



Education Committee

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Dear Geoff

Thank you for your letter dated 11 April regarding our recent evidence session on knife crime and exclusions. I strongly welcome your interest in this gravely troubling issue, and would like to take this opportunity to address the concerns you outlined in your letter. I will take each of these in turn.

In your letter, you state that we should not be “blaming schools for an issue which they have not caused”. I am certainly not saying this. I acknowledge that the causes are complex; of course, other agencies must help reduce gang violence, but schools also have a part to play. There is no established causal relationship between knife crime and exclusions, but there is a correlation between the two and the individuals in either cohort share similar characteristics. Exclusions and knife crime may well be two symptoms of these underlying personal challenges. Either way, it is vital that schools intervene early and help address these challenges, before they spiral to the point where children get drawn into gang activity - whether that activity precedes or follows exclusion.

You say that it is important “not to overstate the issue of exclusions”. With the greatest respect, I simply cannot agree with your position on this. Every school week there are around 4,000 exclusions for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, and around 80 a week are permanent. Between 2014 and 2018, the number of pupils permanently excluded from school rose by 67%. The rate of fixed-term exclusions, use of alternative provision, and home-schooling have all also risen – not just in absolute terms but also as a proportion of the school population. The fact that exclusions were high ten years ago does not mean we do not have a problem today – on the contrary, the fact that rates then dipped to a lower point (before rising again to today’s levels) shows that it is possible to reduce exclusions. That they are going up again now is, surely, concerning; the Government certainly seems to think so, as it would not have commissioned the Timpson review if not.

In your letter, you say that “it is difficult to see what would be achieved by giving local authorities more power to monitor exclusions”. The evidence presented to the Education Committee during our inquiry into alternative provision suggested that, while schools are required to report exclusions to local authorities, the role of the local authority relating to alternative provision has become difficult. The Committee is concerned about the numbers of vulnerable pupils who are being excluded and would like to see local authorities being able to monitor trends and help them in their duties to both safeguard and ensure all children and young people are receiving suitable education.

Your “firm view” is that the rise in exclusions “is driven by significant cuts in real-term funding to schools over the past few years”. I have no doubt that resources play a part in determining schools’ ability to identify, and support pupils to overcome, the sorts of personal challenges that may, if left unaddressed, lead to exclusion. We need to give our teachers the support and training required to do this. You will note that my committee is actively exploring the financial pressures the education sector faces, with a view to arguing for a 10-year funding settlement. However, rising exclusions are not just about funding. Even in a more challenging financial climate, many schools in England have supported inclusion with highly encouraging results. Strategy and ethos are surely as important as resources.

You say that “[i]t is a shame that the press release which accompanies your letter refers to concerns about ‘the poor quality of alternative provision for excluded pupils’”. Let me be clear: there are incredible APs and teachers – I have visited several – and their work deserves all the recognition in the world. But this does not tell the whole story, and we cannot let this obscure our view of the parts of the sector that are just not working. There are clear causes for concern. For instance:

- The Difference’s 2017 report identified there are several places in the country where excluded children have no access to good or outstanding alternative provision;
- the inspection figure you mention only relates to state-maintained alternative providers; one recent calculation suggests that just 68% of independent inspected APs are fit for purpose;
- there is a lack of post-16 AP options, which means good work in APs can be quickly undone at a crucial point in an excluded child’s life; and
- there are serious problems with some unregistered providers – you will have noted Ofsted’s recent report, which reveals, among other concerning facts, unqualified teachers, rat-infested buildings, exposed wires, locked fire doors and open sewers in some of the schools it exposed.

I understand, and empathise, with your instinct to defend the profession. I am struck daily by the brilliance and compassion of the teachers and other practitioners I get to meet, or learn about, in my job. I also have huge respect for your work, your union’s work, and the jobs that school leaders do every day. To point out that we have a problem with exclusions is not to denigrate these points in any way. But I believe it is important to have an open debate about all the complex factors at play, including those that relate to schools; otherwise, we have no chance of fixing them.

I look forward to meeting you to discuss these points in more detail.

Yours sincerely,



Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair of the Education Committee