

# **An Alternative Route:**

**Post-16 support for young people  
attending Alternative Provision**

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



As Children's Commissioner, I have visited hundreds of children from across the country and spoken to them about their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. While many children talk to me about how to improve childhood, they also talk about their visions for the future. Through these conversations, I have seen the sheer scale of ambition this generation holds.

In my visits, I have met future entrepreneurs, social workers, lawyers, pilots. No matter where I am or who I am speaking to, children continue to tell me that they are hopeful for adulthood. The vast majority say that they believe they'll be better off than their parents. They believe that if they work hard, they can achieve success in life.

This is just as true when I speak to children in alternative provision. Despite having struggled in mainstream schools, these children tell me that they see the importance of education. They understand the value of working hard and many are desperate for the chance to have a real job.

However, despite the same strength of ambition, the post-16 outcomes for this group of children are not as good as those of their peers in mainstream schools. Nearly a third (29%) of children in alternative provision did not sustain a positive destination after leaving in Year 11. This compares to 5.2% of children from mainstream schools who did not sustain a positive destination.<sup>1</sup>

In this report, I examine the reasons behind this disparity. My research shows that children in alternative provision are deeply ambitious and see getting a good job or career as a priority. However, often they are not given the support they need to succeed.

Children in alternative provision often have lower levels of self-belief by the time that they arrive in alternative provision. They often have experienced a disrupted education and arrive in alternative provision in Key Stage 4, with very little time for catch up. Sadly, many are battling issues in their personal lives that makes it more difficult for them to engage with education.

As this report shows, this group of children also do not have access to the same resources or opportunities as children in mainstream schools. It's often much harder to arrange work experience placements or to source appropriate careers provision. While many would benefit from extended support beyond Year 11, this is often beyond the capacity of what an alternative provision school can provide.

There is much more to do to level the playing field and to ensure that children in alternative provision have access to the same opportunities as their peers in mainstream schools. These children are every bit as ambitious for their future as other children. It is up to us as adults to match that ambition. This report outlines a plan to ensure that every child in alternative provision is given the advice, guidance, and opportunities they need to thrive.

## Executive summary

*“I think a lot of people in England have amazing talents but they are judged by people who don’t give them a chance to show them what they can do.”*

– Boy attending AP, age 13.

In 2021’s *The Big Ask* survey,<sup>2</sup> children’s top priority for the future was getting a good job or career. Children speak with hope and determination when asked about what they want to achieve in their lives. The results showed that all children, no matter what their background is or where they come from, carry the same ambition to go far in life. This generation is keen to work hard and to strive for a brilliant future.

Children in alternative provision, like their peers in mainstream schools, are ambitious for their futures, however, a greater proportion of children in alternative provision do not progress to positive post-16 destinations.<sup>3</sup>

This paper investigates some of the reasons behind this disparity and sets out policy recommendations to address it. Our research looks at what children in alternative provision say about what is holding them back from achieving their potential. We also examine the current provision of post-16 support in alternative provision.

Research by the Children’s Commissioner has found:

- In *The Big Ask* 74% of children in alternative provision said that having a good job or career was one of their main priorities.
- However, 43% of children in alternative provision were worried that they wouldn’t have a good job or career when they grow up.
- Children in alternative provision were more likely to say that a good job or career was a key priority and a worry for the future when compared with all children who responded to *The Big Ask*.

- When the Children's Commissioner asked children about their ambitions for ten years' time, 52% of children in alternative provision said they were confident that they would have learned the skills they needed to get a good job. This compared with 72% of all children who said that they were confident that they would have learned the skills they needed.
- Just 50% of children in alternative provision felt confident that they would have a job they were happy with in ten years' time.

Through fieldwork, the office spoke to children who attended alternative provision, alternative provision teachers, and headteachers. They told the office that the support children in alternative provision need is often more pastoral than in mainstream. Many of these children are facing challenges in their home life and have experienced a disrupted education. While they are just as ambitious as their peers in mainstream, they do not always have access to the same post-16 options or careers support as their peers.

This paper outlines a plan for improving the post-16 outcomes for children educated in alternative provision.

## The ambitions of children in alternative provision

### Background

#### Findings from *The Big Ask*

In total, 295 children from state-funded alternative provision (AP) responded to *The Big Ask*, a large-scale open survey of children in England aged 6 to 17 which the Children's Commissioner ran in April-May 2021.

Three quarters of children in AP (74%) said that having a good job or career was one of their main priorities for when they grow up. Children in AP were more likely to say that this was one of their top priorities than the overall population who responded to *The Big Ask*. 'A good job or career' was the most common option chosen by children aged 9-17 when asked to choose up to 5 items from a list of 14, in response to the prompt 'When you grow up, which things, if any, do you think will be most important for you to have a good life?'. 69% of all respondents to *The Big Ask*, said that 'A good job or career' was among the most important things in their future.

However, while jobs and careers were a top priority for children in AP, it was also an important source of worry. 43% of children in AP reported that they were worried about their future jobs and careers. A greater proportion of children in AP worried about this, than children overall responding to *The Big Ask*. For comparison 37% of all children who responded to *The Big Ask* chose 'a good job or career' among the up to 5 things, from a list of 14, that they were most worried they wouldn't have when they grew up.

#### A lack of encouragement and self-belief

Many children who were educated in AP who responded to *The Big Ask* said that a lack of encouragement and self-belief was holding children back from achieving their potential. Some children said that they had been told that they would not be able to achieve their goals or that they would not get the grades needed to get on in life. In response to the prompt 'What do you think stops young people in England achieving what they want to achieve when they grow up?', children wrote a range of comments.

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*"Not enough choice at school. You're made to feel worthless if you aren't good at exams."* – Boy attending AP, age 16.

*"People saying that we can't do things."* – Girl attending AP, age 13.

*"People not encouraging their child's beliefs for what they want to do in life such as an engineer or a doctor or something like that."* – Boy attending AP, age 15.

Some children in AP also said that children sometimes lacked a strong sense of self-belief. Some young people said that they did not feel like the adults around them believed in them.

*"As we grow older, ambitions can fade and we lose self confidence that we can do things."* – Boy attending AP, age 16.

*"I think a lot of people in England have amazing talents but they are judged by people who don't give them a chance to show them what they can do."* – Boy attending AP, age 13.

*"I think most young people don't believe in their self"* – Girl attending AP, age 15.

Other children said that a poor work ethic was holding children back from achieving their full potential.

*"Attitude to life chances, some people don't want to work hard to get what they want."* – Boy attending AP, age 15.

*"Bad life choices and not focusing on what they want in life and how they are they going to get it they don't think about what we [want] until it feels really hard to get it."* – Girl attending AP, age 15.

Some young people said that children can fall into the wrong crowds which weakens their motivation and can have a negative impact on their futures.

*"When they don't put their heads down to achieve what they want to achieve, they get distracted by other things or people."* – Boy attending AP, age 16.

*"if they are brought up on a rough estate it could have a less chance of them having a good job when they are older because they might follow other leads who aren't great."* – Boy attending AP, age 14.

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## **A lack of opportunities in education**

In *The Big Ask*, children educated in AP also said that they did not receive lessons which prepared them for adulthood. This was in line with the overall picture, in that children in *The Big Ask* generally wanted more guidance on how to get the right support to move into the workplace.<sup>4</sup>

*“Access to education and learning about the future like mortgages, rent, laws etc.”* - Boy attending AP, age 16.

*“Little education on more important things such as taxes, bills, debt, interest, and mortgages. how money works and how to prepare for an interview or how to get a job.”* – Girl attending AP, age 15.

Some children said that they did not feel like school offered them vocational or technical routes to learn.

*“School is all about academic stuff. some of us are better of learning a job rather than struggling with and failing exams, this means we will not get a job ever.”* – Boy attending AP, age 16.

## **Challenges children faced in their personal lives**

Children attending AP also told the Commissioner that children faced additional challenges in their personal life, such as poor mental health or sometimes criminal records. They believed that this stood in their way of achieving what they wanted in life.

*“Some young people who suffer with problems like anxiety, or autism may worry about their future, for example people with anxiety may not be able to buy stuff on their own or travel by themselves therefore putting stress on them.”* – Girl attending AP, age 16.

*“Some children are restricted from things that they want to do due to criminal records or money problems having low income causes kids to make money in other ways.”* – Girl attending AP, age 15.

## **Concerns around future pathways**

Several children who were educated in AP and responded to *The Big Ask* said that they were worried about their ability to secure or sustain a positive post-16 destination when they left AP.

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*“There are not many job prospects in my town, as we are a coastal town and there are only hospitality or caring jobs. I go to a PRU [Pupil Referral Unit] and there is no funding. Lots of the teachers have lost their jobs so we can’t do the things we used to, like learning life skills, or understanding our behaviour and how we can change. This makes me feel sad because I don’t think I will get far in life.”* – Girl attending AP, age 14.

*“There’s not many jobs in certain areas and not enough support for people who struggle in school.”* – Boy attending AP, age 15.

*“[I] worry about leaving [my AP] and going to normal college - it is a big change.”* – Girl attending AP, age 16.

## **Ambitions for life in ten years’ time**

In March 2023, the office commissioned an independent panel survey provider, Opinium, to run a nationally representative survey of children aged 8 to 17 in England. The purpose was to further understand children’s ambitions for the future.

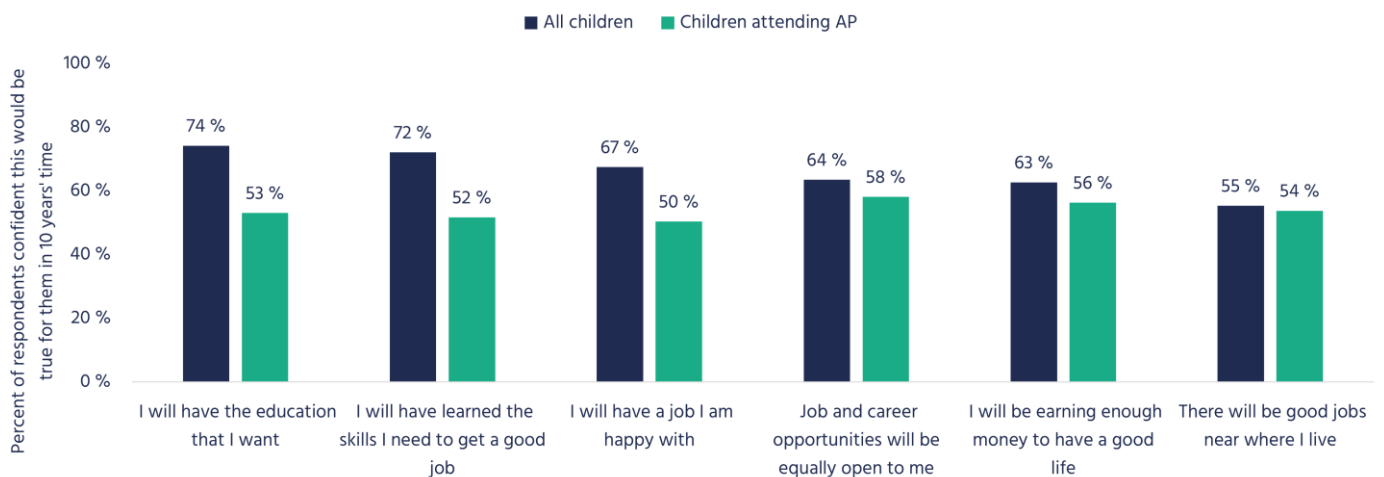
The survey allowed the results to be disaggregated by the child’s type of school. Numbers of children in the survey attending AP were small, especially for questions asked only of 15 to 17 year olds (see Methodology), so these numbers should be viewed with caution, and suggest lines for future research involving larger numbers of these pupils.

The office asked children how confident they were that six statements would be true for them in 10 years’ time. Overall, we found that children, including children reported by their parents to be attending a Pupil Referral Unit or other AP, felt positive about the future, with around half (47%) reporting they ‘often’ or ‘always’ felt optimistic.

Specifically, 67% of all children were confident that they would be happy with their job; 72% that they would have learned the skills they need to get a good job; 74% that they would have the education they want; and 63% that they would be earning enough to have a good life. Most children (64%) were confident that job and career opportunities would be equally open to them, and 55% were confident that there would be good jobs near where they lived.

However, children reported to be attending a Pupil Referral Unit or other Alternative Provision were less likely to be confident in all these aspects of their futures (Figure 1). This difference was only small in respect of 'good jobs near where I live', where the difference was 1 percentage point (55% versus 54%). The difference was largest at 21 percentage points for 'I will have the education that I want' (74% overall compared to 53% for pupils in AP) and 'I will have learned the skills I need to get a good job' (72% overall compared to 52% for pupils in AP). The other large difference was for 'I will have a job I am happy with': overall 67% of children were confident this would be true for them in 10 years' time, compared to only 50% of pupils in AP.

**Figure 1: Children's confidence about their future skills and employment by whether attending AP**



## Understanding post-16 support in alternative provision

### The importance of post-16 support

When the office asked young people who had left alternative provision (AP) about the post 16-support they received, they were very knowledgeable about the support that had been on offer. They spoke positively about their teachers who led on the post-16 support when they were in Year 11. The support they spoke about was largely wellbeing and pastoral support. In some instances, they recalled the school paying for academic resources that they could not otherwise afford.

*"They bought me politics and science books, like £100."* – Boy who previously attended AP, age 16.

The young people who had left AP said that they continued to receive support, despite having left a year ago. They said they were able to call the school to share their worries and concerns and still received practical support with applying for colleges and jobs including providing references and help writing CVs.

*"The school's nice... I have their number they said call me if you need anything."* – Boy who previously attended AP, age 17.

*"I spoke to [my teacher] last week. I needed a job reference"* – Boy who previously attended AP, age 16.

While many of the AP alumni said that they felt the post-16 support was useful, they said that it was limited because they had only been in alternative provision for one or two years. Many told the office that they arrived in AP in Key Stage 4 and did not have a lot of time to prepare for the post-16 transition.

When speaking with AP staff it was clear that one of their main priorities was to help their children move on to post-16 destinations. They felt that one of their primary goals as a teacher in AP was to help the children go on to further their careers and education. Teachers said that they tried to offer post-16 support both before and after young people left AP.

*"They still have access to the school until Year 12. We prioritise this."* – AP teacher.

*“Leavers have always come in. we just didn’t have the funding for it. We give up to two years of ongoing help and support like resources or books.” – AP teacher.*

The staff in the AP talked about the importance of bridging support, after children left AP in Year 11. They said that they tried to gradually step down the support that was on offer to help their leavers acclimatise. AP staff told the office that there was a big difference between the individualised support children received in AP and the college environment many went on to. They stated that some struggled to sustain college places because of the difference in the support available.

*“We find that kids often don’t want to leave because they have built a supportive environment... We have to do some handholding until they get to college. If we can get them to stick with college until October half term, they’re pretty much ok.” – AP headteacher.*

AP leaders from our sector roundtable shared the view that post-16 support was one of the top priorities for young people in AP. Most of them had plans in place for pupils who left their APs to go into education or jobs. They acknowledged that their young people needed additional support to apply for colleges and apprenticeships. They also said that their young people needed careers guidance while at AP and for a short time after. One example being an AP’s new summer programme for keeping in touch after the end of the school year as this is when they were particularly worried about their students.

*“We keep in touch with students for two years. We have a post-16 coach across all sites.” – AP headteacher.*

*“We always start with a Key Stage 3 careers programme.” – AP headteacher.*

*“We are building up an alumni network. It’s our most powerful tool. We offer talks from ex-students. It’s more useful than any teacher talking.” – AP headteacher.*

*“We offer post-16 services for young people where a staff member will track students for two to three years after leaving, they can reengage at any point.” – AP headteacher.*

## Support from staff in alternative provision

Young people told the office that one-to-one support from teachers and staff in their AP is key. Many children talked about how much they valued getting personal attention at their AP. They also welcomed the flexibility of their teachers who were able to address their individual needs and interest through their careers advice. The support included: helping young people with their overall well-being, offering help with schoolwork, and figuring out what the children in AP wanted to do in the future.

*"Teachers here are like 'what's your passions?'"* – Young man who previously attended AP, age 18.

*"They give us more time and attention.... they have a personal connection with us"* – Boy attending AP, age 14.

The young people who were still in AP said that one-to-one support is important, especially when it comes to thinking about their future jobs and educational goals. They talked about how tough it can be to switch from mainstream school to AP, but having teachers who help them with setting goals makes it easier to move forward with their learning.

*"I needed one-to-one support with maths. My teacher gave me revision sheets and gave me past papers."* – Boy attending AP, age 15.

*"We think about how things might affect our career. Our teachers help us make pathway plans for our study goals and career goals."* – Boy attending AP, age 14.

AP staff and AP headteachers from our roundtable also highlighted that one-to-one support was important for helping kids succeed in AP and after they turn 16. The support is all about building relationships, understanding each pupil's unique needs, and helping them in a personalised way. This was described as not just being about schoolwork, but also supporting their mental health and figuring out what support the children need and how their school can help them access it.

*"We really know our kids. Support is always tailored."* - AP teacher.

*"If something's happening at home, we give them a moment. We have a counsellor on the school site."*  
- AP teacher.

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*"We recognise the impact of external factors such as home life on students' well-being" – AP headteacher.*

The staff in the AP setting expressed how important it is to have one-to-one support and good relationships to help students feel good. When we asked the AP headteachers roundtable about the support they offer, they said it's a mix of making sure students feel good mentally and helping them do their best in school, as these two are connected.

*"The support is personalised, but we also push for them to get at least 6 GCSEs."– AP teacher.*

*"Our support is a bit of a mixture. You have to start with children's interests as some children don't know what is available to them. We try to focus on what skills they have." – AP headteacher.*

*"A recent student wanted to be the first person in their family to go to college." – AP headteacher.*

*"We help them to find a love of learning." – AP headteacher.*

## **Careers advisors**

Young people also told the office that they sometimes received help from a careers advisor who helped them organise their studies and future career goals. Many of the children explained how the advisor's role was to help them think about their studies and how they can use their GCSEs to plan for post-16 and beyond.

Young people told the office that careers advisors would talk through a range of options allowing them to think beyond what they knew. Some of the pathways they discussed included: A levels, apprenticeships, and part-time jobs.

*"They [brought in] careers advisors highlighted the best choices based on my predicted grades."– Young man who had attended AP, age 18.*

*"They helped me apply for colleges and having real expectations."– Boy attending AP, age 14.*

*"They helped me with CV writing and applying for jobs."- Boy attending AP, age 15.*

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The AP headteacher roundtable also highlighted the benefits of having career advisors support children in their academic goals and future careers. One said their school had two part-time advisors working with post-16 students.

However, AP headteachers also highlighted that career advisors were often brought in independently rather than being employed by the AP. Hiring career advisors was only possible if funding allowed. AP leaders told the office that AP settings did not always have the funding they needed to provide consistent post-16 support. AP leaders also said that external careers advisors needed to have the time and capacity to build a relationship with the children so they could support them.

AP leaders told the office it was difficult to find suitable, high-quality careers advisors. One headteacher described independent careers advice as a 'lottery' with good and bad experiences.

*"This system needs to be better quality assured. Children need the opportunity to build a relationship with the careers advisor."* – AP headteacher.

## **Work experience**

Young people in AP generally spoke positively about the opportunity to do work experience in Years 10 and 11. However, some mentioned that this offer was not always available to all students.

*"I wasn't offered work experience but some of my friends were."* – Boy attending AP, age 14.

When talking about the work experience on offer, young people said that local businesses gave them a chance to see what the world of work was like. Work experience also enabled the young people to delve into lesser-known roles and jobs. They found work experience both fun and useful as it helped them to build the skills they needed to be employable and improved their understanding of future jobs.

*"I spoke to my teachers about football and was offered to do work experience on the training grounds of [a football team]"* – Boy attending AP, age 14.

When talking to the headteachers and staff at the AP they recognised the importance of offering work experience to pupils especially to aid with future careers and helping them develop job skills. They believed that work experience helped young people widen their knowledge around career options. Staff

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tried to offer work experience that was linked to subjects their students were studying. One art teacher, for example, described taking their pupils to visit the Royal College of Surgeons.

*“We offer work experience on what they’re interested in. It could be one week, six weeks, or a whole term based on what they are able to do.”* – AP headteacher.

However, some AP headteachers raised concerns about the availability of work experience. One reason for this, we heard, was stigma against AP pupils. AP teachers said it can be challenging to find work experience partners who can understand the needs of AP students and provide adjustments to facilitate the roles. The smaller staff teams in AP mean administering work experience is done by, one teacher told us, one or two people, as opposed to a whole team in mainstream schools and it takes *“hours of work”*. A teacher told us that extra help would be welcome to organise work experience by providing *“a catalogue of organisations who will take this many pupils from APs”*.

Some of the AP staff noted that their students could find work experience more difficult than other children. They remarked that sometimes their students weren’t ready to be placed in real-life work environments.

*“Our students don’t have to do work experience. They only do it if they feel ready. It can become quite difficult.”* – AP teacher.

## **Working with local partners**

The young people and AP leaders spoke positively about the relationship the school had with local partners including employers and colleges. Where possible, AP staff tried to encourage local partners to visit the AP and to talk about future careers and to offer advice. AP staff felt this helped inspire the children to think about career paths which were open to them.

*“Someone from [a football club] came to talk about the different roles and jobs in the stadium.”* – Boy attending AP, age 15.

The AP leaders recognised that having local partners from colleges come in and talk about the steps towards further or higher education or an apprenticeship helped to prepare the young people for post-

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16 destinations. One head explained that college instructors visited their school throughout the year. These exchanges could be tailored to pupils' interests.

*"Students like construction so we created good relationship with providers."* – AP headteacher.

However, although AP staff and children recognised the benefits of relationships with local partners, the AP leaders told the office that it can also be difficult to create these relationships. This was attributed to the lack of understanding of AP. AP leaders told the office that outside organisations sometimes did not understand how to support their students. This was particularly a problem for AP staff looking for partners who would offer work experience days.

*"We try to build up good contacts with big organisations who are willing to put reasonable adjustments in place and have a wide range of roles for our kids."* – AP headteacher.

*"We tend to build relationships with public sector employers like the ambulance service."* – AP teacher.

*"While we have some really good links, it's hard finding employers who understand our pupils – they don't have 100% attendance."* – AP teacher.

*"We have to do risk assessments to assess for individual kids. It can be a huge piece of work."* – AP teacher.

## **Funding**

AP staff told the office that inadequate funding was affecting the pupils and the AP itself. They echoed concerns that the lack of funding had worsened the academic offer they could provide. Some told the office that they had larger class sizes and fewer subject specialist teachers than they needed. Some AP leaders also said that, due to the lack of sustainable funding, AP settings often can only offer the basics to their pupils.

*"We don't have a sixth form as we don't have the funding for it."* – AP teacher.

*"The daily rate for funding has been fixed for the last 10 years. Class sizes have grown, it's getting harder and harder."* – AP headteacher.

*"The first thing to think about is allocating staff to classrooms but other services have gone. They're also disappearing from the local authority."* – AP headteacher.

*"We're providing only the basics at the moment."* – AP headteacher.

## **Barriers to effective post-16 support**

Young people the office spoke to felt the opportunities they had had in mainstream school were very different to their experience in AP. While they received extra help in AP, they said they felt like they were missing things such as extracurricular activities and greater subject choice.

*"We don't have the same opportunities like the mainstream schools."* - Boy attending AP, age 14.

*"The AP can offer some parts of the curriculum and some GCSEs but there's a lot of subjects missing."* – Boy attending AP, age 15.

*"Some students have to change from one subject to another [when they arrive in AP] which creates a big step back."* – Boy attending AP, age 14.

Staff members at the AP school the office visited highlighted barriers for young people's academic success. They said that children in their setting often faced barriers such as challenges at home, low self-esteem due to negative beliefs, disruptions from mid-year transitions affecting educational continuity, difficulties in addressing curriculum gaps, and the need for practical life skills education to prepare them for life beyond school.

*"We are an education provider, but we end up falling into other roles"* – AP headteacher.

*"We're trying to fix one part of the puzzle. Kids are so resilient but they're being let down. The barrier is building self-esteem – they've been told they're bad and failures, it takes a lot of effort to break this down."* – AP headteacher.

*"We are still aiming for the same learning objectives, as per the national curriculum, but there is always a gap that's difficult to close. We can identify the obvious gaps."* - AP teacher.

One teacher told us about the curriculum gaps in their AP. They currently had no geography teachers and did not offer GCSE French, leading to *“occasional grumbles”*, but explained that someone trying to teach themselves GCSE French from textbooks would be at a disadvantage.

The AP leaders said that there were several barriers that make it hard for children in AP to do well in education and post-16. These include issues such as AP schools not having enough money for special programmes that help students, not getting enough help for students with special educational needs, or for those who have been expelled following a serious incident.

*‘College entry requirements haven’t changed very much despite schools changing to 5 GCSEs. Generally speaking, entry requirements are English and Maths, college doesn’t care about much else. Apprenticeships usually have same entry requirements as the A level course’* – AP headteacher.

Headteachers also told us that children who have been excluded at any point from mainstream school for carrying a knife are at a disadvantage, regardless of the progress they make or grades they achieve in AP as large colleges often have a total ban on admitting these students.

## The way forward

### Teaching children in alternative provision the skills they need for adulthood

Children in alternative provision (AP) told the office that they wanted greater opportunities to develop the skills they would need for later life. They wanted to learn about how to apply for jobs and how to manage their money. While some children benefited from these lessons in PSHE, the office heard that the quality of these lessons varied from one school to the next.

**Recommendation: Every child in alternative provision should benefit from a comprehensive and high-quality PSHE offer.** PSHE lessons should help children to build knowledges about challenges they will face in adulthood. Ofsted should conduct a curriculum review on PSHE, with a key focus on the experience of children in alternative provision. Oak National Academy should develop resources for teaching PSHE which can be used by AP settings. The Department for Education should develop an AP workforce strategy and, as part of this strategy, should provide training for AP teachers to become subject specialists in PSHE.

Children and AP leaders told the office that alternative providers are often unable to provide a broad range of academic subjects like that offered by mainstream settings. In some instances, children who moved to AP in Key Stage 4 were unable to pursue the GCSE courses that they had been enrolled on, because they could not be taught in the AP school. AP leaders told the office that they did not have the specialist teachers or resources to deliver a broad range of subjects.

**Recommendation: Mainstream settings should support alternative providers to deliver a broad range of subjects for GCSEs.** The government is currently introducing a three-tier model for AP, with a focus on targeted support in mainstream schools. The third tier of this model focuses on transitional placements, with an emphasis on supporting children in AP in Key Stage 4 to sustain a post-16 destination. As part of this review, the government should look at best practice where mainstream schools support alternative providers in their local authority or trust, by brokering access to subject specialist teachers, by providing resources to the AP, or by using innovative education technology to enable children to remotely attend lessons with mainstream subject specialist teachers.

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## **Providing wrap-around support for children in alternative provision**

AP leaders told the office that many of the children that they teach are facing challenges in their personal life and need additional pastoral care or family support. AP staff told the office that a lot of their job is focused on children's wellbeing and mental health. AP leaders said that the children they taught often needed support from other agencies, beyond education, but sometimes struggled to access the support they needed.

**Recommendation: Children in AP should be able to access the support they need to engage with education.** In 2021, the Department for Education introduced AP taskforces to provide wrap around support for children in AP settings. These taskforces collocated other professionals such as speech and language therapists and counsellors on AP sites. At present, this programme is only available in 21 areas. The AP taskforce programme should be rolled out nationally.

## **Creating a sustainable approach to post-16 provision**

AP leaders told the office that they needed to support AP leavers for a period after they left school, to ensure that they sustained a positive destination. AP leavers said that they deeply valued this extended support, knowing that there was someone they could talk to if they faced challenges in adjusting to their new environment.

However, despite the value of this extended support, AP leaders told the office that it was difficult to provide. AP settings are only funded for the children that they have on roll and often do not have the spare capacity to provide additional support to previous Year 11s.

**Recommendation: The government should fund alternative providers to offer a graduated step-down programme of support for all Year 11 leavers and, where necessary, to provide an opportunity to resit the final year of AP for some learners who have had a disrupted Key Stage 4.** As part of their review of AP funding, the government should look at how it can provide ring-fenced funding for the work that AP schools do to support their children to transition to positive post-16 destinations. The review should look at how to create a limited number of post-16 placements for children who have had a disrupted Key Stage 4, who have entered AP very late in Year 11 or who have been unable to access education during their exam years. These placements should enable children to

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resit their final year in alternative provision and to study the qualifications they need for post-16 pathways. The funding review should also look at how to finance careers advisors, work experience, and an extended support programme for all children transitioning from AP to a post-16 destination. The government should review the accountability measures for AP schools offering transition placements, to ensure they capture the extent to which AP leavers secure and sustain positive post-16 destinations.

## Methodology

This report is based on analysis of: *The Big Ask* survey of children aged 6 to 17 in 2021, a nationally representative survey of 8 to 17 year olds in March 2023, and focus groups by the Children's Commissioner's office in February 2024.

### *The Big Ask*

*The Big Ask* was a survey of children in England aged 6 to 17, ran for approximately six weeks in April-May 2021, and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge. The Big Ask was launched online on the Children's Commissioner's office website and social media channels. The Children's Commissioner's office sent the survey link to every school and local authority in England, as well as to mental health hospitals, youth custody settings, children's homes, and many other settings, charities and community groups.

Respondents were asked to provide the name of their school or education provider, in this analysis the 'children in alternative provision' subgroup is defined those who selected institutions listed with the Department for Education as: Academy Alternative Provision Converter, Academy Alternative Provision Sponsor Led or Pupil Referral Unit.

### *Nationally representative survey*

The office commissioned an independent panel survey provider, Opinium, to run a nationally representative survey of children aged 8 to 17 in England in March 2023. Parents of more than one child selected one of their children aged 8 to 17 to respond. Parents reported whether 'They attend a Pupil Referral Unit or other Alternative Provision'.

Children aged 8 to 17 were asked, 'In 10 years, how confident are you that the below statements will be true for you?'

- I will have a job I am happy with
  - I will have learned the skills I need to get a good job
  - I will have the education that I want
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- I will be earning enough money to have a good life
- Job and career opportunities will be equally open to me
- There will be good jobs near where I live

Children aged 15 to 17 were asked to agree or disagree with the following four statements:

- I have been given enough information about vocational routes to a career, such as apprenticeships
- There are enough opportunities for children still in education to get a job if they want one (such as a Saturday job)
- Where I grew up will not be a barrier to my chances of having a good life
- I have had at least one opportunity to gain work experience in a job or career that I am interested in

Overall, 3,593 children responded, among whom 85 AP pupils responded, among whom 30 AP pupils were aged 15 to 17. These small numbers mean the findings should be viewed with caution.

#### *Visits and focus groups*

The Children's Commissioner's office visited an Alternative Provision in London in February 2024, and carried out three focus groups: with 4 alumni aged 16 to 18; with 7 current pupils aged 14 to 16; and with 3 teachers. In the same month, the office also held a roundtable with three AP headteachers from across England.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, Key Stage 4 destination measures. 2024. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures>

<sup>2</sup> Children's Commissioner's Office, The Big Ask, 2021. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/about-us/the-big-ask/>

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, Key Stage 4 destination measures. 2024. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-destination-measures>

<sup>4</sup> Children's Commissioner's Office, Children's Commissioner's Proposals to Support Children into Work. 2021. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/about-us/the-big-ask/>



**Sanctuary Buildings, 20 Great Smith  
Street London, SW1P 3BT**

020 7783 8330

[www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)

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