

Briefing Note

Title: School Exclusions and Suspensions **Date:** 31 January 2024

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Scrutiny Panel: Children and Young People

Recommendation(s) for action or decision

The Scrutiny Panel is recommended to:

1. Note the data and information with regard to school exclusions and suspensions in Wolverhampton schools in 2022/2023 as outlined in this report and appendices.
2. Note that the update only includes data up until the end of the Autumn term for the academic year 2022/2023 as published information on the whole of the previous academic year is only issued annually in the month of March.
3. Agree to receive an annual update report at the end of the Spring school term each year following the publication of national data.

Questions for Scrutiny to consider

1. Does the Panel acknowledge that whilst the rate of Permanent Exclusions is still marginally higher than the national average there is a marked decline in Wolverhampton?
2. Does the Panel acknowledge that suspensions from schools in Wolverhampton are overall lower than national figures?
3. Does the Panel request a focus for additional work to be targeted on any particular vulnerable group or protected characteristic?

Purpose

The purpose of the paper is to inform Scrutiny Panel of the latest available data for school exclusions and suspensions in Wolverhampton and enable comparison of performance against regional, statistical and national figures. This is presented as complete data and broken down by gender, ethnicity and other protected characteristics as well as vulnerable groups.

Background

In the three-year period preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, permanent exclusions and suspensions (the latter known as fixed term exclusions) for children and young people in Wolverhampton were markedly higher than regional and national comparators.

The period of the pandemic saw an inevitable significant reduction in numbers of both exclusions and suspensions, at both local and national levels, attributed to the length of time that schools were required to close for extended periods and even when during the second and subsequent

lockdowns only young people with additional needs or specific vulnerabilities were allowed to access learning on school premises.

Following the re-opening of schools to all pupils, when schools were once again able to deliver learning in classroom settings, it was inevitable that the numbers of exclusions and suspensions would rise, which was borne out both locally and nationally. Particular focus, however, on reducing exclusions and suspensions in Wolverhampton, was required, because of the exceptionally high levels reported in the pre-pandemic period.

Progress, options, discussion etc.

The slide presentation included as appendix 1 attached to this report provides a detailed breakdown of the current data and information held for Wolverhampton, regional and statistical neighbours as well as the published national picture.

For the purposes of this report, the information is further broken down into data pertaining to specific groups of children and young people, such as gender, ethnicity, etc. and also shows data for individual wards across the city.

Compared to other councils in the West Midlands Wolverhampton's performance is improving and although primary and secondary exclusions are higher than West Midlands average this is only by a very small margin and year on year our numbers are reducing.

Of significant concern is the increasing number of exclusions reported for the carrying of an offensive weapon and drug and alcohol related incidents. The Inclusion and Attendance team are working closely with colleagues and partners in the Violence Reduction teams to support schools in their endeavours to alert children and young people about the dangers and risks of bladed weapons. This is a priority area of concern for the city, and whilst overall serious violence figures are reducing in the city, the risk to life where an offensive weapon is carried has been tragically borne out by recent fatalities.

Permanent exclusion and suspension numbers for 2022/23 by Ward are included on slide 6 of appendix 1. This is calculated using the pupils' home address and not that of the school they attend.

All schools are offered support through services in the city and those with high exclusion and suspension rates are targeted with an offer of providing intervention activities at an early stage when young people are beginning to cause concern in schools.

Intensive work is also targeted at the ethnic groups where exclusions and suspensions are disproportionately higher than peers.

Data is only currently available for children and young people who have a free school meal entitlement up to 2021/2022 however we continue to closely monitor this group of children and it is pleasing to see that the numbers are significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels.

In the post pandemic period, exclusion rates for boys and girls increased for the reasons explained above and it remains consistent that boys are more at risk of exclusion than girls. This is in line with regional and national data.

When the regional and national figures are released in March 2024 we will be able to compare performance with that of the Wolverhampton picture although we are aware from our own unvalidated data that total exclusions and suspensions are lower than the previous year although there is a marked difference between schools.

Where leadership and governance has recently changed in some Wolverhampton schools there are higher numbers of permanent exclusions and suspensions, however this is not unusual as new leaders embed new codes of behaviour and expectations.

With regard to children and young people with SEN and who have EHC plans, numbers are very low, however for those at the SEN support stage these are higher than West Midlands and National figures. Because of the small numbers we are able to drill down into the background of individual cases to ascertain if there are unmet needs and additional funding can be requested by schools through the High Needs Block funding stream for children and young people who are pre-EHCP, targeted particularly at those new to the city who may be under assessment.

Other vulnerable groups of particular focus are children and young people who are subject to a child protection or child in need plan. Although slightly fewer children with a CIN plan were excluded in the period to end of the Autumn term 2023 than in the previous year this is still higher than we would want and it is expected that through the Families First Children's Pathfinder programme, where there will be closer working relationships between schools and social care colleagues. The situation is similar for children who have ever been subject to a child protection plan.

The presentation highlights two of the many strategies aimed at reducing exclusions in the city. Ormiston Academy have piloted an 'in-house' solution which they are now rolling out to other schools in Wolverhampton with the LA have commissioned three places from the school for young people who have been previously excluded and all three are now re-integrated into mainstream settings.

A strategy to support teaching and support staff directly has been the development and roll-out of Solution Circles which gives them a 'safe space' to discuss particular challenges within their schools either with individual or groups of children at risk of exclusion. Uptake has been high and feedback very positive from those colleagues who have led or participated in this activity.

Additional activities and actions are outlined in the final slide of the presentation attached as appendix 1. These developments are being co-produced with schools, such as the review of the Inclusion Support & Alternative Provision Panel.

A new section of the council website that will be available to schools and interactive is 'Wolverhampton Inclusive Schools for Everyone' has been developed and is being enhanced to enable access for professionals to guidance on SEN, Inclusion and Attendance pathways.

Appendix 1

Exclusions and Suspensions Summary presentation, January 2024