

News story: Damian Hinds: Autonomy leads to progress in our schools

The freedom and autonomy of the academies programme has driven innovation and standards have risen in our school system, the Education Secretary Damian Hinds said in a speech today (Thursday 11 October).

[Speaking at the launch of the Confederation of School Trusts](#) at the British Library in London, the Education Secretary pointed to the many successes of the academies system and the increasing number of schools making the positive choice to convert as examples of the benefits of backing school leaders.

Mr Hinds said that it is a “fundamental point” that heads and school leaders should have the freedom to make decisions in the best interests of their schools. This has seen:

- More than half a million children now studying in good or outstanding sponsored academies that typically replaced underperforming schools;
- The number of state-funded schools in academy trusts grow from around 3,200 in 2015 to around 6,200 this year – and receiving 600 applications to convert to an academy in the last 12 months; and
- Of the almost 1,400 multi-academy trusts, three quarters (76%) have between 1 to 5 schools, working together to share best practice.

[Building on the principles for a new, clearer school accountability system which Mr Hinds set out earlier in the year](#), the Education Secretary reiterated his commitment to holding MATs to account in a way that is transparent and fair. This will aim to give schools and parents easy access to vital information about a particular trust, and the performance of the sector as a whole.

The department is undertaking a listening period with multi-academy trust leaders, school heads and school leaders to help shape the system. This follows [the announcement to deliver even more transparency over academy finances](#), with academy accounts having to detail all staff earning over £100,000, declare contracts given to family or friends, and seek approval for all related-party transactions over £20,000 from next April.

The Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

It's when you give good people the power to make their own decisions that you unleash their creativity and allow them to drive improvements based on what they know works.

Today I want to re-make the case for freedom...for diversity...and for accountability in our school system...for going forwards not backwards, as we strive to achieve a world-class education for every child, whatever their background.

Trusts clearly have an increasingly important role in our system and we need to make sure our system of oversight and decision-making keeps up with this.

I want to make sure that schools and parents can easily access vital information about a particular trust, and the performance of the system as a whole.

That is why I am working with the sector to figure out how this will work. In particular I want to hear proposals from MAT and school leaders; your views are crucial.

The Education Secretary also backed the freedom of heads and school leaders to make decisions in the interests of staff and pupils – be it banning mobile phones or deciding on their marking policies.

Mr Hinds said:

We heard a couple of months ago how France would be banning mobile phones in schools. Please be in no doubt what I think about mobile phones.

I firmly believe that kids in schools should not be on their phones. I strongly support schools that ban phones.

But when people asked me if I was going to follow the example of France and impose a national ban – I said no.

Because that's autonomy in practice. Heads know best how to run their schools and achieve the objectives they want without any unintended consequences.

There are other areas where I want to proactively stress schools' autonomy.

Too often schools get told that my department or Ofsted expect them to follow the latest fads and fashions in the sector.

That's why Amanda Spielman, myself and others recently made a video stressing that schools are free to follow their own judgement when it comes to lesson plans, the data they collect, the marking policies.

In his speech at the National Association of Head Teachers' annual conference in Liverpool in May, the Education Secretary set out his vision for a clearer

school accountability system. This included:

- replacing the current system of having both below the floor and coasting standards for performance; and
- emphasising that only an Ofsted Inadequate judgement will result in school forcibly being turned into an academy.

A consultation on these principles will be launched shortly.

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[News story: No new inquest into the death of Theresa Biggs](#)

After careful consideration, the Attorney General Geoffrey Cox QC MP has decided not to provide his authority for an application to be made to the High Court for a new inquest into the death of Theresa Biggs. Miss Biggs was 6 years old when she died whilst swimming at Caldey Island, Pembrokeshire, on 18 July 1977.

Miss Biggs' sister submitted an application to the Attorney General for his consent to request a new inquest into the death of Theresa under the Coroners Act 1988. The original inquest was held by Coroner's Court for Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire in 1977.

An application for a fresh inquest may be made only with the authority of the Attorney General, and he can provide his authority only if he is satisfied there is sufficient admissible evidence that there is a reasonable prospect of the Court being persuaded to order a new inquest.

The Attorney General concluded that none of the grounds of challenge set out in the application had a reasonable prospect of success. As there is no fresh evidence that would likely lead to a different outcome being recorded on the inquisition, he would not be able to provide his authority for the applications to be made to the High Court.

The Attorney General said:

I offer my sincere sympathies to the family of Theresa Biggs for their loss. I have given this considerable thought, but, as disappointing as it will be for them, it would not be right to pass this matter to the High Court when the tests for a new inquest are not met.

[News story: £2 million investment to help NHS achieve zero inpatient suicide ambition](#)

The Prime Minister has announced £2 million in funding for the Zero Suicide Alliance (ZSA) over the next 2 years. The funding will help to reduce suicides across the NHS, with the aim of achieving zero inpatient suicides.

It will be used to develop tools for the NHS and public and private partners. The tools will focus on:

- training to prevent suicides
- improving safety
- ensuring lessons are learnt when suicides occur

The ZSA will also develop their digital suicide prevention resource, capturing best practice and learning from across the UK and abroad, and explore the use of analytics to predict suicide risk.

This funding is in addition to the £25 million in suicide prevention funding first announced in 2016. As part of that investment, NHS England is working with mental health trusts to implement zero suicide policies for inpatients and improve safety on wards.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock said:

Every suicide is a preventable death and there's so much more we can do to reduce the number of people lost to it. The Zero Suicide Alliance's new training and awareness tools will help health and care staff recognise the signs and step in before it's too late, as well ensuring openness and transparency when suicides do occur.

On World Mental Health Day, this funding is a vital step forward to help further reduce inpatient suicide and underlines our commitment to bring down the number of suicides everywhere.

Joe Rafferty, Chief Executive of Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust and one of the founder members of the Zero Suicide Alliance, said:

Today's announcement of government backing for the ZSA is fantastic news for every person who has ever struggled with suicidal thoughts and everyone left behind by someone who has taken their own life. The ZSA believe just one life lost is one too many.

The ZSA is already acting as a catalyst and focal point for a broad range of suicide prevention activity across the widest possible group of mutually supportive NHS and partner organisations in this country. As part of this work, the Alliance training, which we developed here at Mersey Care, has now been taken by thousands of people with each one of them now becoming equipped to engage with those at risk.

Moving forward, this funding will enable us to broaden our reach to include a range of options to ensure that NHS response to suicide is the very best it can be wherever you are when the need arises.

News story: Government announces that medicinal cannabis is legal

For the first time in the UK, expert doctors have been given the option to legally issue prescriptions for cannabis-based medicines when they agree that their patients could benefit from this treatment.

The law change, laid in Parliament today, came after the Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, listened to concerns from parents of children with conditions such as severe epilepsy.

Over the summer he called for an urgent review of cannabis-based medicinal products and accepted recommendations that followed from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) and the UK's Chief Medical Adviser.

The new law will not limit the types of conditions that can be considered for treatment and doctors will no longer need to seek approval from an expert panel in order for patients to access the medicines.

Home Secretary Sajid Javid said:

Having been moved by heartbreaking cases involving sick children, it was important to me that we took swift action to help those who can benefit from medicinal cannabis.

We have now delivered on our promise and specialist doctors will have the option to prescribe these products where there is a real need.

I'm grateful to the expert panel – who have been considering cases in the interim – and to those who've worked hard to bring about this change at the earliest possible opportunity.

The decision to prescribe these unlicensed medicines must be made by a specialist doctor – not a GP. These doctors focus on one field of medicine such as neurology or paediatrics and are listed on the General Medical Council's specialist register. They must make decisions on prescribing cannabis-based products for medicinal use on a case-by-case basis, and only when the patient has an unmet special clinical need that cannot be met by licensed products.

Patients under the care of a specialist should discuss their treatment plan with them.

NHS England, the British Paediatric Neurology Association and the Royal College of Physicians will provide clinical advice to doctors ahead of the law change. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has been commissioned to develop more detailed guidelines for clinicians in the longer term.

President of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, Professor Ashok Soni OBE, said:

This news will be welcomed by many patients with serious health conditions.

The prospect of a future where safe and effective licensed cannabis-based medicines can be prescribed to help relieve suffering is genuinely exciting.

We will work with the NHS to help support specialists in making the right prescribing decisions.

The Home Secretary has made it clear that today's announcement does not pave the way towards legalising cannabis for recreational use. The penalties for unauthorised supply and possession will remain unchanged.