



# Education Committee

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Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP  
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Dear Damian

Thank you for your letter dated 27 March 2019 regarding our recent oral evidence session on knife crime and exclusions. The Committee welcomes your interest in the area, and your willingness to address the major issues at play. In this letter, we highlight a few areas of concern arising from our committee session.

## **Early intervention**

There is a clear correlation between exclusions and knife crime. And while there is not an established causal relationship between the two, there is often an overlap in the experiences and characteristics of children and young people excluded from school or involved in knife crime. While many other agencies must play their parts in addressing gang violence, education has an important role to play. It is vital that schools intervene early. Robust behaviour policies are important, but we must do far more than that: teachers need the right training to identify and address the complex personal challenges that are associated with exclusions and knife crime. As Carlie Thomas from the St Giles Trust put it, “there are a lot of tell-tale signs before they have got to the point of carrying a knife or being excluded from school”.

## **Inclusion**

We will not stem the flow of exclusions unless we build more inclusive schools. Some schools have managed to do this well. When done well, ‘therapeutic units’ and ‘learning support centres’ provide pupils with suitable support, including qualified teachers, teaching assistants and appropriate medical support where necessary. But schools must be properly resourced to do this, and need guidance to help them understand what effective inclusion looks like. We urge the Department of Education to assess, and meet, each of these elements.

## **Inconsistency of schools' approaches to knife crime**

We welcome Ofsted's recent report on the role of London schools in tackling knife crime, and echo its concerns about schools' inconsistent approach to exclusions following an instance of knife-carrying. We would like the Department to set out the steps it will be taking to ensure that schools are complying with existing guidance, and tell us whether it will be working with the Home Office to clarify existing guidance on exclusions and police involvement.

## **Officers in schools**

Police officers have an important role to play in engaging and mentoring pupils who are at risk of crime. However, as one witness pointed out, they must spend enough time in schools to do this well. We would like to know whether the DfE has a detailed understanding of turnover rates and if so, whether it places any pressure on relevant police authorities to ensure adequate lengths of tenure.

## **Local authority monitoring**

We recognise that, under Section 19 of the Education Act 1996, local authorities have a legal duty to find education for excluded children who may not receive suitable education. However, local authorities do not have a sufficiently strong role to play in scrutinising schools' approaches to exclusion in the first place. We urge the Department to consider giving local authorities more power to monitor exclusions. As Sir Michael Wilshaw said: "Since a lot of these exclusions involve children with special educational needs and difficulties, local authorities should be able to track what happens to a youngster from a poor background with special educational needs from nursery to key stage 1, to key stage 2, to key stage 3, to key stage 4."

## **Improving the quality of alternative provision**

Excluded pupils should receive a high-quality education, addressing the challenges that led to their exclusion in the first place. We recognise that the Department is taking steps to improve alternative provision and we welcome the £4m it has allocated to developing best practice through the AP Innovation Fund. However, we are concerned that the Department is not moving urgently enough to improve the quality of AP. In a number of local authority areas in England, no state-maintained AP place has been rated good or outstanding. And yet the latest wave of free schools creates space for just two new AP free schools. We would like the Department to confirm whether it is making it easy enough for successful bids to emerge. Given that the increase in the participation age was not accompanied by statutory duties to provide post-16 alternative provision, we would also urge the Department to allocate resources to ensure that local authorities and providers can provide post-16 support to the pupils who need it.

## **Previous convictions**

We heard that there may be resistance from PRUs when it comes to accepting pupils who have been involved in knife crime. Witnesses underlined the importance of ensuring that pupils are not “cast adrift” because they have a conviction. We urge the Department to consider what it can do to mitigate the risk that excluded pupils end up with no education at all.

## **Timpson Review**

Many stakeholders are awaiting the findings of the Timpson Review before they take further action on the issue of knife crime and exclusions and, like us, are growing increasingly concerned by its delay. We would welcome an update on when it will be published – or better still, the report itself.

Finally, it would be worth reflecting on the words of Sir Michael Wilshaw who summed up his personal experience of exclusion at our Select Committee session:

*On the rare occasions when I used to exclude youngsters, I realised that I was often committing them to a miserable few years afterwards, so it was a very painful decision to make. We sent very negative messages to those youngsters—usually boys—and to their families about themselves. We realised very quickly that even if they went to a decent pupil referral unit—and there were not that many about—they were in great danger of being drawn into crime.*

Yours sincerely,



**Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP**  
**Chair, Education Committee**