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Martin-Denham, Sarah and Donaghue, Jacob (2020) Excluding children for no real reason: What is the extent of the use of the category 'other' in reporting the reasons for fixed and permanent school exclusion in England? University of Sunderland, Sunderland.

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Policy Brief

Excluding children for no real reason: What is the extent of the use of the category 'other' in reporting the reasons for fixed and permanent school exclusion in England?

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Date of release: January 2020

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Summary

The Department for Education (DfE) guide on exclusion shares twelve categories that head teachers choose from when reporting the reason for **fixed**¹ and **permanent**² exclusions from school. It is made explicit that of these twelve, the 'other' category is 'to be used sparingly' (2017a, p. 17; 2019a, p. 96). This policy brief examines the percentage of 'other' as the reason for **fixed period** and **permanent** school exclusion from 153 local authorities (LA) in England in 2017/18 (DfE, 2019b). In some LA areas, the reason 'other' accounts for over 57% of all **fixed period** and 67% of **permanent** exclusions issued. This report also explores the rate of children excluded under the category 'other' and highlights how the North East accounted for six out of the top ten local authorities that assigned the reason 'other' for **fixed period** exclusions in 2017/18.

¹ A fixed period exclusion is defined as 'when a pupil is barred from school for a fixed amount of time (including exclusions during lunchtime)' (DfE, 2017b, p.56)

² A permanent exclusion is defined as 'when a pupil is permanently barred from school premises' (DfE, 2017b, p.56)

Introduction

When a head teacher excludes a child from school, they must without delay, let parents know the type of exclusion and the reason(s) for it (Education Act, 2002; DfE, 2017b). This can be in the form of a letter or email (Education Act, 1996) with a record of the exclusion being made on the school system. Since 2003/4, schools are required to report the reason for school exclusions through school census returns (DfE, 2017a). The specific details for exclusions are not reported, instead schools select a reason from one of twelve categories available (see Table 1).

The current and previous school census guide (2019a; 2020) acknowledge some school management information systems allow for multiple reasons for an exclusion to be recorded, although only the main

reason is collected for the school census. Schools can assign the category 'other' for exclusions when the reason does not conform to the descriptions available. However, the school census guidance states that 'the descriptions should be used as a guide and are not intended to be used as a tick list for exclusion decisions' (DfE, 2017a, p.17). The guidance also states how 'the "other" category should be used sparingly' (ibid, p. 17; 2019a, p. 96). According to the Oxford Dictionary of English (2010), sparingly can be defined as 'moderate; economical' with the Cambridge Dictionary (no date) defining it as 'using very little of something'.

Table 1.

Reasons and descriptions for school exclusion in England

Exclusion reason/category	Description
Physical assault against a pupil	Fighting, obstruction and jostling, violent behaviour, wounding
Physical assault against an adult	Obstruction and jostling, violent behaviour, wounding
Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against a pupil	Aggressive behaviour, carrying an offensive weapon, homophobic abuse and harassment, swearing, threatened violence, verbal intimidation
Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult	
Bullying	Verbal, physical, homophobic bullying, cyber bullying
Racist abuse	Derogatory racist statements, racist bullying, racist graffiti, racist taunting and harassment, swearing that can be attributed to racist characteristics
Sexual misconduct	Lewd behaviour, sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual bullying, sexual graffiti, sexual harassment
Drug and alcohol related	Alcohol abuse, drug dealing, inappropriate use of prescribed drugs, possession of illegal drugs, smoking, substance misuse
Damage	Arson, graffiti, vandalism
Theft	Selling and dealing in stolen property, stealing from local shops on a school outing, stealing personal property (adult or pupil), stealing school property
Persistent disruptive behaviour	Challenging behaviour, disobedience, persistent violation of school rules
Other	

Source: DfE, 2017a; 2019a; 2020

Findings

Part A: Percentage of exclusions categorised as 'other' in local authorities in England (2017/18)

The following section presents the extent of the use of 'other' by 153 LAs firstly, in relation to **fixed period** and then **permanent** exclusions in England (DfE, 2019b).

- Nationally, 20.1% of all **fixed period** exclusions in England were categorised as 'other' (DfE, 2019b).
- When looking across local authorities, there were 13 out of 153 (9%) who used 'other' sparingly.
- 'Other' was the most common reason for **fixed period** exclusions in 41 local authorities (27%).

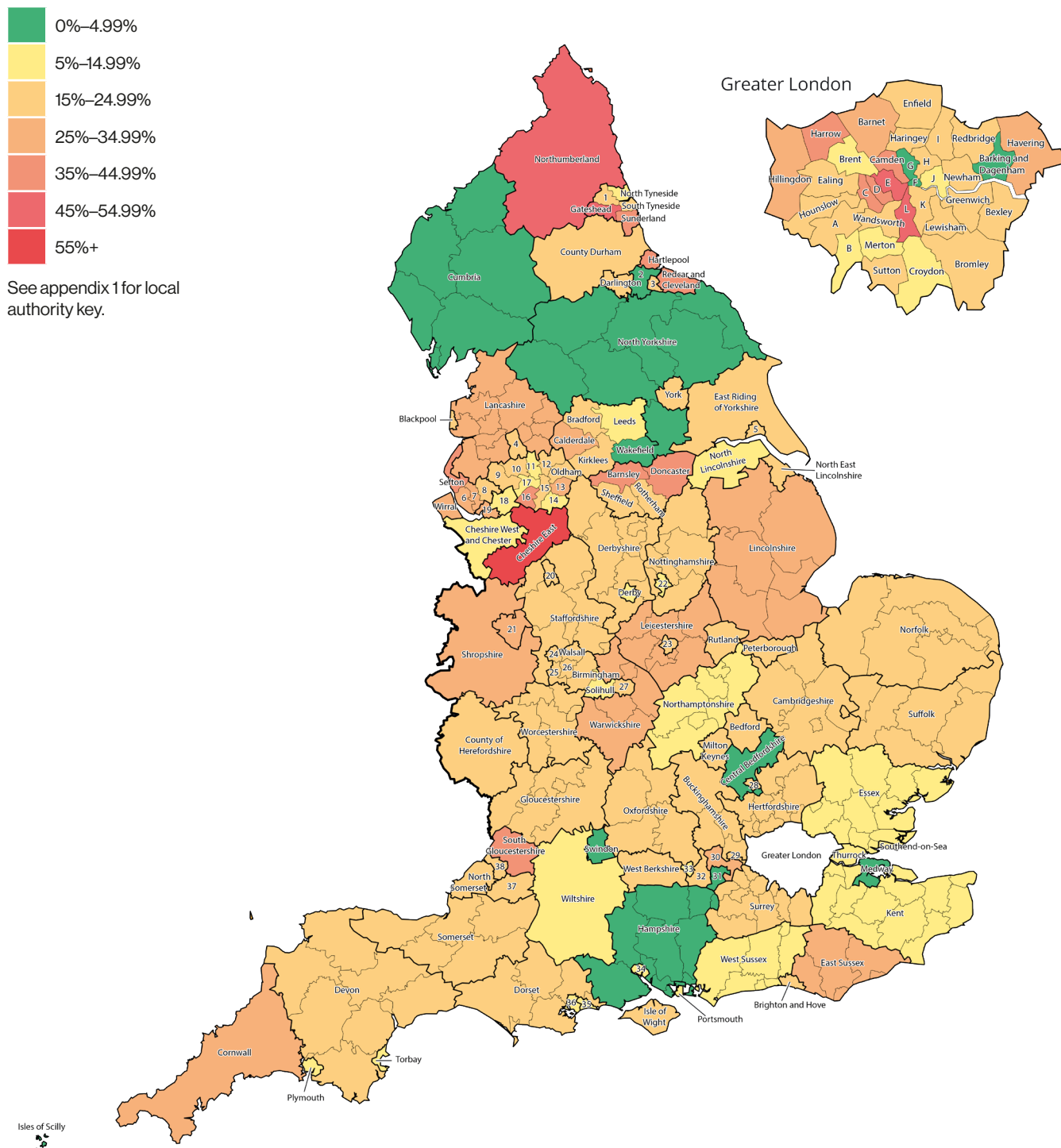
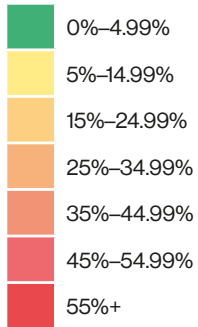


Figure 1. The percentage of **fixed period** exclusions categorised as 'other' in local authorities in England

- Nationally, 18.2% of all **permanent** exclusions in England were categorised as 'other' (DfE, 2019b).
- When looking across local authorities, there were 18 out of 153 (12%) who used 'other' sparingly.
- 'Other' was the most common reason for **permanent** exclusions in 40 local authorities (26%).
- Of these, there were 20 where 'other' was the most common reason for both **fixed period** and **permanent** exclusions.



See appendix 1 for local authority key.

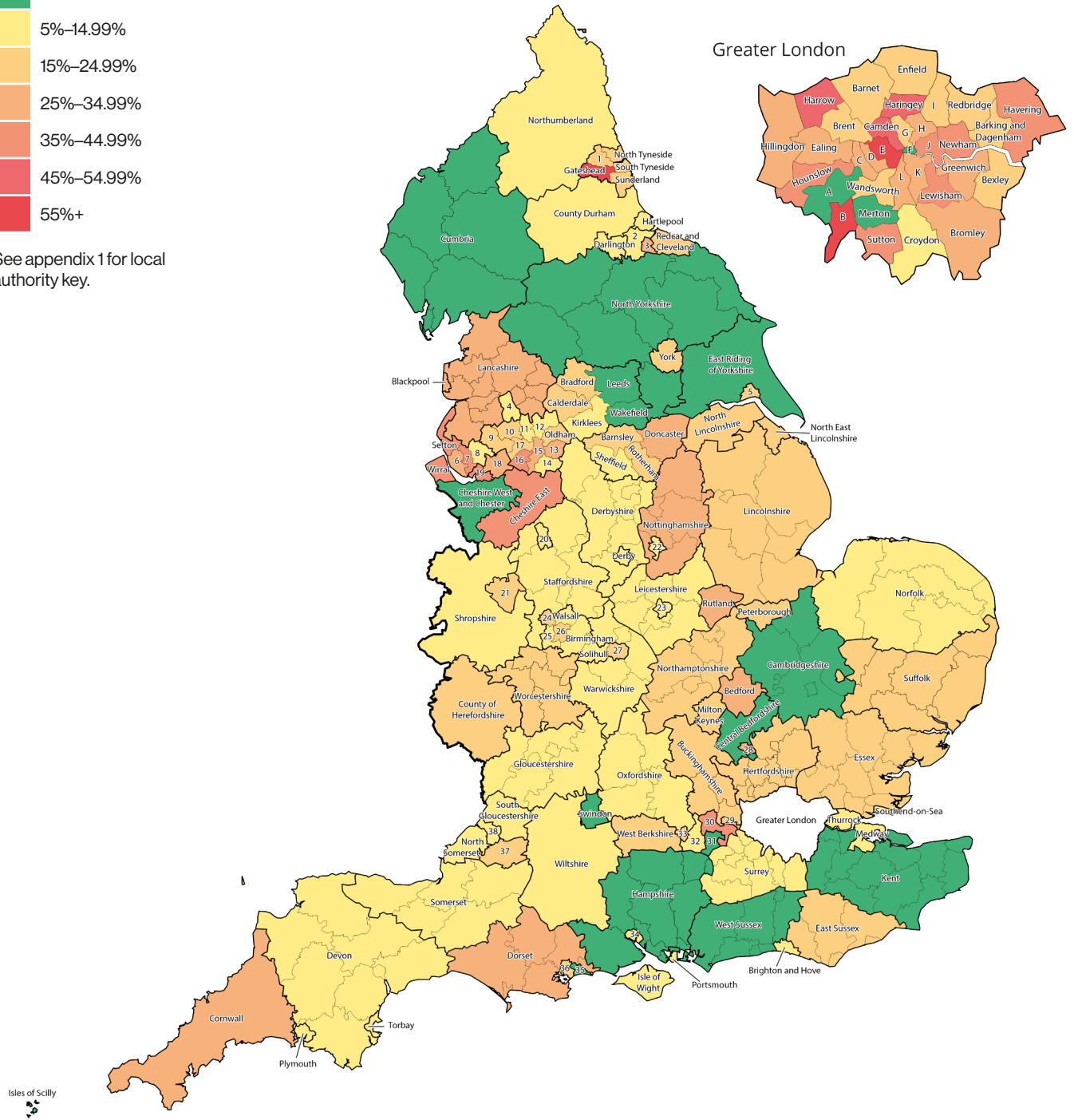


Figure 2. The percentage of **permanent** exclusions categorised as 'other' in local authorities in England

Part B: Top ten local authorities with the highest percentage use of the reason 'other' for fixed period and permanent exclusions in England (2017/18)

This section presents the top ten LAs with the highest percentage use of the reason 'other' for **fixed period** and **permanent** exclusion and is based off the same data used in Figures 1 and 2. As shown in Figure 3, Cheshire East, Gateshead and Northumberland have the highest percentage nationally for allocating the reason 'other' for **fixed period** exclusions. Gateshead also appears in the top three for **permanent** exclusions alongside Kingston upon Thames and Westminster.

Part C: Top ten local authorities with the highest rate of pupils allocated the category 'other' as the reason for fixed period and permanent exclusions in England (2017/18)

So far, this policy brief has considered the percentage use of the exclusion reason 'other' across LAs in England. In recognition of the varying population sizes in each LA, this section presents the number and rate of pupils excluded with this category. Hartlepool, Doncaster and Redcar and Cleveland have the highest rate of pupil **fixed period** exclusions categorised as 'other' (see Table 2). Of the top ten LAs, six are from the North East of England. **Permanent** exclusions account for a much smaller percentage of pupils and there is no one region over-represented (see Table 3).

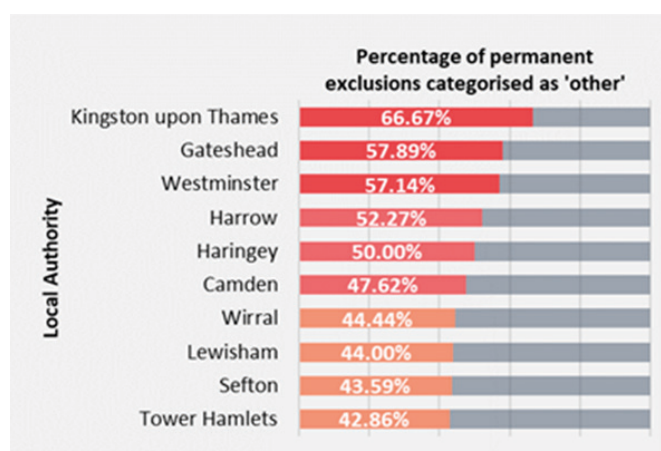
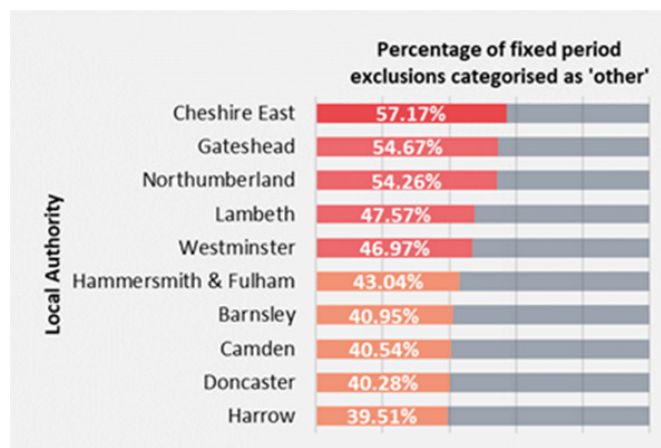


Figure 3. Top ten local authorities with the highest percentage use of the reason 'other' for **fixed period** and **permanent** exclusions

Table 2.

Number and rate of pupils who received a **fixed period** exclusion categorised as 'other'

Local authority	Total pupil population	Number of pupils excluded ('other')	Rate ³ of pupil exclusion ('other')
Hartlepool	15,192	1,818	11.97%
Doncaster	47,364	4,314	9.11%
Redcar and Cleveland	21,931	1,708	7.79%
Barnsley	33,709	2,392	7.10%
Northumberland	45,257	2,344	5.18%
Middlesbrough	24,197	913	3.77%
Sunderland	40,202	1,444	3.59%
Cheshire East	53,303	1,893	3.55%
South Gloucestershire	39,141	1,152	2.94%
Gateshead	28,409	813	2.86%
Total	348,705	18,791	

Source: DfE, 2018; 2019b

Table 3.

Number and rate of pupils who received a **permanent** exclusion categorised as 'other'

Local authority	Total pupil population	Number of pupils excluded ('other')	Rate ³ of pupil exclusion ('other')
Gateshead	28,409	57	0.12%
Tameside	36,326	97	0.09%
Harrow	36,120	44	0.06%
Trafford	41,285	67	0.06%
Blackpool	18,771	42	0.06%
Lancashire	170,689	324	0.06%
Lewisham	40,501	50	0.05%
Kensington and Chelsea	12,959	21	0.05%
Redcar and Cleveland	21,931	59	0.05%
Bedford	28,252	54	0.05%
Middlesbrough	24,197	42	0.05%
Total	459,440	857	

Source: DfE, 2018; 2019a

Conclusion

This policy brief has provided evidence that indicates the exclusion reason 'other' is not being used sparingly across all LA areas in England and in some cases the use is prolific. A possible explanation for this could be the lack of adequate reasons available in guidance that do not encapsulate why children are excluded from school (Centre for Social Justice, 2018; DfE, 2019c). This view is strengthened by the data showing that nationally 'other' exclusions amount to over 20% of **fixed period** exclusions and 18% of **permanent** exclusions in 2017/18. Until the reasons why children are excluded from school are fully understood, there will continue to be a substantial gap in the administration data surrounding why children are excluded from school.

2. The way exclusions are recorded and the descriptions of the reason(s) are different for each nation in the UK (see Table 4). We would recommend that schools are able to record multiple reasons for school exclusion in order of severity (where there is more than one contributing factor). There must be the option to add limited text in place of the category 'other' replicating the policy in Northern Ireland. These changes combined would allow for greater accuracy in the data capture in relation to school exclusions. It is also recommended that the DfE report all the captured data for the purposes of further analysis.

³The rate of pupil exclusion ('other') uses the same rate calculation that appears in statistical releases (DfE, 2017a), however it is specific only to exclusions categorised as 'other'.

Recommendations for policy

1. The reasons head teachers choose the 'other' category when reporting school exclusions needs to be better understood. If specific reasons were known, similarities could be identified to inform new and relevant descriptions of why children are excluded from school. These additional reasons may highlight new patterns of behaviour among groups and reduce or eliminate the need for the 'other' category.

Table 4.

Differences in the recording of school exclusions across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Nation	Number of categories	Multiple reasons recorded	Multiple reasons reported	Option for free text	Option of 'other' category
England	12	No	No	No	Yes
Scotland	29	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Wales	12	No	No	No	Yes
Northern Ireland	11	No	No	Yes	No

Source: DfE, 2017a; Scottish Government, 2018; Welsh Government, 2019; DfE in NI, 2015a; 2015b

Limitations

The main limitation with this research is that by using administrative data, the analysis is based on aggregate figures per LA, not at school level. There may be instances where the majority of schools within an LA area use 'other' sparingly but a minority of schools do not. Additionally, the data concerns state-funded primary, secondary and specialist schools only and not all types of provision such as nurseries and independent schools. It could also be argued that the rate of children excluded may not reflect the true nature of exclusions as children can receive multiple exclusions per year and that rate calculations include sole and dual main registered children which may exaggerate figures. However, as the DfE argue, the calculation 'more accurately reflects the number of pupils who could be excluded, resulting in more accurate exclusion rates' (2017a, p.9).

Method

This research utilised data on school exclusions from 153 LAs published by the DfE and Office for National Statistics (2019b). Percentages were calculated for each of the twelve reasons for exclusion, with those recorded as 'other' mapped by LA area (see Fig. 1 and 2). The DfE guidance (2017a) suggests 'other' should be used sparingly, however to the authors' knowledge, this term does not hold any numerical value. Therefore a range of 0-4.99% was selected to represent appropriate usage of this category (this is approximately equivalent to 1-in-20 exclusions or fewer). The remaining bands increased in increments of 10% to aid readability (see Fig. 1 and 2). The rate of children excluded due to 'other' was calculated using pupil population (DfE, 2018) and exclusion data for each LA area (DfE, 2019b).

Further research opportunities

To contribute to more effective policy design, further research is needed to understand the behaviours children are presenting with that lead head teachers to select the 'other' category.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Table 5.

Local authority key for Figures 1 and 2

A Richmond upon Thames	K Southwark	9 Wigan	19 Halton	29 Slough
B Kingston upon Thames	L Lambeth	10 Bolton	20 Stoke-on-Trent	30 Windsor and Maidenhead
C Hammersmith and Fulham	1 Newcastle	11 Bury	21 Telford and Wrekin	31 Bracknell Forest
D Kensington and Chelsea	2 Stockton-on-Tees	12 Rochdale	22 Nottingham	32 Wokingham
E Westminster	3 Middlesbrough	13 Tameside	23 Leicester	33 Reading
F City of London	4 Blackburn with Darwen	14 Stockport	24 Wolverhampton	34 Southampton
G Islington	5 City of Kingston upon Hull	15 Manchester	25 Dudley	35 Bournemouth
H Hackney	6 Liverpool	16 Trafford	26 Sandwell	36 Poole
I Waltham Forest	7 Knowsley	17 Salford	27 Coventry	37 Bath and North East Somerset
J Tower Hamlets	8 St. Helens	18 Warrington	28 Luton	38 City of Bristol