



# Alternative Provision Practice Notes

February 2025



# About this resource

## What is the purpose of this document?

These practice notes are short, easy to read summaries of key findings and actionable insights about effectively implementing Alternative Provision with supporting examples and data.

This product has been created by the REACH consortium in partnership with the Department for Education. This product contains emerging insights and learning from the Change Programme and should not be regarded as official government policy or guidance. You can read more about the Change Programme [here](#).



# Introduction: Overview

## What does this document include?

This series of practice notes include:

-  Key insights on the Alternative Provision 3-Tier Model
-  Practice note 1: The use of data and evidence to inform decision-making
-  Practice note 2: Developing strong Tier-1 Alternative Provision as part of the 3-Tier model
-  Practice note 3: Strengthening re-integration through a robust 3-tier model
-  What do we know? Olive Academies Alternative Provision Rapid Reviews
-  What do we know? Alternative Provision: exploring the effectiveness of outreach services

# Key Insights: The Alternative Provision 3-Tier Model

## Why this reform?

The Department for Education (DfE) want to improve earlier identification of need, offering targeted support in mainstream settings to identify needs early and reduce preventable exclusions (Tier-1). The model also offers a structure for enabling high quality time-limited and transitional placements (Tiers 2 & 3) and draws on findings from the DfE's Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforces pilot, which involves co-locating a specialist workforce onsite in a school or Alternative Provision setting.

## What are we testing?

This reform covered:

- Integrating Alternative Provision into the wider SEND and Alternative Provision system locally, via Partnerships and Local Area Inclusion Plans.
- Aligning provision and practice to a 3-Tier model, including through commissioning.
- Expansion of the use of Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforces.

## What does good look like?



Local authority **investment for dedicated Alternative Provision roles** to develop and embed the 3-Tier model and manage the Alternative Provision system in an ongoing way to ensure it adapts to meet the emerging needs of children and young people across local areas.



**Enhanced Tier-1 Alternative Provision** providing early intervention and a proactive response to prevent crisis.



**Training and workforce development** ensuring consistency of inclusive approaches to address children and young people's needs.



**Swift pupil profiling** to ensure children and young people receive the right support at the right time.



**A shared responsibility** amongst local partners for reintegration and transitions including **robust data collection and analysis as well as data sharing** on the use and impact of Alternative Provision across a local area.

## Implementation challenges:



Change Programme Partnerships have identified the following significant challenges to overcome when implementing the Alternative Provision 3-Tier model:



A lack of consistent impact and outcome measures coupled with quality assurance concerns for sufficient Alternative Provision.



A need to support the mainstream workforce, funding and capacity pressures.



Lack of understanding of underlying needs in mainstream settings.



Insufficient reintegration.

*These key insights have been expanded upon in the below Practice Notes from experiences and examples shared by the Change Programme Partnerships.*

# Practice note 1: The use of data and evidence to inform decision-making

**The challenge:** Local authorities reported a lack of consistent approaches for measuring impact and outcomes of Alternative Provision. Although schools are aware of the need to carry out appropriate due diligence checks in relation to external Alternative Provision, local authorities identified a need for effective quality assurance processes to ensure Alternative Provision providers meet the required standards when delivering provision.



## Using data and evidence to understand needs and risks

Findings from a recent [What Works in SEND report](#) state that analysis of local data is essential for evidencing effectiveness and for commissioners and outreach providers to target outreach support to pupils at-risk of exclusion. Monitoring and evaluation is essential to support local authorities and partners to understand need and to track a pupils' journey throughout the Alternative Provision (AP) system. This will enable local authorities to utilise data to inform future needs within the system as they emerge through the work of the tiered services, hold settings to account, ensure good outcomes for pupils, provide schools with data and evidence to inform commissioning suitable placements, and increase parental confidence that provision can meet needs effectively.

**Portsmouth** developed an AP data module for their internal Insight Hub. This will draw multiple datasets together to track which pupils have accessed AP across tiers, other services they are open to, attendance, suspension/exclusion, and attainment data. This will enable Portsmouth to predict and manage demand and usage of AP, ensure sufficiency and support conversations with schools to proactively meet needs.

**Brighton & Hove** co-produced a set of KPIs with school leaders to evaluate the effectiveness of their Tier-2 Adaptive Learning Provision and Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) include academic progress, social, emotional & behavioural development, reduction in suspensions & permanent exclusions, successful transition or reintegration and children & young people's views.



## Creating robust AP Directories to address Quality Assurance

Robust quality assurance of Alternative Provision providers is essential to ensure provision meets the needs of pupils to re-integrate back into mainstream or suitable settings, as well as provide assurance on safeguarding, quality and suitability of Alternative Provision. Local authorities have developed robust quality assurance frameworks and established Alternative Provision Directories for schools to draw upon when seeking to commission suitable Alternative Provision.

**Portsmouth** developed a 2-stage quality assurance assessment process for providers listed on their [Alternative and Additional Provision Directory](#). This includes the completion of an application form and a thorough assessment tailored to each individual provider. They are currently creating a quality assurance document which outlines the process. This ensures that schools can confidently and easily identify Alternative Provision providers that meet appropriate educational standards, including those related to safeguarding and health and safety.

**Central Bedfordshire** have developed a [toolkit](#) for schools to utilise when commissioning Alternative Provision which sits alongside their directory. The toolkit includes what to look for in an Alternative Provider, the quality assurance schools should complete before commissioning the service and a checklist that details the information they need to view and quality check as being correct and meeting their standards.



## A dedicated AP role within the local authority

Investment in dedicated Alternative Provision and Quality Assurance roles are critical to improving pathways for mainstream settings to access targeted and specialist Alternative Provision support. Portsmouth and Brighton & Hove have used Change Programme funding to employ an Alternative Provision Commissioning Manager and Alternative Provision Lead respectively. Key responsibilities include:

- A 3-tiered Alternative Provision model, ensuring all stakeholders understand the model and operate within that framework
- Alternative Provider Quality Assurance Frameworks and Assured Provider directories
- A Impact Framework to monitor the effectiveness of Alternative Provision
- Leading on stimulating the market of providers to offer a broader range of Alternative Provision options.

**Shropshire** have appointed 3 SEND Education Quality Advisors who sit within the School Improvement Team - their remit includes leading on whole school improvement for SEND, working with schools and settings to identify support needed, Alternative Provision planning, and quality assurance checks on Shropshire's Inclusive Mainstream and Alternative Provision, ensuring consistency across both.

# Practice note 2: Developing strong Tier-1 Alternative Provision as part of the 3-Tier model

**The challenge:** Local authorities identified school culture and practices as barriers to effective support for pupils in mainstream settings. Lack of understanding and inefficient support to address unmet need via Inclusive Mainstream Practice inevitably results in pupils requiring Tier-1 intervention. Additionally, resource and capacity constraints are key barriers to schools developing effective Tier-1 Internal Alternative Provision.



## A multi-faceted approach to enhancing the Tier-1 offer

Local authorities highlighted the importance of school leaders having awareness that the 3-Tier model is not a fast-track pathway to permanent exclusion. The 3-Tier model should be a minimum standard to ensure Tier-1 early intervention recognise underlying needs as soon as possible rather than at the point of crisis - supporting pupils to ensure they can fully reintegrate into a regular teaching timetable and engage with education. Key to this is an enhanced Tier-1 offer with a focus on relational and trauma-informed practice, and inclusion for all pupils.

**Manchester** piloted a mentoring approach – their Transition Mentors support 150 year 6 pupils identified as at-risk of not making a good transition to secondary school. Their Inclusion Mentors support 80 students across 19 schools - with 0 permanent exclusions from this cohort. Manchester are also considering how to continuously engage pupils who experience Emotional School Based Avoidance (EBSA) and have developed a revised EBSA toolkit and guidance to strengthen the support available.

**Stockton-on-Tees** piloted a project in partnership with the local employment hub focusing on pupils at risk of becoming disengaged and at risk of suspension and exclusion. The project aimed to bring alive the curriculum by exploring the local job landscape and utilising the knowledge and expertise from local employers and employment hub to better understand and develop the skills required to support young people to access those jobs. The pupils involved demonstrated increased engagement with school, increased positive behaviours, reduced suspensions and their attendance has improved.



## Funding tier-1 Alternative Provision

Local authorities can provide schools with dedicated funding to develop Internal Alternative Provision - **Shropshire** have used Alternative Provision Development Funds from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) to support schools with this and have seen a positive impact in terms of a decrease in permanent exclusion and suspension rates. They chose to utilise DSG funding to test a funding stream that could potentially be sustained beyond the Change Programme.

**Bradford** have agreed an uplift from the High Needs Block of £3m with the schools' forum – with resource reserved for Tier-1 to provide improved outreach and support models.

**Worcestershire** issued Change Programme funding to Alternative Provision partner schools and met with District and Alternative Provision Headteachers to co-produce an outreach offer, with each district tailoring their support to meets the needs of each locality. Plans have been shared with Headteachers to secure buy-in. Worcestershire identified recruitment of staff to support the delivery of outreach as a key enabler for Alternative Provision settings to mobilise support to schools and in creating capacity across Worcestershire. All districts have agreed to focus on pupils at the point of transition and KS3 to ensure a targeted approach and in an attempt to prioritise sustainability and impact.

In April 2025, **Luton** launched an SEMH service for its five local area partnerships. The partnerships included Outreach, Family Support Workers and a Lead Practitioner - offering a consistent model of Tier-1 outreach to schools. The service aimed to provide a holistic approach to support where Inclusive Mainstream Practice may not be sufficient for a pupil where needs are present.



## Upskilling the workforce

Improving the capacity and capability of mainstream schools to provide appropriate support to pupils at-risk of exclusion is a critical enabler. Key to this is a better understanding of pupils' needs - ensuring they are met to support pupils to remain in mainstream settings. **Swindon and Luton** have funded trauma informed training for all schools. **Portsmouth** have established an Alternative and Additional Provision Operational Group – comprised of staff responsible for the day-to-day management of internal additional provisions hosted in their mainstream secondary schools. This group will give members the space to access CPD and supervision specifically focusing on how to develop and deliver an effective internal additional provision. **Durham** commissioned leaders with good practice experience of developing an inclusive curriculum (including Inclusion Quality Mark Schools) and Specialist Inclusion Support Teams to enable other schools in Durham to develop inclusive curriculums, foster a system-wide approach and enhance classroom integration rates for pupils in mainstream education who struggle to access the curriculum. This aims to positively impact attendance, suspensions, exclusions and school and parental confidence.

# Practice note 3: Strengthening re-integration through a robust 3-tier model

**The challenge:** Local authorities reported that pathways to entering Alternative Provision can be challenging with Alternative Provision settings feeling pupils are entering too late. Pupils experience difficulties with reintegrating back into existing settings or in transitioning into a new setting. Low reintegration rates result in rising numbers of pupils remaining in Alternative Provision, as often they are at-risk of permanent exclusion upon return to their mainstream setting. Consequently, Alternative Provision becomes a destination rather than an intervention for many pupils.



## Pupil profiling to understand and meet needs

To understand the needs of pupils accessing Alternative Provision, local authorities highlighted effective pupil profiling as critical. This must be conducted in a timely manner upon entry into any Alternative Provision placement to ensure opportunities are not missed. The evidence pupils enter placements with may not always place them into the correct curriculum, class or support offer. Therefore, swift pupil profiling is crucial to ensure pupils receive the right support at the right time - this is especially important where pupils have joined a placement mid-way through the cycle of an existing cohort placement, as this can unsettle the cohort and shift dynamics.

**Durham** have conducted in depth reflective work when considering pupils entering Alternative Provision. This includes multi-agency analysis of pupils' pathways through schools and services that support, and the commission of public health to undertake epidemiological work with pupils entering the Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) sector often via permanent exclusion and Alternative Provision placements. This facilitates an understanding of the life profile of the pupil through the system and is used to map the appropriate pathway for these pupils

A Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in **Hartlepool** has set up a classroom called 'Integrate' where children are placed upon arrival for pupil profiling to better understand their needs. The Integrate classroom provides a transitional space before they access the main body of the PRU ensuring pupils needs are assessed and addressed correctly.

**Stockton-on-Tees** Tier-2 Pathway Development Centres offer short stay partnership places and day 6 provision within a mainstream setting for primary aged pupils, and within a PRU for KS3 pupils. This 12-week programme included planning reintegration from the start, fortnightly reviews, a THRIVE assessment and an Educational Psychology assessment for each pupil. The aim is to determine over the course of the programme what the correct pathway for each pupil should be whether entering back into mainstream, longer stay, pathway assessment or specialist provision.



## Transition planning and successful reintegration

To ensure Alternative Provision is an intervention rather than a destination there must be clear transitional pathways into and out of Alternative Provision with close consideration to the point at which transition occurs enabling pupils to return to mainstream or more specialist support where appropriate. To support reintegration, Local authorities can fund dedicated Alternative Provision roles – with responsibilities including analysis of evidence on pupil reintegration back into settings. Local authorities can facilitate moves back into mainstream settings. In Luton, the local authority led a termly network meeting for Alternative Providers used by schools - the aim is to strengthen the reintegration and transition processes for pupils who attend Alternative Provision to return to mainstream settings. At a recent Practice Sharing Forum, local authorities identified buy-in from mainstream settings as fundamental for successful reintegration. There must be joint ownership and responsibility of reintegration to ensure mainstream settings reintegrate pupils back into settings – a clear service level agreement between the Alternative Provision provider and school is key for this. Brighton & Hove developed a referral process with a clear reintegration strategy attached to strengthen the joint ownership and responsibility for reintegration. Stockton-on-Tees co-produced their pathways into and out of Tiers 2 and 3 with mainstream settings to secure buy-in for reintegration, and to support ownership and accountability.

**Manchester** commissioned a Reintegration Mentor - based at their PRU and have commissioned an Outreach Lead responsible for coordinating reintegration. The mentor works with pupils, families and schools to support reintegration and transition out of Tier-3 placements. Reintegration Mentors ensure pupils are on single roll at the 12-week point and Manchester continuously consult with school leaders to reiterate that pupils should be taken on roll unless there is an exceptional reason that warrants the end of the placement. Manchester have increased reintegration by 50% - key to this success is the targeted work undertaken by the mentor to prepare pupils so they are ready to reintegrate, and ensuring settings set realistic targets with robust fortnightly reviews to address any concerns.

# What do we know? Olive Academies Alternative Provision Rapid Reviews

Olive Academies - REACH consortium Subject Matter Experts on Alternative Provision (AP) conducted 8 'Rapid Reviews' for Local Authorities (LA) between May and July 2024. This involved: a desk-based review; engagement meeting; a written report and feedback meeting which provides a view on the strengths of the LAs current system, its alignment to the intentions set out in the SEND and AP Improvement Plan, and opportunities for development.



**Sustainable Development of Tier-1 Provision :** A key priority for some of the LAs who have engaged in these Rapid Reviews was to explore how a 3-tiered model for AP is achievable, but also sustainable in a challenging financial climate. Typically, the increase in Education, Health and Care Plans, increase in permanent exclusion, numbers in Tier-3 placements, limited provision/use of Tier-1 and 2, are causing significant pressures on High Needs Budget spend. *Key learning: this is the reality for many LAs and the pressures on the system should not be underestimated. Nor, that there is a quick fix and may require an 'invest to save' model and approach.*



**Co-construction of Tier-1 Provision:** In LAs where permanent exclusions have increased and there is significant pressure on the Tier-3 provision, there are identifiable limitations with the provision available at Tier-1. In some cases, there is not the availability of expertise in the LA at this Tier, and for others it is because there is a strain on Tier-2 and 3 that results in resources not reaching, or being withdrawn from, Tier-1. There is also a correlation between LAs where Tier-1 and 2 provision is limited and LAs where Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are not in place with AP Providers. As a result of not having Terms of Reference and SLAs there is neither the clarity and transparency of expectation, nor the means to enable monitoring and accountability. *Key learning: co-constructing SLAs with the schools to engage all stakeholders with the vision and purpose will support key provisions being ringfenced and prioritised. There are some good examples of creative thinking by LAs to address availability of Tier-1 provision e.g. where schools are working together, the AP Specialist Taskforce is being utilised, or funding is being deployed in a different way.*



**KS2-3 Transition:** Where there was limited provision at Tier-1, this was often specific to availability at secondary because primary Tier-1 provision was available and successful. This is, however, creating a longer-term problem for LAs where primary exclusions are low but there is a sudden spike in KS3. *Key learning: providing early assessment and early intervention is critical. However, the transfer of knowledge and information, as well as this support into the secondary phase, is equally critical.*



**Intervention not a destination:** Tier-2 is intended to provide short-term placements in AP schools that deliver a re-engagement curriculum which assesses and addresses pupils needs but with the clear expectations that these are time-limited placements and the pupils return to their mainstream school. In many of the LAs reviewed, the reality is that Tier-2 is seen as a destination and not an intervention and the vision for the Tier needs to be challenged and reversed so that all stakeholders understand that these placements are interventions and not destinations. *Key learning: Engage with stakeholders so that their understanding of, and buy-in to, the 3-tier system is grown. Furthermore, strategies such as developing a successful and focused re-engagement curriculum and establishing a resource base provision, are ones that have helped LAs with successful Tier-2 models.*

# What do we know? Alternative Provision: exploring the effectiveness of outreach services

Findings from the Change Programme build on existing evidence in relation to Alternative Provision as set out by the What Works in SEND programme. There is specific learning in relation to what needs to be in place locally for a strong outreach offer and what needs to be in place strategically to allow these services to function effectively.

## The outreach offer: what needs to be in place locally?

- Signposting and informal advice: helpline for schools; informal partner agency support.
- Specialist support: outreach teams with skills to support and build relationships with children, schools and families.
- Support for reintegration: re-engaging children with learning in mainstream school.
- Support for transition: supporting children at ‘trigger points’, for example transition from primary to secondary school.
- Flexible and bespoke services: responding flexibly to suit the specific needs of the child.
- Innovative service developments: developing new partnerships/joint commissioning:
  - Prioritising outreach in schools with elevated suspension/permanent exclusion rates as a ‘way in’ to challenge school cultures.
  - Outreach teams worked to bridge gaps in service provision in health and social care. Outreach teams also worked with agencies to provide alternative forms of psychological support, responding to rising need and waiting times. Partnerships with Children’s & Adolescent Mental Health Services supported children on waiting lists and joint work with Educational Psychologists to develop support for parent carers.

## Strategic approach: what needs to be in place locally?

- Commissioning and funding: there were complex arrangements of commissioning and funding which varied across the case studies. Despite complex arrangements, providers tended to have flexibility to manage budgets as they deemed most appropriate. This was particularly valued as numbers of children requiring support fluctuated. When there were less than expected AP placements in settings, funding could be redirected to support additional outreach work.
- Credible, expert workforce: The elevated position of AP in case study local area partnerships was a key characteristic: a Local Authority strategic leader describes this as ‘refreshing’ yet vital for effective outreach. Skilled outreach teams also characterised case study areas as work with schools was complex. A broad skillset to build mutual respect and credibility was required. In some AP settings, education and SEND experience was prioritised when recruiting outreach personnel, particularly at leadership level. In other case study areas recruitment focused on key personal characteristics conducive to building positive relationships, skills noted by one AP leader as ‘empathy, humility and hard work’.
- Measuring effectiveness of outreach: It was broadly acknowledged that whilst desirable, measuring outcomes of outreach provision could be challenging. Whilst ‘hard’ data on (multiple) suspension/permanent exclusion rates were regularly measured, making the link between outreach support and outcomes was more complex.

See full report including the case studies mentioned above and barriers to effective provision [here](#).

# Appendix 1. Scope of Alternative Provision tested and direction of travel within the Change Programme

