever your expertise or experience.

Find out more

Sf — Strong foundations

What we learned:

The programme method, particularly the early focus on system mapping and convening, was seen as an effective way to build consensus and identify actionable change. Collaborative members increasingly saw the value of the evidence base represented by the Year 1 System Maps, especially as the project developed.

There is strong consensus across localities that the quality of this process meant the right priorities were identified by this work, ensuring that the subsequent two years of delivery have focused on the activities matched to local needs.

What we recommend:

Allow sufficient time to gather evidence and map out relevant systems and structures to inform action planning.

Support members to fully explore all views on key issues to build consensus before identifying priorities and an action plan.

Dm — Diverse membership

What we learned:

Membership diversity in the collaboratives benefitted projects in a number of ways, including providing diverse viewpoints and expertise and improving understanding of what other members/organisations provide.

However, parent/carer involvement faded after Year 1, and, similarly, the voluntary and community sector had almost no involvement at all, despite both emerging as key partners in the system maps.

What we recommend:

Carefully consider what views/expertise are needed to develop an inclusive approach and who needs to be invited.

Deliberately consider the long-term roles and involvement of all stakeholders and make a plan for engagement, e.g. vary the formats, timings and venues for meetings so working parents can attend.

Nf — Neutral facilitation

What we learned:

The RSA's independent facilitation role was credited by members as one of the catalysts for action. Having a neutral facilitator ensured all partners could fully participate as equals in the vision setting process. In the later stages of the project, the RSA's role evolved to provide problem-solving support as the sub-groups delivered their activities.

A significant part of this process was also providing opportunities for people to be in a room together and building foundational relationships and trust that enabled constructive working.

What we recommend:

Appoint a neutral facilitator to enable true co-design and delivery of vision and action plan.

Intentionally build in time for people to establish personal relationships: don't underestimate the role of good coffee!

Mm — Managed membership

What we learned:

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Deliberately consider the long-term roles and involvement of all stakeholders and make a plan for engagement, e.g. vary the formats, timings and venues for meetings so working parents can attend.

De — Defined expectations

What we learned:

In this model, the RSA's time to facilitate the programme was funded, but no direct funding passed to local authorities, schools, or other services as the purpose and outcomes of the work were considered to be part of participants' usual role/responsibilities.

However, the approach to the work did create additional time and administrative costs above and beyond business-as-usual. At times this had an impact on members' attention for the programme, particularly when other funding was secured locally.

One of the biggest contributors to collective action was the genuine sense of co-design and peer leadership enjoyed by members. However, when not actively nurtured, leadership tends to default to the local authority.

What we recommend:

Design a funding model to suit specific local circumstances. Options could include:

• Cost sharing across a multi-agency partnership to support independent facilitation

• Funding basic administrative costs or "buying-out" time to enhance participation.

Encourage member-led action, with a local authority anchor providing continuity and coordination.

RSA