

## People Scrutiny Working Group report: Inclusion in Mainstream Education

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1. Barriers to an inclusive mainstream educational experience are wide-ranging.<sup>1</sup> There are a number of contributing factors that prevent a young person being, and feeling, included in an educational setting - including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), disabilities or additional learning needs, cultural differences, sexual identity, and poverty.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.2. There are other reasons - individual, institutional and structural - that prevent young people being and feeling included in mainstream education, that, if properly addressed, would enable support for all children and young people, so they have real opportunities to achieve their full potential.
- 1.3. The Working Group set out to examine, via a review and scrutiny of policy and practice, how inclusion in mainstream education for all could be made a reality, overcoming the systemic structures, with resulting inequalities, within the education system.
- 1.4. Work has been ongoing in this area, and the People Scrutiny Working Group commends the insight and ambition of the Bristol Belonging in Education Strategy; that

*“Strong systems for partnership working between education settings and key delivery partners, such as health, social care, youth workers and the police are essential in supporting the achievement of genuinely inclusive provision [and that] an environment in which every child and young person can flourish [will be enabled for] every child in an educational setting in Bristol...”<sup>3</sup>*

- 1.5. Members have not set out to review the Belonging in Education Strategy, but the strategy’s drivers are in line with the Working Group’s motivations, and so it is hoped that findings could assist with the ongoing development of this important strategy.
- 1.6. Finally, it is noted that the reasons scrutiny Members undertook this work are wide-ranging, and so provided a scope which demanded more resource and time than was available. Therefore, whilst there are key findings and recommendations of the Working Group, it is acknowledged some areas brought to Members’ attention require further examination and focus during the scrutiny work-programme 22-23.

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<sup>1</sup> Schuelka, Dr. M. J., (2018) ‘Implementing inclusive education’, [online, accessed 14-4-22] [374 Implementing Inclusive Education.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#), p.2

<sup>2</sup> Bristol One City (2021), ‘Bristol Belonging Strategy: Belonging in Education 2021-2024’ [online, accessed 14-3-22] [Bristol’s Belonging Strategy for Children and Young People - Belonging in Education \(bristolonecity.com\)](#) p.3

<sup>3</sup> Bristol One City (2021), ‘Bristol Belonging Strategy: Belonging in Education 2021-2024’ [online, accessed 14-3-22] [Bristol’s Belonging Strategy for Children and Young People - Belonging in Education \(bristolonecity.com\)](#) p.4



## 2. Membership

- 2.1. Members of the Working Group are: Councillors Tim Kent (Chair), Christine Townsend, Kerry Bailes, Brenda Massey, Sharon Scott, Lisa Stone, and Mark Weston.

## 3. Objectives and Methodology

- 3.1. The Working Group's objectives were to:

- i. Identify the key challenges and opportunities to enable inclusive education in mainstream settings in Bristol (including local policy and practice, significance of admissions policies, and national policy);
- ii. Inform policy development within the Council and across mainstream educational settings, to help address and overcome the systemic barriers to inclusive mainstream education.

- 3.2. Members invited stakeholders and city partners to engage by answering the following question:

**What can help enable all children reach their potential within mainstream education?**

*This may include local policy and practice (the Council and Education, Health, and Community Safety Partners) and national policy and good practice; and also, whether you feel admissions policies have an impact on enabling inclusive mainstream education.*

- 3.3. 17 written responses were received, together with further information around the topic, all of which Members of the Working Group considered - see *Appendix 1*. This approach informed the discussions in five online sessions, attended by 34 participants (including 14 young people on the Student Participation Board) – see *Appendix 2*.
- 3.4. At the online sessions (via Zoom), participants were invited to expand on their written submission, and/or to discuss themes and issues arising from the question at paragraph 3.2. The sessions enabled Members to examine policies, practice and performance further critically, and to hear evidence about different approaches and good practice; and to hear from young people themselves.
- 3.5. The Chair thanks all participants for their valuable contributions; and appreciates the time and expertise provided by all officers, Cabinet Members, external partners, parents, carers and young people – all have ensured the Working Group remained focused and well-informed.

## 4. Engagement with Young People

- 4.1. Engagement with young people was to help ensure their voices were front and centre of the scrutiny inquiry, that Members heard from those with lived experiences, and the themes and issues around enabling inclusive mainstream education were framed from the

point of view of those directly affected. This approach was agreed after advice from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and enabled valuable scrutiny.

- 4.2. Young people were asked to respond to a revised version of the question at paragraph 3.2 so as to refer to their experiences:

**From your experiences, what do you feel can help all children and young people reach their potential within mainstream education?** *You could include your experiences of being, and feeling, included in schools; how school policies and the ways things are done affect you positively or negatively; and whether you have views and experiences of how school places are offered and allocated.*

- 4.3. Young people's comments and insight from themes that arose from this question helped inform the lines of inquiry and discussions with the administration and city partners.
- 4.4. It is acknowledged that the available resource and timescale for the working group meant the methodology for identifying young people who would engage could not provide a group of young people representative of Bristol's diverse communities; but each young person's experiences and views are valid and valuable, and helped Members gain an insight of the issues and opportunities regarding enabling inclusive mainstream education.

## 5. Engagement with the Administration and City Partners

- 5.1. The Working Group decided to avoid a focus on particular aspects of inclusion, but instead had lines of inquiry informed by young people's views and the issues and opportunities they raised, cross-referencing and triangulating with the policies and practice and developing plans of the council and city partners.
- 5.2. Engagement with the council administration was enabled by the Executive Director of People, the Director of Education & Skills, the Director of Children's Services, the Deputy Mayor with responsibility for Children's Services, Education and Equalities, and the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Integrated Care System.
- 5.3. Enabling inclusion in mainstream education relies on a whole systems approach across, not only education settings, but areas of health and community safety, and so the working group invited partners from those sectors to engage. As with representation of young people, the timescale and resource meant the sample of city partners, and education settings, was not fully representative of the city. The evidence and insight received from city partners was immensely valuable, helped to inform the findings, and raised themes which Members' hope can be explored with a wider representation of city partners at a future date.
- 5.4. The full list of partners invited to engage with the working group is set out at *Appendix 3*; most (but not all) partners responded to the request to engage.



## **6. Engagement with organisations that can comment on the local and national picture and good practice**

- 6.1. The working group extended its invitation to engage local charities and organisations that are involved in supporting young people; national organisations with expertise and insight; and people and organisations involved in related research.
- 6.2. The information received from local and national experts provided learning and insight, and informed findings and recommendations.

## **7. Findings and Recommendations**

### **7.1. Initial thoughts**

- Members see progress in terms of the council working, with city partners, towards improving inclusion. The commitment and intent demonstrated through the Belonging in Education Strategy, informed by young people's voices, is noted and commended.
- It is the implementation of the principles of inclusion that can help overcome historic systemic inequalities, and we would like to see those principles fully rolled out in practice across the city.
- We heard about a number of excellent examples of good inclusive educational practice, and that there is a need to extend this practice and sense of responsibility to our children and young people collectively across all settings. This is because we also heard about the continual inequalities in our city, with groups of disabled, Black and minoritised children and young people left behind; that children and young people with additional needs, who are Black and minoritised, and come from deprived backgrounds, have barriers to inclusive mainstream education, which leads to social exclusion.
- These issues and challenges are not new, and so we need to have a thorough review, highlighting the excellent practice in our city, listening to all voices, and responding to the data to enable further progress toward inclusive education and an equitable education system for Bristol's children and young people.
- We recognise teachers and all staff within schools and across the education system face many challenges and are under immense pressure, and the challenges detailed below do not reflect on their dedication and hard work. In fact, one of the key findings is that schools are being asked to be 'all things to all people' with the workforce expected to be knowledgeable and aware of all aspects of welfare issues, including mental health, drug support, knife crime, housing and safeguarding - and so there is a need to be aware of the pressure and workload for the education workforce and to be supportive to schools, including examining how community-based services can offer more support.

- A number of challenges and opportunities have been identified. This report focuses on what are considered as the key areas; (a) Measuring Inclusion; (b) Admissions policies; (c) Organisational Culture, Leadership and Representation in the Workforce; (d) Behaviour Policies and Exclusions; and (e) Families, Mental Health, and SEND

#### **a. Measuring Inclusion**

- Members commend the administration for its ambition to utilise robust inclusion data to inform conversations with schools about improving inclusive practice. Members note, and thank the administration for, the data made available during the inquiry, and request this momentum continues with further clarity and transparency around inclusion data across the city, mapped out by ward. It is noted that the imminent, first-phase roll-out of Power BI across the Council will enhance significantly the ability of the authority to assess and monitor inclusion-related data.
- Many schools are working hard to improve and excel at inclusion but there are competing priorities, including achieving good grades and responding to social issues, the importance of which are not underestimated. Members believe that a focus on enabling children and young people to feel, and be, included in school can help achieve improved attainment levels and alleviate social challenges.
- How inclusion is measured is key to enabling better inclusion across Bristol. Therefore, Members feel that a mechanism should be developed to demonstrate how inclusive a school is, based on student feedback, as well as identified factors affecting inclusion, such as:
  - admissions policies;
  - diversity and social mix of children and young people in the school community;
  - organisational culture and representation of Bristol's communities in the workforce;
  - policies and practice around disability equality and behaviour including culturally competent responses to disproportionate attainment levels and exclusions for Black and minoritised students.
- We support an 'inclusion kite mark', or similar mechanism, that focuses on recognising the achievements of the schools that excel in inclusion, providing opportunities to share good practice and enable other settings to improve.

#### **Recommendations i - ii**

- (i) Inclusion data for schools available from the Department for Education should be mapped out across the city alongside corresponding ward data and should be publicly available wherever possible.**
- (ii) A mechanism, such as an 'inclusion table' or 'inclusion kite-mark' should be developed to demonstrate how inclusive a school is, based on student feedback and factors affecting inclusion identified in this report; and associated good practice should be shared across the city.**

## b. Admissions Policies

- OECD data<sup>4</sup> shows disadvantaged students who are clustered together have worse attainment; and the more socially diverse an educational setting, the better the outcomes are for children.
- The Working Group heard how admissions criteria can lead to selection and a lack of inclusion. The data demonstrates this to be the case in some Bristol schools and we hope that school leaders will agree to reform admissions within the city. We would like to see an admissions criteria added to all schools around the admission of a proportion of pupils with Pupil Premium.
- We heard that young people feel that they had not understood the choices or admissions process when they moved to secondary school, which could lead to not feeling included.

### Recommendations iii - iv

- (iii) **There should be a city-wide review of admissions policies with a view to enabling a fairer and equitable admissions process. This should entail education settings and the Council working together to introduce criteria that recognise the need to serve local communities and enables better inclusion, including the local authority exploring how to encourage schools to implement criteria that provide an appropriate proportion of Pupil Premium student priority places in school applications when places are oversubscribed.**<sup>5</sup>
- (iv) **Children should be engaged through primary school settings in discussions about their transition to secondary school, with explanations provided about options and how decisions are made.**

## c. Organisational Culture, Leadership and Representation in the Workforce

- We heard a lot about the importance of the organisational culture in schools; that language used, and perceptions, are engrained within systemic structures that can perpetuate inequalities and barriers to inclusion. Therefore, it is essential to focus on how a culture is set, including the accountability of leaders and the representation of Bristol's diversity in the workforce – setting the tone for how inclusive a school is.
- We recognise that this is not only the responsibility of schools - how the council and city partners work with school leaders will help determine how inclusive the education system can be.

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<sup>4</sup> OECDiLibrary, 'Equity in Education' [Online]: [Are disadvantaged students affected by the socio-economic profile of their school? | Equity in Education : Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility | OECD iLibrary \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#). Accessed 11 May 2022

<sup>5</sup> Pupil Premium is given to students who are eligible for free school meals, or have been in the last 6 years (as well as children adopted from care or looked after by the local authority). Also, refer to Sutton Trust, 'School Places: A Fair Choice?' [online]; [School-Places.pdf \(suttontrust.com\)](#), pp. 14-15. Accessed 11 May 2022.

- Language used, attitudes, and perceptions are a product of a school's culture, and we heard about the too often use of 'They' when referring to children and young people with disabilities, and that perceptions of children of colour were complex and can manifest into 'Adultification' which is extremely damaging to the child and leads to unfair treatment.
- Members heard that training helps to improve the culture in schools; free training delivered by Therapists and Specialist Nurses is offered and there is a correlation between a culture of inclusion in a school and uptake of the training.
- We welcome the recent launch of the Black Governors Network to help address representation and to improve the culture on Boards and in schools. There is a need to build a workforce fully representative of students' cultural diversity and disabilities. Disabled people are under-represented, and there is a lack of cultural diversity across the workforce; this requires attention so students can identify with teachers as mentors and people like them, providing for a sense of belonging, identification, and inspiration.
- Young people told us having a curriculum more relevant to them, with more diverse and representative areas in History and English would enable more inclusion and engagement with the subjects.

#### **Recommendations v – vii**

- (v) Trust Boards and Governors should have access to advice as to how to hold their schools to account for inclusion; which involves reference to good practice, and listening to students' comments and suggestions (including the learning from young people in this inquiry).**
- (vi) There should be a system-wide inclusion training programme for Trust Boards and Governors to attend, and inset days should be allocated for teachers to focus on inclusion.**
- (vii) Trust Boards and Governors should strive to understand the diversity of children and young people in Bristol, over and above those already attending the school, with a view to building a workforce representative of the wider community and future intake.**

#### **d. Behaviour Policies and Exclusions**

- We recognise there should be behaviour policies that strive for high standards; we believe the hand-in-hand application of high-level support is integral to achieve high standards.
- It is clear that school behaviour policies are unequal – especially with regard to the associated support offered to children with SEND. We heard evidence that these policies can be implemented unfairly to Black children and those from financially disadvantaged

backgrounds. We believe, therefore, that schools need to do more to provide students with support before resorting to suspensions, exclusions or part-time timetables.

- We heard about Trauma Informed Practice, and that it involves a recognition that behaviour is a form of communication, and so behaviour policies should be based on relationships with children and young people, involving appropriate support, empathy and recognition of the differing needs of a child. The Attachment Awareness approach is also recognised as good practice, and we feel, whilst schools would benefit from incorporating such approaches, they should implement an independently evaluated approach which suits their own staff and students.
- We heard evidence that when pupils are in trouble and are moved between schools via the Inclusion Panel, this can result in being moved several times – and children who move around different schools have less attainment. We also heard that often pupils are referred to Alternative Provision too late to be able to achieve a return to mainstream schools.
- It is recognised that schools have responsibilities to ensure a safe environment for all which requires management of challenging behaviours. This takes us back to the earlier point about high-level support being required to maintain high standards – we think that, with good collaboration and planning, a dedicated multidisciplinary team of social workers, therapists, and education professionals could assess and enable targeted support and preventative measures for those young people at high risk of exclusion.
- We note that exclusions are made up of a disproportionate representation of Black and minoritised students which requires a culturally competent response, whilst also recognising that issues related to the education outcomes for Black and other minoritised children and young people in Bristol intersect with class and deprivation, meaning school activities, resources and expectations should be accessible to all, no matter a family's financial means.

#### **Recommendations viii – x**

- (viii) Trust Boards and Governors and the workforce should receive training in an independently evaluated approach, such as Trauma Informed, and Attachment Awareness.**
- (ix) Behaviour policies should be reviewed, ensuring they incorporate principles of inclusion, including a recognition of behaviour as communication, use of reasonable adjustments for support where needed, avoidance of 'Adultification' of children of colour, and ensuring exclusions are the very last resort.**
- (x) The Inclusion Panel should consider earlier intervention in terms of Alternative Provision with the goal of aiding children to return to mainstream education; all students referred to the Inclusion Panel should have had a timely SEND / EHCP assessment (or other assessment where relevant, e.g. numeracy / literacy**



**assessment) to identify if there are unmet needs and to assist in identifying suitable options.**

**e. Families, Mental Health and Special Educational Need and Disabilities**

- More targeted support and training is needed for staff to help them meet the needs of children with SEND. Students with Autism, ADHD and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia are far too often excluded or moved to Alternative Provision.
- We discussed whether mainstream settings were capable of being inclusive to children with special educational needs, and we heard that a model of co-location / pairing up mainstream with special provision does work, providing integration opportunities. We believe that creative ways of utilising space in our schools, and designed into new schools, are essential to enable inclusion, including sensory rooms and quiet spaces.
- It is important to involve parents and carers in enabling inclusion for children and young people, and there are examples of good practice enabling family engagement and involvement, including coffee mornings for parents of children with SEN; and that SENCOs are key to enabling good relationships in schools.
- We know that socio-economic disadvantage can be a barrier to good school experience when families cannot afford laptops, books and uniform; and members heard that it is important for schools to ensure disadvantages are not built into the school day, meaning school activities, and learning resources should be accessible for all.
- Poverty is a major factor and barrier to inclusion; and a family's ability to navigate the system compounds this barrier, so clearer signposting, guidance and communication with families is needed.
- We heard about the growing problems of mental health within secondary schools and the need for more support for vulnerable children. We believe a well-resourced pupil 'peer to peer' scheme is a good first intervention. We believe investment in professional mentors and councillors will also have a positive impact on students' well-being and attainment.

**Recommendations xi – xiv**

- (xi) Clearer signposting, guidance and communication with families is needed to enable parents and carers to better navigate the system, and all learning resources and student expectations should have regard to affordability.**
- (xii) Opportunities to develop well-resourced 'peer to peer' schemes and 'buddy' schemes to support positive mental health should be explored.**
- (xiii) Every secondary school should have a professional mentor and counsellor who can work alongside the school nurse to provide support and confidential intervention.**



**(xiv) Opportunities to enable co-location and creative ways to utilise existing space and design specialist provision into new schools should be examined.**

**8. Next steps**

- 8.1. This report, subject to further discussion and appropriate amendments, to be adopted by the People Scrutiny Commission.
- 8.2. The People Scrutiny Commission to refer this report to the Deputy Mayor with responsibility for Children's Services, Education and Equalities and to the Bristol Learning City Excellence in Schools group for consideration and with an invitation to respond to the report.
- 8.3. It is proposed that the report and recommendations be considered to inform the development of the Belonging in Education strategy and related city-wide development of inclusive practice in mainstream education in Bristol; and that findings should be considered within the council's response to the recently published Government's SEND and alternative provision green paper.

Councillor Tim Kent, Chair of the People Scrutiny Commission, and all Members of the Scrutiny Working Group, would like to thank council officers, Cabinet Members, members of the Bristol Education Partnership Student Participation Board, the Youth Council, and all others who engaged with the Working Group, for their insight, expertise and time - enabling constructive and valuable scrutiny.

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Councillors Tim Kent (Chair), Christine Townsend, Kerry Bailes, Brenda Massey, Sharon Scott, Lisa Stone, and Mark Weston.