



A city wide multi agency strategy to improve school attendance and reduce exclusions

DRAFT V3



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A. Purpose

1. This strategy sets out the case, and a proposed way forward, for a renewed collective effort on reducing time lost from school through non-attendance, exclusion or reduced timetables against the background of the learning loss that so many of our children and young people have experienced throughout the pandemic and unfortunately for some continue to do so.
2. The strategy **builds** on several years of work and a range of initiatives, many of which will continue to be delivered under this strategy. However, this strategy takes a **whole system strategic approach** to tackling school absence and exclusions, a major strand of which is around a whole school approach to **relational practice** building on previous work to support restorative practice in schools.
3. A central theme of the PEP education strategy is **inclusion** and this will be the case for this strategy - *creating an educational environment that is welcoming to all children and young people and not giving up on any child whatever their circumstances*. Inclusion is about ensuring that there is in place comprehensive Ordinarily Available Provision that meets the educational needs of the majority of children; that any additional needs are identified early and support is put in place, as part of a graduated response, to avoid exclusion and enable children to make progress with their learning; and that children are able to attend their local mainstream school wherever possible
4. The strategy has strong links with the PEP Education Strategy (Priority 8) and the SEND and SEMH Strategies, focusing on improving inclusion for all children, but with a particular focus on the provision of education for children with SEND / additional needs and improving outcomes for vulnerable children and young people including children in need, looked after children, children at risk of or already being exploited and/or experiencing the criminal justice system, children receiving targeted early help and other children identified by schools as requiring additional support.

B. Rationale and why this matters

5. Relatively low levels of attendance and high levels of fixed term exclusions, particularly in secondary schools, have been a feature of the Portsmouth education landscape for a long time - these are not new findings. We remain concerned about the impact of low attendance and continuing high levels of fixed period exclusions on the life chances and wellbeing of individual children. We know that being in school consistently is crucial to children making progress and gaining the qualifications they need for success in their lives.
6. We also know that being out of school places children at significant risk in terms of criminal exploitation, involvement in criminal activities and other safeguarding risks. Children also miss out on support for special educational needs and mental health problems.
7. Where children are looked after, periods out of school or with poor attendance can threaten the stability of their placements, leading to more enforced changes for them and harming their emotional wellbeing. Being fully part of their school community is essential to the sense of belonging and self-worth which is the right of all children. It is

crucial to the developmental progression and social networks which will sustain them beyond their statutory school years.

8. The argument for **fixed term exclusions** (now officially renamed as **suspensions**) is we believe generally weak based on the evidence available to us. For some children fixed term exclusions can work first time round, but for the majority of children who receive more than one exclusion, however, it quickly ceases to act as a deterrent to poor behaviour. Instead it becomes normalised by children as something they come to expect, and contributes to a vicious cycle of low self-esteem and expectations. For teachers who suffer from the impact of poor behaviour and lack of respect, the temporary exclusion of a child demonstrates that school leaders acknowledge the impact and also provides them with a short period of respite. It is also sometimes seen as the only equitable way to maintain clear consistent and expectations of good behaviour. However, the price paid by a minority of children for this approach is very high. There is moreover no evidence that the threat of exclusion is what keeps the behaviour of other children good.
9. In the case of **reduced timetables** for children, the reasons for such measures should be exceptional and limited, short term and require parental consent. A clear plan should be in place to support early transition back into full time education. Early Help Assessments should be considered for all cases. Reduced timetables that go well beyond six weeks rarely succeed in positive outcomes for the children concerned.

C. Background

10. Schools in Portsmouth have had to endure two extraordinary academic years in which the global Coronavirus pandemic has put significant pressure on school leaders, teachers and other staff. This has extended to early years settings and post 16 providers. They have all been faced with the immense challenges of providing Covid secure and safe environments when children and young people have been in school, developing and delivering remote learning options at speed to ensure learning can continue at home and supporting families practically and emotionally in a wide range of ways. Despite the full return to school and easing of restrictions, the impact of Covid on school attendance continues and many children are continuing to have learn at home for short periods as a result of having to self-isolate.
11. It is true to say that the vast majority of children have returned to face to face learning since the restrictions were eased in June 2021 and most have returned with enthusiasm and are keen to learn, with some having developed new resilience and adaptability through their experience of the pandemic. However, in common with other areas we know that there are still a significant number of children who are not regularly returning to school when they could be. We also know that some children have experienced fixed term exclusions from school over this course of time. We also know that a significant number of children are on reduced timetables, which whilst not subject to a formal fixed exclusion, are nevertheless not able to attend school full time.
12. It is clear from the studies which have been undertaken nationally, and from the evidence Portsmouth school leaders have shared, that the pandemic has had a significant impact on children's learning. Historically, we also know that children in Portsmouth have experienced, pre-pandemic, more lost school time than most other

areas, including areas with as much or greater levels of social and economic deprivation than Portsmouth.

D. The evidence base and why change is needed

13. There are a number of key performance indicators around school attendance and exclusion which the DfE publishes for all upper tier Local Authority areas. The tables below outline the most reliable position (pre-pandemic) with regard to these key indicators, including our position against all 152 upper tier LA areas.
14. Exclusions data is also available for 2019/20 which paints a rather more positive picture but due to the impact of the pandemic the figures have to be treated with a high degree of caution. The DfE did not collect absence data for the Spring and Summer Terms 2020 due to the pandemic and there is therefore no full year 2019/20 absence data to provide comparisons with.

Overall absence primary	2018/19	2019/20
	4.1%	n/a
National rank	82 nd	n/a
3 year trend	Steady	n/a
Comparators: for this measure, Portsmouth is 2 nd highest compared to 11 most similar LA areas. Only Telford and Wrekin has better outcomes.		

Overall absence secondary	2018/19	2019/20
	6.7%	n/a
National rank	146 th	n/a
3 year trend	worsening	n/a
Comparators: the only LA areas with worse performance are: Salford, Knowsley, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool.		

Persistent absence primary (% of pupils)	2018/19	2019/20
	8.7%	n/a
National rank	94 th	n/a
3 year trend	worsening	n/a
Comparators: for this measure, Portsmouth is 2 nd highest compared to 11 most similar LA areas. Only Telford and Wrekin has better outcomes.		

Persistent absence secondary (% of pupils)	2018/19	2019/20
	17.9%	n/a
National rank	144 th	n/a
3 year trend	worsening	n/a
Comparators: the only LA areas with worse performance are: Blackpool, Redcar and Cleveland, Salford, Knowsley, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough.		

Fixed term exclusions (suspensions) primary	2018/19	2019/20
	1.58%	1.1%
National rank	108 th	100 th
3 year trend	Improving	

Fixed term exclusions (suspensions) secondary	2018/19	2019/20
	17.94%	7.5%
National rank	134 th	97 th
3 year trend	Worsening (nearly quadrupled)	

Permanent exclusions primary	2018/19	2019/20
	0.01%	0.02%
National rank	39 th	104 th
3 year trend	No change	

Permanent exclusions secondary	2018/19	2019/20
	0.15%	0.09%
National rank	47 th	50 th
3 year trend	Improving	

15. There are three other key measures of educational absence where robust and official national data is unavailable:

- Reduced (or part-time) timetables
- Chronic non attendance (CNA) - less than 50%
- Requests for elective home education (pupil deregistrations from school)

16. Local data is provided below for reduced timetables. The figures indicated that the number of pupils commencing a reduced timetable has increased but this also reflects a greater level of tracking and monitoring by the Local Authority

Reduced Timetables				
	Autumn Term 17/18	Autumn Term 18/19	Autumn Term 19/20	Autumn Term 20/21
Number of pupils commencing a reduced timetable	55	60	100	125

17. A snapshot of data from October 2021 revealed 309 **chronically absent children** of which only 44% have a Lead Professional. Of the 309 children:

- 73 are open to Targeted Early Help
- 36 are on a CiN Plan
- 20 are on a Child Protection Plan

- 8 are LAC

18. Portsmouth is not a wealthy city and there is a **correlation between deprivation and poor childhood outcomes**. To provide further context, three deprivation indicators are given below with the city's ranking compared to other local authority areas. The figures demonstrate that there are other many other areas that have higher levels of deprivation than Portsmouth and yet are doing better when it comes to school attendance and rate of exclusions.

- 97th of 152 in terms of % children in low income families (where 1st is low)
- 127th of 152 for % of primary children eligible for Free School Meals
- 119th of 152 for % of secondary children eligible for Free School Meals

E. Previous and current work in the city to improve school attendance and reduce exclusions

19. Over the past few years there have been a number of pieces of work aimed at, among other things, improving school attendance and reducing exclusions. Much of this work has been city wide and multi-agency, involving the council, education settings, health, the voluntary sector, etc. Details of these are summarised below:

- a) **High profile school attendance campaign 'miss school miss out'** and the subsequent welcome back and return to school campaigns and associated resources for schools. The *miss school miss out* campaign was relaunched in Sept 2021 following a pause as a result of the pandemic.
- b) **Work of the Behaviour and Attendance Group (BAG)** - tracking and monitoring of school attendance and exclusions. The Group is now a sub group of the PEP Removing Barriers to Inclusion Group.
- c) **Implementation of the SEND Strategy**
- d) **SEMH Partnership, Vision, Principles and Framework** - in 2018 we established regular meeting with partners to co-ordinate provision in school (school nurses. CAMHS, MABs, etc). We also agreed a Vision for SEMH Inclusion, a set of principles and outlined a 4 tier framework to structure our work around reducing demand for Alternative Provision, including reducing exclusions.
- e) **Emotional Wellbeing Strategy** - in 2017 we rolled out the Strategy including a wide range of improvements to address a range of mental health issues impacting on children's inclusion and learning.
- f) **PACE** - in 2018 we launched the **Turnaround Project** and more importantly in terms of driving inclusion - the PACE Training - with over 160 school professionals trained in the PACE model.
- g) **Restorative Practice in Schools** - since 2017, we have trained professionals across 30 schools in RP, set up the RP School Network and provided intensive whole school support to some schools in partnership with Portsmouth Mediation Service.

- h) **Attachment Aware Schools** - up to 2019, 17 schools had received training from the Virtual School.
- i) **Near-to-School and Short Stay School** - have been developed as options to avoid long-term exclusions.
- j) **Ordinarily Available Provision** - in 2018 we published a shared OAP for the city including expectations of schools vis-à-vis SEMH support.
- k) **Portsmouth Inclusion Education Quality Mark (PIE QM)** - In 2018 we launched the PIE QM to improve school leadership, culture and practice around inclusion - this is a self assessment supported by peer moderation, in order to identify strengths and areas for development in relation to inclusive practice. Consistent use of the PIE QM across our schools offers a real opportunity to drive inclusion and reduce exclusions. Mainstream schools have been asked to self-assess against the first two standards 27 schools have now completed this. They will be completing the remaining standards over the course of this academic year - seven schools have already done so.
- l) **Elective Home Education (EHE) Protocol** - agreed by all schools in 2019 and which has successfully reduced demand for EHE pre-pandemic as well as resulting in only a small increase during the pandemic - in stark contrast to most other LAs in the South East who have witnessed significant increases in EHE.
- m) **Reduced Timetables** - revised process and tracking by the LA of those children on reduced timetables that exceed 6 weeks and where there is no clear plan in place to ensure a transition to full time education.
- n) **Team Around the School** - in 2019 the LA piloted two schools for joint work with leadership teams to improve SEMH and safeguarding practice, building on previous work.
- o) **Inclusion Outreach Service** - in 2019 the LA launched the new outreach model, with a more flexible, multi-agency offer of support for schools where they have concerns about meeting children's additional needs. The outreach support is available to all mainstream schools, delivered by a range of professionals from a partnership of services including Multi-agency Behaviour Service (MABS), Solent Academies Trust, Children's Therapy Service, and experienced Outreach SENCOs from mainstream schools in the city.
- p) **PCC traded services** including Attendance and Education Psychology.
- q) **Identifying schools needing focussed support** - in 2019 we used data (and a new way to stratify schools) which identified 9 'very high' or 'high' excluding' schools and 10 medium excluding schools to work with
- r) **Mental Health Support Teams** - in 2019 we commissioned (Wave 2) MHSTs with an additional (Wave 4) Team secured in 2020. All schools now have access to MHSTs

20. Since the pandemic started, more work and planning has taken place all of which have the potential to impact on school attendance and exclusions. These include:

- a) **LA Education Link Co-ordinators** - during the pandemic, systems were established with schools to track vulnerable children and respond to a wide range of issues impacting on families as a result of the lockdown, including RAG-rated child level data on spreadsheets, LA Link Co-ordinators attached to schools and colleges and the Children's Hub. These systems have now been adjusted with a particular focus on children who are chronic non-attenders, with attendance below 50%. The vulnerable children tracking team has now been established as a permanent team, with additional funding and recruitment to 3 dedicated Link Co-ordinator posts, due to the positive impact of this work. This being extended further to include Early Years and Post-16 providers.
- b) **Studybugs** - using real-time attendance and exclusion data at child-level to reduce absence and exclusions. 60 of 61 schools have signed up to this.
- c) **Early Help Assessments (EHA)** - a multi-agency working group is redesigning the EHA to make it easier to use for schools to be lead professionals and do holistic family-based assessment to reduce exclusions/raise attendance (to be known as Family Support Plans). This is being trialled with five pilot schools before it is rolled out to all schools.
- d) **Review of in-school Alternative Provision (AP)** - the LA has commissioned Delta Education Trust to review on site secondary AP (tier 3 of our model). The reviews are being undertaken during the Autumn 2021.
- e) **Tailoring MHSTs to meet local need** - extending the MHST offer, in addition to the CBT model to better focus on children with 'behavioural' challenges. Better alignment with MABS and a more sensible approach to whole school work in line with our principles and approaches.
- f) **Termly LA School Resource Allocation Meetings** - ensuring the local authority support services are appropriately and proportionally allocated to schools supported by a termly review of all schools.
- g) **Supporting neuro-diverse children in school** - Portsmouth has been successful in securing innovation funding from NHS England which will allow us to work in partnership with a number of schools across the City to transform support for children who have a level of neuro-diversity that is impacting on their engagement with and enjoyment of school. The programme will have 4 key areas of focus: training and development for the school; a programme of specific support for schools; development of our existing Parent Carer Forum to create a central hub from which small, local forums will be set up; and development of a digital platform that provides families, young people and practitioner's access to a range of resources and tools, up to date information and interactive functions, building on existing good practice such as the new Portsmouth ND Resource Pack.

h) **Expansion of the health related absence project** which has been running for the last few years involving a handful of schools. The project has demonstrated impact and reduced levels of school absence due to health related issues. Plans are in hand to expand this as a traded service from Sept 2022.

21. All of the above is in addition to the significant efforts by every school in the city to increase attendance and reduce exclusions. It should also be noted, that all of these initiatives build on a long standing set of very good arrangements in terms of the local authority's Inclusion Services (statutory and traded), the Multi Agency Behavioural Service (MABS) and wider health, early help and safeguarding services.

F. What collectively we need to do - positive success factors

22. We believe that there are a number of **positive success factors** which it is realistic for us as a Partnership to achieve, working together. They may seem obvious and we know they reflect many existing aspirations in schools, but we believe they are worth setting out here to underpin the work we want to take forward over the coming months and years:

- a) **High quality external challenge and support for families who need it by services beyond school which work hand in hand with schools**, and which champion strongly the importance for children of full attendance and positive participation in school life. The LA is committed to continuous improvement in its targeted tier 3 and 4 services for families and are aiming to be judged "Outstanding" by Ofsted. A key part of this is the best possible joint work with schools to support attendance and good behaviour by children. The LA want to hear from schools when they fall short in this aspiration and recognise that there will probably always be a feeling in schools that more of this support is needed than the LA is able to provide. Investment by the LA has been consistent over recent years with a cross party commitment to continue to invest in targeted early help as well as statutory social care. Ofsted judge the quality of the support to be "Good" and peer scrutiny continues to be positive. With continuing feedback from schools we should be able to build on this foundation to keep improving the contribution which these services can make.
- b) **A consistent approach to championing school attendance by all agencies including the NHS**. The LA and NHS partners are also committed to maintaining strong health visiting, school nursing and other NHS services which support families' understanding of the importance of education. Services which are not supportive, for example GPs who do not sufficiently challenge negligent behaviour by families, will be robustly challenged by the LA through the strong partnership networks and by colleagues in other parts of the NHS, particularly local commissioners of GPs.
- c) **High quality early help support and challenge for vulnerable families by pastoral teams in schools**, using the revised Early Help Assessment (EHA) planning tool (Family Support Plan). Across the country, schools provide early intervention support and challenge for families and Portsmouth schools are no exception. We know that pastoral capacity is stretched. We also know that the right conversation with a family, at the right time, including connecting families with other

support in the city such as VCS organisations, housing and welfare support, can make a real difference. The revised EHA, to be known as the Family Support Plan, will be trialled in five schools before it is fully rolled out to all schools. There will be an expectation that in the case of any child who is chronically absent there should be a Family Support Plan in place.

- d) **A consistent city-wide culture in schools of high expectations for all**, in which all children feel both challenged and supported to meet those expectations and where all children know that they belong. Developing and maintaining an effective restorative culture in schools with high behaviour expectations is not a "soft approach to discipline". It is very challenging for both children and adults. We know from examples both elsewhere in the country and in Portsmouth, however, that such a culture can be created and maintained. Consistently championed it could reduce significantly the school absence, voluntary and enforced, which blights the lives of too many children in our city. A key strand of this strategy is to take forward a whole school approach to relational practice building on previous work to support restorative practice in schools. Details of this approach is set out in Section G.
- e) **High quality, effective teaching of an appropriate and ambitious curriculum.** Planning to teach the knowledge and cultural capital that our children need in order to access and understand the curriculum is vital to enable them to engage with education and go on to thrive in later life. We know that this is already the key aim of all schools in the city, as is the identification of barriers that some children face in school and within each subject discipline. It is important to underline its importance, however, in increasing attendance and reducing exclusion.
- f) **A rich extra-curricular offer, and expectation, for all children.** Many children in Portsmouth take full advantage of the enrichment opportunities schools offer, in sport, arts or other interest areas. Children who look forward to doing things they love want to come to school and are motivated when they are there.

G. Focus on chronic absence

- 23. As referred to in section D and the snapshot of data from October 2021 we continue to have a relatively high number of children (309) who are chronically absent from school, i.e. less than 50% attendance. And of these children, less than half have a named Lead Professional.
- 24. A key strand of this strategy will be to ensure all chronically absent children have a plan in place either through an Early Help Assessment (Family Support Plan as it will be known as in the future) (refer to 21 c)) or plans developed as a result of being open to tier 3 and 4 services, including an expectation of having a Lead Professional in place.
- 25. Partners will continue to share information with the Missing Exploited and Trafficked (MET) Group and Early Help, encouraging schools to complete an Early Help Assessment (Family Support Plan) and have a Lead Professional in place, working with Early Help and / or contacting MASH where school interventions and previous legal sanctions have failed.

26. The role of the LA Link Co-ordinators will be an important factor, working closely with schools to track and monitor chronically absent children and to make sure that appropriate plans are in place.

H. Focus on relational practice

27. The work on Restorative Practice in schools from 2016 - 2019 had some notable successes, with 32 of our (then) 64 schools engaged in training, our schools network and implementing various pieces of work. Most schools tended to focus on restorative practice with specific children and held the work in their pastoral and safeguarding functions, rather than necessarily taking a whole-school culture approach - more Restorative Justice than Restorative Practice. In addition, there has been a lot of work done on Restorative Practice in social care, early help and a number of VCS organisations in the city.

28. However, we now have a stand-out example in the city, **Trafalgar School** (part of Salterns Academy Trust), who have exemplified what can be achieved by taking the whole-school approach (referred to **relational** rather than restorative practice) with one clear measurable impact being very low exclusions. This is in addition to other anecdotal and measurable impacts in several other Portsmouth schools since 2016. We also know from cities like Hull and Leeds where this whole-school approach has been adopted by the majority of schools in these areas, that exclusions have been markedly reduced as a result.

29. The Portsmouth Education Partnership (PEP) Strategic Board has agreed that the city needs to take a whole-system strategic approach to tackling the very high levels of absence and exclusion in the city and there is wide consensus that Relational Practice in schools should be a major plank of the strategy to improve outcomes in these areas.

30. Relational Practice is not a silver bullet and there are other things we need to do as part of a strategy to reduce schools days lost as set out in this strategy and detailed in sections E and F. Curriculum flexibility for particular pupils being one amongst many others. Moreover, we know the things that count can't always be counted and we do expect to see a wide range of other major benefits from relational practice in schools including improved relationships, children feeling safer and happier at school, reduced anxiety etc. The direct and indirect impact on mental health and educational progress and attainment should not be underplayed. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to set an early expectation that relational practice in schools will make a very significant impact on:

- Days lost to exclusion
- School attendance, and in particular, reducing the proportion of children who are persistently and chronically absent
- Number of pupils on reduced timetables
- Demand for Alternative Provision

31. Schools have been invited to participate in **'Waves' of implementation** over the next 2-3 years. 17 of our 61 schools have expressed an interest to be in Wave One starting in 2021/22, with the addition of The City of Portsmouth College.

32. There are three key resources that will be needed to roll out relational practice in our schools:
- A commitment from each Headteacher and their senior leadership team, governing board and Multi Academy Trust (where relevant) to ensure a whole-school approach is adopted and followed through
 - Support from the Local Authority which will be through a partnership with the Salterns Academy Trust who will lead this work on behalf of the Portsmouth Education Partnership facilitating school visits, school-to-school support and networking
 - Support from L30 (Mark Finnis) who will provide a bespoke package of support for schools in Wave 1 during the course of 2021/22 working closely with Salterns Academy Trust.

I. A shared mission

33. Back in the late 1990s, Portsmouth was the highest permanent excluding (now referred to as expulsions) local authority in England - 152nd out of 152. Within three years, we had moved to the top half of that table. 20 years later we remain in the top quartile. We have also made improvements in recent years in the levels of reduced timetables and elective home education.

34. Whilst fixed term exclusions, part-time timetables and absence are more complex issues, history does suggest that radical improvement across the public service delivery system can be done at pace and be sustained. Under the auspices of the Portsmouth Education Partnership, and alongside partners in the police, NHS, parent representative bodies and the voluntary and community sector, we co-produce and jointly deliver a coherent, ambitious strategy to make a radical difference to levels of attendance and exclusions in the city. The success factors set out in section F reflect a view about some key elements, but we need to work together on a shared mission - with across the board commitment - to make that step change.

35. To do this, we believe that we should hold ourselves and each other to account in a restorative and relational *high support: high challenge* way. We should be prepared to do things differently, change the structures of accountability and planning, be unafraid to learn from what works and doesn't work locally, and be open to learning from other places and the evidence of what works nationally and internationally. Equally, we must not throw everything away - the long list of initiatives set out in section E includes some very good work, much of which has not had the chance fully to impact due to the pandemic. The city has an abundance of good thinkers, good developments and good practice from which to build. We see this mission as a joint leadership challenge, led by the PEP, but involving everyone with a role to play.

J. Governance, accountability and targets

36. The Portsmouth Education Partnership and SEND Board already have in place structures which can oversee and monitor this strategy in the shape of the Removing Barriers to Inclusion Group (RBIC) and the Behaviour and Attendance Group (BAG) which reports into the RBIC. Much of the current and planned work set out in section E sits within these groups and it is therefore proposed that the implementation of this strategy and the work on Relational Practice will be monitored through these structures.

37. The Groups will be accountable to the PEP Strategic Board who will receive reports on a termly basis. For 21/22 the PEP Strategic Board has agreed that one of its four top priorities will be a focus on reducing exclusions and improving school attendance, and will therefore be committed to scrutinising and supporting this work.
38. The success of this strategy will ultimately be measured by improvements in school attendance and a reduction in school suspensions, against the last set of reliable data from 2018/19.
39. A set of 3 year targets are set out below (i.e. by the end of the 2023/24 academic year):
- Overall absence rate in primary to reduce to 2%
 - Overall absence rate in secondary to reduce to 3%
 - Persistent absence rate in primary to reduce to 4%
 - Persistent absence rate in secondary to reduce to 8%
 - Fixed term exclusions / suspensions in primary to reduce to 0.5%
 - Fixed term exclusions / suspensions in secondary to reduce to 5%
 - 50% reduction in the number of children on reduced timetables
 - 100% of chronically absent children to have a plan in place (as a minimum - a Family Support Plan) and a Lead Professional