

The Future of Alternative Provision in Sheffield

Background and context

This proposal follows on from discussions between Learn Sheffield, colleagues from the sector and Sheffield City Council. The desired outcome of the proposal is to establish a city-wide strategy and operational plan for alternative provision (AP), to facilitate stronger and more effective AP which better meets the needs of young people in the city.

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 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 had 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.

Learn Sheffield was also commissioned to create a network of alternative provision providers and hosted a training session for alternative provision providers in January 2020. The original intention was for these to take place each term. This was halted by the onset of the pandemic.

In response to the review, the local authority created an AP task group. This group included representatives from the local authority, the alternative provision sector, Sheffield Inclusion Centre, and schools. Progress was limited and Learn Sheffield's involvement in this group ceased in March

¹ <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CSJJ8057-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/>

2022. This followed inappropriate conduct of a local authority officer towards a member of Learn Sheffield team and was in the context of a deteriorating relationship between the organisations.

The original report made 11 recommendations:

1. To develop and launch an overarching vision for alternative provision in Sheffield which is connected to the wider vision for a strong inclusive system.
2. To develop better communication between schools, providers and the local authority in relation to AP.
3. To develop a facility to oversee primary-aged pupils accessing alternative provision.
4. To increase the range, capacity and type of alternative provision at all key stages.
5. To improve the availability and use of assessment of need when a young person accesses alternative provision.
6. To rethink the way that Sheffield City Council resources and supports the AP Framework.
7. To review the approach to provider contract renewal and enhance the quality assurance process.
8. To consider the capacity and role of the Sheffield Inclusion Centre.
9. To consider the changing landscape of education with the city and its impact on alternative provision.
10. To explore the benefits of collaboration between AP providers.
11. To further investigate areas which were identified during the review and deemed worthy of further investigation and action.

Stage 1: Understanding the landscape

There is now a renewed commitment from the local authority, Learn Sheffield, and the educational sector to improve AP in the city. A logical starting point would be to glean an accurate understanding of the current context in the city. To achieve this, Sai Patel and Steve Shaw will produce an update to the original report. This will involve two key elements: updating the data sets from the original report and meeting with local authority representatives to better understand key changes from the original review. This will be used to create an updated set of proposed recommendations.

Stage 2: Refining and defining action

This would involve the formation of an AP taskforce. We envisage that the first meeting of the taskforce will be a wider open event. This will enable the feedback from stage one to be understood more widely, a broader group of colleagues to respond and share knowledge and the mandate of the taskforce to be embedded more strongly into the education landscape.

The AP taskforce will need to have representation from the local authority, the AP sector, Sheffield Inclusion Centre, and the education sector (including Minerva Learning Trust and Brigantia Learning Trust who have a direct involvement in AP). The Department for Education and a representative of the Parent Carer Forum would be invited to be part of this group. 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 Safeguarding Partnership).

The group would aim to meet termly. This group would need to refine and agree the recommendations, agree on the key priorities for the city's strategy for AP, and then scope out the required actions and precursors for the creation and establishment of the strategy.

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. This could take the form of a Sheffield AP Summit, i.e. with the aim of gaining wider consensus for the proposed strategy and plan from stakeholders.

Once this has been achieved, the approach to the implementation of the plan will need to be developed. This will be a function of the planned actions and buy-in from stakeholders. This also needs to align with other streams of work in the city, for example with SEND or the SAFE taskforce.