

The Pan London Back on Track Project:

Executive summary



11 November 2011

The background

In 2008 London Councils, working together with other stakeholders, including the Youth Justice Board and the Metropolitan Police Service, was awarded Department for Education (DfE) funding to deliver a project to raise standards for excluded pupils in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) across London. The project set out to improve provision, disseminate good practice, and leave a legacy of cultural change to benefit pupils attending PRUs in the future.

Pupils excluded from school for behavioural issues are more likely to be subject to poor outcomes later in life – for example 60 per cent of young people excluded from school nationally report having offended in the previous 12 months. PRUs mainly take such pupils, although the purpose of PRUs does vary across the capital (e.g. some take young mothers). As such, there is a clear need to ensure that educational provision aimed at excluded pupils is of a high quality in order to be able to transform behaviours before they become entrenched.

Today a new website containing resources produced by the project has been launched at www.londonprus.co.uk

The project workstreams

The Back on Track project set out specifically to help support and develop London PRUs in order to improve the outcomes for young people. The project involved seven distinct workstreams:

1. Leadership

The aim of the leadership strand was to improve the status and support for leaders in PRUs. This recognised that PRUs need leaders able to undertake the same roles and responsibilities as Head teachers in mainstream schools – and that they therefore need the same opportunities and support.

The project promoted the Leaders in Education programme, which identifies and supports outstanding Head teachers to use their skills and experience to support schools in challenging circumstances. During the course of the project a number

of London PRU Heads have acquired this status, which has helped to provide more peer to peer support in London. A new London PRU network was set up to enable better networking and communication between PRU Heads across the capital.

2. Commissioning and quality assurance – alternative provision Key Stage 4

This strand aimed to improve quality of provision in PRUs, particularly looking at how to monitor the outcomes for Key Stage 4 pupils in alternative provision such as PRUs. It developed the London Quality Assurance Framework, launched in 2009, which provided a model for local authorities and commissioners of PRUs to use in their commissioning decisions to ensure provision is consistent with the principles in this guide.

3. A good place to learn

The 'good place to learn' strand highlighted the need for improved buildings and facilities in London PRUs, which replicate the provision in maintained schools and promote positive outcomes for pupils. The project has identified six key priorities for creating successful learning environments and provides advice for use by commissioners of new buildings or refurbishments on PRU premises.

4. Restorative approaches and creative problem solving

One of the key strands of Back on Track has been to develop and evaluate the implementation of Restorative Approaches (RA) as piloted in three London PRUs. RA is a new approach to conflict resolution in schools that allows pupils to have a say, along with their parents and teachers, in how to resolve their behavioural issues. The project has tried to encourage PRUs across London to develop similar approaches to resolving conflicts appropriate to their setting as part of how they manage relationships with pupils, parents and staff.

5. Hearing the pupils

PRUs understand the need to rebuild the confidence and resilience of young people who often arrive in alternative provision with a low sense of self-esteem following the exclusion process. This strand reviewed existing good practice employed in London provision to engage with young people and developed a DVD and training resource for staff filmed in six different PRUs across the capital.

6. Safety and cohesion programme

The programme recognised that pupils in PRUs are not just more likely to engage in criminal activity, but also more at risk of becoming victims of crime. Therefore there is an imperative on PRUs to ensure they provide the safest possible learning environment for their pupils. This strand focused on both keeping young people safe and keeping them out of trouble, as well as attempting to promote and celebrate the positive contribution made by pupils. The project developed a series of tools to help protect pupils, including a school travel plan to help vulnerable pupils get home safely and a photo ID procedure to ensure only appropriate adults and pupils are allowed into a school.

7. Curriculum

The curriculum on offer in many PRUs is variable. This final strand focused on developing a workbook to help PRUs to review their curriculum provision and provide a more consistent offer. The workbook sets out a framework that aims to enable pupils to reach the highest attainment possible and ensure that the curriculum on offer responds effectively to individual pupil needs.

Celebrating and sharing success

It is notable that currently there are no London PRUs in OfSTED Special Measures or Notice to Improve, and indeed there are five PRUs judged 'outstanding' by OfSTED. Nevertheless, it is also clear there are some PRUs which have some way to go to achieve 'outstanding'. The learning from Back on Track continues to make a contribution to the sharing, analysis, strategy and tactics for the improvement of pupil outcomes in all settings in the capital.

The programme has been particularly successful in bringing together PRUs across London and establishing the structures

necessary for them to support each other to a greater degree. Prior to the project, networking among PRUs was limited, but now there are far more opportunities for PRU Heads to share examples of good practice or seek advice from peers.

One of the best practical examples of improved practice has been the success of the Restorative Approaches (RA) pilots held during the project. The effect of this approach on pupils was shown to be improved attendance, a reduction in low level disruptive behaviour, and better peer relationships with other young people. At the same time this led to increased staff confidence and performance, and also improved staff relationships with pupils. A core piece of work has been to set out what makes a PRU ready for implementing RA, and it is now hoped that the use of the approach will be introduced into more PRUs in the capital.

Along with the other tools produced by the project for local authority commissioners, such as the Quality Assurance Framework and the curriculum workbook, the project has helped to raise standards in London PRUs generally. During the life of the project no London PRU was in Ofsted categories to improve – and indeed three achieved the highest overall grade in their inspections.

London cannot afford to be complacent though, as a number of forthcoming policy changes are likely to impact on PRUs. The most important of these is the proposal in the 2010 white paper for schools to retain responsibility for educating pupils they exclude – previously a duty on the local authority. All pupils accepted in year 7 will remain on the original school's roll through until the end of year 11 even if they are excluded, meaning that they will continue to contribute to the school's exam results.

As Head teachers become more accountable for students they exclude, it is not clear how this will impact on capacity and resourcing of PRUs. Alternative provision is more expensive per pupil than mainstream schooling, which may be a disincentive for a school to use this resource as opposed to, for example, making arrangements with another local school to swap students in certain difficult situations.

PRUs will increasingly need to demonstrate their effectiveness in improving outcomes for their pupils to ensure they are seen as a key resource for schools to turn to. This approach has just begun to be piloted in various parts of the country, although there are no pilots in London as yet.

Some more immediate policy changes are affecting PRUs too. Legislation in the Education Bill has enabled PRUs to become academies, although so far there have not been a great many applications to convert. This may be partly because most PRU provision is managed directly by the local authority, so conversion to academy status is likely to require greater cultural change than for other maintained schools.

There are also no statutory powers that allow local authorities to force academies to accept a young person who has been excluded – this will be subject to the discretion of the academy. As the number of academies grows, this could potentially cause more problems for boroughs looking to re-settle excluded pupils – which may have a knock-on effect on the number of pupils who will be forced into alternative provision as a last resort.

The government is also expected to publish a Green Paper on alternative provision shortly, which will set out its vision for developing PRUs in the future. It is hoped that the learning from the pan-London Back on Track project will have put London's alternative provision in a strong position to comment on changes set out in this document. London Councils is likely to make a response to government on behalf of London boroughs.

Sustaining the Back on Track project

The London PRU Heads network will be key to maintaining the progress achieved through this project. It will act as a support, communication and consultation mechanism. This network will also be able to bring key stakeholders together on a pan-London basis to discuss issues affecting PRUs and their position in the landscape of London's education provision.

Certain specific workstreams of the project are continuing. For example the Safer Learners Partnership will be implementing the learning from the Safety and Cohesion strand, while the RA work is being supported at local level as part of many Young Offending Teams' development of Restorative Justice programmes.

The Back on Track pilot team also identified a number of strategic recommendations necessary to deliver continued improvements in the sector. These are set out on the back page of this summary.

Pan London Back on Track strategic recommendations

For PRU Head teachers:

1. The pan London PRU network should be supported by PRU Heads and commissioners across London.
2. That those involved in commissioning new buildings or refurbishments of PRU premises use the principles and advice in the Back on Track report to plan the work.
3. That those involved in commissioning new buildings or refurbishments of PRU premises use the principles in the 'Pan London Back on Track guide to developing a safe learning environment' to plan the work.
4. Head teachers and PRU commissioners should recognise and promote Restorative Approaches in PRUs to teach young people how to deal with conflict and repair harm – and so contribute to raising attainment.
5. That PRU leaders and management boards use the DVD and training pack with staff and pupils to support development of the vision for the PRU and how it can engage the pupils in achieving that vision.
6. Key stakeholders should support the pan London Safer Learners Partnership as a way of continuing the partnership support for PRUs to keep pupils safe.
7. That PRU senior leaders use the curriculum workbook to help their review and planning process for curriculum provision, especially for pupils in PRUs.

For Local Authorities and Commissioners of Pupil Referral Units

8. Commissioners of PRUs should use the Pan London Back On Track Curriculum Model as a review tool for developing personal learning provision for students and as a minimum starting point for new PRUs.
9. That commissioners of PRUs and alternative provision in London should use the guides for commissioning on the PRU website.
10. Local authorities and commissioners should set out a Quality Assurance Framework for PRUs modelled on the London Quality Assurance Framework for alternative provision, so that commissioners and providers are clear about the outcomes desired and the standards expected of PRU provision.
11. Local authorities and commissioners should recognise the key role good PRU provision can play in reducing risks to wellbeing and youth crime and ensure funding decisions are made accordingly.

For OfSTED

12. OfSTED should recognise that PRUs cater for the lower attaining 20% of pupils and ensure that performance judgements are made against the lowest attaining 20% in mainstream schools.
13. OfSTED should state that a key role of PRU provision is that it should be determined by the personal learning needs of young people with a goal of achieving the highest standards of attainment. This should be measured by 'distance travelled' and qualifications to ensure progression.

For DfE

14. DfE should require that the responsibility, and therefore accountability, for PRU provision is clearly set out at local level – be that the local authority, a Head teacher consortium, academy (or academy families), free school or other arrangements.
15. Through the National College of School Leadership, the DfE should recognise the specific skill set of a Head teacher or Leader of PRU as distinctive and promote a relevant Behaviour Improvement Qualification as a key stepping stone to Headship in PRU.
16. DfE should recognise the London partnership commitment to sustain the PRU Head teacher network during the next two years to ensure continuity of support, professional sharing of best practice and challenge, and should match this with support for mentoring of new PRU Heads under the Local Leaders in Education processes. The network should become self-sustaining after this time.
17. DfE should recognise the specialist training and skills of staff in PRU and ensure that each training school has a PRU as a partner.