

Walsall Virtual School

Reducing suspensions and permanent exclusions of children in care



Walsall Council

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Introduction

Walsall Virtual School is dedicated to advocating for children in care and their educational journey, ensuring they have the best opportunities to succeed in their learning. As corporate parents, it is our shared responsibility to collaborate with education providers to monitor, support, and challenge, with the expectation that suspensions are avoided whenever possible and permanent exclusion is used only as a last resort.

Children in care often face unique challenges and barriers to learning due to their circumstances and life experiences, which can manifest as challenging behaviours. Trauma-informed practices and approaches are essential for education providers to support these children effectively, recognising their vulnerabilities and promoting their well-being and mental health.

Suspensions are an ineffective way of addressing challenging behaviours for many children in care, as they do not address the underlying causes stemming from trauma. It is crucial for all parties to work collaboratively to reduce fixed-term suspensions and ensure that Virtual School is involved in any cases where a child is at risk of being suspended.

Context

Children in care often face unique challenges and barriers to learning as a result of their life experiences and circumstances. These vulnerabilities may arise from factors such as abuse, neglect, or deprivation, and all children in care will have experienced some form of trauma. This trauma can manifest in various ways, often resulting in behaviours that are perceived as challenging.

For this reason, it is essential for education providers to adopt trauma-informed practices. Such approaches not only recognise the specific vulnerabilities of children in care but also provide the support needed to improve their well-being and mental health. By understanding and addressing these needs, schools can create environments that foster healing and growth for these children.

Fixed term suspensions data for Walsall children in care

Children in Care	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Suspensions- % of children in care with at least one fixed term suspension	6.1%	10.8% + 4.7%	12% + 1.2%

Suspension statistics show a concerning rise in the number of children in care being suspended within Walsall Local Authority, mirroring the national trend of increasing suspensions each year. It is crucial that all stakeholders work together to reduce fixed-term suspensions for children in care. Schools must ensure that the Virtual School is kept informed and involved in any cases where a child is at risk of suspension.

Suspensions are often ineffective in addressing challenging behaviours in children in care, as they fail to tackle the underlying issues rooted in trauma. Instead, these children require targeted support to help them develop self-regulation skills and address the emotional and psychological impacts of their past experiences.

The Role of Schools in Avoiding Suspensions:

There is undoubtedly an abundance of exemplary trauma-informed practices across Walsall schools, with many becoming increasingly attachment and trauma-aware. Schools are reflecting on their behaviour and sanction policies to better support the needs of children in care. However, there is still room for development as we work towards creating education settings that are even more supportive and inclusive. It is highly encouraged that Designated Teachers (DTs) be involved in decision-making regarding the behaviour of children in care and the most appropriate consequences. DTs often have deeper knowledge of the child, are trauma-aware, and understand the potentially harmful effects of suspending children in care.

Schools should make every effort to ensure that children or young people continue attending school, minimising disruptions to their learning. By doing so, schools play a vital role in reducing the risk of suspensions for children in care. A key priority for schools is fostering a positive educational environment.

For children to thrive, they must have access to a calm, safe, and supportive atmosphere, free from disruption and discrimination. Behaviour policies should clearly outline expectations and conduct, aligned with the school's ethos, as well as appropriate responses to negative behaviours. Parents and carers should familiarise themselves with these policies and collaborate with schools to maintain a positive environment. Where behaviour policies are not trauma-informed or require revisions, schools should remain open-minded and willing to adapt them to reflect a more inclusive, trauma-informed approach.

To promote positive behaviour, schools should recognise, celebrate, and reward good behaviour through a positive behaviour support system that sets consistent and clear expectations for everyone. Building relationships is a crucial element in creating a positive learning environment. When schools adopt a relational approach between staff and students, they are more likely to cultivate a respectful, safe, and secure atmosphere grounded in mutual respect.

It is essential for all parties involved to be informed and updated about any concerns regarding the education of a child in care. These concerns can be communicated during Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings or professional meetings, ensuring timely identification and resolution. At these meetings, SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) targets can be established, and early support or interventions can be identified and implemented.

Potential support and interventions may include:

- **Additional one-on-one tutoring or in-class support.**
- **Access to mental health services, such as counselling or therapy.**
- **Tailored learning plans that take into account the child's emotional and educational needs.**
- **Specialist support for developing social and emotional skills.**
- **Involvement in extracurricular activities that promote well-being and confidence.**
- **Mentorship programs that provide guidance and emotional support.**
- **Regular monitoring and reviews to track progress and adjust support as needed.**

By setting clear targets and putting early interventions in place, schools can proactively address the educational and emotional needs of children in care, fostering a more positive learning experience.

Behaviour is a form of communication, making it essential to understand the underlying reasons for any changes in behaviour. Maintaining a positive and open relationship with parents and carers is vital, as it allows for timely and effective sharing of information. Key factors that may contribute to behavioural changes include placement transitions, life story work, family contact, and bereavement.

Walsall Virtual School partners with schools to prevent suspensions by:

- **Being readily available and responsive to schools seeking support, advice, and guidance.**
- **Ensuring the Pupil Premium Plus grant is used creatively to help reduce suspensions.**
- **Attending Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings to identify current strengths, needs, and to set appropriate SMART targets with identified support strategies.**
- **Offering termly Designated Teacher (DT) training.**
- **Hosting weekly drop-in Q&A sessions for DTs.**
- **Providing staff training to schools on issues affecting children in care.**
- **Collaborating with schools to explore alternatives to suspensions.**

By working together and offering targeted support, Walsall Virtual School and schools can foster environments that reduce the need for suspensions and address the root causes of challenging behaviours.

Alternatives to suspension

We understand that there may be instances where a child is unable to attend a full regular timetable due to social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) difficulties. In such cases, it is important to explore temporary alternative education opportunities that can support the child's reintegration into their regular timetable in a safe and appropriate manner. While these alternatives can be implemented both within and outside of the school environment, it is expected that schools first utilise all in-house resources before considering external options.

Here are some alternative suggestions to avoid suspensions:

- **Increased pastoral support:** Offering dedicated time with a mentor or counsellor to help the child process their emotions and develop coping strategies.
- **Part-time timetables:** Gradually reintegrating the child into a full schedule by starting with reduced hours and slowly increasing attendance as progress is made.
- **Quiet spaces:** Creating a safe, calm area within the school where the child can go when feeling overwhelmed, helping them to self-regulate before returning to class.
- **Tailored interventions:** Developing personalized support strategies, such as small-group work or one-on-one tutoring, focused on the child's specific needs.
- **Alternative learning environments:** Providing access to different settings within the school, such as outdoor learning spaces or specialized units that offer a calmer, more focused atmosphere.
- **Creative curriculum adaptations:** Adjusting the curriculum or lessons to better engage the child based on their interests and emotional state.
- **Peer support programs:** Engaging the child in peer-mentoring programs that foster social connections and build a sense of belonging.
- **Collaboration with external professionals:** If in-house resources are exhausted, engaging with educational psychologists, mental health professionals, or behaviour specialists for further support.

Internal Isolation: Schools may implement an internal isolation as an alternative to a fixed-term suspension. This approach allows the child to remain in school while serving their consequence through isolation. It helps maintain their educational engagement while addressing the behaviour issue.

However, it is crucial that schools assess this option on a case-by-case basis, considering the potential negative effects. Many children in care have experienced significant abuse and neglect, which may have included forced isolation with minimal human interaction. Therefore, schools must carefully evaluate whether internal isolation could be detrimental to the child's emotional well-being and overall development.

Restorative Justice: Restorative approaches prioritize repairing harm rather than punishing the child. They involve those affected by a behavioural incident in resolving conflicts and addressing the root causes of the issue. This often takes the form of a restorative conversation, which may occur between a child and teacher or between two or more children. The aim is to manage the behaviour incident quickly, allowing all parties to reflect, learn, and move forward without lingering negativity. This approach fosters accountability and promotes emotional growth.

Alternative Provision: Schools may sometimes identify alternative provisions to better support a child's current needs when they are struggling within the mainstream environment. Alternative provisions are typically smaller, with fewer students, and offer a more individualized approach to education in a safe and nurturing setting. These provisions often include a broad range of academic and vocational courses to help students reach their full potential. The use of alternative provisions should be reviewed regularly, with a focus on transitioning the child back into their main school provision full-time when appropriate.

Managed Move: In some situations, all parties may agree that it is in the best interest of a child to permanently move to another school following an off-site direction placement—this process is known as a managed move. Managed moves should be voluntary, and all parties involved should reach a consensus before proceeding. Schools must avoid pressuring anyone into agreeing to a managed move and instead engage in open discussion to consider all views and concerns.

Modified timetables: Modified timetables are a short-term measure that should be reviewed frequently and increased gradually. They may be used in conjunction with other supportive strategies such as ELSA and mentoring programs, to support the child in being able to access a full-time curriculum.

By considering these alternatives, schools can create supportive pathways for children to manage their challenges without resorting to suspensions.

Following a fixed term suspension

Unfortunately, there are situations where schools may feel compelled to proceed with a fixed-term suspension as a last resort. In these cases, schools are expected to notify the Virtual School immediately. It is essential that first-day provision is arranged, ensuring that the child has access to full-time education starting the day after the suspension. The fixed-term suspension should be proportional to the behaviour incident and align with the school's behaviour policy.

In response to a suspension, Walsall Virtual School will:

- Gather Information: Collect all relevant details related to the suspension.
- Call a Professionals Meeting: Organize a meeting with relevant professionals to discuss the situation.
- Ensure First Day Provision: Confirm that appropriate educational provision is in place for the first day following the suspension.
- Challenge the Suspension: Review and challenge the suspension if necessary, including the number of days.
- Attend the Reintegration Meeting: Participate in the meeting when the child returns to school to help implement immediate preventative strategies and provide appropriate support.
- Call for a PEP Review: Request that a Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting be scheduled earlier to set appropriate targets and support strategies.

By taking these actions, Walsall Virtual School aims to support the child's reintegration, prevent future suspensions, and ensure they receive the necessary support to succeed in their educational environment.

Please contact Walsall Virtual School at walsallvirtualschool@walsall.gov.uk or on 01922 652816 if you have a child or young person at risk of suspension or exclusion



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