



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

# Review of practices used in maintained schools and pupil referral units to prevent exclusions: summary

Review of practices to prevent school exclusions, maintain engagement and support transition back into mainstream education following fixed-term exclusions.

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# Introduction

York Consulting was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a review of practices used by maintained schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) to prevent fixed-term and permanent exclusions from these settings and to explore how local authorities, schools, children, and their parents/carers<sup>[footnote 1]</sup> can be supported to prevent school exclusions.

The objectives of this research were to:

- explore practices and approaches used by maintained schools and PRUs that are considered to be effective for:
  - preventing fixed-term and permanent exclusions from these settings
  - maintaining contact and engagement with a child once they are fixed-term excluded
  - supporting the reintegration of children into mainstream education following fixed-term or permanent exclusion
- understand the support local authorities, maintained schools and PRUs, parents and children need to prevent exclusions, maintain engagement following fixed-term exclusions, and support transition back into mainstream education where children have been excluded
- develop conclusions and recommendations for how maintained schools and PRUs can prevent fixed-term and permanent exclusions, as well as how local authorities, schools, children, and their parents can be supported to prevent exclusions, maintain engagement following fixed-term exclusions, and support transition back into mainstream education where children have been excluded

There are two types of school exclusion: fixed-term and permanent. Fixed-term exclusion is where a child is excluded for a specific period and is not able to attend their school during that time. In Wales, fixed-term exclusions must not exceed 45 days in one school year. Permanent exclusion is where a child is not

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allowed to return to the school and their name is removed from the school roll (following the conclusion of any appeals process). Welsh Government guidance (2019)<sup>[footnote 2]</sup> makes it clear that permanent exclusion is a matter of last resort and is a recognition that all available strategies to help the child remain in school have been exhausted.

Exclusions from schools are linked with a range of negative outcomes including poorer mental health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes, as well as adverse long-term outcomes such as decreased earnings potential, increased risk of financial difficulties and unemployment, and mental and physical health issues.

## Methodology

A literature review was undertaken between April and September 2023, covering sources from Wales, the UK and internationally.

The qualitative fieldwork for the review was undertaken between April and July 2023. It involved:

- scoping interviews with 14 stakeholders with a national or local authority level perspective
- an online survey (short pro forma) of 37 school leaders in primary, middle/all-through schools, secondary schools and PRUs
- a total of 20 interviews with staff from local authorities, primarily inclusion officers, from 15 of the 22 local authorities
- interviews with 40 staff based in 23 schools and PRUs, including senior leaders and practitioners such as additional learning needs coordinators (ALNCos)
- interviews with 16 children (and nine parents of these children) from the sample of schools and PRUs. These children were identified by the schools and PRUs as previously being at risk of exclusion or who had previously

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been excluded

Interview data was analysed using a thematic analysis framework via qualitative data analysis software. Descriptive data analysis was conducted on the survey data to explore the frequency of responses.

## Findings

There are three categories used for school exclusion rates: permanent exclusions, fixed-term exclusions of 5 days or less, and fixed-term exclusions over 5 days. Since 2014/15 until the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, rates of permanent and fixed-term exclusions of 5 days or less had increased each year. All three categories of exclusions increased in 2021/22 compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants described that schools are experiencing an increase in challenging behaviour from children in recent years, at a time when schools are also reporting a constraint in resources which reduces the support they can offer to children at risk of exclusion. Schools' approaches to exclusions were influenced by their relationships with, and the support available from, PRUs and local authorities.

The literature review identified a number of universal (those delivered to all children) and targeted school-based interventions (those delivered to specific children or groups of children) with the potential to prevent exclusions and improve relevant outcomes (e.g., wellbeing, attendance, attainment) for children, although the level of evidence for each practice varies and effectiveness was dependent on successful implementation.

When considering the strength of the evidence base, restorative practice followed by school-wide approaches to addressing behaviour were the universal

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approaches that had the strongest current evidence base supporting their use for preventing exclusions in schools, while for targeted interventions mentoring demonstrated the most consistent positive impacts.

The evidence for these universal and targeted practices are summarised below (in order of mention based on the qualitative fieldwork).

## Universal practices

Trauma-informed practice in schools, supported by senior leadership and a consistent school-wide approach, can lead to positive student outcomes (e.g., attendance, academic achievement, emotional regulation and confidence), and improved understanding for practitioners of the underlying causes of challenging behaviour. Participants reported that trauma-informed practice is widely used in schools and PRUs in Wales, and indeed there is some promising research evidence that trauma-informed practice is related with reduced exclusions, although more robust research is required.

Parental engagement can improve children's academic progress especially with younger children and there was tentative research evidence that parental engagement can reduce exclusions, provided that parents feel a connection with the school. School and PRU staff participants commonly mentioned parental engagement during the fieldwork, emphasising its role in identifying underlying issues affecting a child's challenging behaviour. The literature however highlighted that it is important to ensure that parental engagement strategies reach all parents to avoid the risk of increasing the attainment gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, common barriers to effective parental engagement strategies include staff lacking the time or confidence to engage with parents, and a lack of staff training on how to handle difficult conversations with parents.

Restorative practice shows promise for improving the school culture,

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attendance, and reducing exclusions particularly for fixed-term exclusions, and especially when implemented as a school-wide approach. Key enablers of successful implementation include taking a school-wide approach, ensuring staff buy-in, commitment, and confidence to deliver. Restorative practice was mentioned by participants in the fieldwork who described the benefits of the practice for fostering positive relationships between staff and children and preventing exclusions at times.

A whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing seeks to support good emotional and mental wellbeing for children and young people by promoting a positive cultural environment in schools, with the approach underlined by clear communication from senior leaders, a focus on staff wellbeing, training to support children's wellbeing, and the involvement of families, children and the community. Many participants described the development of their whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing as an approach that could help to prevent exclusions, through supporting children's mental wellbeing needs. While some research was identified specifically about the impacts of whole-school approaches to emotional and mental wellbeing on children's outcomes, there was no evidence for impact on exclusions. However, improved emotional and mental wellbeing is associated with better educational outcomes, including reduced exclusions, for children.

School-wide approach to behaviour is one where the standards and expectations of good behaviour pervade all aspects of school life. Implementing a school-wide approach, particularly those that train teachers to deliver the intervention and encouraged positive behaviour (e.g., reward systems), rather than utilising punitive measures, can help to improve behaviour and reduce fixed-term exclusions. These interventions can be delivered for all children, although the evidence indicated greater effects for improving behaviour when targeted towards and adapted for those at risk of challenging behaviour. Clear expectations, consistent practice, and staff training were identified as key to effective delivery of school-wide approaches to behaviour. Participants cited the use of school-wide approaches for supporting children's behaviour in schools in

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Wales and emphasised the importance of a positive approach that is also responsive to the individual child's needs.

In addition to the above, the literature review and fieldwork also considered transition support for children (from primary to secondary phase), and while this practice showed benefits for reducing anxiety in children, the evidence for reducing exclusions was limited.

## Targeted practices

Nurture groups can have a positive impact on children's emotional, social and behavioural development, with some positive impacts on academic progress, and amongst primary-aged school children, potentially reducing school exclusions, but long-term delivery is recommended for the groups to be more effective. From the fieldwork, participants identified a range of practice and provision related to nurture groups that were being used in schools to support those at risk of exclusion, including spaces that children could go to if they felt overwhelmed, rather than the more structured groups outlined in the literature, although a few examples of such groups were given.

A modified curriculum is used with children who are struggling in mainstream lessons and whose needs cannot be met without alterations being made to the mainstream curriculum. Modifications to the curriculum must be carried out in line with the duties and responsibilities for a balanced curriculum as part of Curriculum for Wales<sup>[footnote 3]</sup>. There was some international evidence that delivering a modified curriculum adapted to children's needs can improve children's engagement, behaviour, and attendance, but the evidence for reducing exclusions was limited. Participants commonly mentioned the use of modified curricula in Wales, identifying it as a way to improve engagement with education.

Emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) interventions have shown positive

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effects on emotional literacy, social skills, and academic outcomes for children, particularly in primary-aged children, potentially reducing school exclusions although more robust research is required. Effective implementation requires clear communication with parents and support from school leaders to allow ELSAs sufficient time and dedicated space to plan and deliver sessions. ELSAs were not frequently mentioned in the fieldwork, although some participants that did suggested the intervention's potential to prevent exclusions.

Managed moves involve a carefully planned transfer of a pupil from one school into another and can be an alternative to exclusion. While managed moves prevent permanent exclusion in the short-term, the evidence for longer-term impacts is not clear, with tentative evidence for the benefits of managed moves to reduce exclusions and improve attainment. Participants had mixed views about the effectiveness of managed moves in Wales, although they considered managed moves as more effective when used as an early intervention alongside clear communication between those involved. It is important that managed moves are delivered in line with the Welsh Government (2011) guidance.

School-based counselling shows evidence of positive impacts on improved mental health, wellbeing and school engagement for children and young people, although more robust evaluations show smaller effects and there is a lack of strong evidence that counselling reduces exclusion rates. The literature highlighted that counselling services that are integrated within a wider whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing, delivered by high-quality counsellors providing tailored support within a dedicated space at the school, and with the support of parents, are likely to be the most effective. Participants did not commonly mention school-based counselling as an intervention to support those at risk of exclusion in Wales, although positive outcomes were reported when discussed.

Therapeutic approaches<sup>[footnote 4]</sup> such as art therapies, mindfulness, and social and emotional learning, have shown positive effects on children's mental and emotional wellbeing, but there is limited research into their impact as

interventions to reduce exclusions and such approaches were not commonly mentioned by participants.

Enhancing academic skills can involve interventions that target individual children who are experiencing challenges with their academic learning or literacy. Literature exploring the effectiveness of academic skills programmes to reduce the risk of exclusion is limited. While the research provides tentative evidence that programmes that aim to enhance academic skills have shown positive impacts for reducing school exclusions and improving attendance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with ALN, the available evidence comprises only a small number of studies from which the authors noted that firm conclusions cannot be drawn. Enhancing academic skills was not mentioned frequently by participants during the fieldwork.

Mentoring has a positive impact on reducing school exclusions, improving school engagement, attainment, behaviour and reducing violence. While mentoring was not mentioned frequently by participants during the fieldwork, some participants highlighted the use of mentoring in schools in Wales particularly for children at risk of exclusion. Research highlights the importance of consistent and long-term mentor support. In addition, careful consideration needs to be given to who the mentor is and how the mentoring programme ends when good relationships have been built.

Further practices reported by participants in the fieldwork that were used at times as an alternative to exclusions included internal exclusion (removal from the classroom) and reduced timetables (which involve students attending fewer classes for short-term, exceptional purposes).

Views from participants about internal exclusions were mixed, with some seeing it as a preventive step, while others noted recurring use for the same children and young people suggesting limited effectiveness to improve outcomes. Punitive approaches to internal exclusion may not address the root causes of disruptive behaviour. Participants highlighted concerns that as schools aim to

reduce fixed-term and permanent exclusions, the use of internal exclusion may have increased, and it is important to ensure their use is implemented in a way that is supportive to the child's needs. Likewise, reduced timetables show similar widespread use, but recent research in Wales found uncertainty about their purpose, prompting calls from local authorities for clearer guidelines on their use.

## **Practices to maintain contact with a child during a fixed-term exclusion**

Participants identified several practices important to support the learning of children who are fixed-term excluded and to help them maintain engagement with their school. It was considered important for schools and PRUs to establish positive relationships prior to any potential exclusions and to continue dialogue throughout a fixed-term exclusion. During a fixed-term exclusion, it was identified that dialogue between children, their parents, and school can be facilitated through various mechanisms and designated contacts, including members of school behaviour or pastoral teams, learning coaches, and heads of year for pastoral support. Further practice for schools and PRUs included ensuring the provision of schoolwork, either electronically or on paper, and that children can access and understand this work. It was also identified as important to monitor the children's successful completion of the provided schoolwork to support their learning, although this monitoring was reported to be inconsistent.

## **Practices to support reintegration following a fixed-term exclusion**

Participants highlighted various ways to support the reintegration of children following an exclusion that aim to help the child understand and accept behavioural expectations, reflect on their actions, and provide the necessary

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support for a successful return to the school community. Participants highlighted the importance of conducting reintegration meetings between the child, parents, and school representatives to agree on behaviour plans, implement restorative practices, discuss the additional support required, and establish self-management strategies. However, the extent to which parents engage with this process varied. Some parents viewed reintegration meetings negatively and felt the meetings did not sufficiently focus on how to support their child to prevent further exclusions. During reintegration, participants described the importance of maintaining regular dialogue with the child and their family and providing ongoing support for the child's needs.

## **Support needed to prevent exclusions, maintain engagement and support reintegration back into mainstream education**

Participants from local authorities, schools and PRUs, as well as parents and children identified a range of support that could collectively help to prevent exclusions, maintain engagement during a fixed-term exclusion, and support the child's reintegration to school.

The most common form of support that local authorities, schools and PRUs said they needed to prevent exclusions was additional funding and resources. Local authorities indicated that this additional funding would allow them to address demand and support a more proactive strategic approach to support children's needs, while schools and PRUs reported that greater funding would support them to implement interventions, employ staff, and deliver the staff training required to meet their children's needs. There was also an appetite for specific updates to the Welsh Government guidance on exclusions to provide better clarity and practicality, including examples of good practice, with these updates considering challenges to capacity and the availability of provision.

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Local authority staff would like more opportunities to work with other local authorities, schools, and other agencies to share best practice and generate new ideas to prevent exclusions and support reintegration. They would also like:

- additional guidance on providing feedback to schools to support their practice delivery
- to engage in dialogue with schools at an earlier stage about children at risk of exclusions
- school governors to undertake the training provided by local authorities on exclusions
- reduced waiting times for support services (e.g., health and social services)

School and PRU participants highlighted a need for staff training on practices to prevent exclusions (e.g., restorative approaches), more visible signposting to external support and clarification on how to access this support, increased availability of family support services to work with parents and children, and a desire for a template behaviour policy for greater consistency across schools. Participants also indicated that there were not enough places available in special schools for children who require this provision. This means that PRUs are increasingly supporting these children which reduces their capacity to offer temporary provision for children who have the potential to return to mainstream schooling.

## Parents

Many parents highlighted the importance of good communication and positive relationships between schools and families.

Parents also identified that they would like:

- advice in developing their parenting skills and to understand how to help support their child's needs

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- greater clarity around the purpose and status of internal exclusions
- to have a clear school contact point to discuss issues related to their child's needs, which may take the form of a direct phone number to the school's ALNCo
- schools to check families' digital capabilities and connectivity when providing schoolwork for children

## Children

Children reported they would like to see:

- greater understanding amongst school and PRU staff about the reasons for their behaviour, and agreement of possible de-escalation strategies
- earlier identification of their needs, followed by tailored support
- during fixed-term exclusions, regular contact from the school to maintain engagement and support to ensure they understand the work provided

## Recommendations

Evidence from the literature review and qualitative fieldwork indicates a range of school-based interventions with encouraging potential to reduce fixed-term and permanent exclusions.

### Recommendation 1

Those practices identified as having evidence of preventing fixed-term or permanent exclusion should be shared with schools, PRUs and local authorities. Restorative practice followed by school-wide approaches to addressing behaviour were the universal approaches that had the strongest current

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evidence base supporting their use for preventing exclusions in schools, while for targeted interventions mentoring demonstrated the most consistent positive impacts. This will help inform decisions about practices that schools and PRUs decide to utilise. This should include recognition that effective practice is dependent on successful implementation that should consider the school's individual context.

Many school, PRU and local authority participants mentioned working collaboratively with other agencies to prevent school exclusions, although there were also many references to the need for improved multi-agency working. Participants highlighted the importance of a collaborative approach to developing pastoral support plans to support the child's needs, although some local authority staff described not having timely access to children's pastoral support plans.

## **Recommendation 2**

Ensure all pastoral support plans are drawn up using a multi-agency and person-centred practice approach, and are shared with the local authority, to help prevent exclusions. This will ensure that a range of voices inform the development of a pastoral support plan to address the child's needs and that the local authority receives timely copies of the plans for children at risk of exclusion.

It was reported by participants that internal exclusion (removal from the classroom) was used sometimes as an alternative to exclusion, and its use may have increased. However, little is known about the extent to which internal exclusions take place and how they are utilised.

## **Recommendation 3**

Schools should record instances where a child has been internally excluded

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within their management information systems. This should include capturing what activity the child undertakes while internally excluded. This data will support schools to explore their own use of internal exclusions and offer the potential for aggregation of data across all schools, if consistent data measures are established, that will support a greater understanding of the extent and use of internal exclusions in Wales.

The evidence of widespread use of reduced timetables, combined with ambiguity around their purpose and intended outcomes, indicates a need for clearer understanding about how reduced timetables are used by schools and PRUs.

## **Recommendation 4**

Schools should record instances of where a reduced timetable has been arranged for a child within their management information systems. This should include the activity undertaken while on a reduced timetable. This data will support schools to explore their own use of reduced timetables and offer the potential for aggregation of data across all schools, if consistent data measures are established, that will support a greater understanding of the extent and use of reduced timetables in Wales.

There is evidence that staff in some schools were uncertain about the specific support or grants available from their local authority or through third sector organisations for children at risk of exclusion and for those experiencing fixed-term or permanent exclusion.

## **Recommendation 5**

Local authorities should share with schools a directory of available support (provided or funded by the local authority) for children at risk of exclusion and

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those children who are, or have, experienced fixed-term or permanent exclusions. This should include contact details of the relevant local authority officer, so that direct contact can be made by a school. It was also the view of school staff that it would be useful for schools to have information about available support such as the number of places available for services, eligibility, waiting times and whether support was funded.

The literature review revealed that the strength of evidence in relation to effectiveness varied across the interventions identified. Some robust studies looked at exclusion often as one of many educational outcomes, while others explored these practices without considering their impact on exclusion.

## **Recommendation 6**

The Welsh Government should encourage and/or support robust and long-term research which explores the impact of interventions on reducing fixed-term and permanent exclusions.

It is clear from the research, that it can be very difficult for families when a child is at risk of exclusion or has been excluded. Examples of effective support for families (e.g., family engagement officers, family information services) were highlighted during the research and were typically well-received by families. The importance of family engagement prior to, during and after, a fixed-term exclusion was evident through this research.

## **Recommendation 7**

Ensure that local authorities, schools and PRUs are aware of, and provide or signpost parents and children, to parental or family support services (provided by a school, PRU, local authority or external services).

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The literature review indicated that the effective implementation of school-based intervention to prevent exclusions was often dependent on the capability and capacity of school practitioners to deliver or support delivery of the intervention. It is, therefore, vital that the role of school staff is considered when implementing school-based universal and targeted interventions, including their training needs to ensure consistent, school-wide and effective implementation. Currently, the availability and coverage of training in interventions to prevent exclusion is mixed, with time and funding being the main barriers.

## **Recommendation 8**

Schools should consider the role of school staff in delivering interventions to prevent fixed-term and permanent exclusion and ensure that they have the training required to be capable and to feel confident in the effective delivery of interventions to achieve positive outcomes for children. One aspect of this could involve greater use of PRU staff expertise to develop localised communities of practice. An assessment of support required by PRUs to deliver this will be necessary.

Reducing the difficulties and delays faced by schools and PRUs in sourcing specialist expertise could help prevent exclusion for those children identified as at risk and reduce the likelihood of permanent exclusion for those who are fixed-term excluded.

## **Recommendation 9**

Welsh Government should work with local authorities and service providers, including health, to promote access to timely, co-ordinated support for children at risk of exclusion and those who have experienced exclusion.

Improving professional learning, the sharing of good practice and developing

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dialogue between schools, could help to prevent exclusions. There are a number of ways this could be achieved. For example, through cluster groups organised at a local authority level or through the role of education consortia across different regions of Wales. Some school and PRU participants described the need for a national conference on behaviour management to give the issue attention across Wales, as they felt it did not have the necessary profile.

## Recommendation 10

Support ways of capturing and sharing effective practices related to preventing exclusions. This could include sharing information via Hwb, education consortia, conferences and communities of practice.

Local authority staff would like more opportunities to share practice and learn from one another to discuss how best to support schools and PRUs to prevent exclusions, maintain engagement and support reintegration back into mainstream education.

## Recommendation 11

Local authorities should ensure their staff have access to professional development to adequately support schools and PRUs to prevent fixed-term and permanent exclusions. This might include sharing practice via communities of practice.

## Footnotes

[1] Welsh Government. (2019). [Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units \(PRU\)](#). Cardiff: Welsh Government.

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[2] Throughout the rest of this executive summary, the term ‘parents’ will be used to refer to parents and carers.

[3] Welsh Government. (2021). [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Act 2021 \(UK legislation\)](#).

[4] Separate to those mentioned elsewhere such as trauma-informed practice and nurture groups.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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