

Seeking a balance: Conversations with policy makers and influencers about intervening upstream to prevent school exclusions in the context of Covid-19 and beyond

Insights from the Excluded Lives ‘Policy Conversations’

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Introduction

As schools get underway with the COVID-19 recovery phase in England, there is growing consensus among practitioners and policy professionals that rebuilding based on pre-COVID specifications will lead to the re-establishment of a previously broken system; a system which saw the most vulnerable children and young people in society slipping through the cracks. In 2016/17, 97.4% of all pupils permanently excluded in the UK were from schools in England (McCluskey et al. 2019). This report outlines insights from policy makers and influencers about the need for contextual safeguarding aimed at reducing school exclusion. This requires a strategic approach to better meet the needs of vulnerable pupils, stem the rising tide of formal, informal and self-exclusion, and ensure that the four pillars of the Department for Education's (DfE) recovery plan – Attainment, Attendance, Safeguarding and Wellbeing – are met for *all* children and young people in the context of COVID-19 and beyond. The report is linked to two further documents, *Getting the balance right* and *Restoring the balance*, which outline policy recommendations and justifications for collective responsibility in the context of COVID-19.

School exclusion risks after COVID-19

In June 2020, members of the Excluded Lives Research Team² at the University of Oxford published the report: *School exclusion risks after COVID-19* (Daniels, Thompson, Porter, Tawell and Emery 2020). Soon after the launch of the report, the team hosted a series of virtual 'Policy Conversations' to explore the policy implications of the research. Team members spoke with 28 policy makers, sector bodies, third sector representatives and practitioners from England as well as an additional eight policy makers from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Follow-up comments were also received. All contributions have been anonymised in this report.

The 'Policy Conversations' took as their starting point a number of vignettes included in the original report, which depicted children and young people who were deemed to be at risk of formal (permanent and fixed-period³), informal or self-exclusion due to the effects of the pandemic (see Daniels et al. 2020). The original report found that traditionally over-represented groups in formal exclusion figures – pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), pupils eligible for free school meals and those from certain ethnic groups; Black Caribbean boys, Gypsy/Roma and Travellers of Irish Heritage (DfE 2020a) – remain at risk of exclusion in England, with inequalities being exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19. However, new categories of risk of vulnerability to school exclusion were also identified, including:

- ◆ Pupils who had not received any interim provision following a permanent exclusion due to the lockdown, and were transitioning into their new schools;
- ◆ Children and young people who preferred lockdown and did not wish to return to school;
- ◆ Pupils who enjoyed being taught in small groups in school during the partial closure of schools, who did not want schools to return to normal;

² Excluded Lives website: <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/excluded-lives/>

The Political Economies of School Exclusion and their Consequences (ESRC 1811EP001/LH7: Principal investigators, Associate Professor Ian Thompson and Professor Harry Daniels)

Twitter: @ExcludedLives

³ For definitions of permanent and fixed-period exclusions see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion>

- ◆ Pupils who were suffering from mental health problems as a result of the pandemic;
- ◆ Pupils traumatised through bereavement or as a result of difficult home conditions;
- ◆ Children and young people who were unable to access the services and provision they need;
- ◆ Children and young people who had little contact with school, and who did not access education over the period of lockdown;
- ◆ Children and young people who have been affected by recent policy and legislative changes, including changes to Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) legislation, school exclusion guidance, and school behaviour policies.

The remainder of this report documents the outcomes of these ‘Policy Conversations’ setting the discussions within the current policy landscape. Through a review of the *Guidance for full opening of schools*, and related school recovery guidance, issued by the DfE (2020b, 2020c; see Appendix A) we reflect on the advice and resources currently available to schools in England, and highlight gaps and contradictions that need to be addressed to ensure that the identified vulnerabilities outlined above do not lead to formal, informal or self-exclusion in the context of COVID-19 and beyond. In so doing, we recognise existing mechanisms, programmes and evidence, which could be called upon, including school nurses, Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and the newly introduced [Violence Reduction Units](#) (VRUs) and school [Mental Health Support Teams](#) (MHSTs) to support recovery and prevent exclusion, as well as the recommendations made in the Timpson (2019) *Review of School Exclusions*. We also look to our neighbouring jurisdictions – Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – for comparative perspectives.

Setting the policy foundations

The first step in building any stable structure is making sure the correct foundations are set. There was a feeling among participants in the ‘Policy Conversations’ that the policy foundations underpinning the current education system, and school recovery guidance, in England needed to be reset and priorities rebalanced. Three policy recommendations emerged from the ‘Policy Conversations’:

1. Policies are needed which foster a nuanced understanding of vulnerability. They should:
 - a. recognise the diversity of children and young people including those whose pre-existing vulnerabilities have been overlaid with COVID-19, and those who have become vulnerable due to COVID-19, and b. embrace the risk factors, and children and young people’s views on their needs, moving from a focus on vulnerable children and young people to focusing on vulnerable contexts.
2. Policies are needed which recognise and promote wellbeing as fundamental for *all* children and young people to enable them to attend consistently, engage with learning and improve attainment; and ensure continued safeguarding, including mitigating the risks of exploitation.
3. There is a need to identify and resolve policy and practice contradictions and acknowledge the way legislation is enacted within and across government departments and services at all levels.

The discussions which informed these recommendations are discussed below, and the recommendations themselves are set out in more detail in [Getting the balance right](#) and [Restoring the balance](#).

Adopting a nuanced understanding of vulnerability

On 2nd July 2020, the DfE published guidance for the full opening of [schools](#) and [specialist settings](#) in England from September 2020 (DfE 2020b, 2020c). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, focus was placed on supporting vulnerable children and young people and their continued attendance at school. The criteria of ‘vulnerability’ included being assessed as being in need under section 17 of the *Children Act 1989*, and/or having an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Education providers and Local Authorities (LAs) were also given flexibility to use their professional judgement to continue school-based provision for children and young people who they assessed as otherwise vulnerable; for example, those on the edge of receiving support from social services (DfE 2020d). Little to no mention was made of children and young people who had been formally excluded from school prior to the lockdown, and found themselves in the liminal space of being without a school place.

Our original report (Daniels et al. 2020) and subsequent ‘Policy Conversations’ suggested the need to move urgently towards a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability rather than measuring children against fixed categories, which can promote narrow, formulaic and inflexible responses. One size does not fit all. The ‘Policy Conversations’ proposed that definitions of vulnerability should be extended to encompass a broader range of risk factors, and should also take into consideration and act upon children and young people’s views of their needs (see for example Barnardo’s 2020) and what it means to be ‘vulnerable’ (see National Children’s Bureau 2020), and gather input and feedback on any proposed policy changes (see Scottish Government (2020a) and Children’s Parliament (2020) for examples of engaging with the voice of the child/young person through, amongst other things, Youth Parliaments and youth surveys). It is important to acknowledge that the DfE’s recovery guidance has made strides in this direction, by recognising that:

‘Pupils may be experiencing a variety of emotions in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, such as anxiety, stress or low mood. This may particularly be the case for vulnerable children, including those with a social worker and young carers. It is important to contextualise these feelings as normal responses to an abnormal situation. Some may need support to re-adjust to school; others may have enjoyed being at home and be reluctant to return; a few may be showing signs of more severe anxiety or depression. Others will not be experiencing any challenges and will be keen and ready to return to school’ (DfE 2020b).

In the guidance for the full opening of special schools and other specialist setting, the same paragraph as above appears, but with an additional sentence at the end:

‘The return to education settings allows social interaction with peers, carers and teachers, which benefits wellbeing’ (DfE 2020c)

Alongside the guidance for full opening, the DfE also hosted a webinar for school staff on [supporting returning students' mental wellbeing](#), and in the lead up to the 2020/21 academic year there was growing pressure from across the children's charity sector, and the *All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children* ([see All Party Parliamentary Group for Children meeting](#)), for government to put children at the heart of the recovery process (Schools' Wellbeing Partnership 2020a). Many of these organisations produced briefings to aid recovery (see for example: Association of Directors of Children's Services 2020; Children's Commissioner for England 2020; Schools' Wellbeing Partnership 2020b; The Children's Society et al. 2020a, 2020b).

Whilst the wider and more varied understanding of vulnerability included in the DfE (2020b, 2020c) full opening guidance is welcome, we argue that there is a need to go one step further, to recognise 'vulnerable contexts' rather than focus solely on vulnerable children and young people.

Getting the balance right: Debunking dichotomies and policy contradictions

During the 'Policy Conversations' the four pillars of the DfE's recovery plan - Attainment, Attendance, Safeguarding and Wellbeing - were brought to our attention. There was a general sense from those involved in the conversations that the DfE's (2020b, 2020c) guidance sets out much of what is needed in terms of immediate recovery and in many respects says the right things about new priorities for schools following the pandemic, particularly in relation to pupils' wellbeing. However, there was also the feeling that the guidance can be read in many different ways:

"You can read what you want and find your views, whatever they are, reflected in these documents."

For example, good attendance at school is rightly seen as a high priority, but the guidance talks about powers to fine caregivers whose children do not attend. The focus on attainment correctly points out that pupils should not be penalised for the disruption to their education, but there remain concerns from practitioners about accountability frameworks and incentives that can have unintended consequences – including the effects of league tables and performance pressures on schools, teachers and pupils most vulnerable to exclusion. As one participant put it:

"There are the wrong incentives for the wrong targets."

Moreover, despite recognising the diversity of experiences children and young people will have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential repercussions of these experiences, the 'Policy Conversations' and reading of the various published guidance (see Appendix A) and related reports, highlighted that at its core the English Government's recovery guidance is focused on catching or levelling up, and is based on a system of rewards and sanctions. Although the importance of responding to pupil wellbeing and mental health is acknowledged in the English guidance for full opening, and school attendance is noted as beneficial to pupil wellbeing, discussions of pupil wellbeing are largely confined to a dedicated section of the guidance, and presented as separate from rather than fundamental to ensuring that children and young people can engage effectively in their learning. The core focus of academic catch-up in the English guidance is in stark contrast to the equivalent guidance in the other three UK jurisdictions, where wellbeing is seen as the pre-requisite to academic success, and '*continuity of learning*' is the aim

(see Department of Education, Northern Ireland 2020:2; Scottish Government 2020a:36; Welsh Government 2020a:5, 2020b:30).

'There may also be a natural tendency after a period of extended closure for schools to try to ensure missed knowledge content is caught up quickly... The Department would emphasise, however, the key importance after many months away from the school environment of ensuring children have good emotional health and wellbeing, are engaged and motivated to learn and have the tools and skills they require for learning. Schools will know that stress and anxiety have a significant impact on the brain's ability to process, learn and retain information.' (Department of Education, Northern Ireland 2020:5-6)

'[Guidance on support for continuity of learning](#) and [Curriculum for Excellence in the Recovery Phase](#) both reinforce the importance of wellbeing as a critical focus in recovery. Balancing efforts to address lost learning with children and young people's social and emotional needs should be a priority.' (Scottish Government 2020a:36)

'The [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#) is clear that well-being is a pre-requisite for learning. The experience of lockdown and not attending a school or setting for some months is likely to have had an impact on most learners to some degree, which may not be known for some time. As a consequence of their particular needs and pre-existing barriers to learning, it is possible that learners from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups will be hardest hit in terms of the impact on their well-being. The [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#) notes that learners who are not content, safe and secure will not learn effectively.' (Welsh Government 2020b:15)

We were told by one of the Scottish participants that in Scotland they have actively sought to stop using the term 'catch-up' due to the deficit undertones:

"So we're trying to minimise the language that people are using around catch-up, that you need to take children and young people where they are at, look at the experiences they have had, look particularly at what children and young people feel they need to talk about. That's the message we are sharing."

The Northern Irish guidance shares a similar sentiment and acknowledges the impact using particular language might have.

'Language is important and frequent references to "missed work" or "lost time" or "catch up" will potentially increase pupil anxiety.' (Department of Education, Northern Ireland 2020:6)

The discussion around academic catch-up versus wellbeing led to a broader discussion around the need to avoid dualistic thinking and rectify policy contradictions in England in order to get

the balance right. One participant spoke of teachers feeling “*deskilled by the mixed messages about where priorities should lie.*” There was a feeling among the ‘Policy Conversation’ participants that the standards versus inclusion debate is a false dichotomy and a dialectical relationship between wellbeing and attainment was acknowledged. Improving standards was seen to rest on improving inclusion and ensuring wellbeing. Overall, participants in the ‘Policy Conversations’ from England called for closer alignment of the DfE’s four pillars, and a move to see wellbeing as the cornerstone.

Flexibility: One size does not fit all

‘Policy Conversation’ participants from England also raised concern about schools being advised to update their behaviour policies to include new rules to ensure the health and safety of staff and pupils in line with public health advice, alongside corresponding sanctions and rewards. The fact that a pupil’s behaviour may be the result of the trauma they have experienced was felt to be largely overlooked, and that in essence it would be easier for schools to exclude. There was an understanding among the ‘Policy Conversation’ participants that children and young people’s behaviours on return to school may be quite natural reactions to an extraordinary experience, including death and dying in society, and for some in their families and communities, and should be acknowledged as such. Schools will need to carefully weigh up the harm to public health with the harm of school exclusion for the individuals involved.⁴ Concern was raised about one size fits all responses, and a strong view that policies should support flexibility in practice was put forward. It was thought that policies should be designed to ensure that needs led provision is a hallmark of new ways of working. It was recognised that structure in the form of routines, direction, instruction and boundaries are important, but that as policies are enacted they need to be sensibly not rigidly applied. Crucially there is a need to understand where each child is starting from with early identification and intervention, which provides a targeted offer upstream from points of potential conflict and breakdown.

Strategic thinking

The full opening guidance (DfE 2020b, 2020c) and behaviour and attendance checklist (DfE 2020e:4) issued by the DfE notes that: ‘*Many pupils are likely to need some social and emotional support on their return to school. Some pupils will need extra support, such as those who have previously had poor attendance or fixed term exclusions as well as those new to the school, with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or who have not engaged with school during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak*’, that permanent exclusion should only be used as a ‘last resort’ and off-rolling⁵ will not be tolerated (DfE 2020b, 2020c). However, participants in the ‘Policy Conversations’ felt that the behaviour and attendance checklist has the potential to strengthen an already punitive approach to behaviour in England, and is somewhat inconsistent with the guidance on wellbeing in the full opening guidance.

⁴ Recent reports have linked exclusion from school with involvement in violent crime, and criminal exploitation (Hudek 2018a, 2018b), poor educational outcomes (Gill, Quilter-Pinner and Swift 2017) and mental health problems (Parker et al. 2015). See also: Daniels, Thompson and Tawell (2019a).

⁵ ‘*Off-rolling is the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil. This includes pressuring a parent to remove their child from the school roll*’ (Owen 2019).

When discussing the recommendation to update behaviour policies in England, one of the participants from Scotland stated:

"There is nothing to say schools will have to change things in Scotland. We recognise that children and young people may be traumatised."

The existing frameworks and policy approaches – *Positive Behaviour Policies*, *Positive Relationships Policies* and *Child's Rights approaches* – in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively were seen as firm foundations for being able to meet the needs of pupils in vulnerable contexts to prevent formal, informal and self-exclusion (see Children's Commissioner for Wales 2017; Education Authority Northern Ireland 2020; Scottish Government 2019).

The 'Policy Conversations' revealed a growing appetite to move towards adopting public health, trauma informed, and whole school approaches to behaviour and wellbeing in England (see for example, Public Health England's (2020) report on taking [a public health informed approach to improving outcomes for vulnerable children](#) to ensure no child is left behind), much akin to those in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Existing policy and curricula were highlighted that could be built upon in England. For example, the focus on relationships in the new [Early Years Foundation Stage](#), and the [Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) and Health Education](#) curriculum could be expanded to ensure alignment with, or even replacement of, behaviour policies, and form part of a whole school approach to wellbeing. It was also felt by many of our discussants that some aspects of the 2003 *Every Child Matters* policy (HM Treasury 2003) and the *Children Act 2004* are worth revisiting as part of exploring what we already have in legislation that we can implement better rather than adding more policy change. For example, multi-agency working, the inclusion of children and young people's feedback and an emphasis on ensuring wellbeing in order for children and young people to be ready to learn. As one participant from Northern Ireland said:

"What is needed is strategic thinking rather than reactive decisions and fire-fighting."

This requires a fundamental rethink on education policy in England and a "strong government message" to bring about systemic change.

Clarity, consistency and communication

The 'Policy Conversation' participants proposed, in line with the recommendations from the *Timpson Review* (2019), that joining up guidance would help to iron out policy inconsistencies, contradictions and perverse incentives, and ensure a more holistic approach to recovery, and education more broadly. The mapping, and building of policies which promote the development of a shared vocabulary was also advocated as a way to enhance flexibility across agencies (see also Cole et al., 2019; Daniels, Thompson and Tawell 2019b). Referring specifically to school exclusion guidance, Timpson (2019:60) recommended:

'DfE should update statutory guidance on exclusion to provide more clarity on the use of exclusion. DfE should also ensure all relevant, overlapping guidance (including behaviour management, exclusion, mental health and behaviour, guidance on the role of the designated teacher for looked after and previously looked after children and the SEND Code of Practice) is clear, accessible and consistent in its messages to help schools

manage additional needs, create positive behaviour cultures, make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 and use exclusion only as last resort, when nothing else will do. Guidance should also include information on robust and well-evidenced strategies that will support schools embedding this in practice.'

Some participants in the ‘Policy Conversations’ also argued that there is a need to put safeguards back in place (e.g. Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) legislation; see Daniels et al. 2020) and a need to debunk myths that can drive decisions around exclusion in schools (e.g. exclusion will lead to a child receiving the support they need).

The general consensus of those working in England was that communication of recovery plans and public relations will be key in both the short and long term. This will require:

- ◆ **Clear, succinct, accessible and reliable communication** from schools, Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and LAs to families and communities, and between government, schools and other settings. Where mixed messages emerge, as inevitably they will, these need to be rapidly resolved and clarification given in ways that are accessible and manageable. Policy needs to be clear and understandable to schools and families.
- ◆ **An understanding of children’s rights** and a fair system with clear communication and information about the child’s needs that is shared.
- ◆ **Avoiding overload.** The volume of information in statutory and policy documents was already high and has now reached such a volume that the risk is messages will be only partially understood and inflexible responses made for fear of getting things wrong (e.g. schools risk assessing that: they can no longer support the special needs of some pupils; that pupils who are dual registered will not be allowed to attend both settings; or that external professionals will not be allowed into schools to provide additional support).
- ◆ **Avoiding short termism** in terms of interventions, which need time to see what the effects are.
- ◆ **Translation of policy/guidance into practical steps/advice.**

Culture and values

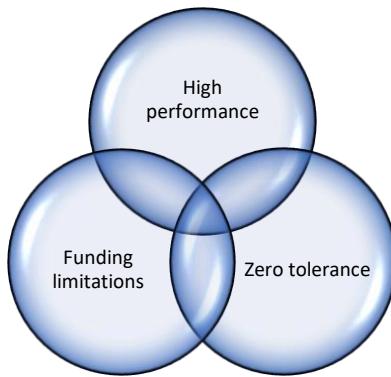
As mentioned earlier, the ‘Policy Conversation’ participants discussed how systemic change, like that proposed in this report and in *Getting the balance right* and *Restoring the balance*, needs a strong government message. One participant described this as having been the case in Scotland where permanent exclusion rates are much lower (McCluskey et al. 2019):

“We talk about our three key drivers, one is Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), one is Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) and one is Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) so it’s there as a key message saying we value wellbeing.”

Attendees were of the view that the English government needs to set out some principles about the way it intends to work and provide guidance about accountability expectations, what flexibility exists in practice, and in line with earlier discussions in this report, re-examine system incentives to see if they are fit for purpose. While there was hope that the recovery period may open up space for schools to adopt more holistic positive approaches to behaviour and wellbeing,

concern was raised that as pressures, such as returning to a normal academic year, exams and inspections resume, room for manoeuvre may be reduced. The section on *Building the infrastructure: Resourcing change* below suggests some ways of maintaining and supporting change, through revisions to current accountability frameworks.

The risk is that exclusions of all kinds will increase if the infrastructure and culture of schooling in England that emerges is one that emphasises:



However, if the DfE's four pillars are consistently supported and wellbeing is recognised as the pre-requisite for delivery of the other elements, the risks of exclusion can be mitigated and the chances of successful return to school by *all* children and young people increased:



The OECD (2020:3) set out three principles for education responding to COVID-19 that go from strategic policy to operational school level issues, which may provide a framework to help achieve the alignment of the DfE's four pillars:

- ‘Quality: to minimise the disruption in learning and ensure that students are able to complete their studies with the required level of competences.
- Equity: to ensure that all students from the same cohort enjoy the same learning opportunities, and that students impacted by the crisis will graduate with the same level of competences as their peers from unaffected cohorts.
- Wellbeing: to ensure not only students’ physical and mental health, but also the development of socio-emotional skills, by preserving the school community, and the link between peers and teachers.’

Similar principles of equity and excellence, and a focus on wellbeing and children's rights underpin the Scottish and Welsh education systems, and commitment to these principles have informed the approaches to school recovery adopted in both jurisdictions.

'The Scottish education system is based on the principles of Excellence and Equity. The Scottish government continues to be committed to closing the poverty related attainment gap and the principle of equity. In line with the principle of equity, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds should be offered specific and targeted support and access to learning as part of the staged re-opening of schools.' (Scottish Government 2020b:9; see also Scottish Government 2020c)

'Our shared commitment – right across the country – to combine equity with excellence means that we can navigate this period and invest in tackling issues such as digital exclusion, continue to move forward with a world-leading approach to online learning, and support bespoke professional learning for our education workforce.' (Welsh Government 2020a:4)

Changing hearts and minds

Along with a strong government message, it was acknowledged by participants that change of culture also needs to happen at school level:

"Schools have other short term priorities. There needs to be a sea change in attitudes of some of the teaching profession. If they are on zero tolerance mode, then the child presents a problem. So a long term objective must be to change hearts and minds, change the culture of the school."

Participants spoke of a need for strong school leadership that focuses on improving pupils' and staffs' learning and wellbeing, and networks of school leaders to support one another. Previous successful examples of this are the *London Challenge Families of Schools* and the *National College for School Leadership community* (see for example Kidson and Norris 2012). There was discussion around how some head teachers in England had reported feeling helpless to resolve children's needs pre-lockdown and were looking to external support, including Alternative Provision, to sort the problem out. It was felt that:

"There has been a loss of some professional expertise and heads ask: 'who do I buy in to solve it' rather than 'what skills do we have'."

Participants noted that there is a need now, more than ever, to help school leaders to feel empowered, with assistance if needed, to meet the needs of their pupils and build local capacity. It was also seen as important to have a strong and coherent middle tier between government and schools which builds and sustains effective relationships, ensures continuity over time, and helps to coordinate support through their knowledge of the local offer. It is important that each

element of that middle tier between schools and central government is well understood in terms of its role, responsibility and relationship.

We heard that at present the fragmented nature of some LAs in England and the strong performative ethos of some MATs has led to increased risks for exclusion. However, this is not a uniform situation across England with some LAs retaining a strong role in coordinating support and some MATs having developed a cooperative ethos where they work together to support vulnerable children and young people. In Scotland and Wales, and to some extent Northern Ireland, the approach to supporting vulnerable children and young people was seen to be more coordinated across the jurisdiction.

The crisis has led to questions about the role of pedagogy and pastoral care in the development of a nurturing education system that values and includes all children and young people. There was widespread recognition during the ‘Policy Conversations’ that there needs to be a better focus on valuing all children and young people and what they bring to education, and including the voices of children and young people in decision making. In line with findings from the *Timpson Review* (2019) and the JUSTICE report on *Challenging school exclusions* (de Friend 2019) there was a call for better communication to enable parents and carers to understand their legal entitlements, and actively participate in school exclusion processes.

There was a call for creating a system of values and beliefs rather than targets and outcomes and a collaborative rather than competitive culture (within and across all services, including schools, MATs and LA teams), with some participants speaking about needing a nurturing, child centred, more holistic approach underpinned by principles of equality, children’s rights and positive relationships in schools. However, like with the policy dichotomies outlined earlier in the report (e.g. standards versus inclusion; attainment versus wellbeing), other participants saw getting the balance right between a system built on values and beliefs versus targets and outcomes, and collaborative versus competitive cultures as key.

Building the infrastructure: Resourcing change

While the appetite for taking a more strategic and flexible approach to meeting the needs of children and young people in vulnerable contexts, including those at risk of formal, informal and self-exclusion, was strong among the ‘Policy Conversation’ participants, there was also recognition that a strategic focus requires sustained resources in order to embed system change and enable intervention upstream.

Resources and capacity

As mentioned earlier the pressures that have been placed on schools in England over recent years, including performativity (Ball 2010) and funding cuts⁶ threaten to undermine the principles laid out by the OECD, and pose a risk for meeting the DfE’s four pillars. While funding has been made available to schools through the [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) catch-up premium](#) issued by DfE (2020f), it was seen as only a drop in the ocean with ‘Policy Conversation’

⁶ The [Under Pressure](#) report produced by a consortium of children’s charities found that cuts to children’s services in England amounted to £2.2 billion per year between 2010 and 2019. These cuts have largely impacted on non-statutory services including those who provide early intervention/preventative work, and also education workers that mediate between schools and families.

participants calling for a wholescale review of school and local service (including early intervention, Educational Psychology, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), mediation services and youth work) budgets in England. It was widely felt that the [National Funding Formula](#) should take greater account of the additional support some children and young people need to help them thrive during their time in school. There was a general plea for the fair and proportionate allocation of aligned budgets which would provide adequate support for the restoration and development of capacity in schools and children's services. There was some suggestion of the potential benefit of pooling resources among clusters of schools and services, particularly with respect to aiding multi-agency working, a point we will return to later. Alongside budget allocations, and additional staff recruitment, the participants also talked about other infrastructure that needed to be enacted in order to bring about change.

In terms of monitoring the needs of children and young people at risk of formal, informal and self-exclusion, it was suggested that feedback mechanisms need to be established to monitor in real time accurate numbers of pupils returning to schools, as well as absences (Including local closures of classes and schools) and exclusions (including their reasons) in order to respond promptly where necessary⁷. Similarly it was felt that there needs to be local data collection to enable LAs, MATs and other services to monitor, collaborate and respond as issues arise in terms of wellbeing and teaching and learning support. Cross-sector and cross-service commitment to data sharing, common indicators, common inspection frameworks and joined-up activity to address key concern areas were also identified.

There was also a feeling that “*new initiatives don't always focus on sustainability*” and that schools are “*overwhelmed by programmes.*” Participants called for continuity of funding and therefore changes to current commissioning practices. There was also recognition that “*schools are up against it*” and so anything in addition to their usual workload (e.g. training) “*needs to be easy to do.*” The practitioners who took part in the ‘Policy Conversations’ also talked about needing more time and staff capacity to be able to engage and build positive relationships with both pupils and caregivers.

Lastly, there was discussion around the commissioning of Alternative Provision in England, and a push to see alternative provision (decapitalised) as “*as an integral part of the education sector not distinct from it.*” One participant stated:

“There needs to be more policy thinking around funding and exclusions, re-shaping the money spent on Alternative Provision with the development of hubs that enable children to stay in mainstream and access different forms of support.”

Some of the ‘Policy Conversation’ participants talked of the benefits of redirecting funding “*upstream.*” Investing in early intervention and upskilling mainstream teachers and support staff was noted as a way to remove the need for Alternative Provision, and ultimately reduce expenditure (see Centre for Social Justice 2020).

⁷ In Scotland, since schools reopened on 11th August 2020 [attendance and absence data for pupils and staff in schools and childcare settings](#) has been collected on a weekly basis.

Accountability

In order to achieve the right incentives for the right targets, it was felt that accountability systems for schools should also be revisited. Discussants mentioned that there had been some short-term positives that had come from external requirements being removed during COVID-19 such as intensive support for pupils in vulnerable contexts, and school staff feeling enabled to develop creative curriculum responses to needs without the constraints of exams and assessments. There was a feeling in the ‘Policy Conversations’ that efforts should be made to remove excessive performance accountability pressures in favour of an increased focus on wellbeing. Again, any changes and new flexibilities in the system must be well communicated, and schools must be clear on how they are going to be held to account.

The following points and specific suggestions around accountability were raised:

- ◆ **Exam and statutory assessment pressures are driving behaviours in ways that militate against effective practice for all.** The current system may encourage perverse incentives and workarounds.
- ◆ **Accountability measures for the curriculum offer and behaviour are important but they should be set alongside measures of wellbeing, positive relationships with families and children and young people, multi-agency working (including collaboration with neighbouring schools), preventative work and support for transition.** In line with the first point above, when developing such measures it was noted that policy makers must be alert to possible unintended consequences or perverse incentives, such as children and young people being formally/informally removed for bringing down their wellbeing figures. Some participants suggested that wellbeing indicators could measure provision, training and working with others rather than direct impact, which would be very varied according to individuals’ experiences. However, others believed that: “*measuring provision and workforce would not be reliable indicators of wellbeing given the lack of evidence of impact of school-based interventions to support wellbeing and the difficulties in equating investment in people with impact.*” We were informed about a common outcomes framework for children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing, currently under construction by PHE, which will capture mental health problems through wellbeing indicators and risk and protective factors, and the development of a “*good schools index which will reflect more than just academic attainment*” by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England, both of which may help to further understanding of the best way to capture wellbeing data when published.
- ◆ **The breadth of the inspection frameworks cannot be covered in the time allowed** leading to inconsistencies and often an emphasis on curriculum and behaviour to the detriment of wellbeing.
- ◆ Rather than there being different inspectors and inspection regimes/frameworks for every service it was suggested that **there should be overarching accountability for all services working with vulnerable children and young people.**
- ◆ A system for quality assurance of new programmes and school based strategies designed to address trauma and Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs should be developed.

Bringing about change through learning

There was a call for the reworking and rewriting of the scripts that inform practice. A much-vaunted outcome was that of the school as community taking collective responsibility. In order to achieve this, it was deemed necessary to promote self-evaluation in schools supported by a system of peer monitoring. Alongside the idea of schools supporting schools in the gathering of evidence around best practice and supporting transition there was general and widespread support for policies which assist professional learning in and of practice. It was argued that the middle tier, discussed earlier, of LAs and MATs can support sustainability of change brought about through such learning.

Training and support

Finally, we heard that there was a need for more focused attention on behaviour and Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs within Initial Teacher Training and embedded in the [Early Career Framework](#) (see also Timpson 2019). Teachers want more training in the support of social and emotional skills as an integral part of subject lessons. Continued Professional Development (CPD) will be important for both teachers and support staff. It was suggested that targeted CPD would help them to more confidently interpret and understand trauma related behaviours, adopt a holistic approach to investigating underlying factors, make reasonable adjustments/endeavours, and ensure that their decisions comply with the *Equality Act 2010*. Useful CPD courses might focus on:

- ◆ Upskilling teachers to provide a universal offer and meet the needs of children and young people below thresholds;
- ◆ Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma informed training;
- ◆ Whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing;
- ◆ Relationship based approaches to behaviour and restorative practices;
- ◆ Joint training to encourage joint working;
- ◆ Racial trauma and cultural competency training;
- ◆ Bereavement training;
- ◆ Compulsory training for school governors on school exclusion due processes and procedures.

As part of their recovery package, the DfE (2020b, 2020c) announced that the Whole School SEND consortium would be delivering staff training on supporting pupils with SEND as they return to school, and published the [COVID-19 Send Review Guide](#) to help schools to reflect on their provision and prepare for reopening. Governors for Schools (2020), a national governor recruitment charity, have also started a campaign for all schools to have a Wellbeing Link Governor. Additionally, the DfE (2020g) launched the [Wellbeing for Education Return programme](#), which was acknowledged by participants in the ‘Policy Conversations’ as a welcome start in providing accessible training for school staff on understanding and supporting children and young people affected by bereavement or trauma or struggling with anxiety or other mental health problems on return to school; and promoting wellbeing.

It is however, as one participant said:

"...a one-off immediate response to the crisis and needs to be built on with a longer term plan for all staff. Plus as a train the trainer programme working through un-ringfenced grants to LAs, there is some uncertainty about reach of the training."

Another participant commented:

"The problem is that short-termism is not appropriate. This is an unprecedented context where schools need to focus on the longer game with mental health and wellbeing a critical component. We need to ask where are the strengths and assets within the school system, and how can we build on them."

As well as training teachers to feel more confident in responding to pupil mental health and wellbeing, addressing staff wellbeing was also seen as a key priority. Where pupil wellbeing was seen as fundamental to engagement and learning, ensuring staff wellbeing was seen as essential to allaying concerns and anxieties around COVID-19, enabling teachers' capacity to teach, avoiding staff burnout and supporting retention. The importance of staff wellbeing has been acknowledged by the DfE (2020h) who are making additional funding and resources available, see for example: [Extra mental health support for pupils and teachers](#). A number of other training programmes across the UK were identified in the 'Policy Conversations' as promising initiatives to learn from and build on, outlined in the box overleaf.

England:

- Introduction of a whole school approach to mental health in schools, and the *Mental Health Support Teams (MHST)* pilot.
- Restorative approaches adopted in some cities and LAs.
- Trauma related training and support for schools in the 18 *Violence Reduction Unit (VRU)* areas.

Northern Ireland:

- Trauma informed training has been rolled out across different bodies (including police, youth work and education) and joined-up thinking has led to common and uniform understandings.

Scotland:

- ACEs training has been part of professional learning for the last four years, and discussion on mental health is part of everyday culture. "*Distressed*" and "*behaviour as communication*" are the terminology used in Scotland.
- A whole school approach is embedded into The General Teaching Council for Scotland's (GTC Scotland) Professional Standards. GTC Scotland (2012:3) says that teachers should provide and ensure '*a safe and secure environment for all learners within a caring and compassionate ethos and with an understanding of wellbeing*', and '*demonstrate a commitment to motivating and inspiring learners, acknowledging their social and economic context, individuality and specific learning needs and taking into consideration barriers to learning.*' More specifically teachers are required to '*recognise when a learner's behaviour may signify distress requiring the need for further support, and take appropriate action.*' (GTC Scotland 2012:17).
- The introduction of nurture groups in many schools, particularly, but not exclusively, those in the primary sector to support children who are vulnerable.
- Introduction of school counsellors in every secondary school in Scotland (in progress). Counsellors will also support pupils who are aged ten and above in primary and special schools.

Wales:

- Introduction of a whole child/family view. Trauma informed training has been given a legal basis, linked to children's rights.
- Whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing are being introduced.

Curricula and assessment

The school opening/recovery guidance in all four UK jurisdictions shares a commitment to assess the starting points of pupils to meet them where they are, while providing a '*broad and balanced*' (DfE 2020b, 2020c; Welsh Government 2020c:4) or '*broad and meaningful*' (Scottish Government 2020d) curriculum and addressing gaps in knowledge and skills (in particular literacy and numeracy). The Northern Irish guidance states: '*Schools will use their professional judgement to find the right balance for their children and young people*' (Department of Education, Northern Ireland 2020:15).

However, one of the ‘Policy Conversation’ participants mentioned that in England there seems to be:

“An emerging dichotomy between schools taking a whole child development view or an academic catch-up approach. There does not seem to have been any central government focus on the wider issues of child development without which education is ineffective.”

This is in contrast to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales where, as mentioned earlier, the aim is to equip pupils with the skills they need to (re)engage with learning and feel confident to continue their learning (including focusing on social-emotional development, health and wellbeing, as well as digital competency), rather than simply catching up on content. All curricular areas are seen as providing a context to focus on health and wellbeing, literacy and numeracy.

‘The key message across the system is that the aim for 2020/21 is to support pupils to be motivated to learn and towards becoming skilled and independent learners through a curriculum that gives equal emphasis to knowledge, understanding and skills rather than catching up missed knowledge content.’ (Department of Education, Northern Ireland 2020:6)

Guidance in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales also emphasizes the importance of having ‘recovery conversations’ (Department of Education, Northern Ireland 2020:14) and rebuilding relationships (see Scottish Government 2020b; Welsh Government 2020c). Moreover, the existing curricula ([The Northern Ireland Curriculum](#); [Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence](#); [Curriculum for Wales](#)) and guiding principles (for example, [Getting it Right for Every Child](#)) in the three jurisdictions have informed the guidance and are depicted as providing robust methodologies for adapting curricula and “considering the holistic needs of children and young people engaging with blended learning approaches in school and at home” (Scottish Government 2020b:2; see also Scottish Government 2020d). The Welsh guidance states for example:

As schools begin to think about learning and teaching for the next term and school year, the [Curriculum for Wales guidance](#) may offer useful support. The recent disruptions have highlighted that now, more than ever, learners’ education should be based on the four purposes. Practitioners will be developing and changing their approaches in response to the changing situation. The four purposes [‘ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work; principled, informed citizens in Wales and the world; healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society’ (Welsh Government 2020d)] offer a central focus for the learning and teaching they develop. Many of the answers to the flexibility, autonomy and challenges of the foreseeable future are found in [Curriculum for Wales guidance](#); which has been developed with practitioners over recent years with greater flexibility as a key principle. (Welsh Government 2020c:15)

Turning to the ‘Policy Conversations’, participants discussed the need to develop curricula and assessments that can be adapted to meet diverse academic and social needs, and are culturally responsive, in order to foster a sense of connectedness. The Black Lives Matter protests were highlighted as one example which has led to children and young people wanting and expecting

that the curriculum and its assessment will reflect broader and more balanced perspectives. Linked to earlier discussions around trauma and training, one participant talked about the need to address “*racial trauma*” and enhance cultural competency. Other participants also discussed the importance of maintaining a focus on the arts. Additionally, some mention was made of continuing a blended learning approach (see Fullan et al. 2020) for some children and young people who, for a variety of reasons, may not be able to physically attend school full-time:

“I was taken by the vignette about those who have been reengaged through COVID, and have started to consider SEND digital provisions. Ninety percent of our Year 10s accessed their online work. Do we really need to have children in school for a full day, can we continue with blended learning if it is right for the child? Can we build on the positives and consider how these positives can be drawn on to move these children forward?”

Finally, there was discussion around what form assessment should take during the recovery period, with some practitioners worrying that regular testing could be detrimental to pupil wellbeing. There was also some concern that as the external requirements, which were relaxed during the partial-closure of schools, are reinstated, creative curriculum responses to meet need will vanish.

Intervening upstream: Contextual decision making and joined-up working

The key take-home message from the ‘Policy Conversations’ was the need to intervene upstream of school exclusion, or as one participant put it:

“We need to start building fences along the top of the cliff rather than parking ambulances at the bottom.”

By ensuring that the necessary policy foundations, infrastructure, resourcing and professional training and on-going support set out in this report are in place, it was felt that schools and related services in England would be able to identify needs, intervene early, and prevent formal, informal and self-exclusion. Ultimately they would be able to take a proactive rather than reactive approach.

Linking back to adopting a more nuanced understandings of vulnerability set out at the beginning of this report, and the DfE’s third pillar, safeguarding was widely recognised as a critical issues and everybody’s responsibility. As well as serious incidents, there was an understanding in the ‘Policy Conversations’ that multiple low-level risk factors which have a cumulative impact should trigger support. Contextual safeguarding (see Firmin and Lloyd 2020) and contextual decision making in which the background and emergence of barriers to effective progress are considered in the formulation of interventions, and enactment of policies, was recommended. In line with previous discussions around the need for flexibility rather than the blanket and rigid application of zero tolerance policies, there was a widespread conviction that policy should encourage thoughtful and reflective professional work, which takes into account, and aims to address, the factors and unmet needs that may lie behind a pupil’s behaviour; seeing “*behaviour as communication*.”

It was acknowledged in the ‘Policy Conversations’ that there are some important existing mechanisms including school nurses, *Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs)*, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), and youth services and mentors, as well as Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSL), which should be utilised to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, enable contextual decision making and share good practice and expertise. Reflecting on the recent *Review of children in need* (DfE 2019) there was also discussion around changing/extending the remit of the DSL, with the DSL becoming responsible for setting the ethos and culture of the school, pupils’ mental health and wellbeing, and ensuring all children and young people vulnerable to formal, informal or self-exclusion remain in school and do not become missing from education.

The Scottish example of Guidance Teachers is a powerful model to learn from. As one participant explained, in Scotland: “*every secondary school pupil is allocated a guidance teacher who is responsible for the personal curricular and vocational guidance of a caseload of pupils. Usually a pupil retains the same guidance teacher throughout their years in the school.*” The 18 *Violence Reduction Units (VRUs)* led by the Home Office in England (based on learning from a public health approach originating in Scotland) were also identified as an example of multi-agency mechanisms that could be called upon in terms of upskilling teachers to take a trauma informed approach. Teachers need to feel skilled and empowered with clear messages about expectations, effective training, on-going support and collaborative working within and between schools and settings.

The importance of effective multi-agency working, and data sharing, across education, health, social care and youth offending and police services in order to screen for and identify at-risk children and young people, avoid school exclusions, improve safeguarding, and aid transitions, was emphasised repeatedly, and goes hand-in-hand with the proposed changes already discussed in the report (and in the *Timpson Review* 2019). This would involve professionals recognising and accessing expertise distributed across local systems, thereby linking disciplines and agencies both operationally and strategically. It would also require establishing levels of trust in order to negotiate the boundaries of responsible professional practices, and taking a pedagogic stance to sharing expertise (e.g. explaining why you want to do something or why you are doing something in a certain way). There is also a need to attend to lack of knowledge about what other services do, and as mentioned earlier develop a shared vocabulary and knowledge of the local offer. An example was given of health visitors, speech and language therapists and early years practitioners being over-focused and busy on their own areas of work rather than sharing insight. This point returns us to the call for joint inspection and accountability frameworks across services working with children and young people in vulnerable contexts. Reflecting on multi-agency working one of the participants from Northern Ireland noted:

“While people on the ground see the connections, they are not reflected in policies. Nobody says what collaborative approaches should be. The attitude of ‘this is my cake’ dominates.”

However, it was felt that professionals across the jurisdictions, from a variety of children’s services, do welcome joint working and this can be significantly helped by joint training, identifying specific issues/key priorities to work together on, and clear data sharing protocols.

The use of virtual meetings, as has become commonplace during the COVID-19 lockdown, and “*blended working*” were identified as ways of overcoming potential logistical barriers to hosting multi-agency meetings. Coming together as multi-agency teams/clinics focused on specific

issues, which schools, caregivers and children and young people could refer to was also suggested, and seen as a way to achieve early intervention. Some participants in the 'Policy Conversations' referred to the important role of early years provision to support effective early intervention. However, the term 'early intervention' was also highlighted in reference to the need for rapid and joined-up responses when children or young people of any age were identified as being vulnerable to school exclusion. Multi-agency working across ministries and the third sector was also viewed as essential (e.g. *Violence Reduction Units (VRUs)*, the Youth Endowment Fund, and the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England), particularly as third sector organisation often provide the training suggested in government policy. Examples of current multi-department groups which were highlighted as working well included the DfE's *Vulnerable Young People's Board* and the Scottish Government's [Mental Health in Schools Working Group](#). Seeing school as a community and building strong relationships with families was also seen as key to recovery and preventing school exclusion.

Conclusion

The 'Policy Conversations' revealed a high level of consistency of opinion concerning the need to take a strategic approach to preventing school exclusion in the context of COVID-19 and beyond, and the policy, infrastructure and practice changes that needed to be enacted. The key issues outlined in the report are summarised below:

◆ Balance and flexibility

Concern was raised about dichotomised thinking and one size fits all responses, and their inability to address the complexity of the challenges that face us. There was a strong view that different policies (behaviour, attendance, safeguarding, wellbeing etc.) should be aligned through a shared vision and support flexibility in practice. Policies should be designed to ensure that needs led provision is a hallmark of new ways of working. It was recognised that structure in the form of routines, direction, instruction and boundaries are important, but that as policies are enacted they need to be sensibly not rigidly applied. Crucially there is a need to understand where each child is starting from with early identification and intervention, which provides a targeted offer upstream from points of potential conflict and breakdown. The mapping, and building of policies which promote the development of a shared vocabulary was advocated as a way to enhance flexibility across agencies.

◆ Culture change

The pandemic has led to questions about the role of pedagogy and pastoral care in the development of a nurturing education system that values and includes all children and young people, and sees wellbeing as fundamental to learning. Participants in the 'Policy Conversations' felt that there needed to be a sea change in the culture of schooling in England, and a more concerted effort to get the balance right between standards/inclusion, attainment/wellbeing and competition/collaboration. There was a view that if performance pressures, zero tolerance policies and funding cuts continue the principles laid out by the OECD (2020) will be undermined, and will pose a risk for meeting the DfE's four pillars - Attainment, Attendance, Safeguarding and Wellbeing.

◆ Resources

Inevitably there was much discussion about resources, and the infrastructure needed to enable flexibility and a more strategic approach to preventing schools exclusion in all its guises. It was widely felt that the *National Funding Formula* should take greater account of the additional support some children and young people need to help them thrive during their time in school. There was a general plea for the fair and proportionate allocation of aligned budgets which would provide adequate support for the restoration and development of capacity in schools and children's services. There was also discussion of the reductions to local budgets witnessed over recent years, and the need to reinvest in early support, and mediation services which in the past were seen to help resolve situations and avoid exclusion being the outcome of long-term low-level tensions.

◆ Accountability

It was argued that changes in policies and practices of accountability were required. It was acknowledged that accountability for the curriculum offer and behaviour is important but that it should be set alongside measures of wellbeing, positive relationships with families, children and young people, multi-agency working, preventative work and support for transition. However, in developing measures, policy makers must be alert to possible unintended consequences or perverse incentives. Rather than there being different inspectors and inspection regimes/frameworks for every service it was suggested that there should be overarching accountability for all services working with vulnerable children and young people.

◆ Contextual analysis

There was also strong support for policy which embodies notions of contextual safeguarding and contextual decision making in which the background and emergence of barriers to effective progress are considered in the formulation of interventions. Rather than the blanket and rigid application of zero tolerance policies there is a widespread conviction that policy should encourage thoughtful and reflective professional work.

◆ Joined-up working

Linked to aligning policies and inspection frameworks across services working with vulnerable children and young people, was the need for increased multi-agency working. Professionals should be encouraged to work across professions to address needs and respond effectively. This must involve the progressive alignment of priorities and forms of accountability which all too often in the past have resulted in perverse incentives which inhibit collaboration and deflect attention. Policy should encourage the sharing of problems and collaborating to develop solutions rather than practices in which the main incentive appears to be oriented to passing challenges on to someone else.

◆ Intervening upstream

Overall there was considerable optimism that thoughtful and creative policy making could make a substantial difference to the lives of children and young people and the professionals who support them as they strive to make progress in such challenging times. The key take-home

message was the need to intervene upstream, by ensuring that the necessary infrastructure, resourcing and professional training and on-going support is in place, so that schools and related services are able to identify needs and provide effective, and joined-up, early intervention and support to prevent formal, informal and self-exclusion. There needs to be a recognition that the varied experiences of lockdown will have led to new and diverse forms of risk for many more children and young people than those previously defined as 'vulnerable'. It is important that a wider definition of vulnerable is adopted to encapsulate 'vulnerable contexts', and that children and young people's perspectives are included. Some children and young people will have multiple low level needs that cumulatively cause problems. Local and national monitoring of attendance and exclusions as schools return will be essential to enable rapid and effective early support. Intervening upstream will likely help towards achieving the aim of providing an equitable and high quality education for *all* children and improving their attainment, attendance, safeguarding and wellbeing.

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Appendix: COVID-19 school recovery guidance in the four UK jurisdictions

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