



# Dorset Belonging Strategy and Plan 2024

Version 1:0

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## Introduction

This is our Belonging Strategy and Plan for the period 2024 to 2027. It has been co-produced with:

- children and young people
- parents and carers
- school leaders
- health colleagues
- MYTIME Young Carers (a charity which supports young carers)

It is an overarching strategy and plan which sets out the priorities for all partners across Dorset. It addresses key issues through an increased sense of belonging including:

- attendance
- suspensions
- exclusions

For many children and young people in Dorset, belonging is their everyday, positive reality. Our aim with this Belonging Strategy and Plan is to make sure that this is the lived experience for all our children and young people.

The Belonging Strategy and Plan sits alongside the [Children, Young People and Families Plan](#). It also links closely to our [Attendance](#) and [SEND](#) strategies.

Belonging is:

- being somewhere you can be confident that you will fit in
- a feeling of being safe in your identity
- feeling at home in a place

A strong sense of belonging is important for:

- our development
- our social identity
- our relationships with others
- managing our emotions
- a successful move into adulthood

All children and young people have a need to belong. Schools and other educational settings can offer a common and predictable place of belonging for most.

Likewise, Elective Home Education (EHE), which is an equal alternative to school education, can provide this sense of belonging. [Elective home education: guidance for local authorities](#) (Department for Education, April 2019) notes that 'educating children at home works well when it is a positive choice and carried out with proper regard for the needs of the child'.

We know that:

- councils
- schools and settings
- partners, such as health providers

face challenges when supporting children and young people with complex needs.

There are financial constraints on all our budgets. Schools and settings have pressures to meet attainment targets and OFSTED expectations. And school leaders and governors are responsible for the safety and well-being of the whole school community.

However, the changes needed to achieve a sense of belonging for all are far from insurmountable. And the potential gains are incalculable.

# Our vision, values and ethos

Through this Belonging Strategy and Plan, we want to achieve a shared vision, values and ethos with:

- children, young people and their families
- schools and settings
- our partners, such as NHS Dorset, Dorset Police, and voluntary and community sector representatives

## Vision

We want Dorset to be the best place to be a child, where communities thrive, and families are supported to be the best they can be.

We want our schools and settings to be inclusive for all our children and young people through thinking therapeutically. This means individual needs and the development of trusting relationships are considered and enable our children and young people to flourish.

We want our children and young people to have the right support at the right time. This will help them to have a stable and settled education.

We want our children and young people to be able to achieve their goals so that they are prepared for adult life and go on to successful futures.

We will work with children and young people, families, schools, settings and our other partners, to make sure this vision becomes a reality. We will also draw on the strengths of our communities and the work of volunteer organisations which are often under used.

## Values

We are committed to working with children, young people, and their families in the following ways:

- always putting children and families at the heart of everything we do
- no child or family left behind
- working restoratively – doing things with families, not to or for them
- focusing on and building on strengths
- being inclusive
- taking a rights-based approach to our work
- delivering best value for money
- remaining hopeful and determined to achieve good outcomes for all

## Ethos

We are highly aspirational for the children and young people of Dorset and empathetic to the challenges faced by our families.

Relationships are at the heart of everything we do. They help to create an environment where everyone feels that they:

- belong
- are safe
- are cared for
- are valued

We are all responsible for all the children and young people of Dorset. We hold a shared responsibility for:

- emotional wellbeing
- outcomes
- equity for all

Read our [Children, Young People and Families Plan](#) to find out more about our vision, values and ethos.

# Why we need a Belonging Strategy and Plan

The covid-19 pandemic had a big effect on our children and young people, especially their mental health. Nearly one in five young people aged 10-17 describe themselves as being unhappy and feeling that their choices in life are gradually being eroded.

Schools and settings have not seen a return to 'business as usual' following the pandemic. This is evident from attendance and suspensions data.

In the Autumn term 2019, the last term before the pandemic, the overall absence rate in England was 4.9%. The overall absence rate for the academic year 2022/23 was 7.5%

In the academic year 2021/22, one in 17 secondary school pupils were suspended from school at some point. This is the highest level since recent records began.

Our children and young people are also being significantly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. Families are increasingly unable to afford necessities such as:

- travel
- food
- toiletries

Children can feel too embarrassed to go to school when they do not have access to:

- hot showers
- deodorant
- sanitary products

We need to create a sense of belonging and address the challenges and issues facing the children and young people of Dorset today. This requires a shared vision and approach.

Research shows increased health benefits when a child or young person has a sense of belonging within a school or setting. These include:

- good health and well-being
- protection against mental health problems such as stress, depression and anxiety

Evidence about the relationship between a sense of belonging and student outcomes has been found in research findings from many countries and has been linked to:

- student motivation
- absenteeism

- academic outcomes

Additionally, pupils who have a sense of belonging in school tend to:

- be happier
- be more confident
- perform better academically

Their teachers feel more professionally fulfilled, and their families accepted.

We will use the Framework for 'Understanding, Accessing and Fostering Belonging'. This shows that children and young people develop a sense of belonging because of:

- their skills and abilities
- the opportunities they have
- their own motivation to belong
- their positive and negative experiences

We need to think about the whole school curriculum in our schools and settings and whether it enables young people to 'belong' rather than 'fit in'. We need to make sure that all children and young people:

- are provided with the opportunities to develop and be taught the skills that support belonging
- are recognised and acknowledged within the curriculum
- develop a deeper understanding of the many people and groups that reflect life in modern day Britain

Successful schools:

- consider in depth what content is built into individual curriculums
- avoid tokenistic activities and events



# The Dorset Context

Dorset is a beautiful coastal county. Over half is covered by the area of outstanding natural beauty designation and 7% is protected as a site of special scientific interest.

The rural idyll can conceal hidden deprivation, mostly in urban and coastal areas. But there is also some rural deprivation due to:

- isolation
- difficulty in accessing housing, transport and essential services

Crime is generally low but there has been an increase in serious sexual offences against girls and women.

Earnings are below average and house prices are high. Dorset has relatively low birth rates and younger people often move away from the area.

There are approximately 75,000 children and young people aged between 0-19 years. There are almost 90,000 aged 0-24.

Under 10% of our children and young people are from black and minority ethnic community groups. This compares to over one third nationally. However, there are 83 different languages spoken in our 159 schools.

We have just under 450 children in our care. The number of Dorset children entering care is reducing. But there is an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering our care. We have over 500 care leavers aged 18-25 years.

There are approximately 3,900 children with special educational needs (SEN) supported by an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan as of January 2024. Approximately 40% of these CYP aged 0-25 are placed within specialist provision.

4% of children and young people in our schools have Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs (SEMH). 2% have a diagnosis of autism. 5% are identified as having a speech, language and communication need (SLCN). 4% have a specific learning difficulty (SPLD) (School Census, January 2023). We currently have 664 children registered as Electively Home Educated (EHE).

Dorset now has more academies than maintained schools. We also have two free schools. This makes the need for a shared vision more essential than ever in ensuring successful partnership working.

85% of schools and 90% of Early Years Settings are good or outstanding.

Educational outcomes for most children and young people are in line with national at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 4. However, they are below national at Key Stage 2.

The gap between children who are under-resourced, and their peers is widening and larger than the national average.

The achievement of children and young people with SEN is mixed. There is strong achievement at the early primary stages but achievement is lower than national by the end of primary.

The attendance of Dorset's primary aged children is above the national average. Dorset's attendance for the academic year 2022/23 was 94.0% compared to a national average of 93.8%.

However, the attendance of secondary aged children and young people is below the national average. Dorset's attendance for the academic year 2022/23 was 89.7% compared to a national average of 90.7%.

We had reduced our number of permanent exclusions, following a peak of 88 in 2018/19 to 31 in 2021/22. This was below both the national and southwest rates. However, in 2022/23 the number of permanent exclusions rose to 69. This is equivalent to doubling the rate.

Suspension rates in Dorset for 2021/22 were below both the national and southwest rates. However, there was a rise in the number of suspensions in Dorset in 2022/23.

At the end of the academic year 2022/23 there were 244 children and young people in Dorset schools on a part-time timetable. 99% had been on part-time timetables for more than six weeks.

# What our children and young people told us

We spoke to our children and young people to gather their views about belonging. They told us that belonging is:

- acceptance whatever you feel
- being together
- not feeling lonely
- being part of something (a community)
- having a voice and being heard
- feeling safe and cared for

Our children and young people told us they have this feeling with:

- family
- friends
- pets
- teddies
- teachers and teaching assistants

They also said they have this feeling when they are having fun, through:

- gaming
- music
- art
- sport
- dance

and when there is respect.

They have this feeling in their community, in school and in class.

Our children and young people told us that they feel a sense of belonging when they go:

- swimming with their friends
- for days out with their families

but the costs can stop them from doing this.

Children and young people told us that the advantages of living in Dorset include:

- beautiful beaches and countryside
- good food
- dog friendly areas

They felt that there were some activities and safe places.

The disadvantages of living in Dorset included:

- poor transport
- being isolated
- a lack of things to do
- not enough clubs for children with special educational needs (SEN)
- closing of shops

Our children and young people told us the following makes a good school day:

- being with friends
- being able to get around the school
- going on trips, being outside and playtime
- support from staff and teachers
- good health
- attending clubs and activities

They also told us what makes a bad school day. This included:

- not being with friends
- inaccessible spaces and not being able to get around
- unkind words
- lack of support from teachers and teaching assistants
- being unwell
- poor communication

But the following things could make a bad school day better:

- being with friends
- being able to do activities they enjoy
- having some quiet time
- acceptance of their disability
- support from staff and therapies
- talking to someone
- going home

# How we wrote this Belonging Strategy and Plan

In the summer term of 2023, we held a Belonging Workshop to co-produce this strategy and plan with:

- school leaders
- parents and carers
- health colleagues
- MYTIME Young Carers (a charity which supports young carers)

The workshop identified that Dorset has the following strengths:

- outdoor spaces and the environment
- offers and opportunities in the community
- cultural events
- libraries
- community groups supporting young people (in larger towns)
- parent support groups
- youth centres (in some areas)
- friendly communities
- family belonging is established as older relatives of children and young people grew up in Dorset
- resettled families being welcomed into communities
- professionals know the context of the community
- there is a willingness and desire to do things differently
- dedicated and committed workforce
- improving communication
- locality model of delivering Children's Services
- early years provision
- leaders are ambitious and enthusiastic
- thinking differently
- use of therapeutic thinking (when part of the whole school culture)

We also held workshops with children and young people from two schools with the support of Dorset Youth Voice.

To further facilitate co-production, a draft of this Belonging Strategy and Plan was shared with:

- Head Teacher Associations
- Dorset Parent Carer Council
- Dorset Youth Voice
- Health colleagues

# Principles of belonging

Using what we learnt, we have established the following principles of belonging. These underpin the ethos of our partnership working:

**1. Every child has an entitlement to receive a suitable, full-time, education.**

This applies whatever the presenting behaviours or emerging needs. It is the shared duty of all to work together to rigorously protect this entitlement.

**2. Therapeutic thinking alongside Relational trauma informed practice is the preferred approach to managing relationships when emotional well-being is preventing a child/ young person from accessing education.**

Therapeutic thinking involves using a variety of person-centred tools to explore, consider and understand emotionally distressed behaviour.

**3. The voices of children, young people and their families should be sought and listened to.**

They should be active participants in decision making.

**4. All stakeholders commit to working together in a solution focused way**

This approach helps to secure positive outcomes. It requires a spirit of trust and good will.

**5. All phase transfers will be carefully planned to support the needs of the child or young person.**

This includes reintegration into mainstream schools and managed moves.

**6. Permanent exclusion will only be used as a last resort. Suspensions will rarely be applied and only for as short a period as possible.**

This approach recognises the sense of rejection felt by many young people.

**7. All provision will be of a high quality.**

It will meet the specific needs of children and young people and it will enable them to fulfil their potential and aspirations.

**8. Staff in all schools and settings are passionate, enthusiastic and motivated to support children and young people.**

They will have appropriate training to help them meet the needs of children and young people.

**9. High quality, outcome-focused Alternative Provision (AP) should be available for children and young people where appropriate.**

AP will lead to reintegration into a school when it is the right approach for the child or young person.

AP should take the form of:

- early intervention to work alongside schools to support inclusion and belonging.
- Short-term placements leading to reintegration into a school
- A placement to support the young person into a new school or into a post-16 destination.

**10. Part-time timetables will only be used in very exceptional circumstances.**

These will be determined on an individual basis. They will not be treated as a long-term solution.

It is recognised that schools, settings and provisions are autonomous and will manage and implement these principles in their own way.

# Dorset's priorities

We have agreed the following six priorities for us to work towards to support all children and young people in Dorset have a sense of belonging:

1. All schools and settings have a truly inclusive ethos.
2. All children and young people are ready for the next phase of learning.
3. Additional support is available to enable all children and young people to have a sense of belonging to their school or setting.
4. Schools and settings work together to secure positive outcomes for children and young people in their area.
5. Partnership working between schools, settings and other agencies are integrated, robust and effective.
6. Children, young people and their families have a sense of belonging to their communities.



# Dorset's Belonging Plan

## Priority 1

All schools and settings have a truly inclusive ethos.

### To achieve this, we will:

- provide training in Therapeutic Thinking to all staff and school governors and provide support to embed this within schools and settings
- agree a set of Dorset Belonging standards
- develop a framework for schools and settings to assess belonging and inclusion
- develop a Dorset 'Belonging Curriculum'
- explore and develop the current curriculum so that it meets the needs of all children and young people
- guide education settings to carry out a review of their curriculum with a focus on a sense of belonging
- provide training to Dorset Council staff, school colleagues and other partners on the 'Framework for Understanding, Accessing and Fostering Belonging'
- increase the number of Dorset Council staff, school colleagues and other partners trained in person-centred approaches and deliver refresher training where needed
- share model 'belonging' interview questions with Dorset Council, school colleagues and other partners
- create materials to promote belonging for use by Dorset schools and settings
- share good practice from successful schools with an inclusive ethos and accessible learning environments (both local and national)
- promote the provision of 'safe spaces' for children and young people to regulate their emotions
- develop 'peer mentoring' systems in schools to engage children and young people who need support with friendships
- collaborate with schools and other settings to put in place support for staff wellbeing and their sense of belonging
- increase the number of inclusion hubs for children with communication and interaction and social, emotional and mental health needs
- issue Dorset guidance around the use of part-time timetables

## Priority 2

All children and young people are ready for the next phase of learning.

### To achieve this, we will:

- agree a robust phase transfer process and implement it across all Dorset schools and settings
- identify children and young people who may struggle with phase transfer or attendance and support them to build a relationship with a key adult
- collaborate with the Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) to deliver sessions for help children and young people to cope with their anxiety when moving schools
- raise awareness of employment and training opportunities much earlier to children and young people, with a focus on Dorset's emerging industries and initiatives
- develop support for securing apprenticeships and employment opportunities
- provide children and young people who are Electively Home Educated (EHE) to support where required

## Priority 3

Additional support is available to prevent children and young people from losing their sense of belonging to their school or setting.

### To achieve this, we will:

- raise awareness of support available to children, young people and families
- review alternative provision so that children and young people can stay within their local school, community and circle of friends
- create a programme of activities focused on building a sense of self and belonging for those who find learning environments challenging
- improve Dorset Learning Centre capacity and provision for children and young people who need this support
- focus on the reintegration of children and young people from Learning Centres into mainstream settings where appropriate

## Priority 4

Schools and settings work together to secure positive outcomes for children and young people in their area.

### To achieve this, we will:

- ensure Dorset Learning Centre processes and practices are clear through a Learning Centre agreement and specification
- develop a Dorset Learning Centre Early Intervention model which includes outreach provision
- promote the development of progression opportunities for early years, school, and college support staff
- review the In Year Fair Access (IYFA) protocol
- use Locality Inclusion Partnerships (LIPs) as joint problem-solving spaces to develop a sense of belonging for children and young people in schools
- expand special school provision within Dorset

## Priority 5

Partnership working between schools, settings and other agencies is integrated, robust and effective.

### To achieve this, we will:

- support schools to become 'hubs' with enrichment activities for children and young people and their families
- facilitate community group projects which develop informal networks for families
- have annual Dorset Education Awards to recognise and celebrate good practice
- improve interaction between settings and families ensuring both verbal and written communication is strength-based

## Priority 6

Children, young people and their families have a sense of belonging to their communities.

### To achieve this, we will:

- collaborate with other agencies and communities to improve transport in local communities for our children, young people and their families
- offer a range of activities for children and young people in each Dorset Locality, to cover different needs and interests
- facilitate children and young people to create peer led activities to increase their sense of agency
- work with local businesses and the voluntary sector to provide more resources and opportunities for children and young people
- make youth clubs available for more children and young people, including those who are 16 and over and those that have a disability
- support the workforce to have a better understanding of children and young people's diverse needs
- have a disability pride month which includes the celebration of hidden disabilities

# How we will measure our success

We will use the following measures to check how successful we are.

1. Every child of compulsory school age has a school place
2. Dorset's attendance is in the top 20% of all local authorities, including for specific groups such as children:
  - eligible for free school meals
  - with a social worker
  - with SEN
3. Dorset's exclusion and suspension rates are in the lowest 20% of all local authorities
4. There is a reduction in the use of part-time timetables and the length of time that children and young people are on them
5. There is a reduction in the number of children and young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)
6. Children and young people tell us:
  - schools and settings are inclusive
  - that they have a sense of belonging
  - they feel part of the school or setting irrespective of background, needs or culture
7. Children, young people and staff in education settings can say how and where the curriculum addresses all aspects of inclusion and belonging
8. Children, young people and their families tell us phase transfer has been a positive experience irrespective of background, needs or culture
9. Resources are deployed equitably and transparently and are used to optimum effect, leading to a reduction in the High Needs Block (HNB) deficit
10. Children, young people and their families tell us they have had positive experiences when working with schools, settings and other partners
11. Children, young people and their families tell us they have a sense of belonging in their communities
12. Children, young people and families tell us that transport has improved
13. Analysis of participation in activities shows high take up amongst all cohorts, including children with SEN and children eligible for free school meals

14. There is a reduction in the need for external alternative provision
15. There is reduction in the length of time children and young people access alternative provision and more children and young people reintegrate into mainstream education (where this is appropriate)
16. There is a reduction in the need for alternative provision and other specialist provision away from the child or young person's local community
17. Where alternative provision is commissioned, it:
  - is of high quality
  - is outcome focused
  - enables children and young people to successfully re-integrate to school where appropriate
18. Children and young people accessing alternative provision achieve their outcomes
19. Alternative provision provides value for money leading to a reduction in the High Needs Block (HNB) spend on such provision

# How we will we deliver this strategy and plan

The progress of this strategy will be reviewed at the Dorset Education Board.

A termly report detailing evidence and impact of action points will be presented for each of the priority areas.

Key performance indicators will also be monitored through the Education Performance and Practice Board and Children's Services Performance Board.

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