



Alternative Provision in Sheffield 2025

An update on progress since the city-wide review of Alternative Provision carried out in December 2019

Background and context

Learn Sheffield has a long history of working in the alternative provision sector. In 2019 and following on from a piece of work on exclusions in the city, Learn Sheffield was commissioned by Sheffield City Council (SCC) to carry out quality assurance visits to every alternative provision provider on the local authority framework. The purpose of these visits was to support self-evaluation, identify areas of strong practice, and identify areas of potential support.

These initial quality assurance visits highlighted the need for a more holistic understanding of alternative provision in the city. In December 2019, a review of alternative provision was carried out (again commissioned by SCC). This was a significant undertaking; it spanned three days and involved 14 people. It included discussions with school leaders, alternative provision providers, Sheffield Inclusion Centre, key personnel at the local authority, and pupils. A small number of case studies were conducted, and data from the local authority and national datasets was used to understand the alternative provision landscape. Key lines of enquiry were:

1. How effective, efficient and appropriate are the current systems and processes linked to alternative provision?
2. How well does the curriculum meet the needs of learners and how do all parties ensure that alternative provision is coherent and complimentary?
3. How effective are systems for monitoring the quality of education, attendance and progression?
4. How does the geographical spread of providers and the location of the Sheffield Inclusion Centre impact on the choice and quality of provision for learners?

The findings of the review were published in a report. The report was shared with the local authority and all relevant stakeholders. It was also shared with the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), who supported part of the review. This led to other work with CSJ¹ and IntegratEd² (including the development of a dashboard for the AP Quality Toolkit). Learn Sheffield also contributed to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Exclusions and Alternative Provision³.

The report made 11 recommendations, including:

- Improved communication between schools, providers and the local authority in relation to AP.
- To develop a facility to oversee primary-aged pupils accessing alternative provision.
- To increase the range, capacity and type of alternative provision at all key stages.
- To review the approach to provider contract renewal and enhance the quality assurance process.
- To consider the changing landscape of education with the city and its impact on alternative provision.
- To explore the benefits of collaboration between AP providers.

In 2024, and as part of a renewed relationship with the local authority, SCC commissioned an update to the original review, and this is the focus of this report. For clarity, the scope of the current review was to provide an update on what has changed in the intervening five years, to identify areas of emerging strength, and to make recommendations for areas of improvement. The review is not intended as a repeat of the 2019 review. The review was led by Sai Patel and Steve Shaw (Learn

¹ <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CSJ8057-Cold-Spots-Report-200507-v1-WEB.pdf>

² <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/AP-Quality-Toolkit-2022.pdf>

³ <https://www.integrated.org.uk/video/appg-school-exclusions-and-alternative-provision/>

Sheffield Improvement Partners) and carried out in collaboration with lead officers from the local authority.

The demand: Who typically accesses the provision?

Two key elements were used to gather information about AP in Sheffield. The first was data provided by the team at the local authority with oversight of AP (the Progressions Team), and the second was using census data from schools (which includes pupils accessing AP). The data indicates some significant changes since 2019, many of which were related to the pandemic.

Census data shows that numbers attending the PRU are approaching double the national average, with 262 pupils in state-funded AP in 2024. In terms of AP more generally, close to 500 pupils accessed AP in 2023/24 and around a fifth of these were primary aged pupils. Moreover, the census data shows that, in terms of school-based placements, a lower proportion of secondary-aged pupils in Sheffield access AP than national, but greater primary-aged pupils are accessing AP than national. Trends in the data show that the demand for AP is increasing since the pandemic. This reflects trends in behaviour, exclusions, SEND, and mental health.

The cohort accessing AP is characterised by a range of factors. Around 70% of the AP cohort are White British and the same proportion are male. More than half of the pupils accessing AP are classed as being disadvantaged and three-quarters had some form of special educational need, with 41% having an EHCP. These groups are accessing AP disproportionately; those with an EHCP accessing AP in Sheffield is approaching twice the national average.

The supply: Provision in city

The city continues to be unique nationally by virtue of the fact that nearly all AP is unregistered provision, i.e. they are not recognised by the Department of Education and are not regulated by Ofsted. In Sheffield, 90% of placements are in unregistered provision (the national average being 60%).

AP in the city has increased over time. In 2023/24 there were 26 providers on the local authority framework, and in the current year there are 36 settings providing AP for young people. Of these (and including Sheffield Inclusion Centre), 3 are registered provision (8%). Most provision is located close to the city centre or in the south of it. Except for one setting in Barnsley and one in Rotherham, all AP settings on the local authority framework are in the city.

How is AP used?

More than half of the cohort are placed in AP for behavioural support, and just over a fifth have a mental health need. These are close to the national figures. The local authority has worked hard to ensure that no pupil in the city accesses a single provision for more than 18 hours. This would be deemed as being a full-time placement and would constitute as an unregistered provider operating as an illegal school.

This, however, does not mean that no pupil accesses AP for more than 18 hours in a week, they could be in multiple provisions in any given week and cumulatively, this might add up to more than 18 hours. The scale of this is not routinely analysed. In 2019, AP was used for those pupils identified as CME or new to the city. This is no longer the case.

The data shows that attendance to AP in 2023/24 was 72%, with no discernible differences between disadvantaged pupils or SEND pupils and their peers. There is significant variation between the providers, with attendance ranging from 93% to 44%. For comparison, in 2018/19 attendance stood at 61%, with a range of 12.5% to 81.1%.

The intended programme and content of each AP is summarised in two brochures (secondary and primary) produced by the Progressions Team. In 2023/24, at secondary level, only 3 providers were offering Level 2 qualifications. The remainder of providers offer either Entry Level or Level 1 qualifications (e.g. Unit Awards, Certificates etc., ASDAN), or non-accredited pathways. Whilst these courses are on offer, the uptake, scale of achievement, and progress made are not well understood. A system to record qualifications achieved is in place, but there is limited evidence on how this is used at a strategic level. This is particularly pertinent where pupils are accessing multiple AP within a week.

AP in Sheffield rarely results in the reintegration of pupils into full-time education at their schools. In 2023/24, only 6% of pupils were deemed as being 'closed'. Once 'closed', it is assumed that this means that they are no longer accessing AP. This, however, may not be the case. A pupil might still be accessing AP albeit through a private contract between a school and a provider, or they could have simply moved out of the area. In any case, given the low figure for reintegration, this is a moot point.

The low number of closed referrals is indicative of a wider culture towards AP in the city; AP is not viewed as being a short-term measure. In Sheffield, a pupil accessing AP in the autumn term is likely to still be at the provision in the summer term. Some will access some form of AP for the remainder of their school career. Given that the youngest pupils accessing AP in the city are now in Reception, this is of concern.

The lack of reintegration is due to the structure and type of AP in the city and in part at least to the current systems and processes being used by the local authority. Unregistered provision is typically a commercial venture, and so short-term programmes present a challenge in terms of business continuity and sustainability. The forms completed by schools and the agreements signed by parents do not reference reintegration; no time frame is given for when a pupil might exit AP. The same is true of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) used for monitoring on a termly basis. Short-term support and reintegration are simply absent from AP in Sheffield.

Key changes since the last review

Since the last review, there have been significant and positive structural changes in the local authority. The Progressions Team, which leads on AP, sits within Access and Inclusion. Inclusions and Attendance, CME, EHE, and virtual school all sit alongside the Progressions Team. This represents a more logical positioning for AP than was previously the case.

The AP team comprises of a service manager, leads for finance, contracts, and quality, and five placement officers (the majority of whom are former teachers). The team has grown marginally since the last review. There has been significant turnover of staff in the team; the vast majority of people now in post were not in post during the review of 2019.

There have been significant improvements in the operational practices of the Progressions Team. The ILPs were refined and now include a range of targets, which (when applicable) align with those in EHCPs. Monitoring systems have been refined, and templates were introduced for providers aimed at ascertaining progress made each term. Attendance is now monitored on a three-weekly basis and is used in meetings with schools. Communication between schools, providers, and the local authority has improved.

Contracts are now three years in length (in 2019 they were reviewed on an annual basis). This has aided recruitment and retention of staff for providers. It has helped with sustainability and stability in the sector, and local authority leaders feel that the continuity of staff has, to some degree, contributed to improving the quality of provision.

A network of providers has been established, although this is in its early stages. Providers are mandated to engage with this network, and a long-term goal of this network is to strengthen the quality of education with AP in Sheffield. Sheffield Inclusion Centre was inspected in November 2023 and was rated 'good' in all areas. It no longer provides AP but does use it (38 pupils in 2023/24).

A key change has been the introduction of AP for primary-aged children in the city. This was introduced in 2023, and its growth reflects a national pattern⁴. Need is often linked to SEMH and 'dysregulated behaviour'. There are currently 11 providers in the city catering for primary pupils and as mentioned previously, primary-aged pupils represent more than a fifth of the AP cohort. On average, AP placements for primary-aged pupils cost around 30% more than secondary placements.

Whilst the Progressions team carry out several safeguarding checks, such as ensuring that staff at AP have enhanced DBS checks, risk assessments remain the responsibility of schools. The completion of these is not monitored or checked by the local authority and this represents a risk that needs to be addressed.

One of the recommendations from the last review was 'to develop and launch an overarching vision for alternative provision in Sheffield which is connected to the wider vision for a strong inclusive system'. This became the focus for an AP working group formed after the 2019 review. The AP working group also focussed on the development of a strategy to address the points made in the last review. This strategy never materialised and this, to a degree, has impeded progress towards the recommendations made. This highlights the need for more effective mechanisms for governance and line management within the local authority.

Reflections

The demand for alternative provision in Sheffield remains significant and is growing. This is particularly evident for primary-aged pupils. Since the last review, there have been improvements in both the diversity of providers and the management of the commissioning service provided by the local authority. The introduction of provision for primary aged pupils has been well received and safeguarding has been strengthened. Attendance is now monitored in a more robust manner and there are plans to develop this further. The period of contracts has been extended to three years, and this has aided recruitment and retention in the sector. That said, there are some important areas for development:

SEND support by proxy

The data shows a disproportionate of pupils with some form of SEND access AP, and this is particularly acute for those with an EHCP. AP then, is seen as being an appropriate intervention for those with SEND. The vast majority of AP in the Sheffield remains unregistered, and the lack of formal regulation means the quality of AP in Sheffield remains variable. Whilst systems for monitoring have been formalised and are now more structured, there is little compelling evidence to suggest that AP in the city is meeting the needs of these pupils, academically or otherwise.

This would suggest that AP is perhaps being used as a proxy for more formal and structured interventions. This occurs because the limited access to such services and chimes with findings from the Department for Education: 'Some pupils with complex needs stay in AP for years while waiting for a special school place'⁵ and those that underpin the SEND Manifesto being led by Learn Sheffield.

⁴ [Alternative provision for primary-age pupils in England: a long-term 'destination' or a 'temporary solution'? - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ [Alternative provision for primary-age pupils in England: a long-term 'destination' or a 'temporary solution'? - GOV.UK](#)

Quality control rather than quality assurance

Much of the monitoring currently in place is about compliance (i.e. quality control) rather than evaluation (quality assurance). It is easy to see if termly tutor reports have been completed or not, but it is much harder to ascertain the quality of provision; an AP provider can be fully compliant with the requirements of the Progressions Team and yet not improve outcomes for pupils.

Many of the targets are long-term goals (i.e. linked to the end of a key stage) and the quality of these is variable and often vague. Moreover, it is not always clear as to how these are going to be achieved, and few relate to academic outcomes. It is sometimes difficult to ascertain accurately what progress has been made towards the targets cited in ILPs or indeed the likelihood of those targets being achieved by the end of the placement. Updates from providers are often subjective and do not always link directly with targets.

Data is not routinely analysed and used to inform strategy. A range of data now exists but this has not been collated or cross-referenced. For example, the number of pupils accessing multiple provisions is not known and this means that it is difficult to understand what their educational diet comprises of. The improved use of data would help to ascertain and inform the quality of provision, but there is a recognition that this might require increased capacity of the relevant team at the local authority.

The absence of reintegration as an endpoint

The data shows that AP is not viewed as a short-term intervention to support pupils to re-engage with their education. Only a very small proportion of pupils in Sheffield ceased using AP in the last academic year and the reasons for this are not fully understood. This figure (6%) does not compare favourably with the national figure (46%)⁶.

For a small proportion of pupils (those who have been excluded or are accessing a pupil referral unit), AP will be a long-term measure. The longer a pupil spends in AP, the less likelihood there is of them returning to full-time mainstream education and research shows that age of pupils when they first attend AP correlates with lower later attainment⁷.

Re-integration into mainstream education in Sheffield is not prioritised sufficiently well and this is evident in the absence of the term in both referral and monitoring forms; there is no sense that an AP placement is anything other than indefinite.

Some registered alternative provision settings in other parts of the country have two routes for pupils: short-term (typically a term or shorter) and long-term (a year or longer). Because the endpoint of these is different, these pathways focus on different things (i.e. the long-term route is more curriculum focussed). In Sheffield, the notion of a short-term placement is largely absent. This could relate to the fact that nearly all the provision is unregistered; these are commercial entities which are reliant on the funding they receive from schools via the Progressions Team. From a business perspective, long-term placements mean long-term funding and this in turn brings financial sustainability.

The content and quality of provision

The quality of provision remains variable. Specific aspects of provision, such as the curriculum or programme of study, are not well understood and this relates to a focus on quality control rather than quality assurance. This also relates to the principle of understanding clearly 'how' targets are going to be achieved. Given that AP placements tend to be long-term, with a pupil typically attending one day per week for a year, there needs to be an appropriate balance between intervention

⁶ [working_paper_reintegration.pdf](#)

⁷ https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/working_paper_ap_quality_v4.pdf

strategies to address specific needs (for example, self-regulation or behaviours) and academic learning. This would help aid reintegration. Targets need to focus on both support strategies and learning. There needs to be more stringent monitoring of the quality of education.

Next steps

Consolidating the findings of this report down into three key areas for improvement:

- **Better intelligence:** Whilst there have been significant improvements in the management of AP in the city, there remains a need for more detailed data to be used to inform strategy and more robust quality assurance (with a specific focus on the quality of education).
- **Better provision:** Whilst there are undoubtedly some examples of effective provision in the city, the quality of provision remains variable. Increasing the number of registered providers in the city (either through existing providers going through the registration process or through the creation of new entities) would help support this aim. There needs to be an appropriate balance between support and learning.
- **Better progress:** In this context, progress can be measured through the achievement of targets, academic outcomes, or the reintegration of pupils into their schools. In Sheffield, all of these need to improve, and this links to both of the points above.

To help develop these further, we propose the formation of an 'AP Taskforce'. The AP taskforce will need to have representation from the local authority, the AP sector, Sheffield Inclusion Centre, and the education sector. The AP taskforce will be connected to the education sector via the sector partnership groups supported by Learn Sheffield (notably Secondary Partnership, Primary Partnership Group and Special & IR Partnership). It will also be connected to other significant groups (including the Safeguarding Partnership).

This group would need to agree on the key priorities for the city's strategy for AP and then scope out the required actions and precursors needed to achieve these. The work of the group would serve to inform a future strategy for AP and a five-year operational plan for change. This would be created by Learn Sheffield and shared with the sector for review and adoption in 2025-2026 academic year. Given the clear link between SEND and AP, this process will also connect to the SEND manifesto.