

The Stand Alone Pledge:

Analysis of Pledge Letters and Commitments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Stand Alone Pledge was first devised by the charity Stand Alone (SA) in 2016 to garner publicly declared support from institutions providing Higher Education (HE) in support of estranged students: “*Young people studying without the support and approval of a family network*” (Stand Alone, 2016a, np). As of November 2022, 112 institutions, including universities and colleges, have made the Pledge. In August 2022, Dr. Rachel Spacey and Rebecca Sanderson from the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute at the University of Lincoln (UoL) were awarded the tender to evaluate the Stand Alone Pledge. This report details the findings of that analysis completed in November 2022 (Ethics Reference: UoL2022_10126).

The evaluators reviewed all 112 SA Pledge letters (a statement of commitment signed by an institution’s Vice-Chancellor or deputy) in conjunction with the information provided on each institution’s profile page on the SA website. The support offered was then mapped according to key indicators agreed with SA and analysed descriptively using both MS Excel and IBM SPSS Software.

Key findings from our analysis include:

- Pledge commitment has grown from 0 to 112 institutions since the introduction of the Pledge in 2016
- Almost half (81) of Higher Education Providers (HEPs) in England have endorsed the Pledge, with half in Wales (5) and over three quarters in Scotland (15). None of the HEPs in Northern Ireland have engaged with the Pledge
- In terms of mission group, the greatest proportion of SA Pledge signatories sit within the Russell Group (19 from 24)
- Most institutions set out their support for estranged students in the context of their commitment to widening participation
- Just under half of the signatories aligned their support for estranged students to existing provision for care experienced students at their institution
- In relation to the four areas of best practice suggested by SA for inclusion in the Pledge, at least one facet of financial support for estranged students was promised by 107 institutions

- The most popular types of financial support were priority or access to hardship funds, Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) or a dedicated bursary, grant, or fund for estranged students
- Estranged students' accommodation needs were supported by 105 institutions. The most promised support was in relation to the availability of university accommodation
- A commitment to support the mental health and wellbeing of estranged students was pledged by 103 institutions, of which access to wellbeing and counselling services was the most common provision
- Outreach and transition best practice for estranged students was promised by 97 institutions including over half promising to provide IAG support and almost half promising a named advisor or point of contact from pre-application through to transition
- In addition to the four areas of best practice, a range of support was pledged for estranged students including a dedicated contact or team at their institution, a dedicated webpage which was online or in development, information on their website for estranged students and support, awareness raising, information or training for staff.

Support for estranged students in the UK now includes a comprehensive range of financial support measures, accommodation support, support for mental health and wellbeing and outreach and transition. Since the Pledge is neither a quality nor a charter mark, the range of support pledged to estranged students in the Pledge letters and commitments is remarkable. It must also be noted that the range of support available to estranged students at Pledge institutions may in fact be much greater than this analysis suggests as some institutions may not have included every single support measure they provide.

Our recommendations to enhance existing support amongst Pledge institutions include:

- All Pledge signatories make use of the Stand Alone branding tools to strengthen the visibility of the support available for estranged students within

their institution while raising student and staff awareness of the work and support offered by Stand Alone

- All Pledge signatories should signpost to relevant financial, pastoral, academic and mental health support, for example, through a dedicated web page or social media presence and/or targeted communications to estranged students which make this information available pre- and post-application/enrolment
- Stand Alone could encourage Pledge holders to consider the relevance of strategic and regulatory objectives like widening participation targets and their related obligations to care experienced students to facilitate further development of support for estranged students without significant input of additional resources from the institution
- Uptake of the Pledge within the university sector has been mostly high but there is scope and appetite for the Pledge amongst colleges providing FE and HE which Stand Alone could harness.

1. BACKGROUND

In July 2022, Dr. Rachel Spacey and Rebecca Sanderson from the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute at the University of Lincoln (UoL) submitted an Expression of Interest to the charity, Stand Alone (SA), and were subsequently awarded the tender to evaluate the Stand Alone Pledge. This report details the findings of the project to analyse the SA Pledge letters and understand the change in support, completed in November 2022 (Ethics Reference: UoL2022_10126).

1.1 THE STAND ALONE PLEDGE

Estranged students are “*young people studying without the support and approval of a family network*” (Stand Alone, 2016a, np) and Stand Alone’s research and advocacy work brought it to the attention of the Higher Education (HE) sector that students without family support or approval were more likely to drop out and leave university (Stand Alone, 2016b). The Stand Alone Pledge was thus devised by the charity in 2016 to garner publicly declared commitments from institutions providing HE in support of their estranged students. As of November 2022, 112 institutions, including universities and colleges, have made the Pledge. The contents of the Pledge letters are not “*prescriptive*” - the charity asked for a member of an institution’s senior management team to write a one page letter setting out how they currently supported estranged students and the areas of support they wished to develop in the future. SA provided examples of best practice in four key areas which institutions could consider when developing their support for estranged students. Institutions committing to the SA Pledge did not need to have support in all four areas but were encouraged “*as a minimum, to identify one commitment in two pledge areas*” (Stand Alone, 2016b, 3). The four areas of best practice are:

- Finance
- Accommodation
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Outreach and transition.

Whilst monitoring of the Pledges has been undertaken annually by SA, the team from the UoL were tasked with ascertaining what has been achieved since the

Pledge was launched in 2016. This report details the results of analysis of the SA Pledge letters supported by the information institutions provided to SA for the Pledge website to understand what has been accomplished since 2016. In addition, any gaps and future development opportunities for SA identified during the investigation are presented.

2. METHODOLOGY

The team reviewed all 112 SA Pledge letters in conjunction with the information provided on each institution’s profile page on the SA website. The support offered was then mapped to the four areas of best practice and key indicators agreed with SA and analysed descriptively using both MS Excel and IBM SPSS Software. This analysis was supplemented by reference to publicly available datasets from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) where relevant.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 PROGRESS OF THE PLEDGE

Of the 112 SA Pledges, 94 were from universities (83.9 per cent) whilst Pledges from colleges (including Further Education (FE) and colleges providing both FE and HE) totalled 18 (16.1 per cent) (Table 1). Of the 18 colleges, seven Pledge commitments have been made by FE only colleges.

<i>Type of institution</i>	<i>No. of Pledge signatories</i>	<i>% of total</i>
University (public & private)	94	83.9
College	18	16.1
Total	112	100.0

TABLE 1 PLEDGE SIGNATORIES BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION

Analysis of Higher Education Providers (HEPs), which includes universities and some Further Education (FE) colleges providing HE, indicates that Pledge commitment has grown steadily since the introduction of the Pledge in 2016 from 13 in 2016 to 105 in 2022 with a notable increase of 48 to 75 commitments between 2018 and 2019 (Figure 1).

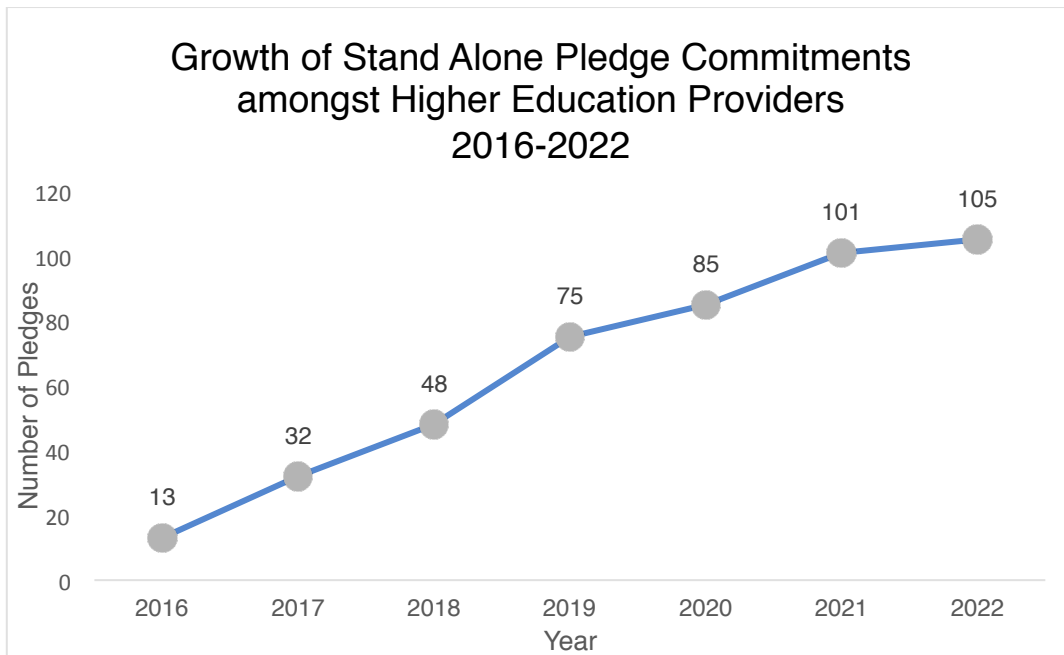


FIGURE 1 GROWTH OF PLEDGE COMMITMENTS AMONGST HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

3.1.1 GEOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE

Consideration of the numbers of HEPs who have signed the Pledge compared to the number of registered HEPs (HESA, 2022) suggests that almost half of HEPs in England have endorsed the Pledge. Scotland has almost full coverage with over three quarters of institutions committed to the Pledge and half of all HEPs in Wales have signed up. At the time of writing, none of the HEPs in Northern Ireland have engaged with the Pledge (Table 2):

<i>:UK nations</i>	<i>No. of HEPs (excludes distance learning and student numbers <100) based on HESA 2020-21 data</i>	<i>No. signing the Pledge</i>	<i>% of total</i>
England	186	81	43.5
Scotland	18	15	83.3
Wales	10	5	50.0
Northern Ireland	4	0	0.0
Total	218	105	48.2

TABLE 2 COVERAGE OF PLEDGE COMMITMENTS AMONGST HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

3.1.2 TYPES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION MAKING THE PLEDGE

Drilling down to just the universities who have signed the Pledge, in terms of university mission group (collections of universities with a shared focus or ambition), the largest number of SA Pledge signatories sit within the Russell Group (n=19) - 79.2 per cent of their members have signed the Pledge (Table 3). The Russell Group represents world-class, research-intensive universities. Similarly, large proportions of both the MillionPlus (modern universities) and the University Alliance (professional and technical universities) groups have signed the Pledge (68.2 and 60.0 per cent respectively). Both the MillionPlus and the University Alliance “*actively emphasise a widening participation component*” or commitment to increase the proportion of people entering HE from under-represented groups, in their mission statements (Hubbard et al., 2021, 295). It must be noted, however, that many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not belong to a mission group.

<i>University mission group</i>	<i>No. of Pledge signatories</i>	<i>No. of mission group members</i>	<i>% of group</i>
MillionPlus	15	22	68.2
Russell Group	19	24	79.2
University Alliance	9	15	60.0
Total	43	61	70.5

TABLE 3 PLEDGE SIGNATORIES BY MISSION GROUP

3.1.3 STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Most institutions (n=78; 69.6 per cent) set out their support for estranged students in the context of their commitment to widening participation - this might be in relation to their Access Agreement (up to 2019), Access and Participation Plan (from 2019), Fair Access commitments, existing widening participation activity or service or more widely as a social justice imperative to support under-represented groups of students to access and succeed in HE or FE. Just under half of the institutions aligned their support for estranged students to that they already provided to care experienced students or care leavers at their institution (n=51, 45.5 per cent).

3.2 SUPPORT FOR ESTRANGED STUDENTS

This section explores the support pledged by the 112 Pledge signatories which includes HEPs (n=105) and FE only providers (n=7). Support promised for estranged students across the Pledges includes financial help such as bursaries and hardship

funds, 365-day a year accommodation, mental health support including peer support groups, and Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) about the support available to estranged students at university or college at pre-entry, indicating that guidance from SA has successfully raised awareness of the key needs of this student group (Figure 2):

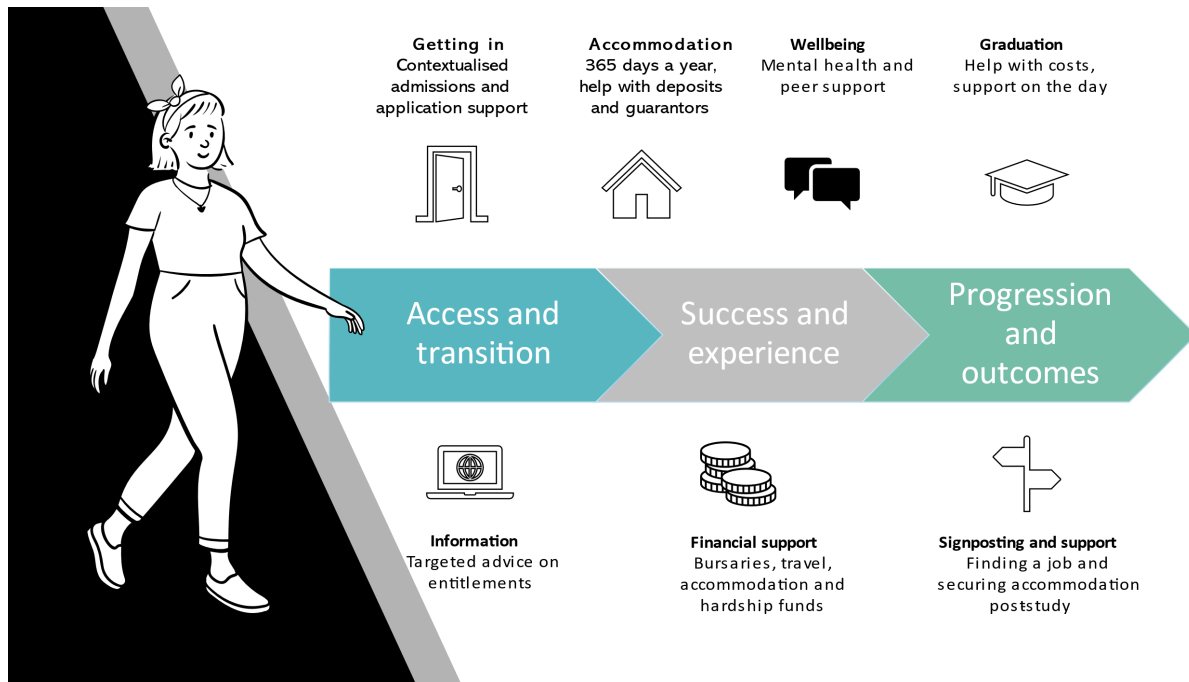


FIGURE 2 RANGE OF SUPPORT ACROSS THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE

Institutions pledged at least one aspect of support for estranged students during the following student lifecycle stages – access, transition, success, and progression, revealing that support is particularly focused on the access (getting into university or college) and success (staying and doing well at university or college) stages of estranged students’ journeys (Table 4). The transition stage, generally understood to mean from pre–entry through arrival, induction and the first year was a focus of almost half the Pledge commitments whilst progression or post-graduation (beyond university or college) was a focus of a quarter of Pledge signatories.

No. of Pledge signatories	<i>Student Lifecycle Stage</i>			
	<i>Access</i>	<i>Transition</i>	<i>Success</i>	<i>Progression</i>
	98	55	109	28
% of Pledge				

signatories	87.5	49.1	97.3	25.0
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TABLE 4 COMMITMENTS ACROSS STAGES OF THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE

In relation to the four areas of best practice suggested by SA for inclusion in the Pledge – finance, accommodation, mental health and wellbeing, and outreach and transition, analysis of the Pledge letters and commitments revealed the following:

3.2.1 FINANCE

At least one facet of financial support for estranged students was promised by **107 (95.5 per cent)** institutions. The most popular types of support were priority or access to hardship funds for estranged students (69.6 per cent), financial support IAG (66.1 per cent) and a dedicated bursary, grant, or fund for estranged students (58.0 per cent) (Table 5):

<i>Financial Support</i>	<i>No. of Pledge signatories</i>	<i>% of Pledge signatories</i>
Access/priority to hardship funds/bursaries or funds	78	69.6
Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)	74	66.1
Estranged Students' bursary/grant/fund	65	58.0
Summer vacation - accommodation or living expenses	16	14.3
Graduation costs - gown, ceremony, or contribution towards it	9	8.0
Moving on (beyond graduation) - deposit, accommodation, or maintenance	8	7.1
Travel costs	4	3.8

TABLE 5 FINANCIAL SUPPORT

3.2.2 ACCOMMODATION

Support for estranged students' accommodation needs was pledged by **105 (93.8 per cent)** institutions. The most promised support was in relation to the availability of university accommodation (70.5 per cent) (Table 6):

<i>Accommodation Support</i>	<i>No of Pledge signatories</i>	<i>% of Pledge signatories</i>
Available 365 days a year/52 weeks/all first year/duration of course	79	70.5
Financial support towards deposit, rent or deposit waiver	31	27.7

Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)	30	26.8
Guarantor scheme for university accommodation/private accommodation	28	25.0
Work with/partnership with UNITE funding ES accommodation/UNITE bursary	12	10.7
Welcome pack - equipment, groceries	6	5.4

TABLE 6 ACCOMMODATION SUPPORT

3.2.3 MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

A commitment to support the mental health and wellbeing of estranged students was pledged by **103 (92.0 per cent)** institutions (Table 7):

<i>Mental Health and Wellbeing Support</i>	<i>No of Pledge signatories</i>	<i>% of Pledge signatories</i>
Access to counselling/support/wellbeing services	90	92.0
Access to allocated point of contact/support package/priority	45	40.2
Peer support – groups/opportunities for meeting other ES or care (not MH)	27	24.1
Mental health peer support group for estranged students	18	16.1
Wellbeing welcome pack/online portal/resources	15	13.4

TABLE 7 MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORT

3.2.4 OUTREACH AND TRANSITION

Outreach and transition best practice for estranged students were promised by **97 (86.6 per cent)** institutions. That included over half promising to provide IAG about support for estranged students (59.0 per cent) whilst almost half had a named advisor or point of contact from pre-application through to transition that estranged students could contact (45.5 per cent) (Table 8):

<i>Outreach and transition</i>	<i>No of Pledge signatories</i>	<i>% of Pledge signatories</i>
General IAG about university support	66	59.0
Named advisor/point of contact	51	45.5
Targeting of estranged students in WP programmes/summer schools/open days/mentoring/tours/transition events	48	42.9
Financial IAG	31	27.7

Offer contextualised admissions/outreach programme attendance can lead to lower conditional offer	16	14.3
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TABLE 8 OUTREACH AND TRANSITION SUPPORT

3.2.5 ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR ESTRANGED STUDENTS

In addition to the four areas of best practice, a range of support was pledged for estranged students (Table 9):

<i>Additional support for estranged students</i>	<i>No of Pledge signatories</i>	<i>% of Pledge signatories</i>
Dedicated member of staff/team for ES to contact	72	64.3
Online information or dedicated webpage(s)	50	44.6
Information, training, and awareness raising for staff	41	36.6
Working with Students' Union, Guild or Association	28	25.0
Dedicated member of staff/team responsible for Pledge	27	24.1
Working with third sector organisations	25	22.3
Dedicated careers and employability support	7	6.3
Discounted postgraduate tuition fees/financial support	5	4.5

TABLE 9 ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR ESTRANGED STUDENTS

Almost two-thirds of signatories (n=72, 64.3 per cent) had a dedicated member of staff and/or team at their institution that estranged students could contact of which 25 were named on Pledge letters. In terms of responsibility for the SA Pledge commitment itself, almost a quarter of institutions (n=27) had a member of staff or team with oversight and/or responsibility for their Pledge (24.1 per cent).

Fifty (44.6 per cent) institutions referred to either a dedicated webpage for estranged students which was online or in development and/or information on their website for estranged students whilst 41 (36.6 per cent) institutions stated that they were providing either academic support, awareness raising, information or training for personal tutors and/or other academic staff and/or professional services staff so that staff were more aware of the issues affecting estranged students and were conversant with the ways in which their institution was supporting them should they need to signpost or support ES in some way.

Twenty-eight (25.0 per cent) institutions were working or planned to work with their respective Students' Union, Guild or Association to provide a co-ordinated approach to supporting estranged students at their institution. Twenty-five (22.3 per cent) institutions were working with third sector organisations and/or community organisations to better support estranged students' pre-entry and beyond - this was in addition to existing institutional outreach activity with schools and colleges.

In terms of preparing estranged students for life beyond the university or the progression stage of the student lifecycle, seven (6.3 per cent) institutions provided work experience or internship opportunities specifically targeted at ES whilst five (4.5 per cent) referred to either discounted tuition fees or institutional financial support for postgraduate study.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the SA Pledge commitments has revealed that in the six years since the initiative was introduced by the charity, support for estranged students in the UK has grown, year on year from 0 in 2016 to 112 Pledge commitments in 2022 of which 94 are from universities whilst Pledges from Colleges (including FE and Colleges providing both FE and HE) total 18. Amongst HEPs which include universities and some FE colleges providing HE there are currently 105 signatories to the SA Pledge. This represents almost half of HEPs in England, half in Wales and over three-quarters in Scotland in terms of coverage.

Support for estranged students is primarily aligned with institutions' commitments to widening participation and strategic commitment to welcome under-represented groups of students into HE. In addition, providing parity of support for all students studying without family support is important to those universities and colleges who already had a good package of support for care experienced students.

Support for estranged students in the UK now includes a range of financial support measures (95.5 per cent of SA Pledge signatories), accommodation support (93.8 per cent), support for mental health and wellbeing (92.0 per cent) and outreach and transition (86.6 per cent). Since the Pledge is neither a quality nor a charter mark, the range of support pledged to estranged students in the Pledge letters and

commitments is remarkable. It must also be noted that the range of support available to estranged students at Pledge institutions may in fact be much greater than this analysis suggests, since the Pledge letters are not formulaic, and some institutions may not have included every single support measure they provide.

The Pledge has helped raise awareness of estranged students and the unique challenges university students without family support encounter, across both the HE and FE sectors. Indeed, 41 institutions (36.6 per cent) stated that they were providing or were working towards providing information and/or training for academic and/or professional staff so that their organisations were more aware of the issues affecting estranged students and the ways in which they could support them.

This analysis has several limitations. The data analysed was confined to the commitments listed in the Pledge letters and associated institutional page on the Stand Alone website. The level of detail provided within the Pledge letters varied, and some providers stated an intention to develop further initiatives for estranged students. However, follow up or investigation of the support listed for ES on institutions' websites was outside of the scope of this study. It should also be noted that there may be other HE institutions who currently support estranged students but have not yet signed the Pledge. These also lie outside the scope of this analysis, and it may be useful to consider further research to better understand the extent and nature of provision made by HE institutions beyond that recorded in the Pledge letters.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

We suggest the following to enhance existing provision of support for estranged students at Pledge institutions:

- Where HEPs align their support for estranged students with that offered for care experienced students, packages were more comprehensive.
Encouraging Pledge holders to consider the relevance of strategic and regulatory objectives like widening participation targets and their related obligations to care experienced students may facilitate further development of

support for estranged students without significant input of additional resources from the institution

- Some institutions already make good use of the Stand Alone brand and logo and even the Pledge letter itself, in their student-facing information and communications. We suggest that all Pledge signatories make use of these branding tools to strengthen the visibility of the support available for estranged students within their institution while raising student and staff awareness of the work and support offered by Stand Alone
- It can be difficult for estranged students to identify the support available to them at their place of study (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021) and our analysis indicates that the full range of support detailed in the Pledge commitments is not always effectively promoted. We suggest all Pledge signatories' signpost to relevant financial, pastoral, academic and mental health support, for example, through a dedicated web page or social media presence and/or targeted communications to estranged students which make this information available pre- and post-application/enrolment
- Uptake of the Pledge amongst traditional universities has been high but there is scope and appetite for the Pledge amongst colleges providing FE and HE. Stand Alone could seek to increase the number of signatories amongst these providers.

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