

In partnership



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PREVENTING SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS IN TOWER HAMLETS

Strengthening relationships between schools and families.
RSA summary report for the borough of Tower Hamlets

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Author's note

The literature review for this report was conducted in summer 2020, during the first stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, it does not include insights and findings from research undertaken to understand the pandemic's effect on school-family relations, exclusions, or educational outcomes. Please read with this caveat in mind.

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About us

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Where world-leading ideas are turned into world-changing actions. We're committed to a world that is resilient, rebalanced and regenerative, where everyone can fulfil their potential.

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Enabling people, places and the planet to flourish.

Our vision

A world that is resilient, rebalanced and regenerative, where everyone can fulfil their potential.

How we deliver our work

We unite people and ideas in collective action to create opportunities to regenerate our world.

We are

A unique global network of changemakers enabling people, places and the planet to flourish.

1 Executive summary

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.

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has been working to engage parents 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 people's life chances and outcomes improve.¹ Tower Hamlets have also been working to improve exclusion practices and processes by developing a consistent and transparent approach to managed moves, with high success rates.²

The RSA first partnered with Tower Hamlets in 2019 to explore how to continue to reduce exclusions and improve practice in the borough as part of the RSA's Pinball Kids project.³ Building on that, through this work we have further explored the ways schools and families communicate about behaviour, attendance, and around the exclusions process. Through our research, the RSA explored the following questions:

- 1. How do schools and families communicate about changes in behaviour and attendance (early indicators of exclusion)?**
- 2. How do schools and families communicate about the exclusion process?**
- 3. What does best practice in building strong school-family relationships that contribute to improved attendance and behaviour look like?**

This report captures key insights from interviews 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. After a summary of recommendations for Tower Hamlets, an introduction outlines our methodology and the context of Tower Hamlets' approach to managed moves. The next chapters provide insights from our literature review, and then from interviews, before finishing with conclusions, considerations, and recommendations. A summary of these recommendations is shared below, focusing on ensuring consistency in parental engagement and inclusive practice, early intervention, and other appropriate provision for pupils vulnerable to exclusion. A separate briefing has also been published on the RSA's website to share these findings and connect this work to broader debates and trends in national policy and practice.

- ¹ Tower Hamlets Council (2020) Parental Engagement Team (PET) [webpage]. Available at: www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/ign/education_and_learning/parental_support/parental_engagement.aspx [Accessed 12 September 2023].
- ² Tower Hamlets Council (2019) Exclusions in Secondary Schools Scrutiny Review Report. [PDF] Available at: democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s156686/Appendix1%20ExclusionScrutinyReview%20FINAL.pdf
- ³ Partridge, L, Landreth Strong, F, Loble, E and Mason, D (2020) Pinball Kids: preventing school exclusions. London: RSA [PDF] Available at: www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/preventing-school-exclusions [Accessed 12 September 2023].

Summary of recommendations for Tower Hamlets Behaviour and Attendance Partnership (BAP)

1

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

2

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.

3

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

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 fair access protocol (FAP) advisor role.

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 guidance is easily, readily available, and accessible.

2 Introduction

Background

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 (see the appendices for an overview of Tower Hamlets' approach to managed moves and new statutory guidance).⁴ 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.

Methodology

Through this research, we 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?

In order to answer these questions, we undertook the following research activities.

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, which is summarised on page 9. The literature review has been produced as a separate document to this one, but key elements are referred to throughout this report.

Further detail on findings can be found in that document and, while we do not suggest they are generalisable, they offer valuable qualitative insights into the issue of school-family communication around behaviour, attendance, and exclusions. 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. We hope that our interviews with families and young people begin to address that gap.

⁴ Department for Education (2023) Suspension and permanent exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England, including pupil movement. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion [Accessed 12 September 2023].

Semi-structured interviews

The insights from our literature review informed interviews undertaken with school staff, families, and young people. In total we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with young people, their families, schools, and with staff at Tower Hamlets local authority.

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 what they would recommend for future practice.

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 doing this, and what support they felt they might need to improve their communications with families.

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 more and less success with reintegration into mainstream school through their managed move, and those who have been in alternative provision long-term:

Pupils*	Status of education at interview	Pupil interviewed	Family member(s) interviewed
Amir	Educated at LEAP	x	
Bilal	Educated at LEAP	x	
Carmen	Educated at LEAP	x	x
Daria	Educated at LEAP (with reintegration plan)	x	
Eli	Mainstream school	x	x
Frankie	Mainstream school	x	x
Gabriel	Mainstream school	x	x
Haseeb	Mainstream school	x	

*All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

With the help of Tower Hamlets as well as an open call out, we identified the following settings in Tower Hamlets to interview staff:

Schools	School type	Members of staff interviewed
South Quay College	Alternative provision	Headteacher
Bishop Challoner Federation of Schools	Mainstream	Head of year 10, emotional literacy support assistance lead, and learning support center lead.
Stepney All Saints School (formerly Sir John Cass School)	Mainstream	Assistant head (also behaviour lead and former FAP advisor)
Mulberry Academy Shoreditch	Mainstream	Executive principal, deputy head, and learning support unit coordinator
London East Alternative Provision (LEAP)	Alternative provision	Deputy head and keyworker and child protection coordinator

We have developed case studies from our interviews with young people and their families, which can be found on pages 13–17. From each of these, and in conjunction with interviews with schools and alternative provision settings, we have developed recommendations for policy and practice, which can be found on pages 26–27.

These recommendations are intended to inform Tower Hamlets' ongoing work to improve educational inclusion in the borough, and their specific approach to managed moves which is outlined in the appendix.

3 Scene setting: Tower Hamlets

Tower Hamlets have established a range of preventative measures designed to manage behaviour in the borough, going beyond statutory guidance to support those children at risk of exclusion, such as:

- **Managed moves** arranging for children to have a period of targeted support via alternative provision before going back into a new mainstream school, designed to aid them with their new placement.
- **Reintegration placements** which allow children to remain at their existing school but spend eight weeks in alternative provision to support them with specific behaviour challenges, enabling them to return to their existing school with the best chance of a fresh start.
- Arrangements whereby pupils who had been **permanently excluded**, and so where managed moves or reintegration placements were not possible, spend time in alternative provision, before re-entering mainstream school to give this future placement a greater chance of success.

These measures were developed in response to specific local conditions and education policy developments during the New Labour governments of the 2000s. During this time, rates of permanent exclusions in Tower Hamlets were increasing, rising from 31 in 1999-2000 to a peak of 60 in 2005-06 before falling again. From 2006-07, permanent exclusions in Tower Hamlets continued to drop to 5 in 2013-14, before doubling to 10 in 2015-16, then dropping again to a single documented permanent exclusion in 2019-20.⁵

Some schools in the borough, simply due to being unable to fill all their places at the beginning of the year, would automatically receive these children, accommodating a disproportionate number of children presenting challenging behaviour issues compared to other schools, affecting their ability to sustain improvement, and in turn their Ofsted results.

There was no system in place to ensure a fair or supportive way of providing excluded children with new school places while also ensuring schools were properly resourced to do so. Against this backdrop, the government introduced the Education and Inspections Act 2006, which provided a new strategic role for local authorities to promote “high standards and the fulfilment of potential” for every child.⁶ The act also placed a specific duty on local authorities in England to promote fair access to educational opportunity through a tightening of the admissions framework.

Building on this, in 2009 the renamed Department for Children, Schools, and Families (DCSF) introduced behaviour and attendance partnerships for the first time, enabling local authorities to explore ways to strategically improve arrangements in the local area for behaviour and attendance, with a particular focus on reducing exclusions.⁷ These partnerships aimed to nurture collective responsibility for the allocation of excluded children and support for those at risk of exclusion.

Every local authority, by law, must have a fair access protocol (FAP) in place, but some seek only to distribute ‘hard to place’ pupils as they come into the admissions process. Tower Hamlets’ approach casts a wider net, encompassing any in-year movement in and out of the borough, between schools, and all moves into the borough.

5 See assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642577/Guide-to-exclusion-statistics-05092017.pdf for all data releases since 1999/2000.

6 See www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/40/contents for further detail.

7 See dera.ioe.ac.uk/697/1/00329-2010BKT-EN.PDF for further detail.

The Behaviour and Attendance Partnership (BAP) in Tower Hamlets, a partnership of all schools, the local authority and other statutory partners is the 'commissioner' of the local fair access arrangements.

There are three main strands to the arrangements:

- Oversight, tracking, placement and monitoring of all hard to place in-year admissions and facilitation of managed moves to ensure that pupils access appropriate education provision as quickly as possible. These arrangements and procedures are actioned by the multi-agency fair access protocol panel (FAPP).
- Provision through commissioning and partnership agreements of high-quality alternative provision, both long term and short term for pupils who require it and is indicated by local circumstances, such as the level of exclusions.
- Aligning the fair access provisions with other overarching local area policies, such as the SEND (special education needs and disabilities) strategy.

Schools sign up to the partnership every two years and from the beginning have continually requested that Tower Hamlets coordinate in a uniquely centralised way. Alternative provision in the borough is also centrally commissioned, meaning the local authority not only determines where children are placed, but also quality-assures the provision.

Tower Hamlets' approach has been strengthened by new statutory guidance from the Department for Education (DfE), published in September 2022, which has provided clarity over the purpose of managed moves.⁸ The aims of the guidance are couched in terms of ensuring that pupils 'benefit' from education, with managed moves viewed as an essential aspect of behaviour management.

For the first time, a managed move has been defined simply as a coordinated, direct transfer from one school to another. Tower Hamlets monitor these kinds of arrangements, but don'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, now known as a 'transitional placement'.

The biggest piece of new guidance is that around 'direction off-site' to improve behaviour (previously referred to as 'reintegration placements'), where pupils spend time in alternative provision before returning to the same mainstream school.

Other key, new guidelines include:

- Expectations that all alternative strategies (eg directing a pupil off-site for alternative provision or a managed move) should be considered before turning to exclusion.
- Schools considering pupils' own views, including giving them the support to express their views before a decision is made on exclusion. This can be done via an advocate if necessary.
- The entitlement of social workers or virtual school heads to attend governors' meetings where exclusions are discussed and are encouraged to provide contextual information.
- Highlighting that any failure to make reasonable adjustments for pupils with disabilities can be considered discriminatory.
- Tighter scrutiny by governing bodies examining exclusion data for signs of off-rolling or unlawful exclusions.
- Emphasising that schools have a duty to comply with the 2010 Equality Act.

This guidance, along with the government's SEND and alternative provision improvement plan published in March 2023, therefore provides a new legislative environment for this research. As such, this report aims to situate insights and recommendations for practice in this new context to better understand how to improve relationships between schools and families so all children and young people can benefit from an inclusive education.

⁸ DfE (2023) op cit.

4 The experiences of young people and their families

In this chapter, we present case studies developed through speaking to young people and their families. They capture the experiences of young people and families in Tower Hamlets who have experience of long-term placement in alternative provision or have been through the managed move route (with some moves successful and others where placements have not been sustained).

In our literature review, we found that there are significant barriers to effective communication and engagement between schools and parents/carers, both before and during exclusion processes. These case studies build on these insights, offering a window into families' experiences as well as providing recommendations for strengthening relationships between families and schools to prevent exclusions.

We spoke to eight pupils and four families. Positive insights from these conversations, which build on the literature review, include:

- Success where strong, trusting relationships have been built with pupils who feel listened to, understood, and supported.
- Examples of proactive, positive, two-way communication leading to families feeling comfortable enough to be open and truthful about the challenges they or their child is facing, without fear of professional judgement.
- Pupils becoming reflective about their behaviour through close, targeted support and relationships with professionals, such as dedicated family support workers, leading to an understanding of how they can manage their behaviour better.
- Fresh starts for pupils being an opportunity to start anew, rather than focusing on where things have 'gone wrong' in the past.
- Long-term AP as a stable and viable option for some pupils and, therefore, should be offered where it is in the best interest of the pupil.

Evidence and guidance are clear that risk factors for exclusion can be mitigated through positive relationships between school and families.⁹ The 2019 Timpson Review of School Exclusion also stresses that placing parents 'at the centre of discussion and decisions about their child is a key component of strategies to reduce the risk of permanent exclusion'.¹⁰ Our case studies demonstrate examples of where managed moves have led to families receiving improved communications in the form of regular, positive, two-way contact, and feeling more involved as active partners in their child's education, building on insights from our literature review.¹¹ Much of this was received in alternative provision,

9 For more information on the importance of family relationships during exclusions processes, see Bagley, C and Hallam, S (2016) Young people's and parent's perceptions of managed moves. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 21:2, pp205-227; Department for Education (2019a) Timpson Review of School Exclusions. [PDF] Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf; and Evans, J (2010) Not present and not correct: Understanding and preventing school exclusions. Essex: Barnardo's.

10 DfE (2019a) op cit.

11 Bennett, T (2017) *Creating a Culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour*. Department for Education. [PDF] Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/602487/Tom_Bennett_Independent_Review_of_Behaviour_in_Schools.pdf; Education Endowment Foundation (2018a) *Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning* [online] Available at: www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/working-withparents-to-support-childrens-learning/

but also from mainstream schools building on the good practice that exists across the AP sector.¹² Examples of this targeted support included the use of dedicated family support workers, reduced timetables, and personalised curriculum.

However, we identified areas for improvement including:

- Missed opportunities for school-family collaboration to identify practical support for a young person's behaviour and attendance issues.
- Pupils not being supported properly to self-identify barriers to their behaviour or attendance.
- Pupils and families not being or feeling fully involved in decisions that affect their education, leading to a lack of understanding from schools, and a sense of disempowerment for families.
- Inconsistent support (eg different key workers) during the entire transition from a school to alternative provision and reintegration into mainstream education.
- Lack of, or unclear, 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.
- Delays in new mainstream school or alternative provision placements being made leading to loss of learning time.
- 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.

Again, findings from our literature review bolster these insights. Several studies in our review suggest that teachers do not always feel equipped to communicate effectively with families.¹³ There was also evidence to suggest that schools are less prepared to communicate with the parents of children who are most vulnerable to exclusion, such as those “known to have a particularly negative or unengaged relationship with the school” or where there were known family problems, such as addiction or abuse.¹⁴ Though less of the literature consulted focused on the perspective of families, significant barriers parents may face in communicating with schools emerged, such as “low self-esteem, linguistic barriers, a negative educational experience themselves, problems at home, poor mental or physical health, or working full-time (particularly in respect of single parents and those living in poverty”.¹⁵

During exclusion processes, including fixed-term and permanent exclusions, managed moves and appeals, literature suggests that challenges in communication between schools and families are exacerbated.¹⁶ What's more, much of the literature highlighted that communication with, and support for, families experiencing exclusion is often unhelpful or lacking altogether, sometimes in direct breach of official guidance.¹⁷ Concerningly, the

12 Mills, M and Thomson, P (2018) Investigative research into alternative provision. Department for Education. [PDF] Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748910/Investigative_research_into_alternative_provision.pdf; Education Endowment Foundation (2018a) op cit.

13 Education Endowment Foundation (2018a) op cit; Parentkind (2017) Teacher Survey 2017: Teachers' perception and practice of parental engagement in school. [PDF] Available at: www.parentkind.org.uk/uploads/files/1/Documents/Teacher%20Survey%20Report.pdf;

14 Mills and Thomson (2018), op cit.

15 Eastman, A (2011) No Excuses: A review of educational exclusion. London: The Centre for Social Justice. [PDF] Available at: www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CSJ_Educational_Exclusion.pdf

16 Kulz, C (2015) Mapping the Exclusion Process: Inequality, Justice and the Business of Education. Communities Empowerment Network. [PDF] Available at: <http://cenlive.org/download/10/mapping-the-exclusion-process-christy-kulz>; Ofsted (2009) The exclusion from school of children aged 4 to 7. [PDF] Available here: dera.ioe.ac.uk/4175/1/The_exclusion_from_school_of_children_aged_four_to_seven%5B1%5D.pdf; and Evans (2010) op cit..

17 Michelmore, O and Mesie, J (2019) Unfair results: Pupil and parent views on school exclusion. Coram. [PDF] Available at: www.coram.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource_files/School%20exclusions_full%20report_final_0.pdf; Mills, M and Thomson, P (2018) op cit.

literature reveals that for many parents, the exclusion process often feels “beyond their influence, intimidating and sometimes [...] very sudden”.¹⁸ Many studies describe a sense of “powerlessness” or “voicelessness” experienced by parents, who feel that power is weighted towards the school.¹⁹ They note that exclusion processes are complex, parents do not know their rights, and there is a lack of guidance and support available, particularly for those with fewer avenues to support and advice. For instance, working-class parents often “struggle to get their voices heard” during exclusion processes as they are less likely to have the material resources and professional social networks that middle-class parents have.²⁰

The following case studies demonstrate areas where more understanding of the above issues could have helped the pupil and their family. Not all of the interviews have been turned into case studies, but we have still taken insights and recommendations from them.

Bilal: Not involved in decisions about his education

In year 7 Bilal became at risk of permanent exclusion following physical altercations with peers. He was struggling with regulating his emotions, but his school were slow to put support in place, only assigning him a learning mentor two weeks prior to discussions about his transfer to alternative provision. The transfer decision took the family by surprise. They had taken the introduction of Bilal's mentor as a sign of progress and the school's commitment to supporting him. Bilal and his family visited the alternative provision setting and at the end of the visit, it was agreed that Bilal would join for six weeks before returning to his old school. As the end of the six weeks approached, Bilal's school met with the family to say they had decided not to accept him back. Bilal wanted to go back to his old school, but he was not included in the decision-making. Bilal remained in alternative provision for six months, where he was supported to manage his emotions. He felt staff there were more understanding and less judgemental of his behaviour, compared to his old school:

“I think things could have been very different [at the previous school] if teachers had been more understanding of students”

When the time came for reintegration to mainstream education, Bilal and his family were supported by a key worker. Once he had fully transferred to his new school, however, he had no further contact and was not assigned one at the new school, hindering his progress. Though his family had informed the new school of a medical condition that could affect his attendance, Bilal felt teachers were suspicious and unsympathetic. Over time, this dynamic strained the relationship between school and Bilal's family. Following a medical episode, and an incident outside of school, the managed move broke down further and the decision was made for Bilal to return to alternative provision. Bilal didn't feel he had enough support, and though he no longer wanted to attend the new school, because he wasn't involved in any of the discussions it wasn't clear why the school thought the managed move was unviable.

Upon returning to alternative provision, Bilal received one-to-one support for the first few weeks to get back on track after his absences. Since then, he has been making good progress towards his GCSEs. He is eager to try for reintegration again once he has addressed the gaps in his learning.

18 Mills and Thomson (2018) op cit.

19 Kulz (2015) op cit.; Hodge, N and Wolstenholme, C (2016) “I didn't stand a chance”: how parents experience the exclusions appeal tribunal. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 20:12, pp1297-1309; House of Commons Education Committee (2018) *Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing school exclusions - Fifth Report of Session 2017–19*. House of Commons. [PDF] Available at: publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/342/342.pdf

20 Gazeley, L (2012) The impact of social class on parent–professional interaction in school exclusion processes: deficit or disadvantage? *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 16:3, pp297-311.

Carmen: Long-term alternative provision a more appropriate setting

Carmen experienced persistent bullying in her early years of secondary school. She relied on coping strategies such as hiding in empty classrooms during break times and concealing the bullying from her family. Eventually, this led to Carmen experiencing panic attacks and being physically sick on the way to school. Her mental health deteriorated, and she withdrew from her education. Neither Carmen nor her family felt confident in the school's ability to effectively address the situation, and so they requested a direct transfer to another school. Rather than support with the underlying issue of the bullying, Carmen's family felt threatened into staying; the school had sent letters suggesting the family would be fined if Carmen continued to miss school. During this time, Carmen remained at home with no homework from school.

After a protracted process spanning the summer holidays, the transfer was agreed but the new school that the family had identified was oversubscribed and they were left without a school place. The old school did not offer any further help to identify a new school or signpost to the local authority, so Carmen's family decided to electively home educate while waiting for a school place. This lasted until the spring term, leaving a gap in support during which the family struggled to keep up with home education due to a lack of time, material resources, and a consistent routine. By this point, Carmen had been out of school for almost a year. The family, with local authority help, decided to place Carmen in alternative provision. Carmen's sister had previously been educated in alternative provision, but the family weren't aware that it could provide support for social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs.

The whole family attended an induction visit, including meeting with the headteacher. Carmen remembers staff being welcoming and understanding of her circumstances, which reassured her. She started on a reduced timetable to adjust to a formal routine. Having now been at alternative provision for a year, this timetable is still regularly reviewed with input from Carmen, her family and alternative provision staff. Since joining alternative provision, Carmen has had access to the school counselling service and has been able to start music therapy to help support her mental health. Carmen now feels that mainstream school is not for her due to school staff's inability to support pupils with social and emotional mental health needs. Carmen plans to continue her education through alternative provision with no desire for reintegration back into mainstream schooling.

Eli: Lack of support, networks, and resources for family

Eli's parents didn't feel fully informed about the issues their son was facing at school. They would speak with staff at parents' evenings and appreciated positive communication commending good work and behaviour. They were therefore shocked to learn from Eli that he felt picked on by a specific teacher who, he said, had suspected him of drug dealing due to the type of phone he had. Soon after, Eli was involved in a violent incident outside of school along with two other pupils. His parents were initially called into a meeting with the assistant headteacher to be informed of a two-day fixed-term exclusion and an additional two weeks in the school's internal exclusion unit. Without any communication, this was increased to three weeks. In total, Eli spent nearly two months in internal exclusion, where he reported running out of work to do and, as a result, underperformed in his end of year assessments.

At the school's sports day Eli's father was informed, publicly, that he would have to look for a new school for the next academic year as the decision had been made to permanently exclude his son. The family was dismayed and embarrassed given the public delivery of the news, and how unexpected it was. They felt helpless – they were unaware of what support existed or where to find it. They also wanted to complain or lodge an appeal, alongside identifying appropriate support, but didn't know how to go about this. Given everything, Eli's father firmly believed his son's treatment was the result of discrimination based on the family's ethnicity.

They eventually decided against pursuing further action, having met with the headteacher who arranged a direct transfer to another school she had a relationship with, rather than a permanent exclusion. They felt reassured by the headteacher's actions, who seemed more understanding of Eli's previous good behaviour than the assistant headteacher. When the new school place was confirmed at the beginning of the autumn term, Eli and his parents attended an induction meeting, accompanied by a teacher from his previous school. The family appreciated her support and were reassured by the new school's efforts to make the transition process clear.

During the first months of Eli's new placement, his parents met staff regularly, receiving updates on his behaviour, academic progress, and adjustment. They felt well-supported during the transition, appreciative of the gradual integration into lessons, and the effective use of the internal inclusion unit enabling Eli to catch up on lost learning. They felt that staff at the new school were genuinely interested in supporting them – a contrast to their previous experiences.

Frankie: A fresh start with the right support

Frankie struggled with behaviour and attendance in her early years of secondary school. After repeated internal exclusions, she became disengaged and stopped attending school altogether. Frankie had never felt particularly supported by her school, while her mum also thought the school's communication about her daughter's behaviour was poor. When the school notified Frankie's mum they had decided on a managed move via alternative provision, neither of them challenged the decision. Both thought an opportunity for a fresh start was a good idea, but Frankie wasn't excited about the placement. She didn't think pupil referral units (PRUs) were good for a young person's education.

When the placement started, Frankie and her mum felt supported and well-communicated to. Expectations around Frankie's timetable, learning, and the duration of the placement were clear; Frankie would be there for six to eight weeks before returning to a new mainstream school. At first, Frankie found alternative provision overwhelming but soon began to enjoy it. It felt easier than her old school, and her attendance improved. Frankie was given a few options for schools by her key worker and chose the one closest to home. Frankie's mum thought the new school were very communicative, and she was directly involved in decisions about Frankie's new timetable.

Frankie was originally nervous about the move, and for her first six weeks she was educated in a specialist unit for managed moved pupils before joining classes. Frankie's mum believes this time was vital for helping her to settle in and reintegrate into mainstream school. She was supported by a mentor, who she got along with, and once she joined regular lessons, the school organised for Frankie to receive 'break slips' so she could have some time with her mentor before going back into classes, which were much longer than she was used to. This targeted approach, based on individual need, supported Frankie to get to a point where she was excited about her school day. Frankie's mum continues to feel thoroughly engaged in her daughter's education, through consistent points of contact. She receives a phone call every day, whether about positive news or things Frankie is finding challenging. Frankie has developed a support network, and strong, trusting relationships with adults and peers which her mum believes have been highly beneficial for her reintegration, confidence, behaviour, and attendance.

Frankie's own sense of personal responsibility for her behaviour has changed too. She doesn't think this level of reflection would have been possible at her old school, given the lack of support. She thinks the managed move was important for her transition to mainstream and reflected that she had to go through the placement "to learn", though she doesn't think staying there would have been beneficial for her long term. Based on her experience, Frankie would tell her old school that it takes time to work with somebody to achieve the positive outcomes she eventually did.

Gabriel: A successful move, and prefers mainstream education

In primary school, Gabriel's needs were properly understood – believed to be the result of an abusive childhood. Both staff and Gabriel's mum were clear during his transition to secondary school that he would require additional support. This didn't happen, and Gabriel's behaviour issues continued into secondary school, leading to suspensions and the risk of exclusion. Gabriel's mum felt the school's response lacked the trauma-informed approach it clearly required, despite communicating this during transition and afterwards.

Gabriel remembers being “threatened” with exclusion numerous times before his school proposed a managed move. At first Gabriel's mum was fighting for him to stay in school, but after doing her own research and finding the support of a parent's advice centre, she better understood the benefits of a managed move. She felt the school had not fully communicated the process to her or Gabriel, and all they wanted was for her to sign the papers and “get him out” without explanation or reasoning. Consequently, they both felt a fresh start in a new school would be the best option.

Gabriel started his placement a few weeks before the first Covid-19 lockdown but despite the disruption, his new setting worked closely with him to identify his behaviour issues and provided a key worker for him who visited him at home and gave him work. Communication and understanding between Gabriel's mum and the school about his behaviour was much better than previously. Gabriel felt supported to understand what he needed to do to work on his behaviour, with staff explaining that Gabriel was more than able to return to mainstream school if it improved. Despite the support he received here, Gabriel didn't think alternative provision was the right place for him, as it was full of other kids “like him”, who he thought wouldn't be helpful to mix with.

At the end of his placement, Gabriel chose a school where he didn't know anybody, for the best chance of a fresh start. Both Gabriel and his mum found the support overwhelmingly positive, which included a flexible support plan, reduced timetable, close and targeted behaviour support, and consistent communications about any developments:

“I can't explain to you, the support he got here was just something wonderful, amazing... There are no words to express how much I appreciate how much this school has done for me...” (Gabriel's mum)

Despite the positive start at the new school, Gabriel was involved in a situation which nearly saw him transferred back to alternative provision, but he was given another chance. This “turning point” encouraged Gabriel to make a concerted effort to improve his behaviour, and he worked closely with dedicated staff in the school's inclusion unit, who supported him with his work. These close, strong relationships Gabriel built with staff members in the inclusion unit were vital:

“I think it's the people in the inclusion unit you work closely with, like the relationship you make with them. They'll help you. You don't want to let them down, innit. It's that respect. They've tried for you, so you need to fix up”

Haseeb: A successful move, but preferred alternative provision

Haseeb first received warnings about exclusion at the beginning of year 9, attending meetings with his mum and teachers about his behaviour. Neither Haseeb nor his mum believed his behaviour was extreme enough to warrant exclusion – in his own words he was just “clowning around”, or not wearing his uniform properly. Haseeb’s mum remembers telling the school to give him a chance – that once he starts his GCSEs in year 10, and with a bit of extra support, he’d take his education more seriously. After a pastoral support plan didn’t lead to any change in his behaviour, Haseeb’s school made the decision to transfer him elsewhere on a managed move. Haseeb’s mum received some information about what this would involve, though she recalls the school saying that if she didn’t sign the required forms, they’d do it anyway as his behaviour was so unacceptable.

Over summer, Haseeb and his mum were unsure of where he would be attending school in September. She had proactively been trying to communicate with the old school but had found it very difficult: “the process was really horrible, they should have been more supportive”. It was when Haseeb should have been starting year 10 that he found out which alternative provision setting he would be attending and so, as a result, he stayed home for four weeks before he started his placement. Once he started, he found the lessons easier and more fun, and the fact there were fewer pupils, and more one-to-one time with teachers, encouraged him to engage with his work: “the teacher is mostly focusing on us, more than the work. Like he’s helping **us**. It’s easier.” While there, Haseeb’s key worker gave him three options of schools to choose from. About six weeks into his placement, his chosen school contacted Haseeb and they had a meeting where they accepted him onto their roll.

For the first eight weeks at his new school, Haseeb would have regular meetings with his key worker, with whom he’d built a relationship during his placement. These meetings ended after his behaviour improved and it was clear he wasn’t getting into trouble. Now, Haseeb only gets detentions for punctuality, rather than his behaviour. He doesn’t enjoy his new school as much because the days are longer than they were during his placement, and wishes he’d stayed there instead of moving back into mainstream. Overall though, he feels his managed move was a positive experience. He’d recommend other pupils who were at risk of exclusion to spend time in an alternative provision placement as it’s more enjoyable – staff understand pupils and their behaviour better, and what support is required.

5 School practice and perspectives around strengthening relationships

We found in our literature review that strong school-family relationships are highly valuable where they occur, but that there are significant barriers to effective communication and engagement between schools and families, before, during and after exclusions and managed moves.²¹ Many examples of best practice are already well-established in alternative provision settings, as well as mainstream schools, though more of the latter could learn from the former. We spoke with schools and alternative provision settings across Tower Hamlets to understand current practice and recommendations for the future in strengthening relationships and communication between schools and families.

The importance of strong relationships

All the schools we spoke to understood how central building strong relationships with families was to improvements in behaviour and attendance of pupils at risk of exclusion: “the role of [engaging] families is vital”, said Dominic Willis, head of year 10 at Bishop Challoner Boys’ School. “We need [parents’] support to ensure that we can implement an effective change that helps the pupil make a change in themselves”.

Staff at Bishop Challoner also recognised that healthy, two-way communication with families can offer extra context for behaviour, and deeper insights into how best to provide support: “[having built rapport] the parent is more willing to admit that they are sometimes struggling at home. And I think that’s a really valuable thing that [...] you can then use as a base to say: ‘what are we going to do about it, as a community, home, and school to help tackle this?’”.

At London East Alternative Provision (LEAP), pupils present a range of challenging behaviours and additional needs. LEAP staff admitted to a learning curve in terms of their work with families: “in the beginning we didn’t do that much work with parents, but now our parenting work is a really integral part [of providing support for pupils] ...when we started doing it, it very quickly became apparent that there was a massive need to do that link work with parents and to [...] build relationships with them in order for them to buy into what we do. And the response has been really positive”.

When headteacher Ruth Holden joined Mulberry Academy Shoreditch it was apparent that exclusions were not a deterrent for poor behaviour and attendance, they didn’t address any underlying issues, and challenging issues facing the local community led her to believe that “if pupils are not in front of you in the school, they’re not safe”. Senior leadership instead explored more effective means of managing challenging behaviour through minimising suspensions and building better relationships. The focus is on the school community and while members of this community – pupils, parents and teachers – may not always get it right, it is through positive communication, rather than unnecessary punitive responses, that the community is rebuilt when things do go wrong. “I don’t see any point in doing one-day, two-day, three-day, four-day, five-day exclusions” Ruth says. “From my point of view, it’s either: ‘you can’t be in this community anymore because you disrespected it in a way that was so bad that it made everyone feel unsafe’ or ‘you’re here and part of this community’. But there are only those two options”.

21 See Section 3 for a summary of literature review insights.

Best practice

But what does best practice in building these relationships look like across Tower Hamlets? Four areas emerged in our conversations with schools, both mainstream and alternative provision, that work to cultivate and maintain strong, supportive, trusting relationships with families to ensure the best outcomes for the children and young people in their care:

- An open-door policy.
- A thorough induction.
- Proactive, positive reinforcement.
- Robust pastoral structures.

An open-door policy

Mulberry Academy Shoreditch encourages parents to be actively involved in the school community. They host informal coffee mornings for families and school staff regularly collect feedback on these events, to ensure they are meeting families' needs. As well as this, all staff are encouraged to meet with parents the same or next day after any issues arise. If a parent comes into school with a request to meet, staff will try hard to meet them impromptu rather than tell parents they need to book an appointment and come back. Headteacher, Ruth Holden, will also try to prioritise meeting with all parents if there's been an issue, along with the relevant head of year. Ruth and the senior leadership team see this communication as a vital part of early intervention, giving families a safe space to voice concerns and an opportunity for staff to learn about challenges a pupil might be facing before they escalate. As a result, in 2020 Mulberry achieved 'centre of excellence' status as part of the Inclusion Quality Mark Award.²²

Proactive, positive reinforcement

In our literature review, we highlighted examples of where schools with the most successful behaviour outcomes proactively contacted families in response to positive behaviour to keep families updated about school life rather than as a punitive function.²³ At South Quay College, an alternative provision school for pupils aged 14-19, all school staff aim to build in positive conversation moments with pupils and their families. "We try to catch them doing as much good as we possibly can... even if it's something like they've turned up once out of five days on time. Whatever it is that's a positive, we then engage the parent, and then build that level of trust". says Martin Nirsimloo, South Quay's headteacher.

Andrula Christine, emotional literacy support assistance (ELSA) lead at Bishop Challoner School, does something similar: "I work with a few families at the moment, where I call them on a weekly basis. And that's basically to just let them know that I'm checking in with them as well, to see what's going on at home. And it's not only to just [tell them what their child has] been doing wrong, but it's also to give them praise as well, to make that bond stronger in the pupils". Twice a day at London East Alternative Provision, staff hold briefing sessions to discuss pupils' behaviour – positive and/or negative – and determine next steps for communication with parents.

²² See iqmaward.com/news/mulberry-academy-becomes-a-centre-of-excellence/ for more information.

²³ Bennett (2017) op cit.; Education Endowment Foundation (2018a) op cit.

Thorough induction processes

At Mulberry, where managed moves primarily involve pupils coming into the school rather than the other way round, Ruth is proactive in building a relationship with these pupils: "I think it's quite important for the headteacher to go and say 'hello' and introduce themselves because it's often the headteacher in their previous school that they have ended up with in their office being excluded". Mulberry seeks to integrate pupils as soon as possible after being notified: "we get them into school in the next couple of weeks, whereas I know some schools don't. Some just leave it so the more frustrated a parent gets [...] families can be really unhappy because their child has been out of school for a long time," says Jennie Montgomerie, Mulberry's deputy head.

Ahead of the move, Ruth and other members of the inclusion and pastoral team will meet the pupil and their family at their transferring school to determine strategies for a smooth transition. This includes initial work with the inclusion team before full integration. This structure eases transition and provides a high level of support in the first few weeks, including daily contact with families, positive communication, and early intervention around any concerns.

At LEAP, new pupils go through an intensive, week-long induction process so that staff can get to know them fully. They conduct baseline testing of reading, speech and language, cognitive ability, English and maths, and review all documentation relating to pupils' educational, child protection and social services history. Parents are involved at various points throughout the process. Needs identified through this assessment are communicated with all staff, and pupils are matched to a key worker with specialist responsibility for needs/areas of provision relevant to the pupil, such as sex and relationships education, gang membership, sexual exploitation.

South Quay similarly uses an 'in-depth' induction process with pupils and families which very often picks up lots of information otherwise missed about the challenges they face. Once the induction process is undertaken, pupils are then assigned a 'pastoral lead' – a non-teacher who becomes the pupil's case holder and develops a relationship with the family during their time at South Quay.

Robust pastoral structures

South Quay have also been piloting wider 'pastoral bubbles' with pupils, which further builds and maintains relationships with families so that someone is always on-hand for the pupil. Someone within that pastoral team will have an end-of-day checkout with the pupil to talk to them and provide some level of intervention if needed, which so far seems to be working well.

Bishop Challoner includes pastoral relationships across school and home as a specific part of the work of the school's emotional literacy support assistance lead. They have found this to be a successful approach as they can maintain a less formal relationship with the family than senior leaders: "[senior leaders] may be putting in sanctions, whereas my role is completely opposite to that" says Andrula Christine. "I really build a rapport with the parents or the carers. You're not 'friends', but it's a more informal way of speaking to them".

These kinds of roles mimic/build on the role of key workers – an established role within alternative provision. LEAP key workers can have up to 15 pupils allocated to them. As well as being the main point of contact for pupils, they also facilitate dialogue between pupils and parents, social services, and other members of staff: "we do everything at every step of the way to hold the child, to make sure that we all know what the child is about" says Astrid Schon, headteacher of LEAP. "So, they don't just get [...] lessons here, but they get an all-rounded support system that will ensure that they function here [and are] equipped with the skills and the knowledge they need to make it back into mainstream".

Barriers

Though all this good practice is embedded across Tower Hamlets, staff we spoke to were also honest about the many barriers that exist to building strong relationships with families – many of which mirror the findings from our literature review.

Delayed communications

Often, in forming relationships with families, the main barrier is getting in contact with them early enough. Communication can start very late in the process. Earlier contact would allow for better expectation-setting and mitigating of any negative feelings related to the transfer. Schools also sometimes give false or misleading information to the family and the child. “That does create some problems sometimes”, says South Quay’s Martin Nirsimloo, “because it depends how those conversations are had [...] sometimes a school has been desperate to send a learner after a big incident, and has promised them [particular courses] but hasn’t had that conversation with us”. To mitigate this, Martin thinks earlier conversations between the school, alternative provision, pupils and their families are needed. Mainstream schools should also be better informed of the local offer and its prerequisites so that they’re able to pass that on to families.

Budget and resource pressures

Staff at Stepney All Saints School voiced a particular obstacle in the reduction of external behaviour support due to pressure on budgets. Staff reported that the support of someone independent from the school, with a different point of view from them, the pupils, and their families, has been helpful in maintaining relationships.

In the past, LEAP has employed a specialist family support worker, but due to cuts to their budget this work had to cease temporarily. During this time, teaching staff had responsibility for family liaison which put additional pressure on already time-poor teaching staff. Due to new funding received for being an AP Specialist Taskforce school, LEAP has now been able to employ a specialist family support worker again.²⁴ Any potential future budget cuts would however compromise the effectiveness of this service.

Many of the pupils enrolled at South Quay are looked-after children or those on the edge of care, with multiple services supporting them. Often, poor information-sharing causes friction or delays between families, schools, and services, straining relationships.²⁵ Martin sees a need for one or two people coordinating and sharing important information between services. Likewise, LEAP staff mentioned the inconsistency of local procedures and protocols for preventing exclusion, requiring improved monitoring and quality assurance.

24 See www.gov.uk/government/news/support-for-vulnerable-young-people-in-serious-violence-hotspots for more information on ‘AP hotspot areas’.

25 See Partridge, Landreth Strong, Loble, and Mason (2020) for recommendations about strengthening relationships between schools, families, and other services, op cit.

Family context

One of schools' biggest barriers in building effective relationships with families is the challenging background contexts many families themselves face. For many parents who have had previous negative experience of their own or their child's schooling, being in a potentially antagonistic or hostile situation with school staff can often manifest as defensiveness due to unpleasant memories.²⁶ Because of this, Mulberry head Ruth Holden thinks parents sometimes perceive her as "bad cop" in the dynamic. Sometimes, it's not necessarily defensiveness which is the issue: "very often [parents have] had six, seven years of phone calls from schools – primary and secondary - saying 'your child's got x, y, z', so very often, they just ignore it," says Martin Nirsimloo.

LEAP [staff member] shared that she thought [exclusion] processes can be blind to the huge array of variables that constrain parents' ability or likelihood to engage with schools and/or alternative provision. The local authority should understand and provide support for these constraints, which include "low self-esteem, linguistical barriers, a negative educational experience themselves, problems at home, poor mental or physical health, working full-time, particularly [with] single parents or those living in poverty often working multiple jobs".

Literature suggests that teachers do not always feel equipped to communicate effectively with families.²⁷ Not shying away from difficult discussions with parents is a priority for Mulberry, as this has been an obstacle in the past. Consequently, they have invested in external training to tackle this and build the skillset for managing relationships with parents, particularly around de-escalating tense situations. Staff use scripts that follow a restorative justice approach to help facilitate this and, where appropriate, involve pupils in these meetings alongside an inclusion lead.

Stepney All Saints School spoke about challenging circumstances with some families, where language barriers can often cause or exacerbate misunderstandings and points of tension (at the time of interview almost 68 percent of pupils came from households where English was not their first language). Often school staff rely on siblings translating or representing non-English speaking parents.²⁸

26 DfE (2019a) op cit.

27 Parentkind (2017) op cit.

28 Eastman (2011) op cit.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

There is clearly much good practice across Tower Hamlets to be celebrated, delivered by professionals who care deeply about the young people and families they encounter daily. Despite this, our research indicates there continue to be barriers to school-family communication around behaviour, attendance, and exclusions. Though the case studies should not be viewed as generalised experiences across Tower Hamlets, they are important examples of where improved relationships between schools and families, and a more consistent approach to inclusion across the borough, could have helped.

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 the borough. We heard of this demonstrated through:

- 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 is facing, without fear of professional judgement.
- The vital role of 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.

We also saw 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. This is found to be particularly difficult for working-class parents, who are less likely to have the material resources and social networks possessed by middle-class parents.
- Misinformation or misunderstandings among parents and pupils about managed moves, eg that reintegration involves a 'trial period'.
- 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.

There was also evidence of factors beyond an individual school's control, but where appropriate support is necessary to mitigate their effects:

- 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.

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 innovative practice is already underway in Tower Hamlets, as highlighted in previous research.

However, there is momentum to build upon following the publication of the government's SEND 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

1

To ensure consistency of inclusive practice, the 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 trusts.²⁹ The BAP should therefore 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).³⁰ 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 FAP, strategic panel, school forum), and support school leaders in organising themselves for peer-to-peer work.

2

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.

29 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.

30 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/

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 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 updating 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.

7 Appendix 1: Considerations for school leaders

We spoke to staff in alternative provision and mainstream schools who work hard to ensure their relationships with families are as healthy as possible to support pupils at risk of exclusion. Through conversations with these practitioners, young people and their families, and insights from our literature review, we identified the following set of considerations for schools who are seeking to do the same. As well as the above recommendations, the local authority should ensure that all schools in the borough are aware of the following:

1. *Are you working collaboratively with families to identify risks and provide appropriate support?*

Some pupils may struggle to identify and articulate the barriers they face regarding their behaviour, attendance, and engagement. Our research shows working collaboratively with families early on, through practical support rather than punitive measures, leads to pupils feeling better enabled to identify, articulate, and communicate these barriers and the support need to overcome them. Working proactively with families also sheds light on specific issues a pupil might be facing and the reasons behind it, such as the social and emotional impact of bullying and its link to school phobia or emotionally-based school avoidance.³¹ Schools should also consider texting, email, and social media to ensure regular, same day communications with families to build trusting, positive relationships.³² Our research also highlights how the importance of schools, with local authority support, assigning pupils with a pastoral lead or key worker to develop trusting relationships with them and their family, works to reduce the risk of exclusion.³³

2. *Are you working collaboratively with families and pupils to involve them in decision-making around exclusions and managed moves?*

As our case studies and literature review show, proactive and consistent communications throughout managed moves are paramount in ensuring parents and young people feel as reassured as possible through what can be a hugely disruptive process.³⁴ This is particularly so for families under great pressure, or for parents who have had negative experiences of education themselves.³⁵ Our reviewed literature highlights imbalances of power between schools and families at various stages of exclusions processes, where families reported feelings of “powerlessness”, “voicelessness” and complexity, corroborated through our primary research. It is therefore paramount that schools

31 Bennett (2017) op cit.

32 Ibid; Education Endowment Foundation (2016) Texting Parents: Evaluation report and executive summary. [PDF] Available at: ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/appalachia/events/materials/3_22_19_BuildingBridges_05_REL-AP_Handout3_508.pdf

33 Stamou, E, Edwards, A, Daniels, H and Ferguson, L (2014) Young People at-risk of Drop-out from Education: Recognising and Responding to their Needs. University of Oxford. [PDF] Available at: research.aston.ac.uk/en/publications/young-people-at-risk-of-drop-out-from-education

34 See The Centre for Social Justice (2018) op cit.; Mills and Thomson (2018) op cit; and Bryant, B, Parish, N, Swords, B, Gary, P, Kulawik, K and Saied-Tessier, A (2018) Alternative provision market analysis: Research report (Isos partnership). Department for Education. [PDF] Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/752548/Alternative_Provision_Market_Analysis.pdf for evidence on the importance of schools engaging parents and young people in exclusions processes effectively.

35 Department for Education (2019a) op cit, Evans (2010) op cit, and Eastman (2011) op cit.

work proactively to mitigate the potential of this for the families they engage with. Key routes to building trust are through proactively involving families and pupils in decisions about exclusions and managed moves, such as through early contact by phone and letter outlining the reasons for the school's decision, information about school behaviour policies, material for children to work on during the exclusion period, and the process for appeals.³⁶ Building on this, accompanying any meetings related to behaviour, attendance and pupil movement with written communication detailing process, timeline, and ways for families to receive additional advice, may help to build trust and reassure both pupil and family. Finally, schools should remind parents of their right to have an independent party present to oversee any meetings, particularly for those who may lack the resources or pre-existing knowledge to do so.

3. *Are you working collaboratively with families throughout the managed move process and transition to and from alternative provision?*

If the decision to transfer to alternative provision is taken, young people and their families should be involved in these discussions as early as possible, ideally with a consistent contact between the transferring school and alternative provision throughout the move.³⁷ Ideally, this should be an adult that the pupil has a strong and trusted relationship with who might attend induction days with families to agree key check-in points and help ease the transition. The current key worker model is effective when supporting pupils in-school. It could be helpful to have this support extended during transition between school settings before handover to a new key worker.

This should similarly apply with reintegration; transfers between alternative provision and mainstream schools should include meetings between transferring schools' key professionals, including key workers from both sides, and agencies working with the pupil to ensure clear, consistent, and comprehensive information sharing and handover.³⁸ Schools should consider their induction processes for all incoming pupils and their families to understand the challenges they have faced, ensuring senior leaders, key worker, and any outside agencies known to the family are involved in this process.

Finally, our case studies suggest that long-term alternative provision could be a stable and viable option for some pupils and should be offered where it is in the best interests of the pupil.

4. *Are you ensuring all staff are fully informed of guidance to support families?*

In many cases, we found that even though policy and guidance was in place in Tower Hamlets, this wasn't always being translated into preventive practice. Local authorities should ensure that all schools are aware of the most up-to-date information and guidance, and in turn, schools should ensure that all staff are aware of guidance so they can appropriately support families and pupils at risk of exclusion. As well as practical support, trauma-informed emotional and psychological support may also be needed where transfers cause understandable emotional distress. Schools should also have a greater awareness, and more readily available information, about the support AP can offer to pupils experiencing SEMH difficulties, and where possible mainstream schools should draw on the expertise of alternative provision through outreach offers.

36 Mills and Thomson (2018) op cit.

37 The Centre for Social Justice (2018) op cit, Mills and Thomson (2018) op cit. See both Bagley and Hallam (2016) op cit, and Bagley, C and Hallam, S (2015) Managed moves: school and local authority staff perceptions of processes, success and challenges. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 20:4, pp432-447.

38 Bryant et al (2018) op cit.

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