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Research and analysis

Alternative provision for primary-age pupils in England: a long-term 'destination' or a 'temporary solution'?

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Applies to England

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Executive summary

Roughly 7,000 primary-age pupils are known to be in state-funded, unregistered and independent AP. This is a small portion of all primary-age pupils. [\[footnote 1\]](#) However, the number of primary-age pupils referred to alternative provision (AP) has been rising in England over the last 5 years. [\[footnote 2\]](#) The majority of those are aged 8 to 10. [\[footnote 3\]](#) The

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younger pupils are when they first attend AP, the worse their later attainment. This might be due to more severe underlying problems. However, younger pupils are also more likely to return to mainstream education than older, secondary-age, pupils.

In this study, we explore the purpose of AP, the reasons why primary-age pupils are referred to it, and the expectations for their progress and outcomes. We identify examples of joined-up working that would benefit pupils. We also highlight the challenges in supporting primary-age pupils with additional needs, such as a lack of access to specialist help or a breakdown in the relationships between parents and school staff.

There are many types of AP for pupils with additional needs, and many pupils in AP who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and/or education, health and care (EHC) plans. In this study, we have focused on pupils who have been referred to AP mostly because of their behaviour and/or social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs or SEND, rather than because of long-term illness or hospitalisation.

In this study, the term 'alternative provision' encompasses a variety of services that include:

- off-site provision for pupils with additional needs (part time or full time)
- outreach work carried out in mainstream schools by staff from APs or local authorities (LAs)
- specialist provision in some mainstream schools

This is a qualitative research study based on a sample of:

- 11 primary schools
- 8 APs
- 1 SEMH school
- 5 LAs

We carried out fieldwork between September and November 2021. This included semi-structured group interviews with staff from mainstream primary schools (LA-maintained and academies), APs and LAs. We also interviewed 8 parents of pupils in AP.

We refer to the LAs included in this study as: LA 1, LA 2, LA 3, LA 4 and LA 5.

We refer to staff from mainstream schools as 'school staff' and staff from APs as 'AP staff' throughout the report. When we say 'staff', we refer to school and AP staff.

We chose a qualitative approach to help us understand what participants' views on the purpose of AP were. This approach also helped us get a better picture of why individual pupils were referred to AP, what progress they have made and the expectations that staff and parents have for them.

Our report is based on in-depth research from a small sample and the findings are therefore not representative of all AP in England. We highlight examples of joined-up working and what participants thought was good practice, but we are aware that this does not represent the experiences of all pupils, schools or alternative providers.

We know from previous research that some APs do not have qualified staff, and offer poor-quality provision to pupils. [\[footnote 4\]](#)

Our unregistered schools team has visited settings that should have been registered and found a range of concerns, including:

- inappropriate or unsafe accommodation
- staff being recruited without suitable checks
- staff not having the necessary skills to support vulnerable pupils
- pupils not receiving a suitable education

Main findings

Most pupils in our study were referred to AP because of violent behaviour

Pupils were referred to AP when school staff could not safely manage their violent physical and/or verbal behaviour, and this behaviour was having a negative effect on other pupils and staff. Staff in schools, APs and LAs believed that violent behaviour originated from difficult home lives or, in some cases, from previously undiagnosed SEND. Staff told us that a large majority of primary-age pupils referred to AP had SEMH needs as a primary area of need. This aligns with the national statistics on the needs of pupils referred to AP. [\[footnote 5\]](#)

We also know from inspection that needs are sometimes labelled as SEMH or SEND when in fact they originate from inadequately designed curriculums or poor teaching. While there are children who have severe, profound or multiple needs, others are identified as having SEND during key stages 2 or 3, which can be traced back to a poor curriculum and poor teaching in the early years and key stage 1, rather than a genuine need or difficulty.

Therefore, staff must consider each pupil's needs carefully when deciding what measures to put in place. [\[footnote 6\]](#) A high-quality curriculum and high-quality teaching are crucial for preventing needs from developing, worsening or leading to avoidable AP referrals. Staff also need to be aware of pupils' circumstances and develop good relationships with their parents and carers.

Pupils were referred to AP when mainstream school support strategies had not worked

School staff referred pupils to AP when they were not able to meet pupils' additional needs because of a lack of funding, training or facilities.

School support strategies became ineffective when the relationships between parents and

school staff had broken down. In such cases, school staff referred pupils to AP. It is important that school staff can build effective and close relationships with parents from the start, through regular, clear and balanced conversations. This reduces the likelihood that pupils will be referred to AP, and allows staff to allocate extra resources to them in good time. Many parents may themselves be in need of support. An awareness of this, along with signposting them to relevant sources of help and expertise, can help staff to build strong relationships with parents.

Staff had high expectations for the progress and outcomes of pupils

Staff expected that most pupils would return to mainstream education having developed the necessary skills and ability to learn and function well in this environment. [\[footnote 7\]](#) They also expected that primary-age pupils referred to AP would go on to achieve well in secondary school and after leaving school. School and AP staff were determined to help pupils in AP to achieve positive outcomes. Their long-term expectations were high. This was because they considered that using AP when pupils were young was likely to have long-term benefits, especially when pupils were making good progress in AP, and because they focused on pupils' academic needs as well as their SEMH needs. However, these high expectations are not borne out by previous research, which found that the younger pupils are when they first attend AP, the worse their later attainment. [\[footnote 8\]](#)

When AP and school staff did not consider it appropriate for a pupil to return to mainstream school, they worked together to identify the right future setting, such as a special school.

AP staff also expected school staff to improve their knowledge of and skills in working with pupils with additional needs. AP staff worked with mainstream colleagues to ensure that pupils were reintegrated successfully.

Primary-age pupils' stay in AP is usually short, but some stay in AP for years

Most pupils in AP are expected to stay for a short period (several weeks or months), and mostly part time. School and AP staff told us that they worked together to make sure that education is coherent for those pupils. For example, they decided which subjects should be taught in AP and which ones in school, or they taught the same subjects in a similar way. It was apparent that a close alignment between school and AP staff on pupils' progress and outcomes was important to the staff we spoke to.

However, some pupils with complex needs stay in AP for years while waiting for a special school place. AP staff do not feel that they can meet those pupils' needs fully. If these vulnerable pupils do not receive appropriate teaching and support for a long time, this is likely to affect them negatively.

Parents were positive about their child's progress, but their expectations for long-term outcomes were not always high

All parents acknowledged that their child's behaviour, SEMH needs and academic work had improved since joining AP.

However, parents focused mainly on social and well-being outcomes. Although their child's behaviour had improved, some were unsure whether AP could substantially 'change' their child or lead to them having a happy and full life after leaving AP.

There was no consensus among staff on what AP is

Some staff considered outreach work to be AP, and others took the broad view that any sufficiently differentiated curriculum was AP. Some staff considered AP to involve an off-site placement, while others thought that some types of AP, such as pupil referral units, were short-stay schools rather than AP.

School staff did not consider internally resourced provision (where school staff work with pupils from the same school) to be AP. One school, however, used its internal AP for a pupil from another school.

The lack of consensus on the definition of 'alternative' may stem from the way AP is currently defined in the statutory guidance. When AP is arranged by LAs, it is 'education' for the excluded pupils. When it is arranged by schools, it is 'off-site provision to improve their behaviour'. The SEND and AP green paper looks at reforming the role of AP, so that it can offer a range of services from 'targeted support in mainstream schools' (where AP staff provide advice, coaching and one-to-one support for school staff) to 'time-limited placements'^[footnote 9]

Staff identified outreach work as an important role of AP

Outreach work involves AP staff advising school staff to help them and the pupil(s) in the school setting. School staff found this helpful for:

- early identification and intervention
- preventing suspensions or permanent exclusions
- reintegrating pupils into mainstream education

However, AP staff said that funding arrangements affect the amount of outreach work they can do in schools. They find it difficult to meet the need for outreach when funding is insufficient or uncertain. This can prevent staff from identifying the additional needs of pupils quickly. In addition, pupils may be suspended or excluded, when this could have been avoided.

A lack of available funding also sometimes led to AP being used as a short cut to getting support.

Staff thought that pupils benefited from a different environment

Staff from schools and APs considered staff in off-site APs to be better placed and qualified than school staff to identify certain needs and to tailor provision to individual pupils.

Some APs also had multidisciplinary teams on site (for example, child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) workers and educational psychologists) so that pupils' needs could be assessed and understood quickly.

APs were used as a 'circuit breaker' to repair relationships

When relationships between school staff and parents contributed to AP referral, AP staff were seen as helpful and effective mediators in repairing those relationships and working with parents and school staff to meet the pupil's needs.

When some parents did not have strong relationships with school staff, they objected to referral because they believed that AP was a punishment. Clear communication about its actual purpose helps with this, as does hearing from other parents whose children have been referred to AP, or from AP staff.

School staff's knowledge and skills are important in keeping pupils in mainstream education

It was sometimes possible to meet pupils' additional needs in mainstream schools when the school's staff had sufficient training and skills.

Staff develop their knowledge and skills through high-quality training, with help from external services or through good-quality outreach work by AP staff. All of this contributes to an inclusive school ethos, which was shared and valued by school and AP staff in our study.

Many school and AP staff in our study referred to strained external services and the lack of access to them, both of which have been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. They said this also limited the ability of school staff to support pupils in their schools.

Core elements of joined-up working across the schools and APs

In our sample, these included:

- strong collaboration between school and AP staff
- schools remaining accountable for referred pupils
- AP staff providing advice and training for school staff to ensure that the school environment (strategies, and staff's knowledge, skills and understanding) is right for the pupil with additional needs
- school and AP staff working with parents and pupils throughout the process

Introduction

Context

The aim of the government's policy is to educate all children, including those with SEND, in mainstream settings wherever possible. Legislation strengthening children's rights to mainstream education came into force in each country of the UK in the 1990s and 2000s. [\[footnote 10\]](#)

Pupils with SEND are educated either in mainstream settings or in special schools in the UK. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is also alternative provision (AP) to mainstream education, which falls outside the categories of special or vocational education. [\[footnote 11\]](#) The aim of AP is to address the additional needs of pupils that are not met in mainstream schools. In England, the term AP refers to a range of different provision for pupils. The Department for Education (DfE) defines AP in its statutory guidance as:

“ Education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour. [\[footnote 12\]](#)”

AP in England caters for pupils with a wide range of additional needs. Most pupils (95%) referred to AP are of secondary school age. [\[footnote 13\]](#) Therefore, much of the previous AP-related research has focused on older pupils. Most pupils in AP are also male and vulnerable. This includes many pupils with SEND, with or without an EHC plan, or with SEMH needs, and also many on free school meals or in care. [\[footnote 14\]](#) A large majority of pupils attending AP have not been permanently excluded from their school (76% as at January 2021). For those who have been permanently excluded, the most common reasons for their exclusion were 'physical assault against an adult' and 'persistent disruptive behaviour'. [\[footnote 15\]](#)

Many APs keep pupils safe and provide at least a good standard of education, which is evident from our inspections of pupil referral units, AP free schools and AP academies. [\[footnote 16\]](#) However, there is concerning variability in the quality of provision across the sector. Not all AP settings are registered with the DfE, and some of those that should be registered are not. [\[footnote 17\]](#) As a result, they are not subject to any direct

oversight.

This adds a further layer of complexity, as we do not fully know the size of the unregistered sector. What we do know is that the number of placements in unregistered AP has been rising since 2017. [\[footnote 18\]](#) We also know that some unregistered AP settings do not carry out the required checks on staff. Our inspectors have found low standards of education in some of these settings, along with a range of other safety and safeguarding concerns.

Quality of AP and pupils' outcomes

The quality of registered AP varies across areas and LAs. This affects pupils' ability to gain qualifications and move on to further education or employment. The DfE has found that very few AP programmes are rigorously monitored for quality. [\[footnote 19\]](#) Some schools and LAs have reported that, when schools monitor APs more closely, they stop using providers that they consider are not good enough. [\[footnote 20\]](#)

The Centre for Social Justice's 2020 report on AP found that, in 21 LAs, Ofsted had judged over half of APs as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'. [\[footnote 21\]](#) Many pupils in these APs were unable to gain the qualifications needed to move on to other education, training or employment. For example, the report says, 'In 13 local authorities there has not been a single case where a pupil in AP has achieved a grade 9–4 in maths and English over the last three years.' [\[footnote 22\]](#)

According to research, academic outcomes for children and young people in AP are lower than those of their peers in mainstream schools. [\[footnote 23\]](#) For example, one study found that a smaller proportion of young people who completed key stage 4 in AP moved on to a positive destination (such as education, training or employment) after the age of 16. [\[footnote 24\]](#)

The age of pupils when they first attend AP correlates with their attainment when they are older. In one study, pupils who were younger than 9 when they first attended AP had the lowest outcomes for attainment 5 scores and level 1 basic skills. [\[footnote 25\]](#) This may be due to more severe underlying problems that become more apparent in the earlier phases of education. However, researchers recognise that there are gaps in the evidence on the outcomes of pupils in AP. This is particularly true for long-term outcomes, such as further education, employment and income. [\[footnote 26\]](#)

Pupils in AP also tend to have lower attainment before they join AP. A 2008 report found that 'pupils who enter secondary school with very low literacy skills have an exclusion rate five times that of pupils entering at average levels,' while 'pupils with very poor numeracy (but average literacy) carry twice the risk of exclusion.' [\[footnote 27\]](#) Poor communication, due to difficulties with speech and language, was also common among children and young people who have mental health issues, and who exhibit offending behaviour. [\[footnote 28\]](#)

Reintegrating pupils into mainstream schooling is seen as an important outcome of AP. A 2021 report that studied groups of children born between 1999 and 2003 found that the following went on to complete key stage 4 in a mainstream or special school:

- 68% of pupils who attended state-funded AP at age 10 or below
- only 44% of pupils who attended local authority AP at age 10 or below [\[footnote 29\]](#)

The remaining pupils either completed key stage 4 in AP or were missing from the system entirely. [\[footnote 30\]](#)

The younger a pupil is when they first attend AP, the more likely they are to return to mainstream school by the end of key stage 4. [\[footnote 31\]](#) This echoes a 2018 report that found a high proportion of primary-age pupils left AP to return to mainstream education (65%) or attend special schools (30%). [\[footnote 32\]](#)

Rising number of primary-age pupils in AP

Even though most pupils in AP are of secondary age, the number of primary-age pupils with AP placements is rising in England.

In 2019, the DfE's Timpson review noted that permanent exclusions of 5-year-olds, although rare, had increased over 3 years. [\[footnote 33\]](#) According to our own analyses, there has been a 27% increase in primary-age pupils in AP over 4 years, from around 5,600 in 2017/18 to about 7,000 in 2020/21 (see [Appendix A](#)). There has also been a 46% increase in the number of primary-age pupils in independent and unregistered AP, and an 18% decrease in the number in pupil referral units, academy APs and free APs (see [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#)).

Most primary-age pupils in AP have an EHC plan or receive special educational needs (SEN) support (93% as at January 2021). For a large majority (69%), SEMH is the primary area of need. [\[footnote 34\]](#)

Length of placements

The DfE's 2018 market analysis of AP showed that the average length of an AP placement was between one term and one academic year among pupils of all ages. [\[footnote 35\]](#)

Placements were generally longer for secondary-age than for primary-age pupils. However, we have found that some primary-age pupils spend more than a year in AP (see [Table 5 in Appendix D](#)). [\[footnote 36\]](#) Some of these pupils stayed in AP during their secondary education. This was more likely to happen to Year 5 and Year 6 pupils.

We found that most primary-age pupils return to mainstream school while they are still in the same year group as when they joined the AP, or when they move up to the next year group. More pupils who join AP in Years 5 and 6 stay there until Year 11 than those who join when they are younger. This indicates that AP may be less successful for older pupils (see [Appendix D](#)).

Study aims and research questions

This study considers the purpose of AP for primary-age pupils. We have focused on pupils who were referred to AP mostly because of their behaviour, SEMH needs or SEND, rather than because of long-term illness or hospitalisation. The [number of primary-age pupils referred to AP](#) has been rising over several years, and it is important to explore the reasons

for this.

We have used the following research questions to guide our study:

- What is the purpose of AP?
- Why are primary-age pupils referred to AP?
- What do school, AP, and LA staff, and parents and carers, expect in terms of pupils' progress and outcomes?
- How does AP meet the needs of pupils and school staff?
- What impact has COVID-19 had on the pupils with additional needs who use AP and on the staff who work with them?

Methodology

This is a qualitative study, based on in-depth research in a small group of settings. The findings are therefore not representative of all AP in England.

We chose a qualitative approach to better understand the different participants' views on the purpose of AP for primary-age pupils more generally, as well as for specific pupils. This approach enabled us to get a richer picture of each pupil's reasons for AP referral, their progress and the expectations for them. Analysing the findings across different participants also allowed us to compare and validate what parents and staff from schools, APs and LAs said about the same pupils.

We carried out all interviews and discussions between September and November 2021.

The sample of local authorities

We identified LAs where schools used AP for primary-age pupils and those where AP was rarely used.^[footnote 37] We then narrowed the list of LAs further, using the following criteria:

- type of the LA (urban or rural)
- percentage of pupils with SEND
- whether there were special schools and alternative providers in the LA

We wanted the LAs to be reasonably comparable in terms of these criteria (for example, urban character and percentage of pupils with SEND). This would allow us to exclude simplistic reasons for use or non-use of AP in an LA, such as a lack of AP, or a very low or very high proportion of pupils with SEND.

Of the 5 LAs that participated in this study, 4 used AP for primary-age pupils (LA 1, LA 2, LA 4 and LA 5). We selected LA 3 because it rarely used AP for primary-age pupils (see [Appendix C](#)). Our findings are based on both the main sample and the pilot sample.^[footnote 38]

This kind of selection allowed us to explore why schools use AP for primary-age pupils in some areas, and why they do not in others.

Schools and APs in the sampled local authorities

Our sample consists of LA-maintained schools and academies with a range of overall effectiveness ratings at their last Ofsted inspection.

Table 1: Sampled schools and pupils in AP

	Total of sampled schools	Number of pupils in AP (in the sampled schools) in January 2019	Number of pupils in AP (in the sampled schools) at the time of the visit
LA 1	4	1–11	1–5
LA 2	1	1	1
LA 3	4	0	0
LA 4 – pilot	1	4	1
LA 5 – pilot	1	3	2

In LA 1, 1-5 is the range of pupils in AP across the 4 schools.

The APs in our sample are the settings used by the selected schools in our study:

- 8 settings are alternative providers (including 3 pupil referral units and 1 free school) and 1 is an SEMH school
- of those 8 APs, 4 are registered and 4 are unregistered

Approach

We carried out 25 semi-structured group discussions and interviews with:

- primary-school staff (the headteacher, deputy headteacher, special educational needs coordinator or another member of staff with responsibility for AP or SEND, and the relevant teacher or teaching assistant providing additional support to a pupil or pupils)
- AP staff (the AP headteacher and a member of staff with in-depth knowledge of specific pupils)
- representatives from the LAs who have responsibility for pupils with additional needs

We also interviewed 8 parents from across all the LAs where pupils were in AP.

All participants could choose whether or not to take part in the study.

We analysed the data thematically to identify the main and recurrent themes. [\[footnote 39\]](#)

Strengths and limitations of the study

Strengths

Our in-depth focus on pupils attending AP allowed us to:

- compare the perspectives of school, AP and LA staff and parents, and determine how aligned these perspectives were
- get rich data on each pupil's path to AP and their expected outcomes
- identify examples of effective collaboration between schools, APs and LAs

Including parents in our study gave us a more rounded insight into:

- the role of AP and the expected outcomes for their child
- staff–parent relationships, which can affect provision for a pupil with additional needs

Carrying out research in 5 LAs meant that we could explore how different areas provide AP for pupils with additional needs.

Limitations

The parents who we spoke to were selected by the schools, using the following criteria:

- their child was using AP
- their child either had, or did not have, SEN support or an EHC plan (to ensure that we included both groups)
- they were willing to speak to our research team

We did not interview pupils, because our focus was on the purpose of AP rather than on individual pupils' experiences.

We did not include independent APs because the sampled schools did not use them. [\[footnote 40\]](#)

Findings: focus on pupils

Staff from APs, schools and LAs all agreed that it is best for a pupil with additional needs to stay in a mainstream school when the school is equipped to meet their specific needs.

Most school staff across all LAs reported that, before referring a pupil to AP, they had many

discussions about whether to do so, and which AP would be the most appropriate. This was particularly the case when the pupil was very young or had to travel a long distance to get to the nearest AP.

In some cases, staff decided that it was best to meet the pupil's needs in their school. This was because the available AP was not appropriate for the pupil's specific needs or circumstances. For example, if a pupil had already experienced a lot of upheaval or a lack of continuity in their life (such as a child in care), school staff felt that a transition to AP could unhelpfully repeat this pattern. Another example school staff gave was that, if a primary-age pupil was displaying sexualised behaviours, then an AP placement with older pupils could be harmful.^[footnote 41] School staff therefore felt that the pupil's mainstream school would be a better environment for them. Previous research has also shown that schools may decide against an AP referral if the AP available is of [low quality](#)^[footnote 42].

In this section, we explore the reasons why the primary-age pupils in our study were referred to AP. We also discuss what their parents, and school and AP staff expected for their progress and outcomes. We give an overview of a pupil's journey from mainstream school to AP and back again, and set out some of the core elements of joined-up working.

Reasons for referral

SEMH needs presenting as 'dysregulated behaviour'

The AP staff who we spoke to reported that most of the primary-age pupils in their areas who had been referred to AP were referred because of SEMH needs.

Staff at one AP estimated that 70% of pupils who had been referred there had SEMH needs as their primary area of need. This is similar to the national average of 69%.^[footnote 43]

The school and AP staff in LAs 1, 2 and 3 described pupils as 'dysregulating' or displaying 'dysregulated behaviour'. The concept of dysregulation comes from psychology. Although there is no single definition of the term, research indicates that it relates to problems with emotion, behaviour and attention.^[footnote 44]

When pupils are dysregulated, AP staff help them to self-regulate. For example, staff at one AP taught pupils to recognise and understand the emotions that they were feeling. They then encouraged pupils to use certain strategies when they felt those emotions. This links to literature on executive function, which is described as the 'cognitive control functions needed when you have to concentrate and think, when acting on your initial impulse would be ill-advised'.^[footnote 45] According to one study, self-regulation 'enables people to alter their behaviour so as to conform to rules, plans, promises, ideals, and other standards'.^[footnote 46]

Some researchers have found a correlation between childhood dysregulation and family vulnerabilities, such as poor parental mental health. School and AP staff in our study said that their pupils' SEMH needs originated from adverse childhood experiences.^[footnote 47]

Some school staff described SEMH needs as 'separation anxiety'. For example, pupils did not want to leave their mother and would either abscond from school or behave badly so

that they would be sent home. Sometimes, the pupils' additional needs were SEND, such as autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Some staff said that, unlike the term 'challenging behaviour', the term 'dysregulated behaviour' recognises that there are causes for the behaviour, and they found this a useful distinction. The staff who used it said that they taught pupils to self-regulate rather than viewing solutions as 'fixing' pupils' behaviour. As a staff member at one AP said, 'It's not just about making them behave.'

AP staff do not see their role as solely finding strategies to get the pupil to change their behaviour. They also work with mainstream schools to help them to become more inclusive for children. A staff member at one AP explained, 'It's never about just working with the child, but also with the school, getting the environment right for [the pupil] to go back to school.'

This is important, because the uneasy tension between a pupil being seen as 'vulnerable' and being seen as 'a threat', due to their impact on other pupils, may inadvertently lead staff to focus on 'fixing' the pupil rather than also on 'fixing' or adapting the school environment. Although we did not observe this in our study, it characterised the approach of some schools in previous research:

“ Attempts to support the needs of young people were geared more towards ameliorating the risk they posed through the development of compliance, than to addressing the more complex foundations of their vulnerability to exclusion. Meanwhile any emphasis on changing the mainstream schooling context was diminished. [\[footnote 48\]](#)”

Staff in our study reported that, when a pupil's additional needs manifest as dysregulated behaviour, this creates a risk of harm to the pupil, other pupils and staff. Additional needs led to an AP referral when:

- a pupil with SEMH or SEND needs was physically or verbally violent and the school could not manage their needs safely
- the school's strategies had not worked
- the staff–parent relationship had broken down, which meant that the school's strategies were ineffective

One of the consequences of ineffective strategies was that some pupils did not learn and participate in lessons.

Physical or verbal violence

'Dysregulated behaviour' often involved physical or verbal violence. Staff reported that this included spitting, swearing, throwing objects and destroying property. Some of these behaviours caused concern to schools because they were unsafe for the pupil, for example climbing high gates or banging their head on the wall.

In some cases, other pupils or staff were harmed or at risk of harm. One school reported that a member of staff had been hospitalised by a pupil. Other schools said that staff felt intimidated or threatened. Many schools reported that other pupils were unsafe because they were being physically attacked. Alternatively, pupils might use language that was

inappropriate for their age group, such as swearing or sexualised language. One school staff member said that 'mainstream works until it's not safe for everybody'. Research has found that one of the main reasons that schools exclude pupils is the need to keep other pupils and staff safe and protected from violent behaviour. This was also one of the main reasons for using internal exclusion or isolation practices.^[footnote 49]

School and AP staff in our study also mentioned the connection between dysregulated behaviour and social isolation. They said that other pupils are scared of pupils who display dysregulated behaviour. As a result, these pupils find it hard to form and maintain friendships. This has also been highlighted in previous research on pupils with SEMH needs.^[footnote 50] On the other hand, secure friendships were found to help pupils to stay in mainstream schools.^[footnote 51]

Lack of effective and appropriate school support

School staff were aware that their strategies did not always meet pupils' needs effectively. Sometimes the strategies failed because the staff had not received relevant training, and sometimes they failed because of a lack of funding, facilities or access to services. In some cases, this led to an AP referral.

Some staff used strategies to help with learning, and others to help pupils with their behaviour. However, despite their best efforts, there were times when they could not support pupils with additional needs effectively. This happened when they did not have the skills to manage the pupil in school, or did not understand the pupil's needs well enough to provide effective support.

This was more likely when the pupil had multiple needs and displayed dysregulated behaviour, and was not able to learn. For example, a pupil referred to AP because of dysregulated behaviour was later diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Other pupils referred to AP had speech and language needs alongside SEMH needs.

When a school's support strategies were not effective, one of the consequences was that pupils did not respond to teaching. Staff in one school said that none of their support strategies had been successful with one pupil, even though the pupil was bright. As a result, staff were 'babysitting, trying to coax him through the day' rather than teaching. Another pupil was able to stay in the classroom as long as they were 'given jobs to do', but they did not take part in lessons at all. In these cases, the school staff eventually referred the pupils to AP.

In areas where schools used AP services, the schools, APs and LAs all agreed that AP staff had more expertise than school staff in understanding and managing pupils' underlying needs. Schools therefore referred pupils to AP so that the staff could identify the pupils' needs and/or find the most effective strategies to help them make progress with their learning and behaviour.

Previous studies have shown that APs have a higher proportion of unqualified teachers (17%) than mainstream settings (8%), and that AP staff's professional development rarely focuses on teaching, assessment and pedagogy.^[footnote 52] For example, one study found that there were 'very few people with formal special education qualifications' in some APs, and that these staff had 'almost no specific training in literacy and numeracy'.^[footnote 53] In

contrast, in our study, AP and school staff reported that AP staff have more expertise in [identifying and meeting some additional needs](#). We are aware that this does not apply to the whole AP sector, however.

Breakdown of parent–school relationships

Sometimes, parents and school staff did not work together well, which undermined the school's support for pupils. The reported reasons included:

- disagreement about the best way to support the pupil
- parents being too busy with work to engage with the school
- parents constantly receiving negative information about their child

Parents felt it was important that the school communicated with them positively about how it was supporting their children. Several parents in our sample commented that their child was in trouble at school for their behaviour, and this was the main theme of communication between themselves and the school. However, the parents were unable to say what the school was doing to support their child. Some parents believed that schools could not provide the necessary support. For example, some believed, or had been told by the school, that their child needed full-time one-to-one support, but funding was not available.

School staff reported difficulties when suspending a pupil or reporting their behaviour to their parents. They noted that parents could be hostile and blame the school. A staff member at one school recognised that it is 'difficult when you have to communicate so many negatives' about the child. Other schools appreciated that parents had to deal with dysregulated behaviour at home. They recognised that it was challenging for parents to receive negative information about their child from school while coping with domestic challenges of their own.

These issues were compounded when parents did not have a good sense of what AP was, and perceived it to be a place for 'naughty children'. As one LA representative explained:

“ I don't think they can see the value of support in AP. They see it as the punishment of the child and that their child is going to be with naughty children. It's nothing like that – [the child is] in a supportive, small environment and they can learn to regulate their behaviour.”

Several AP staff were keen to emphasise that AP is not intended as a 'punishment'. They were aware that the stereotype persists, but said that AP plays an important role in the education system and can be a positive choice for some pupils. Staff at one AP said that this was particularly the case for pupils with SEMH needs.

Sometimes, clear and consistent communication resolved issues between the school and parents. For example, one parent initially felt that the school was trying to 'get rid of' their child. However, the parent came to see AP as a positive choice, because school staff made an effort to help them understand why the child was being referred to AP.

In the schools where relationships with parents were good, staff said that they had been able to plan early support for pupils. This was possible because they had built effective relationships with the pupils' families from when the pupils first started at the school. School staff said that being 'approachable and visible' helped them to maintain relationships with

families. For example, one school ensured that staff and senior leaders greeted families in the playground and asked parents for their input on various initiatives, such as a breakfast club. This close contact with families also enabled schools to provide help for other family members, or signpost them towards external agencies.

Expectations for pupils' progress and outcomes

All staff expect pupils to make progress academically and achieve positive long-term outcomes

The school, AP and LA staff in our study had aligned their expectations for the progress of the primary-age pupils referred to AP.

AP staff expected primary-age pupils to make academic progress, for example to learn to read and write. Staff in many of the APs and schools we visited worked together to ensure that pupils' education was coherent. Some AP and school staff said that their settings had similar academic expectations. For example, in some schools and APs, maths and English were taught at both settings in a similar way.

Short-term and part-time AP placements often focused on SEMH needs, and the core curriculum subjects that the pupils had fallen behind in because they had missed class time. The school was then responsible for the pupil's progress in other subjects when they were in mainstream education. For example, one pupil went to AP in the mornings to make progress in English and maths in a small-group setting. They then went to their mainstream school to learn other curriculum subjects in the afternoon.

AP and school staff told us that when a pupil's SEMH needs are met, this can help them to make academic progress, as 'other things can fall in place'. For example, when one pupil was anxious about learning, staff gave them smaller learning targets that were gradually increased. In another example, where a pupil had difficulty trusting adults, AP and school staff ensured that their expectations of the pupil's behaviour were consistent. Staff believed that this would encourage the pupil to participate in lessons and achieve good outcomes when they returned to mainstream school full time.

School and AP staff were confident about the long-term outcomes for primary-age pupils referred to AP. They expected the pupils to go on to achieve well in secondary school and after leaving school. One AP explained that this was because the pupils had been given extra support when they were young. This early intervention was thought to change the course of their lives, through education and beyond. Another reason for their high expectations was that AP focused on meeting the pupils' academic needs as well as their SEMH needs. However, research has found that the age of pupils when they first attend AP correlates with lower later attainment. [\[footnote 54\]](#)

These findings testify to the high aspirations of staff, who are determined that pupils in AP will achieve positive outcomes.

Schools and APs reported that they work closely together to improve pupils' progress, both

academically and more holistically. School staff visited pupils in AP and looked at samples of their work. AP staff would visit the pupils in their mainstream setting, if pupils were part time. This meant that AP staff could observe the pupils' progress, particularly in terms of their SEMH needs and behaviour.

Parents are positive about their children's progress, but their expectations for long-term outcomes are not always high

All of the parents we spoke to were positive about the effect of AP on their child's behaviour, SEMH needs and academic progress. Some have seen considerable improvements in their child's behaviour and some recognised that AP staff had met their child's SEMH needs. For example, one parent noted that their child would 'previously... act and think later'. The parent went on to say, 'But now... he's actually realised to stop in his tracks. It's a huge milestone.'

Although parents wanted the best educational, mental health, and life outcomes for their child, some were not sure whether AP was going to help their child to achieve these. For example, one parent said that they wanted their child to be better behaved, but they were not sure if AP could 'change' them. Another parent said that, although AP was helping their child, it was difficult to imagine them leading a happy and full life after leaving AP.

Parents' expectations focused mainly on their child's social and life outcomes. One parent wanted their child to be 'where every child is'. Another thought that academic achievement was less important than well-being, and said, 'I expect him to feel more confident and happier. He needs an education but at the minute that's not my priority.'

These findings indicate that some parents could benefit from school and AP staff helping them to have higher expectations for their child.

Staff and parents expect pupils to return to mainstream education, having developed the necessary life skills

We were often told that outcomes were personalised to the child. This was because different children have different needs and starting points.

A 2018 study showed that 30% of primary-age pupils in AP go on to a special school.^{[\[footnote 55\]](#)} In our study, the main expected outcome was for primary-age pupils to return to a mainstream setting. Staff and parents hoped that, with specialist intervention, pupils would learn to manage their emotions and behaviour with minimal support from school staff. Pupils were also expected to develop social skills and to be able to socialise with their peers.

Staff decided whether pupils were ready to return to mainstream education by looking at the progress they had made in regulating their emotions and developing learning behaviours such as resilience and concentration.

Usually, staff reintegrated pupils into mainstream school gradually, by reducing the number of days per week that the pupils spent at the AP. The purpose of AP at this stage was to work with school staff to implement the AP's successful strategies in the mainstream setting. What is vital, according to AP staff, is that AP placements are reviewed regularly (usually every 6 weeks). This is so that pupils do not spend longer in AP than is necessary. It also

means that the AP can share pupils' progress with school staff, and plan next steps. One parent reported that it was reassuring to know that their child's case was being reviewed regularly, so that the child did not get 'lost' in the AP system.

A pupil's return to mainstream education is also an opportunity for school staff to develop their skills and knowledge. Another successful outcome of AP is that it leads to school staff understanding pupils better, and being able to meet their needs. One AP staff member said that this sometimes required a 'behaviour change within school staff'. This meant that staff were prepared to try the new strategies suggested by the AP once the pupil was back in mainstream school.

Some AP staff said that mainstream education is not always the best option for pupils who come to their AP. For some pupils, the expected outcome was that they would get a suitable place in a special school. The AP's task for these pupils was to identify the right setting as soon as possible, so that they did not 'bounce' between different settings.

The expected length of stay for primary-age pupils in AP is usually short

Most APs that we visited were using a short-term placement model, with placements usually lasting weeks or a few months at the most. Often, these placements were not full time, and pupils spent part of the week at their mainstream school. APs told us that the length of the placement was decided on a case-by-case basis. When pupils had longer placements, this was either because they had more complex needs, or because the AP was leading the process of getting an EHC plan for them.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the length of time pupils spent in AP, particularly during school closures and while 'bubble' systems for grouping pupils were operating in schools. As a result, pupils who had been attending AP settings before the pandemic remained in them for longer periods. School closures disrupted plans to reintegrate them into mainstream school. Other pupils spent more, or less, time in AP than originally planned because of the bubble system. Pupils who were registered at both an AP and a mainstream school sometimes had to attend one or the other. Decisions about which they would attend were influenced by staff capacity.

The DfE's statutory guidance on AP does not specify a maximum length of stay, given that pupils' needs vary considerably. As a result, the time and effort required to meet those needs also varies:

“ The focus should remain on ensuring that a child continues to receive a good education on par with their mainstream peers whilst the needs which require intervention are being addressed. Therefore, the length of time a pupil spends in alternative provision will depend on what best supports the pupil's needs and potential educational attainment. [\[footnote 56\]](#)”

Staff from one LA told us that AP was used differently in different LAs – some considered it a long-term 'destination', while others saw it as a 'temporary solution'.

One AP in our sample reported that it did not set a limit on the length of time a pupil might spend at the setting. This was echoed by staff at an LA, one of whom said, '[Pupils] spend as much time as they need in AP.' However, even in the places where staff held this view,

there was a consensus that pupils should return to mainstream school.

There were long waiting times for an EHC plan and a lack of special school places

The length of a pupil's stay in AP should be determined by what best meets the pupil's needs. However, we found that some pupils stay in AP because of long waiting times for an EHC plan or a lack of special school places.

AP staff told us that getting a place at a special school can be a lengthy process. It can take a long time to get an EHC plan so that the pupil can be referred to a special school, particularly when their parents do not support the process. One AP member of staff added that there is no system for managing exceptional cases. They said, 'Unless a child has an EHCP [education, health and care plan] finalised, we just have to manage as best as we can. There is no contingency funding or planning.'

There are long waiting times for an EHC plan in some LAs. This can create problems, especially when a pupil's needs are very complex and/or issues escalate and there is no available contingency funding or planning. In England, 58% of new EHC plans were issued within 20 weeks in 2020, down from 60% in 2019.^[footnote 57] However, there is huge variation in this figure across different LAs, ranging from less than 1% to 100%. Most LAs that we spoke to as part of this study were above the 20-week national average.^[footnote 58]

Once a pupil's needs were identified and an EHC plan was in place, a further barrier was access to special school places. In LAs 1 and 2 particularly, AP and school staff said that there were not enough special school places, and that a pupil could wait a long time for a place in an appropriate school. Staff in one AP in LA 1 said that this wait could be up to a year. Some primary school staff believed that the purpose of AP is to be a 'stopgap'.

AP staff in our study recognised that this is not an ideal situation. They acknowledged that there is a need for more special school places for pupils with SEMH needs.

Staff from one AP told us that their provision felt like a 'dumping ground' for pupils who needed a special school place. When there are no special school places available, pupils can sometimes remain in their AP full time for 3 years. An AP in LA 1 reported that, in these cases, the AP is a more suitable environment for the pupil than mainstream school, but AP staff still cannot meet all the pupil's needs.

As a result, vulnerable pupils who cannot return to mainstream education can end up in an unsuitable setting for the long term. These settings cannot provide them with the most appropriate education and support for their specific needs. This is likely to be challenging both for the pupil and the AP staff who work with them.

In 2018, LAs reported that pupils with EHC plans were being placed in AP as a last resort, because there were not enough other specialist SEMH services.^[footnote 59] Demand for specialist SEMH provision exceeded the number of places and, as a result, pupils with increasingly complex needs were having to attend local APs.^[footnote 60] We also observed this in our study, and it relates back to the question of the purpose of AP.

Pupils' journeys from mainstream school to AP and back again: examples of joined-up working

This section looks at how schools and APs in our sample worked together throughout the process. The steps we describe have been distilled from what staff from the sampled schools, APs and LAs told us. They did not happen in every AP placement, and do not represent the experiences of all pupils, schools or AP providers.

The core elements of joined-up working across our sample include:

- strong collaboration between school and AP staff
- schools remaining accountable for referred pupils
- AP staff providing advice and training for school staff to ensure that the school environment (strategies, and staff's knowledge, skills and understanding) is right for the pupil with additional needs
- school and AP staff working with parents and pupils throughout the process

Before a pupil starts at AP

- School staff identify that a pupil has a need, or they observe persistently disruptive and/or violent behaviour.
- They put internal measures in place using their own expertise, or use school funding to bring in external professionals. They typically try several strategies to support the pupil over a period of time.
- If this is not successful, they contact an AP or LA for outreach support. Outreach work involves observing the pupil, discussing the pupil with school staff and helping school staff to put new strategies in place. Sometimes, AP staff will go into the school to put these strategies in place and work with the pupil.
- If this is not successful, the AP or LA can suggest that the pupil spends time away from the mainstream school setting in an AP. The school will then look for a suitable AP placement based on the pupil's needs. This may be the AP they have been working with for outreach support, or it may be a different AP.
- A panel decides whether to refer the pupil to AP. This panel includes the school, the AP and sometimes the LA. Schools and APs must report on what strategies they have tried, and why an AP placement would be the best option for the pupil. External professionals may be involved in this panel, for example educational psychologists or speech and language therapists.
- The panel approves the AP placement if it determines that everything possible has been tried in the mainstream setting and there is an appropriate AP placement available.
- The school and AP decide on the initial length of the placement, and what proportion of the week the pupil will spend at the AP. They also agree on an action plan. They consult the pupil, and the pupil's parents/carers, about this decision. The parents/carers must agree to the placement it before it goes ahead.

Transitioning to AP

- School and AP staff plan the process of transferring the pupil to AP.
- This might start with AP staff spending time with the pupil in their school, and then the pupil making short visits to the AP.
- The school is responsible for the pupil's transport to the AP for the duration of the placement. For example, a staff member may accompany the pupil to the AP to drop them off and pick them up.

During the AP placement

- AP staff communicate regularly with school staff to provide updates on the pupil's progress. This might be through phone calls, written reports or staff visits from one setting to another. This is likely to be a combination of formal and informal communication.
- As AP staff learn more about the pupil's needs and develop effective strategies to help them regulate their behaviour, they communicate this to school staff. AP staff may also lead staff professional development sessions in the mainstream school.
- AP and school staff hold regular review meetings to discuss the pupil's progress. They decide whether the pupil has made enough progress to return to mainstream education full time, or whether the pupil should continue with the AP placement but spend more time in their mainstream school. Staff also discuss the pupil's progress with parents.

Transitioning back to mainstream school

- The pupil starts the transition back to mainstream school when AP and school staff decide that school staff have the expertise to meet the pupil's needs in school, and the pupil can use effective strategies to regulate their own behaviour.
- This transition takes place over several weeks. Staff from both settings work with the pupil to make sure they feel positive about the transition.
- AP staff accompany the pupil back to mainstream school for visits. These visits allow them to observe the pupil in lessons and during social interaction, and to support them as they reintegrate.
- AP staff also continue to work with school staff. School staff explained that this helped to ensure that they maintain the strategies that AP staff put in place in the mainstream setting. This includes ensuring that any new staff are trained in these strategies.

Findings: focus on the AP sector

In this section, we discuss the different forms and interpretations of AP in our study, and the role and purpose of AP for primary-age pupils based on our findings.

Different AP models

In all 5 LAs, we saw different models of AP for primary-age pupils. Outreach work – where

AP staff work with school staff and a pupil in a mainstream setting – is an important part of the support that schools and APs provide for pupils with additional needs. However, there is variation in the extent of outreach work, how it is provided and whether off-site APs are used or not.

In LAs 1 and 2, outreach work was carried out systematically across the whole LA, with more focus on outreach than referral to AP. LA 1 did this through partnerships between the LA, local schools and APs. LA 2 provided school staff with the required expertise and help by sending its own staff or external professionals, such as educational psychologists, to schools for free.

LA 4 used a hybrid model. The single AP we visited in this LA divided its work and funding equally between outreach work and work in the AP itself.

LA 3 rarely used off-site AP for primary-age pupils, even though it had seen a large increase in the number of children with SEND, particularly autism spectrum disorder and SEMH. Schools reported that they worked with pupils internally instead, using the expertise of their own staff. Just under 30 schools provided this kind of support in LA 3. Qualified teachers and staff with expertise in specific additional needs (such as speech and language therapy or autism spectrum disorder) run the provisions^[footnote 61] in those schools, and work with some pupils with additional needs. These pupils spend most of their time in mainstream education with their peers.

The variation in AP models could partially be attributed to the geography of the local area. It is more difficult for mainstream and AP staff to share their expertise between settings in rural areas with large distances between schools, than in urban areas. There could also be variation because of funding arrangements.

Different views on what AP is

Our research participants had different views on whether outreach work provided by AP staff and work carried out by the school's own staff constitutes AP.

APs in LA 1 saw themselves as 'inclusion bases' rather than AP, acknowledging that outreach was the main component of their work. In contrast, in LA 2, AP was considered to be 'a bespoke package for an individual learner which offers something broader than the mainstream'. In LA 3, schools did not consider their own internal provision to be AP. However, one school in this LA had used another school's provision as AP for some time.

This lack of consensus may stem from the way AP is currently defined in the statutory guidance. When AP is arranged by LAs, it is 'education' for the excluded pupils. When it is arranged by schools, it is '[off-site provision](#)'.^[footnote 62] This can lead to different interpretations of what AP is, and different ways of providing it.

Outreach support

All APs in our study that received referrals from schools considered that their role had several purposes. APs were not only a different setting, away from the mainstream school, but they also provided outreach work in schools.

All the LAs we spoke to agreed that an important purpose of AP was to provide outreach for schools. They reported that their APs provide more support for pupils in mainstream schools than in off-site AP. As a result, some schools and APs included outreach support in their definition of AP, particularly in LA 2.

School staff valued outreach work because it enabled them to use the expertise and advice of AP staff while keeping the pupil in school. Staff from one school said that this expertise had allowed them to find out about other services, support groups and training. This had helped them to support pupils whose needs went beyond school staff's expertise.

AP outreach generally took 2 main forms:

1. AP staff work with a pupil and school staff in a mainstream setting.
2. If a pupil has to be referred to AP, the AP staff continue to work with the school while the pupil is in the placement. They train the school staff in using the systems and strategies developed in the AP. This helps to make sure the pupil's return to mainstream education is successful.

Outreach work can prevent escalation

Staff from schools, APs and LAs all said that it was vital to identify pupils' needs, and interventions to meet them, as early as possible. This was because they could try more strategies at an earlier stage. AP staff would start with lighter-touch interventions in the mainstream school. If these were not successful, staff would attempt progressively more intensive interventions.

Staff in LA 2 said their policy is to provide inclusion support for schools at an early stage, as a preventative measure. This helps to prevent the pupils' behaviour from becoming more challenging.

Staff in one school also described how delays in supporting pupils in school are more likely to result in the need for external services. They discussed cases of pupils who had not been given additional support in their previous school. For example, one pupil had very low attendance in their early years setting, and had made little progress. The setting did not support the child to improve either their poor attendance or their learning, and the problems worsened when the pupil moved to a new school. As a result, the pupil needed AP.

Outreach work can prevent suspensions or permanent exclusions

The participants in our study told us that one of the most common reasons for using AP is to prevent suspensions or permanent exclusions. In England, low numbers of primary-age pupils are permanently excluded every year, [\[footnote 63\]](#) while far more are referred to AP. [\[footnote 64\]](#)

Schools told us that several pupils had been suspended before they were referred to AP.

When pupils receive multiple suspensions, there is a risk that they will be permanently excluded. Schools and APs can sometimes prevent this when an AP agrees to take a pupil full time or part time.^[footnote 65]

APs can also reduce the number of suspensions when they provide outreach support for schools. Staff from LA 2 noted that the number of suspensions had fallen since it started offering free outreach support to schools. A staff member at one AP said that when schools are feeling 'left on their own, they are more likely to exclude'. A staff member at a primary school in the same LA echoed this:

“ We needed support – if we had nowhere to go this would have been a permanent exclusion. Without the support [of the LA and AP] this would have happened.”

Staff from a primary school in LA 1 described how outreach work had helped them to keep 2 pupils in mainstream education and avoid permanent exclusion. They explained that they frequently experienced 'challenging behaviour' from those pupils. One of the staff said that the school decided against 'sending them off to another school as this would have broken them, despite the fact it would have made our lives easier'. So, they asked for and received the help of AP outreach workers. Outreach staff came to the school to work with the pupils twice a week. They also worked with the parents and carers to help them to use the AP workers' strategies at home. School staff referred to these as 'massive success stories'.

Timely intervention

It is important to identify pupils' needs, and interventions to help them, as early as possible, as this improves their progress and outcomes, according to the research discussed in this section. However, it is also important to bear in mind that there can be risks in moving too quickly to a formal diagnosis; for example, this can lower children's expectations of themselves, as well as adults' expectations.

Needs that are identified and made visible are more likely to be addressed.^[footnote 66] The Early Intervention Foundation has shown how appropriate early intervention can prevent problems from emerging or stop them from worsening. Interventions can strengthen children's physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social and emotional development.^[footnote 67] They can also help to prevent children from becoming involved in gang and youth violence.^[footnote 68] Programmes in early to middle childhood are the most effective, and can prevent challenging behaviour from getting worse.^[footnote 69]

The potential benefits of timely intervention were also mentioned in a report by Berridge and colleagues.^[footnote 70] They noted that it was common for children in need and children in care to require multiple periods of intervention. They believed that, had effective support been given earlier, this may have avoided the need for repeated intervention. When children were moved from mainstream schools, this was sometimes because their emotional and behavioural difficulties had worsened. These difficulties could have been dealt with more effectively at an earlier stage.

Research has also suggested that timely intervention is important for good academic outcomes. The Centre for Social Justice stressed that the attainment gap between privileged and disadvantaged children gets wider as they move through school years. Early intervention can reduce this gap when it is narrowest.^[footnote 71] This is relevant to exclusion

and AP, as there is a link between poor literacy and numeracy, and poor behaviour. More than half of the pupils permanently excluded from school have very [low attainment](#) in literacy and numeracy. Poor communication, resulting from difficulties with speech and language, was also common among children and young people who have mental health issues, and who exhibit offending behaviour. We are concerned that these difficulties are sometimes first identified during assessment by youth offending services, rather than earlier, by schools or health providers. [\[footnote 72\]](#)

Providing a different environment for pupils

Schools can use off-site AP to identify and meet pupils' needs when this is not possible through outreach. Staff from one primary school noted that AP gives pupils the time and space to 'reinvent' themselves away from their mainstream school. AP staff also recognised that, when a pupil is violent, the school may need 'breathing space' or the pupil may have a 'well-embedded reputation that needs resetting'.

Participants in our study thought that APs could identify and provide for pupils' needs more effectively than mainstream schools because they had:

- qualified staff
- smaller class sizes
- tailored curriculums
- high staff-to-pupil ratios (sometimes 2:1 or 3:1 when the pupil's behaviour is dysregulated)

AP staff told us about the specific training that they had taken. For example, one staff member had trained in working with pupils with autism spectrum disorder and a range of other additional needs. AP staff in our study also reported having more experience of working with pupils who display dysregulated behaviour than mainstream school staff. This experience meant they had a wider repertoire of strategies to use.

APs are also likely to have a range of staff on site in addition to teaching staff. One AP told us that it had CAMHS workers and educational psychologists based on site. Another AP said that it has a 'vast amount of non-teaching staff', including specialists in mental health and well-being, and experts in specific needs such as speech and language therapy.

School staff think of APs as providing a multidisciplinary approach with on-site specialists. They believe that this enables APs to carry out timely assessments and to understand children's needs. This way, from the earliest point, AP staff can understand the causes and triggers of pupils' behaviour, and the needs that are not being met in mainstream education. APs sometimes extend help to families, as some parents of the children in AP have their own emotional, cognitive or learning needs.

School staff recognised the need for a personalised approach to learning. They thought that APs were able to offer tailored provision because of small class sizes. APs told us that they decided on the most appropriate provision and timetable on a case-by-case basis. This individualised approach meant that decisions reflected the pupil's needs. For example, one

pupil in an AP was unable to concentrate for sustained periods of time. AP staff set an initial target for the pupil to concentrate on a learning task for 10 minutes. Once the pupil had achieved this, it was increased to 15 minutes, and so on.

Some of the physical activities for pupils on AP placements (such as tennis, swimming, forest trips and horse riding) could also be tailored to individual pupils. For example, one AP staff member provided tennis coaching. This developed a pupil's resilience by helping them to cope in adverse situations in sport (such as when they miss the ball).

APs in our study have a higher adult-to-pupil ratio than mainstream schools and a higher number of non-teaching support staff. As a result, AP staff believe that pupils who are physically violent can be better supported in AP to take part in all aspects of their education. For example, one pupil was excluded from PE in their mainstream school and another was excluded from school trips. In both cases, this was because of their behaviour. AP staff stressed that the activities offered at their AP settings are inclusive. One AP also told us that no pupil is banned from subjects such as PE, which is sometimes the case in mainstream education.

Improving relationships between schools and parents or pupils

The [relationship between schools and parents](#) can already be challenging by the time an AP is involved. In the words of one AP staff member, 'There may have been exclusions, the atmosphere is already negative and trying to get them all to work together [is difficult].'

When relationships broke down, and school interventions were not effective, school staff in our sample believed that referring pupils to AP would enable them to get more effective support. The referral was also thought to act as a 'reset' to repair these relationships. APs were therefore seen as a 'circuit breaker' or an 'impartial third party': a mediator necessary to repair negative relationships between school staff and parents. APs' intention was to help to fix the broken relationships, while supporting the child.

The parents in our sample were very positive about what APs were doing for their children. Some said that the APs had also improved their relationships with staff in mainstream schools. For example, one parent said that the AP told the school what triggers caused their child to behave in certain ways. The school staff then knew how to provide appropriate support. This in turn meant that the parent was much happier for their child to return to mainstream school, because of the way that school staff would work with their child.

Generally, when parents knew that the support provided in the AP was then being provided at the mainstream school, they were more positive about their child returning to the school.

AP staff also reported that they were quick to build effective relationships with parents. They did this by keeping parents well informed about how they were supporting their children, which parents saw as positive.

One parent said that they were reassured by regular reviews of their child's progress at the AP placement, so that it was clear that their child had not just been 'dumped' there. Parents generally also said that their children were happier in AP. They felt that the AP placement

was where their child 'needed to be' at that point in time, and that their behaviour had improved.

Research on AP has recognised the importance of effective working relationships between staff and parents. For example, one study found that excluding children from mainstream education and referring them to AP can have a negative impact on parents.^[footnote 73] They often feel excluded from the process, and this can turn into feelings of anger and a sense that they have no real power or choice. The induction process is therefore a critical point for APs. It is an opportunity to make a fresh start and begin the relationship on a positive footing. When parents are actively involved in planning and implementing their child's support, there is 'a greater chance of success'.^[footnote 74]

The study also identified ways that APs build trust and cooperation with parents. For example, some APs did this by focusing on the child's achievements or using opportunities to catch up with parents (even informal opportunities, such as in the playground).^[footnote 75]

Barriers and challenges for supporting primary-age pupils with additional needs

We have touched on some of the challenges that staff across schools, APs and LAs in our sample discussed. Here we summarise and elaborate on the main challenges.

Limited access to services

Staff from primary schools and APs told us that one major barrier to supporting pupils was limited access to services. This was also the case before the COVID-19 pandemic. School staff rely on professionals to give them the advice they need. However, the national shortfall in professional experts and services has had a negative impact on the quality of provision.

For example, school and AP staff said there was a shortage of speech and language services, as well as educational psychology services like CAMHS. This was a source of frustration for school staff:

“ CAMHS – there isn't someone available with mental health specialism. Families do not feel supported by CAMHS at the moment.”

If schools are unable to access external services and AP, this may have consequences, such as permanent exclusions. For example, staff from one primary school had been trying to meet a pupil's academic and social needs for 2 years. They put strategies in place and had regular meetings with parents. However, the external support was lacking:

“ Support services resources are scarce; they came twice to see the pupil but [gave] no new strategy for the school to manage the behaviour. It was a last resort... [It] would have made a difference if AP support came in earlier. The class size limited what he could do

[in mainstream school].”

Towards the end of their time in school, the pupil’s violent behaviour escalated, which resulted in permanent exclusion. Even though external support may not have helped to avoid the exclusion, staff felt that they could not get external help when it was needed.

COVID-19 has further aggravated existing issues, as a rise in additional needs during this period has not been matched with timely identification and support. The most commonly reported impact was the decline in children’s mental health. School and AP staff reported increases in anxiety, attachment issues and other mental health issues. An AP staff member commented:

“ Last academic year we’ve seen a huge presentation of quite complex mental health issues after lockdown. When we look at persistently disruptive behaviour, we look at kids who’ve experienced various degrees of trauma, whether it’s bereavement, grief, separated from friends or unmet SEND, speech, language, and communication needs.”

Staff across LAs reported that escalating behaviours from children have put additional pressure on already strained resources. One staff member said, ‘Our team, and in the primary sector, we get a high volume of calls, more so now after COVID.’

Concerns about funding

AP and school staff raised concerns about funding. Staff from several primary schools said that limited funding was an issue, especially when pupils did not have an EHC plan. This made it difficult to provide proactive support when the pupils’ needs first emerged (for example, through challenging behaviour or lack of interest in learning).

In one case, a lack of funding led to an AP placement. Staff from one pupil’s primary school told us that the pupil only needed support for a few hours a week during breaktimes and lunchtimes, when their behaviour was extreme. However, funding was only available for 16 or more hours per week. This pupil’s behaviour threatened other pupils, so the pupil was referred to AP.

Many AP staff said that the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in a reduction in referrals. This may have been because of financial challenges for APs. Limited funding also reduces the volume of outreach work that AP staff can do. It can even prevent APs from doing this work at all. Schools highly appreciate the value of outreach, but a school staff member from LA 1 said that the APs are struggling:

“ APs are incredibly stretched. Even if the funding application gets awarded in April, this is nowhere near our costs. It’s important to hear it first-hand. Sometimes it feels like fire-fighting. If we had more services like this it would be more cost-effective in the long run rather than removing and reducing services.”

Lockdowns also limited APs’ ability to carry out outreach work. This prevented them from identifying children’s needs at an early stage.

One AP recalled that it had better funding in the past, which had enabled it to go into the community to offer its staff's expertise. When this funding was reduced, their outreach work had to stop:

“ So if schools come to us and ask about behaviours, we can observe, support, give guidance. If that does not work, we can offer placement in our setting. If that child is ready to move on, then we let them move back to mainstream. If not, they can still stay here. Without better funding, our work life is limited to this setting and [it's] harder to go into mainstream or community.”

This AP now only offers full-time provision for pupils, and so considers its work to be reactive.

Location of APs

Some schools mentioned that the location of an AP setting was a barrier when pupils had to travel long distances to attend. One pupil's placement was a 40-minute drive away. The pupil's parent was not able to take them, so the school needed to use a taxi and a vetted taxi driver.

School and AP staff told us that they need to consider high transport costs when sending pupils to AP. This is more likely to be a problem in large rural counties such as LA 2. AP provision is located in the east of the county, which means that some pupils have a journey of over an hour to reach it. In these cases, the pupil's age was taken into account. For example, school and AP staff were discussing a placement for a 6-year-old pupil. They decided that a journey time of an hour each way would not be in the pupil's best interests.

Parent–school relationships and parents' misunderstanding of the role of AP

Sometimes pupils were referred to AP because the relationship between their parents and staff had broken down. Also, the 'stigma' associated with mental health issues prevented some parents from agreeing to their child's referral to external services such as CAMHS:

“ You can recognise the stigma attached to mental health. It's the sort of things that parents say to children – not mental health, just pull yourself together.”

Difficult relationships between parents and school staff have implications for the timeliness and effectiveness of interventions. This in turn can put pressure on both mainstream and AP staff's workload. If schools could manage those relationships differently, fewer resources would be needed. This could reduce the number of referrals to off-site AP.

Knowledge and experience of school staff

Because of the [pressure on children's health and other services](#), teachers find themselves a common source of support for pupils. They are often the first port of call. Previous research has found that support from teachers makes it more likely that pupils will stay in mainstream education; their impact on children's mental health and their academic performance was found to be substantial. [\[footnote 76\]](#)

Lowry and colleagues argue that inadequate training for teachers remains an issue. [\[footnote 77\]](#) They reported that there is often no mental health training for teaching staff, and teachers feel ill-equipped to support pupils effectively.

Teachers in mainstream schools teach pupils and meet their additional needs when they have access to appropriate external services or funding, and when they have the right knowledge and skills.

Increasing mainstream teachers' skills could allow more support for pupils' additional needs to be provided in mainstream settings. This could be done in different ways, including:

- [AP staff giving school staff the relevant insights and skills](#) to work with specific pupils, which may reduce the need for AP referrals or ensure that more pupils are successfully reintegrated into mainstream education
- secondments of school staff to APs or SEMH schools [\[footnote 78\]](#)
- training for school staff; for example, one research study found that, after training in trauma awareness, most school staff said they were better able to support vulnerable pupils; they also found it had given them new skills [\[footnote 79\]](#)

Finally, an inclusive school ethos, and a school's capacity to develop systems that enable secure staff–pupil relationships, play a significant role. Supported by research, Bennett explains the benefits of a whole-school focus on building a 'mature and cooperative culture of excellent behaviour', while also making 'every effort to support all... students, even the most challenging ones.' [\[footnote 80\]](#)

Conclusions

We set out to explore the use of AP for primary-age pupils and the purpose of AP in the education system in England for those pupils. We carried out our research in 5 LAs.

We found that most primary-age pupils in our study were referred to AP because of violent behaviour, which staff attributed to SEMH needs. They were referred to AP when support strategies at school were not effective.

The main purposes of the AP in our sample were to:

- provide outreach work in mainstream schools to help identify pupils' additional needs, and strategies to support them, at an early stage
- prevent avoidable suspensions and permanent exclusions

- support reintegration of pupils into mainstream school

When AP was used as an off-site setting, its purpose was to provide a different environment for pupils so that their needs could be better identified and addressed, or to reset and repair relationships with parents and/or the pupil.

AP was also used as a path into special schools for some primary-age pupils. Some pupils with complex needs stay in AP for years while waiting for a special school place.

Although we saw many examples of joined-up working in our study, previous research and our inspections of some unregistered APs have made us aware of some serious issues in the sector. These include safeguarding arrangements, the quality of education and staff qualifications. We looked at a small number of schools, and so our findings cannot be applied more widely. In addition, schools themselves selected the pupils' cases that we examined in greater depth, and this self-selection could account for the positive examples we heard.

Appendix A: Number of primary-age pupils in AP by academic year

Figure 1: Numbers of primary-age pupils in AP in England by academic year (in state-funded AP, independent schools and unregistered providers of AP)



View [data in an accessible table format](#)

The analysis was produced by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census and the AP census, provided by the Department of Education. For more information on the school census, see: '[Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2021](#)', Department for Education, June 2021. For more information on the AP census, see: '[Alternative provision census guidance](#)', Department for Education, July 2020.

Appendix B: Number of primary-age pupils in AP by academic year, type of AP and length of stay in AP

Table 2: Number of pupils attending independent schools and unregistered providers of AP between 2017/18 and 2020/21 in England

Age	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
4 and under	247	402	305	376

5	193	207	199	267
6	303	342	373	383
7	469	556	629	665
8	696	815	904	1,008
9	876	1,064	1,216	1,373
10	1,177	1,344	1,584	1,699
Total	3,961	4,730	5,210	5,771

The analysis was produced by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the AP census, provided by the Department of Education. For more information on the AP census, see: ['Alternative provision census guidance'](#), Department for Education, July 2020.

We are not able to accurately calculate the above figures as a percentage of the total cohort of pupils. This is because we do not know how many other children there are in unregistered provision, in addition to those who go there for AP.

Table 3: Number of pupils attending pupil referral units, academy AP and free-school AP between 2017/18 and 2020/21 in England

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Age 4 and under	42 (0.0%)	69 (0.0%)	32 (0.0%)	30 (0.0%)
Age 5	58 (0.0%)	59 (0.0%)	60 (0.0%)	33 (0.0%)
Age 6	164 (0.0%)	136 (0.0%)	135 (0.0%)	98 (0.0%)
Age 7	221 (0.0%)	235 (0.0%)	241 (0.0%)	177 (0.0%)
Age 8	284 (0.0%)	276 (0.0%)	307 (0.0%)	253 (0.0%)
Age 9	388 (0.1%)	371 (0.1%)	370 (0.1%)	342 (0.1%)
Age 10	457 (0.1%)	494 (0.1%)	449 (0.1%)	391 (0.1%)
Total	1614 (0.0%)	1640 (0.0%)	1594 (0.0%)	1324 (0.0%)

The percentage of primary-age pupils in state-funded AP was calculated out of 4,834,461. This is the total number of all pupils aged 10 or under in state-funded primary schools and other providers (PRUs, nurseries, special schools, non-maintained special schools and all-through schools).

The analysis was produced by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census, provided by the Department of Education. For more information on the school census, see: ['Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January](#)

[2021](#), Department for Education, June 2021.

Figure 2: Number of consecutive years in state-funded AP for primary-age pupils in 2019, 2020 and 2021 (in percentages)



Note: Figures are rounded

The analysis was produced by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census, provided by the Department of Education. For more information on the school census, see: ['Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2021](#), Department for Education, June 2021.

View [data in an accessible table format](#)

Appendix C: Selected local authorities

Table 4: Features of participating local authorities

Features of LAs	LA 1	LA 2	LA 3
Character	Urban	Rural with large hub towns	Urban
Total primary-age pupils	79,104	26,534	38,932
Pupils with SEND	12,385 (16%)	4,131 (16%)	4,992 (13%)
Total primary-age pupils in any AP (full time or part time)	44 (0.1%)	45 (0.2%)	>10 (0.0%)
Number of primary-age pupils in AP (part time only)	32	25	0
Number of primary-age pupils in AP (full time only)	12	20	7
Number of special schools	7	8	2
Total number of APs	13	10	5
Number of state-funded AP	2	1	1
Number of independent schools used for AP	6	5	4

Number of non-mainstream schools used for AP	5	4	0
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Appendix D: Length of time that primary-age pupils stay in state-funded AP by the year they started and the year they left AP

The table below is based on 1 cohort of pupils who would have started Reception in 2008 and were in Year 11 in 2019.

For example, of the pupils who started state-funded AP in Year 2, 76% also returned to a mainstream school in Year 2, 11% returned in Year 3, 5% returned in Year 4, 6% returned in Year 6 and 2% remained in AP until Year 11.

Table 5: Length of time primary-age pupils stay in state-funded AP, by the year they started and left AP

First year group in AP (number of pupils)	Last year group in AP: Year 2	Last year group in AP: Year 3	Last year group in AP: Year 4	Last year group in AP: Year 5	Last year group in AP: Year 6	Last year group in AP: Year 7	Last year group in AP: Year 8	Last year group in AP: Year 9	Last year group in AP: Year 10	Last year group in AP: Year 11
Year 2 (87)	76%	11%	5%	n/a	6%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	2%
Year 3 (86)	n/a	56%	20%	8%	5%	1%	1%	n/a	n/a	9%
Year 4 (117)	n/a	n/a	62%	13%	14%	1%	1%	1%	2%	8%
Year 5 (159)	n/a	n/a	n/a	44%	35%	2%	3%	2%	1%	14%
Year 6 (173)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	69%	8%	5%	5%	1%	13%

The analysis was produced by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census, provided by the Department of Education. For more information on the school census, see: ['Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2021'](#), Department for Education, June 2021.

Annex: data tables for figures

This section contains the underlying data in an accessible table format for all figures.

Data for Figure 1: Numbers of primary-age pupils in AP in England by academic year (in state-funded AP, independent schools and unregistered providers of AP)

Year	Number of primary age pupils in alternative provision
2017/18	5,575
2018/19	6,370
2019/20	6,804
2020/21	7,095

See [Figure 1](#)

Data for Figure 2: Number of consecutive years in state-funded AP for primary-age pupils in 2019, 2020 and 2021 (in percentages)

	Up to 1 year	Up to 2 years	Up to 3 years	Up to 4 years	4+ years
2019		62	26	9	2 1
2020		60	26	10	4 1
2021		41	37	15	5 2

See [Figure 2](#)

1. In 2020/21 there were a total of 4,834,461 pupils aged 10 or under in state-funded primary schools, pupil referral units, nurseries, special schools, non-maintained special schools and all-through schools. [↪](#)
2. The number of primary-age pupils in AP rose from about 5,600 in 2017/18 to about 7,000 in 2020/21, see [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#).

[‘Timpson review of school exclusion’](#), Department for Education and Race Disparity Unit, May 2019. [↪](#)

3. 74% of pupils who are in state-funded AP are aged 8 to 10; 71% of pupils who are known to be in independent and unregistered AP are aged 8 to 10. See [Appendix B](#). [↪](#)

[‘Warming the cold spots of alternative provision’](#), The Centre for Social Justice, May

4. 2020, page 14. [↪](#)
5. In January 2021, 69% of the primary-age pupils in AP had SEMH as their primary area of need. Analysis by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census: '[School pupils and their characteristics](#)', Department for Education, June 2021; '[Special educational needs in England](#)', Department for Education, June 2021. [↪](#)
6. Our research of inspection data also showed that, because of COVID-19-related disruption, some school leaders were still unpicking the reasons behind their concerns for some pupils. Some pupils' additional needs will be related to SEND, but for others these could be a result of gaps in knowledge caused by missed learning and delays in speech and language due to fewer opportunities for social interaction. See: '[Education recovery in schools: summer 2022](#)', Ofsted, July 2022. [↪](#)
7. These expectations are high, given that a 2018 study found that 30% of primary-age pupils in AP go on to attend a special school; '[Alternative provision market analysis](#)', Department for Education, October 2018. Department for Education, October 2018, page 85. The finding is based on 48 LAs' estimates of the percentage of pupils placed in AP over the past 12 months going to different destinations after AP. [↪](#)
8. 'Working paper: using data in assessing the quality of AP schools', FFT Education Datalab, July 2021. Attainment 5 scores were produced by the authors of the FFT Education data report as an alternative to the nationally used attainment 8 scores. Attainment 5 excludes English Baccalaureate subjects and includes all qualifications, including those the Department for Education no longer includes, such as function skills, but that are widely used in AP. [↪](#)
9. '[SEND review: right support, right place, right time](#)', Department for Education, March 2022; . [↪](#)
10. The Education Act 1996 in England and Wales, for example. [↪](#)
11. The system of AP does not exist universally. In Scotland, for example, the term AP is rarely used because a vast majority of pupils are educated in mainstream schools. [↪](#)
12. '[Alternative provision: statutory guidance for local authorities](#)', Department for Education, January 2013, page 9; [Education Act 1996](#), section 19. [↪](#)
13. Analysis by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census. For more information on the census see: '[School pupils and their characteristics](#)', Department for Education, June 2021; '[Special educational needs in England](#)', Department for Education, June 2021. [↪](#)
14. Analysis by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census: '[School pupils and their characteristics](#)', Department for Education, June 2021; '[Special educational needs in England](#)', Department for Education, June 2021. [↪](#)
15. This applies to pupils who were previously excluded and were attending AP in January 2021. Analysis by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census: '[School pupils and their characteristics](#)', Department for Education, June 2021; '[Special educational needs in England](#)', Department for Education, June 2021. [↪](#)
16. '[The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2020/21](#)', Ofsted, December 2021. [↪](#)

17. Some providers operate on a part-time basis and are not required to register as schools. We do not directly oversee these settings. However, a setting must register as a school if it provides full-time education for 5 or more pupils of compulsory school age, one or more pupils of compulsory school age with an EHC plan or one or more pupils of compulsory school age who are looked after by the local council. See: '[Independent school registration](#)', Department for Education, December 2013.

['Unregistered independent schools and out of school settings'](#), Department for Education, March 2018. [↪](#)
18. '[Nobody knows how big the unregistered alternative provision sector is](#)', FFT Education Datalab, October 2019. The number of placements in unregistered AP went up from 4,900 in 2017 to 8,800 in 2020. See: '[The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2020/21](#)', Ofsted, December 2021. [↪](#)
19. '[Alternative provision: effective practice and post-16 transition](#)', Department for Education, January 2017; . [↪](#)
20. '[Alternative provision: progress made, but still more to be done](#)', Ofsted, February 2016. [↪](#)
21. '[Warming the cold spots of alternative provision](#)', The Centre for Social Justice, May 2020, page 14. [↪](#)
22. '[Warming the cold spots of alternative provision](#)', The Centre for Social Justice, May 2020, pages 25 and 33. [↪](#)
23. '[Investigating alternative provision: part one](#)', FFT Education Datalab, September 2021. Pupils who had attended an AP between ages 11 and 16 achieved an equivalent of below grade 2 at GCSE on average. [↪](#)
24. In the 3 years before 2017, an average of 4% of pupils in state-maintained AP achieved grades 9 to 4 in maths and English GCSE, compared with 64% among pupils in state-funded schools nationally. Additionally, 54% of pupils in state-maintained AP sustained a positive post-16 destination, compared with 94% of mainstream pupils. See: '[Warming the cold spots of alternative provision](#)', Centre for Social Justice, May 2020. [↪](#)
25. 'Working paper: using data in assessing the quality of AP schools', FFT Education Datalab, July 2021. Attainment 5 scores were produced by the authors of the FFT Education data report as an alternative to the nationally used attainment 8 scores. Attainment 5 excludes English Baccalaureate subjects and includes all qualifications, including those the Department for Education no longer includes, such as function skills, but that are widely used in AP. [↪](#)
26. P Thomson and J Pennacchia, 'What's the alternative? Effective support for young people disengaging from mainstream education', Prince's Trust, 2014. [↪](#)
27. '[Getting in early: primary schools and early intervention](#)', Centre for Social Justice, November 2008, page 38. The findings are based on the analysis of the data supplied by the Department for Children, Schools & Families' Research & Statistics Division. [↪](#)
28. '[Feeling heard: partner agencies working together to make a difference for children with mental ill health](#)', Ofsted, December 2020. [↪](#)
29. '[Working Paper: Returning to state schools following permanent exclusion or alternative](#)

[provision'](#), FFT Education Datalab, June 2021. [↪](#)

30. Of the pupils who experienced state-funded AP by the age of 16 (aged 15 in 2019), 46% completed KS4 in mainstream or special schools, 43% did so in AP, and 8% dropped out of the system. Of the pupils who experienced local authority AP by the age of 16 (aged 15 in 2019), 23% completed KS4 in mainstream or special schools, 68% did so in AP, and 6% dropped out of the system. ['Working Paper: Returning to state schools following permanent exclusion or alternative provision'](#), FFT Education Datalab, June 2021. [↪](#)
31. ['Investigating alternative provision: part two'](#), FFT Education Datalab, September 2021. [↪](#)
32. ['Alternative provision market analysis'](#), Department for Education, October 2018. The proportion of pupils who left AP to return to mainstream school decreased as pupils got older. Rates were 64% among key stage 3 pupils, 53% among Year 10 pupils and 10% among Year 11 pupils. See: ['Alternative provision market analysis'](#), Department for Education, October 2018, page 85. The proportion of pupils who left AP to attend special schools decreased as pupils got older. Rates were 17% for key stage 3, 9% for Year 10 pupils and 4% among Year 11 pupils. See: ['Alternative provision market analysis'](#), Department for Education, October 2018, page 89. [↪](#)
33. ['Timpson review of school exclusion'](#), Department for Education and Race Disparity Unit, May 2019. The review reports on data published by the Department for Education, which shows that the number of 5-year olds who were permanently excluded during the 2014/15 school year was 85 (rate of 0.01), compared with 125 pupils in 2016/17 (rate of 0.02). See: ['Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017'](#), Department for Education, July 2018. [↪](#)
34. Analysis by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census. For more information on the school census, see: ['School pupils and their characteristics'](#), Department for Education, June 2021; ['Special educational needs in England'](#), Department for Education, June 2021. [↪](#)
35. ['Alternative provision market analysis'](#), Department for Education, October 2018. [↪](#)
36. Analysis by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census: ['School pupils and their characteristics'](#), Department for Education, June 2021. In the school census, if a pupil attends AP part time, they will be recorded as dual main-registered at their school and dual subsidiary-registered at the AP. If they attend AP full time, then they will be recorded as having a single registration. [↪](#)
37. We categorised local authorities by sorting the number of pupils in AP and calculating Z scores. Z scores measure standard deviations from the mean, with positive values meaning that the LA had more pupils in AP than the mean. Z percentages were then calculated and subtracted from the Z score to give a combined rank. The combined ranks were sorted and we gave each LA a rank. [↪](#)
38. Two out of five local authorities were part of the pilot sample – they were chosen using the selection criteria for the live sample. Both had primary-age pupils in AP. [↪](#)
39. We used a combination of top-down coding, driven by research questions, and bottom-up descriptive coding to capture emerging themes in each dataset. Coding is a process of systematically categorizing segments of qualitative data in order to find themes and patterns. As part of the thematic coding process, the research team reviewed the data and identified initial codes to create a working framework. This enabled data to be

compared across multiple files. The team identified codes and emerging themes in each dataset. Coding was carried out in Maxqda, a software for analysis of qualitative data. For information on the thematic coding process, see: V Braun and V Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', in 'Qualitative Research in Psychology', Volume 2, 2006, pages 77 to 101. For information on creating a coding framework, see: J Adair and G Pastori, 'Developing qualitative coding frameworks for educational research: immigration, education and the Children Crossing Borders project', in 'International Journal of Research & Method in Education', Volume 34, 2011, pages 31 to 47. [↵](#)

40. Unlike the APs that are state -run, some APs are independent and usually commissioned by mainstream schools, other (state) alternative providers, or local authorities. [↵](#)
41. Some APs group their pupils by need or by educational ability, rather than by age. [↵](#)
42. ['Alternative provision: progress made, but still more to be done'](#), Ofsted, February 2016. [↵](#)
43. In January 2021, 69% of the primary-age pupils in AP had SEMH as their primary area of need. Analysis by Ofsted using pupil-level data from the school census: ['School pupils and their characteristics'](#), Department for Education, June 2021; ['Special educational needs in England'](#), Department for Education, June 2021. [↵](#)
44. J Asmussen, A Skovgaard and N Bilenberg, 'Trajectories of dysregulation in preschool age', in 'European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry', Volume 31, 2022, pages 313 to 324. [↵](#)
45. A Diamond and K Lee, 'Interventions shown to aid executive function development in children 4 to 12 years old', in 'Science', Volume 333, 2011, pages 959 to 964. [↵](#)
46. R Baumeister, B Schmeichel and K Vohs, 'Self-regulation and the executive function: the self as controlling agent', in 'Social psychology: handbook of basic principles', edited by A Kruglanski and E Higgins, The Guilford Press, 2007, pages 516 to 539. [↵](#)
47. These findings were similar to those reported in: S Martin-Denham, 'Defining, identifying, and recognising underlying causes of social, emotional and mental health difficulties: thematic analysis of interviews with headteachers in England', in 'Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties', Volume 26, 2021, pages 187 to 205. Headteachers in this study also believed SEMH was a result of children's exposure to adverse childhood experiences. [↵](#)
48. J Pennacchia and P Thomson, 'Alternative provision in England: problematising quality and vulnerability', in 'International perspectives on alternative education: policy and practice', edited by M Mills and G McCluskey, University College London Institute of Education, 2018, quote on page 59. [↵](#)
49. S Martin-Denham, ['A review of school exclusion on the mental health, well-being of children and young people in the city of Sunderland'](#), University of Sunderland, March 2020; ['Timpson review of school exclusion'](#), Department for Education and Race Disparity Unit, May 2019; ['The exclusion from school of children aged four to seven'](#), Ofsted, June 2009; S Martin-Denham, ['An investigation into the perceived enablers and barriers to mainstream schooling: the voices of children excluded from school, their caregivers and professionals'](#), University of Sunderland, March 2020. [↵](#)
50. S Martin-Denham, 'Defining, identifying, and recognising underlying causes of social, emotional and mental health difficulties: thematic analysis of interviews with headteachers

in England', in 'Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties', Volume 26, 2021, pages 187 to 205. In this piece of research, headteachers in Sunderland were interviewed regarding how they define, identify and recognise SEMH difficulties among their pupils. Some teachers suggested that friendship difficulties, as well as the inability to cope with everyday experiences and social situations, could be included in the definition of SEMH. [↵](#)

51. S Martin-Denham, '[An investigation into the perceived enablers and barriers to mainstream schooling: the voices of children excluded from school, their caregivers and professionals](#)', University of Sunderland, March 2020. [↵](#)
52. '[Warming the cold spots of alternative provision](#)', The Centre for Social Justice, May 2020, page 62. [↵](#)
53. P Thomson and J Pennacchia, 'What's the alternative? Effective support for young people disengaging from mainstream education', Prince's Trust, 2014, page 33. [↵](#)
54. 'Working paper: using data in assessing the quality of AP schools', FFT Education Datalab, July 2021. Attainment 5 scores were produced by the authors of the FFT Education data report as an alternative to the nationally used attainment 8 scores. Attainment 5 excludes English Baccalaureate subjects and includes all qualifications, including those the Department for Education no longer includes, such as function skills, but that are widely used in AP. [↵](#)
55. '[Alternative provision market analysis](#)', Department for Education, October 2018, page 85. The finding is based on 48 LAs' estimates of the percentage of pupils placed in AP over the past 12 months going to different destinations after AP. [↵](#)
56. '[Alternative provision: statutory guidance for local authorities](#)', Department for Education, January 2013, page 12. [↵](#)
57. This figure is taken from the data 'Timeliness – rate of EHC plans excluding exceptions issued within 20 weeks', broken down by LA. This data is in '[Education, health and care plans](#)', Department for Education, May 2022. [↵](#)
58. This was evidenced by figures from the data 'Timeliness – rate of EHC plans excluding exceptions issued within 20 weeks', broken down by LA. This data is in '[Education, health and care plans](#)', Department for Education, May 2022. [↵](#)
59. '[Alternative provision market analysis](#)', Department for Education, October 2018. [↵](#)
60. '[Alternative provision market analysis](#)', Department for Education, October 2018. [↵](#)
61. School and LA staff call them resourced provisions. [↵](#)
62. '[Alternative provision: statutory guidance for local authorities](#)', Department for Education, January 2013, page 9. [↵](#)
63. Between 2017/18 and 2019/2020, the annual rate of permanent exclusions in primary schools was 0.03 (3 pupils per 10,000) or 0.02 (2 pupils per 10,000). For instance, this is 1,067 permanently excluded primary-age pupils in 2018/19 (at the rate of 0.02). In 2020/21, 392 primary-age pupils were permanently excluded (at the rate of 0.01). Accessed from: [Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England, Academic Year 2020/21 – Explore education statistics](#). and [Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England, Academic Year 2018/19 – Explore education statistics](#). [↵](#)
64. See [Appendix A](#), Figure 1: for example, 7,095 primary-age pupils were in AP in

2020/21. [↵](#)

65. 'The exclusion from school of children aged four to seven', Ofsted, June 2009; <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4175/>. [↵](#)
66. S Martin-Denham, 'Defining, identifying, and recognising underlying causes of social, emotional and mental health difficulties: thematic analysis of interviews with headteachers in England', in 'Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties', Volume 26, 2021, pages 187 to 205. [↵](#)
67. '[Realising the potential of early intervention](#)', Early Intervention Foundation, October 2018. [↵](#)
68. '[Preventing gang and youth violence: spotting signals of risk and supporting children and young people](#)', Early Intervention Foundation, November 2015; '[Intervening early to prevent gang and youth violence: the role of primary schools](#)', Early Intervention Foundation, March 2018. [↵](#)
69. '[Getting in early: primary schools and early intervention](#)', Centre for Social Justice, November 2008. [↵](#)
70. D Berridge and others, '[Children in need and children in care: educational attainment and progress](#)', University of Bristol, April 2020. Mixed-methods study using quantitative analysis of national data on the cohort of children born 2000/01, followed by interviews with children, parents and carers, social workers, teachers and managers, regarding the progress and experiences of children in need and in care. [↵](#)
71. '[Getting in early: primary schools and early intervention](#)', Centre for Social Justice, November 2008, pages 40 to 41. [↵](#)
72. '[Feeling heard: partner agencies working together to make a difference for children with mental ill health](#)', Ofsted, December 2020. [↵](#)
73. D Page, 'Family engagement in alternative provision', in 'British Educational Research Journal', volume 47, 2021, pages 65 to 84. [↵](#)
74. '[It was hard to escape](#)', The Child Safeguarding and Practice Review Panel, March 2020. [↵](#)
75. D Page, 'Family engagement in alternative provision', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Volume 47, 2021, pages 65 to 84. [↵](#)
76. S Martin-Denham, '[An investigation into the perceived enablers and barriers to mainstream schooling: the voices of children excluded from school, their caregivers and professionals](#)', University of Sunderland, March 2020; C Lowry and others, 'Teachers: the forgotten health workforce', in 'Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine', Volume 115, 2022, pages 133 to 137. [↵](#)
77. C Lowry and others, 'Teachers: the forgotten health workforce', in 'Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine', Volume 115, 2022, pages 133 to 137. [↵](#)
78. One organisation that provides training to assist staff in supporting pupils with additional needs is [The Difference](#). Its programme offers a 2-year placement for individuals who work in mainstream schools to join the senior leadership team of an AP. This enables them to develop skills and strategies for supporting pupils with additional needs, with the intention that they will return to mainstream education and implement what they have

learned. [↩](#)

79. 'Working paper 1: attachment and trauma awareness training: analysis of pre-Covid survey data from staff in 24 primary schools', University of Oxford Department of Education, October 2020; and ['Working paper 2: attachment and trauma awareness training: analysis of pre-Covid staff interviews and pupil focus groups in five case study schools'](#), University of Oxford Department of Education, November 2021. [↩](#)
80. T Bennett, ['Creating a culture: how school leaders can optimise behaviour'](#), Department for Education, March 2017, pages 31 and 46. [↩](#)

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