



Alternative Provision in Sheffield: A Research Study

December 2019

Abstract

In the autumn of 2019, a working group looking at alternative provision in Sheffield commissioned a research study to explore and understand the alternative provision landscape across the city. This report outlines the key findings from the three day review, recommendations for improvement and areas for further investigation.

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Introduction

This holistic review of alternative provision in Sheffield was proposed by a working group comprising of representatives from Learn Sheffield, Sheffield City Council and the alternative providers' network. The study aims to inform system-wide reform and in so doing, better meet the needs of young people, their schools, the providers and Sheffield City Council.

Methodology

The study took place on 4th–6th December and was carried out by two teams. The teams included individuals who volunteered their time to support the review and included representatives from: Learn Sheffield, the local authority, alternative provision providers, and all phases of the school system. In all, thirteen people were involved in carrying out the review. The composition of the teams varied from day to day; a small core group of individuals were present throughout the study.

Activities included meetings with different teams from the local authority and the teams visited four alternative provision providers, three primary schools, two secondary schools and Sheffield Inclusion Centre. The Social Care team at the authority and a primary school provided detailed case studies to the team. One team spoke with the Alternative Provision Programme Lead at the Centre for Social Justice via telephone and also with the consultant supporting the Action Research Project being led by the Virtual School. Representatives from schools were also invited to contribute to an open forum held on the first day of the process.

Key areas of investigation

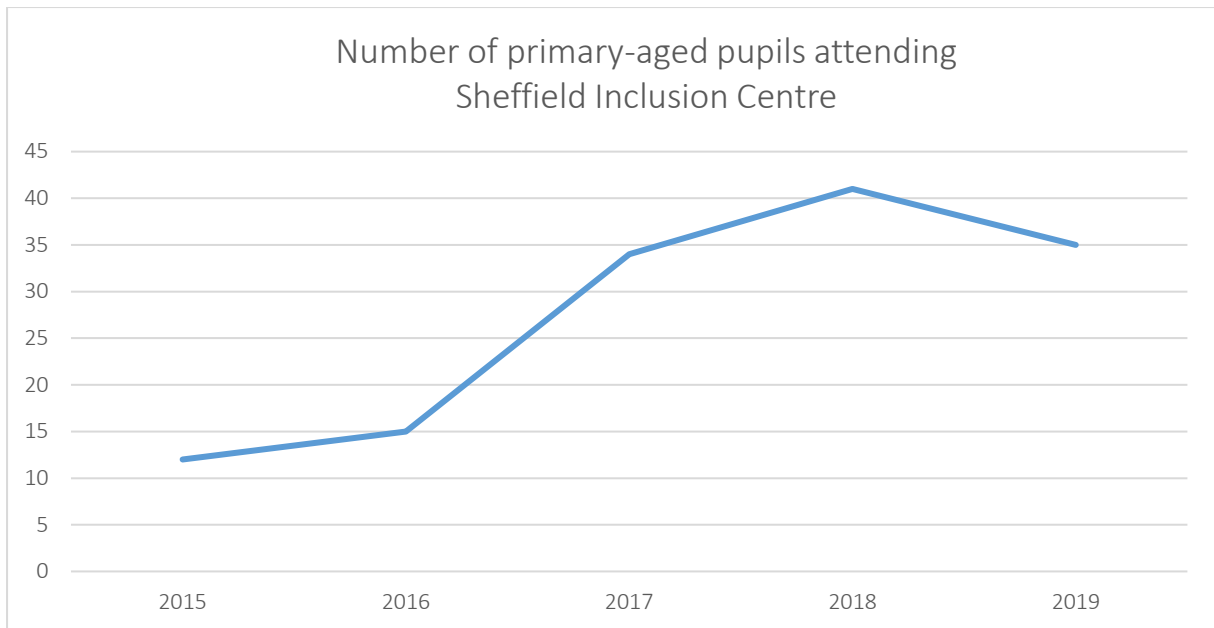
1. How effective, efficient and appropriate are the current systems and processes linked to alternative provision?
2. How well does the curriculum meet the needs of learners and how do all parties ensure that alternative provision is coherent and complementary?
3. How effective are systems for monitoring 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?

Context and cohort

In the 2018-19 academic year, at least 359 secondary aged pupils in Sheffield accessed some form of alternative provision. The approximate nature of this figure is because of the way in which data is recorded; some students accessing provision in the city are from outside of the city, and some move within the year. The figure cited above does not include these.

Any detailed understanding of the use of alternative provision is further complicated by virtue of the fact that existing data does not include information about any private contracts or arrangements between schools and providers, and neither does it take into account fully all students at Sheffield Inclusion Centre who access alternative provision. A growing number of schools in the city are starting to develop their own alternative provision, and these numbers are not included in the available data.

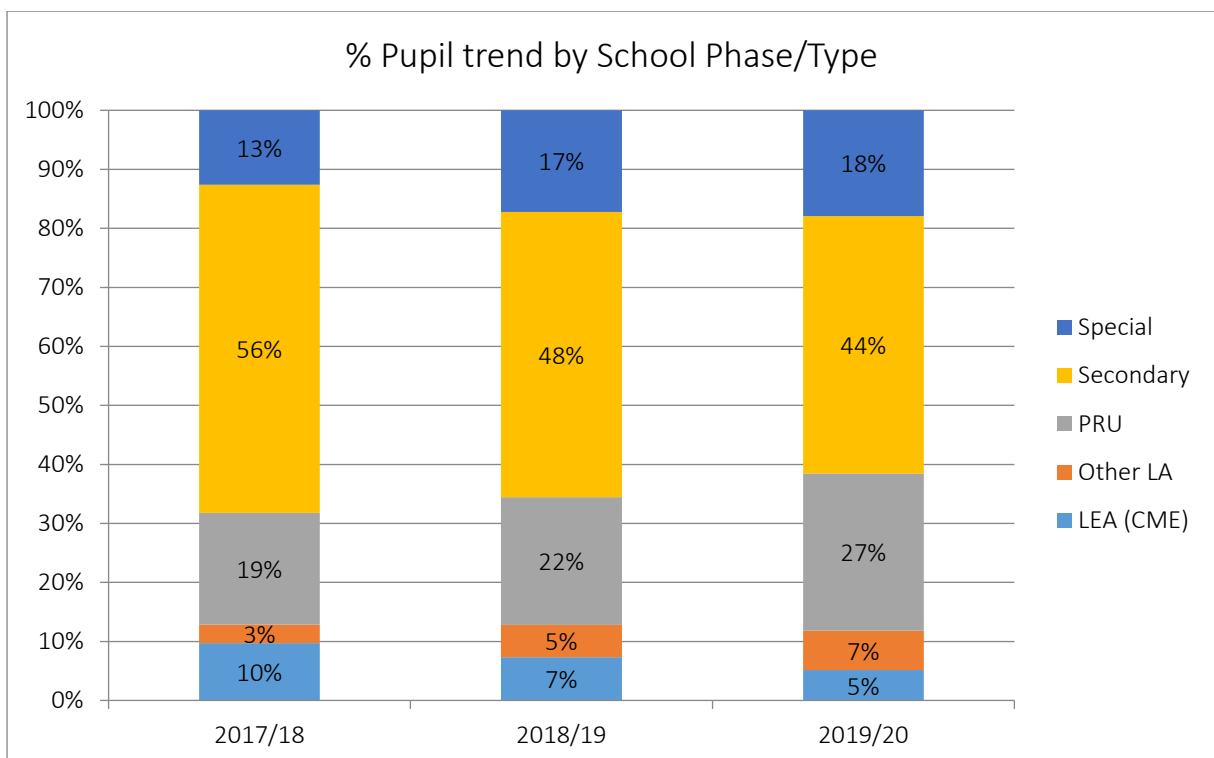
No city-wide data exists for the number of primary aged students accessing alternative provision, and yet it is widely acknowledged that an increasing number of younger pupils are doing so. Data for the proportion of primary students attending Sheffield Inclusion Centre does show significant growth; numbers have nearly tripled since 2015.



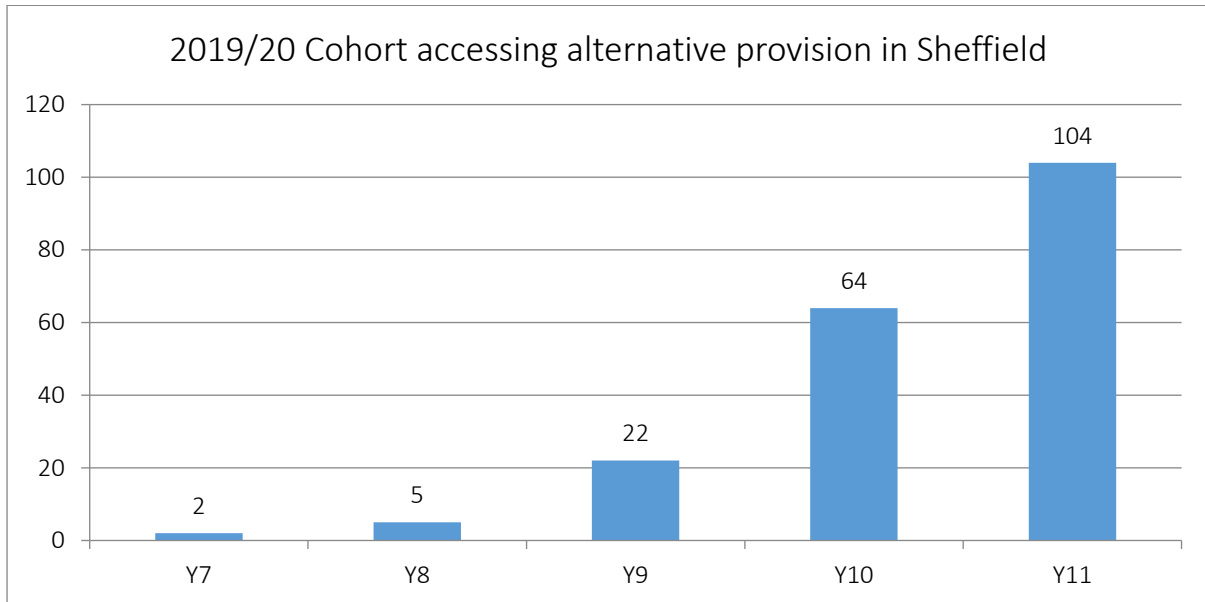
Source: FFT Education Datalab

All data in the remaining section of this report relates only to those students who are allocated to alternative provision placements by the local authority via the framework that is in place.

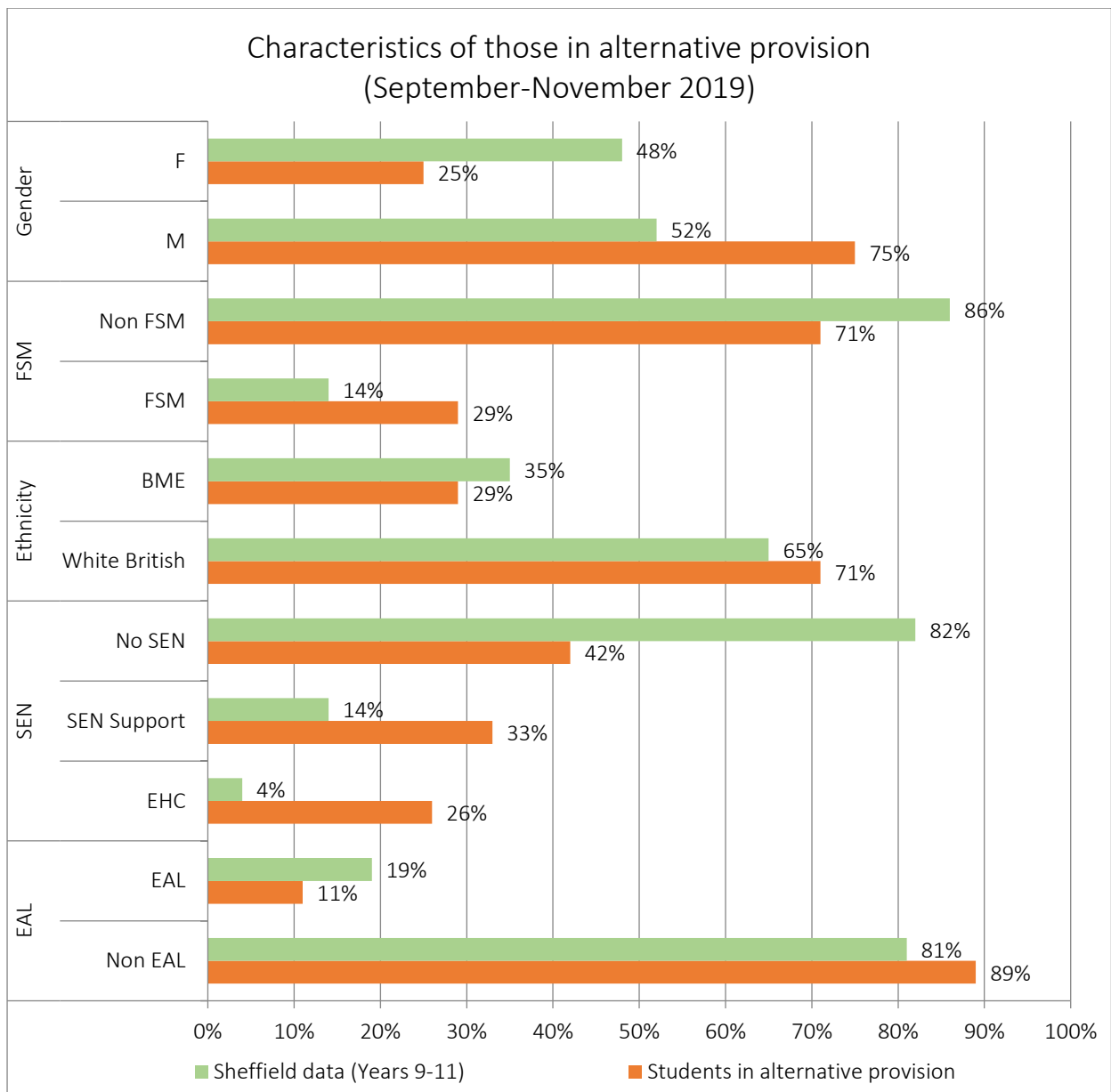
Analysis of the data from the local authority might suggest that the number of secondary-age students accessing alternative provision is in decline. In 2016/17 there were 497, in 2017/18 there were 381 and in the last academic year 383 students were allocated alternative provision placements through the local authority. In the first three months of the current academic year, 197 students accessed some form of alternative provision. This does not necessarily mean that schools are using alternative provision less, and could be linked to the increased use of either private contracts or school-run alternative provision; further data is required in order to draw any meaningful conclusions.



The chart above shows the changing demographic of those accessing alternative provision. The proportion of those from secondary schools shows some decrease, while those from special schools or from Sheffield Inclusion Centre show an increase. Out of authority placements, for example from Rotherham, show steady but small growth. The available data shows that in the first three months of the current academic year, 197 students accessed alternative provision in Sheffield through the local authority framework.



Nearly all of the students are in Year 9, 10, or 11. The following table provides more contextual information about the current cohort and compares their characteristics with Year 9–11 students in Sheffield as a whole.



Key points of note are:

- One in four students accessing alternative provision are female
- Those who are eligible for free school meals or those who have special educational needs are twice as likely as their peers to attend alternative provision
- Those with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) are six times as likely to access alternative provision as their peers
- Those with English as an additional language are less likely to access alternative provision through the local authority.

How effective, efficient and appropriate are the current systems and processes linked to alternative provision?

There is currently no mechanism in place for placing or monitoring alternative provision for primary aged pupils. Evidence suggests that there is a growing need for some form of alternative provision in this sector. Unlike the secondary sector, no directory of approved providers exists and neither is there a common daily rate. Some primary schools in the city have carried out extensive research on potential providers, completed their own risk assessments and have organised transport to providers. For two days of alternative provision, these schools are paying in the region of £15-20,000 per annum. This demonstrates the commitment of school leaders in meeting the needs of all children in their care; they do not want to permanently exclude those with the most complex needs.

Naturally, the needs of each primary pupil will vary, but they are significantly different from older students. Often, need is linked to a special educational need, mental health or specific behaviours. A case study of a pupil who has been accessing alternative provision since Year 2 exemplifies this. In this case, and with other primary schools visited during the research study, leaders have carried out highly effective assessments of need and have liaised with providers to ensure that the alternative provision curriculum aligns to these. A close working partnership with the providers means that there is effective integration between the work of the provider and the school.

The use of data relating to those in alternative provision is not always systematic or regular. The system currently in use was developed by the Performance and Analysis Service in 2013. This involved adapting a module on a management information system for work experience to cater for those in alternative provision; it was never planned as a permanent solution. A number of report templates have been developed for the Progressions team to access and use.

The system does not link to other systems in the local authority. For example, Social Care or the Youth Work teams both use other systems. This lack of coherence between systems means that key information is not always shared and this has a detrimental effect on ensuring appropriate provision and on monitoring, e.g. transition at Post-16. A case study of a secondary age pupil highlights the need for better sharing of information between social workers, providers and schools. A more unified management information system would greatly aid the more effective sharing of information and would mitigate against the risks associated with silo working. Where the Progressions Team are using information effectively, for example in the mapping of student's contextual safeguarding needs, this could also be enhanced by stronger links across Sheffield City Council and with providers and schools.

Currently, all providers on the framework are required to re-register to be an approved provider on an annual basis. The rationale behind this is to make it possible for new providers to join the framework. Providers report that this creates an issue in terms of staff retention and recruitment. The uncertainty created by annual contracts means that pupils accessing alternative provision experience a lack of continuity and expertise. This links to the quality of education they receive and their engagement and attendance.

The quality of communication between schools, providers and the local authority is variable. There are examples of strong practice, but in a number of cases the absence of timely information is having a negative impact on the quality of provision. In some cases, providers or Sheffield Inclusion Centre are often provided with only limited information about a pupil and this limits the degree to which they can personalise the curriculum in a timely way which maximises initial engagement with new provision by pupils who are often disengaged with education. More importantly, key information relating to mental health or special needs are not always shared in appropriate detail; this creates risk.

How well does the curriculum meet the needs of learners and how do all parties ensure that alternative provision is coherent and complementary?

Schools would value an increased range of alternative provision in the city and particularly at primary level and at key stage 3; there is a growing demand in this area. There are currently only a limited number of providers on the alternative provision framework. The capacity, type and geographical location of these mean that they are not always appropriate. One suggestion from the school sector is the notion of more peripatetic alternative provision, with specialists delivering an alternative curriculum within a school setting or using the school as the base for engagement. This model is not without its drawbacks, but is perhaps worthy of further consideration as an element of a more comprehensive map of provision.

There is a growing consensus toward using alternative provision as a short-term early intervention rather than another school-type setting. Primary schools visited during the research study were keen for pupils to be re-integrated fully into the life of the school. Examples included workers from the alternative provision providers working within the school setting. This approach has obvious benefits for transition and reintegration. Schools are keen for a more responsive, dynamic and flexible approach to model for alternative provision.

Many providers offer a nurture curriculum to help support their students. Where this is done well, the nurture curriculum is tailored to meet the needs of the individual, and often involves close working between providers and schools. In other cases, the nurture curriculum is planned less well. The lack of accreditation sometimes means that this curriculum is not appropriately sequenced or assessed against clearly defined goals.

Some students attend alternative provision at different providers. There is no clear or consistently applied mechanism for mapping the curriculum they receive in different settings. This means the curriculum they receive sometimes lacks coherence; the content in one provider does not always complement the content in another.

Outcome and destination data for those accessing alternative provision is not gathered in a discrete way; available data relates to the holistic performance of a pupil. For example, Progress 8 measures would typically include qualifications that may have been completed in a school setting. The curriculum studied at alternative provision can only be viewed as a contributory factor to this. A similar case can be made for destination data.

The timing of census returns and the transient nature of pupils accessing alternative provision both add further complications to the analysis of data. From the available data on outcomes, broad conclusions are that pupils accessing alternative provision perform significantly less well than their peers in the city. This underperformance is particularly acute for high- and middle-ability pupils, and for those with EHCPs. A higher than average proportion of the alternative provision cohort do not progress into education, employment or training.

The lack of coherence in the curriculum offer, coupled with an uncertainty regarding the quality of some alternative provision, means that some schools and multi-academy trusts are now investing in creating their own alternative provision. In spite of significant costs, schools feel this allows a more integrated curriculum, and the use of experienced staff is helping to secure quality. In addition, some schools, both primary and secondary, are radically reshaping their curriculum offer within schools to better meet the needs of learners. All such in-house provision is not subject to quality assurance from the local authority, but is subject to any inspections carried out by Ofsted.

How effective are systems for monitoring the quality of education, attendance and progression?

Some providers spend a significant amount of time and resource in monitoring and analysing attendance. In other cases, the real-time attendance rate of pupils at an alternative provision is not always known. The current framework utilises an online system to capture this attendance data and has the facility to produce reports on attendance as required. This information is analysed and scrutinised by the local authority on a regular basis. Providers are presented with this information on an annual basis.

Data for the last academic year shows that attendance across alternative providers on the local authority framework stand at around 61%. There is considerable variation in rates of attendance, ranging from 12.5% to 81.1%. The average figure of 61% corresponds to over five thousand days of lost curriculum time and equates to £250,000 of expenditure by schools. Attendance in alternative provision for the first three months of the current academic year stands at 62.5%.

Sheffield Inclusion Centre (SIC) is the largest user of alternative provision in the city. Currently, over a quarter of placements made through the local authority are from this institution. In reality, the figure is much higher; there are separate contracts in place between SIC and six providers in the city. More students are placed in alternative provision through these six contracts than through the local authority framework. These contracts were arranged by the local authority, and some of these six providers are on the framework.

The attendance of pupils accessing alternative provision through these six contracts is not recorded or monitored by the local authority. The attendance figures cited above do not include the six contracts. These providers fall outside many of the normal protocols for providers, but do fall under the quality assurance process commissioned to Learn Sheffield by the local authority. These contracts are a historical arrangement, and the rationale behind continuing it is not fully apparent, but is linked in part to finance.

Data relating to the performance of pupils in alternative provision is not well understood. Whilst there are some examples of providers tracking their own data well, there is currently no mechanism in place to gather this information centrally. This means that the impact of the curriculum in alternative provision is not understood well.

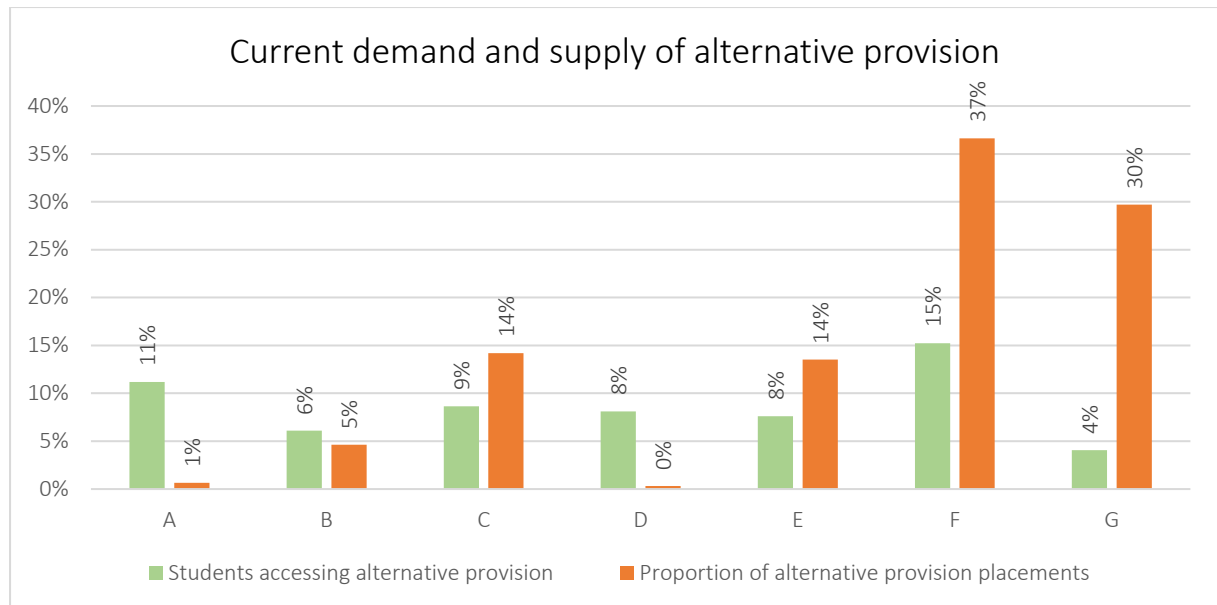
Some schools are overly reliant on the quality assurance of providers carried out by the local authority. The ultimate responsibility for the safeguarding of students will always rest with the schools. The use of the term 'due diligence' means that this key responsibility is not always well understood by schools. Some schools have concerns about the accuracy information from providers and this breakdown in confidence has led to the development of new approaches to the delivery of alternative provision.

Conversely, some schools are not sufficiently cognisant of their responsibilities in relation to ensuring that pupils accessing alternative provision are safe and in receipt of a good quality of education. This is most apparent where the placement is via a private arrangement, which is the case for all primary aged pupils and a proportion of secondary aged pupils.

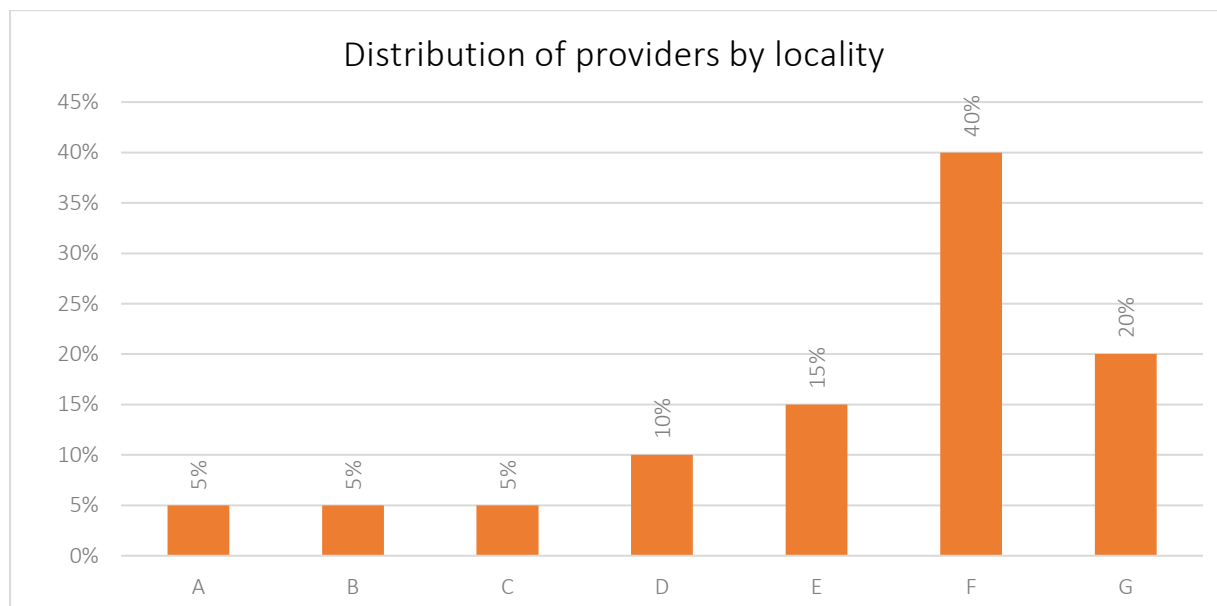
A disconnect in the sharing of information between different teams within the local authority means that providers can often receive a multitude of visits related to quality assurance and compliance. This places an additional burden on providers in accommodating such visits. This lack of coherence reflects a lack of joined up working in the local authority.

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?

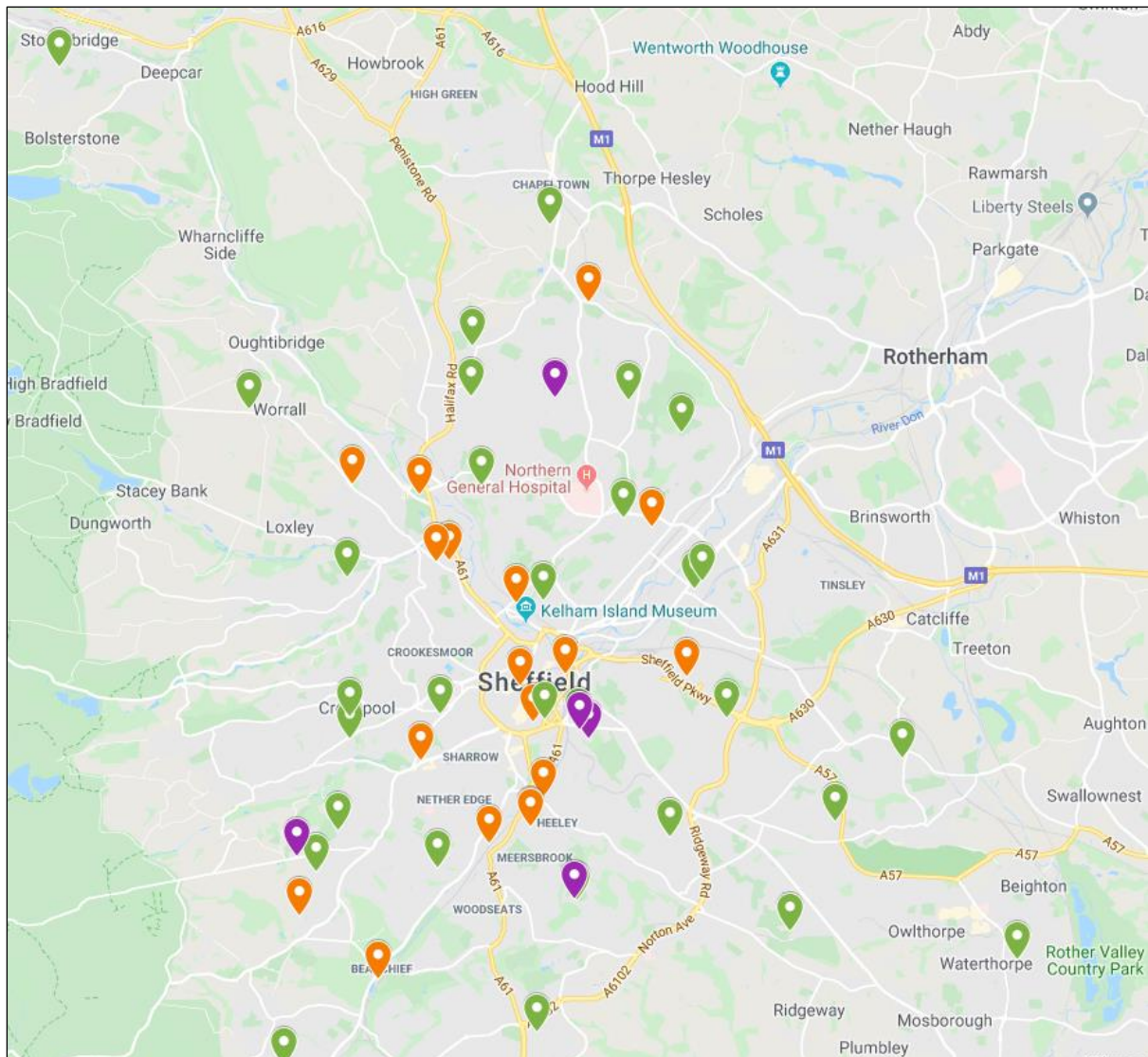
The chart below illustrates the proportion of students in each locality (defined by their home school) currently accessing alternative provision and proportion of alternative provision placements. For clarity, this graph does not show which provision students in a particular locality are attending; it illustrates which localities give rise to the largest demand for alternative provision and the localities which contain the greatest number of placements.



The chart below illustrates the number of alternative providers in each locality, represented as a percentage of the 20 providers on the local authority framework. The data does not provide information on the capacity of each provider, i.e. the number of pupils that could be placed in an institution, but does provide some insight into spread. Localities A, B and C have one provider on the framework in their locality. Locality F represents the city centre.



The map below shows the distribution of providers, secondary and special schools across the city.



📍 Alternative provision providers 📍 Secondary schools 📍 Special Schools

The data implies that pupils accessing alternative provision are often required to travel a significant distance from their home school. This means that some of the most vulnerable and disengaged pupils in Sheffield are required to undertake significant journeys, often unaccompanied. In addition to impacting on attendance and punctuality, this gives rise to safeguarding concerns. At least one pupil in a primary school is required to make a round trip of 24 miles twice a week to access alternative provision. Although accompanied on this journey by an adult, this example highlights the challenges some young people face in accessing an appropriate provision.

Information from the Centre for Social Justice indicates Sheffield does not fare well nationally in terms of the quality of alternative provision; it features in the bottom ten of all local authorities. Factors included in their analysis include the Ofsted ratings of any pupil referral units in a city, destination data, success rates in English and mathematics and attendance. The result of their analysis is due, in part, to Sheffield Inclusion Centre being located on a single site. This is relatively uncommon in large cities; Birmingham has a number of satellite provisions which are placed to ensure appropriate coverage across the city.

Recommendations

Good alternative provision

30. Good alternative provision is that which appropriately meets the needs of pupils which required its use and enables them to achieve good educational attainment on par with their mainstream peers. All pupils must receive a good education, regardless of their circumstances or the settings in which they find themselves. Provision will differ from pupil to pupil, but there are some common elements that alternative provision should aim to achieve, including:

- good academic attainment on par with mainstream schools – particularly in English, maths and science (including IT) – with appropriate accreditation and qualifications;
- that the specific personal, social and academic needs of pupils are properly identified and met in order to help them to overcome any barriers to attainment;
- improved pupil motivation and self-confidence, attendance and engagement with education; and
- clearly defined objectives, including the next steps following the placement such as reintegration into mainstream education, further education, training or employment.

Source: Alternative Provision, Statutory guidance for local authorities, January 2013, Department for Education

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.

A more integrated approach is required such that the systems become pupil-centred and responsive to pupil needs. Thought needs to be given to the underlying principles and purpose of alternative provision to build on the consensus that alternative provision should serve as a short-term 'step out' intervention with an ultimate goal of reengagement and reintegration. Stakeholders from schools, providers and the local authority need to help develop the new vision, which should link explicitly to other strategic decisions which relate to vulnerable pupils. A shared understanding of what excellent alternative provision looks like, coupled with robust systems and processes, will aid implementation. Useful sources of information are the latest inspection report for Westside School¹ (an outstanding alternative provision provider in London), and the report from the House of Commons Education Committee on alternative provision and exclusions².

The over-arching vision for alternative provision must be connected to the wider vision for a strong inclusive system across the city. This requires connectivity to high quality inclusive schools in communities and additional local provision which meets the learning needs of children and young people in the holistic context of care and health needs. This vision must be driven by high standards and a relentless drive to support achievement so that Sheffield's children become resilient, thriving confident young people who can flourish and contribute to their communities and wider city as they become adults. It must retain a focus on the ambition of the city to educated children and young people in high quality local schools and academies.

¹ <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50126538>

² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/342/342.pdf>

2. To develop better communication between schools, providers and the local authority in relation to AP.

Communication between schools, providers and the local authority needs to be more consistent and purposeful. Clear expectations of what information is required and when it is required need to be defined and agreed upon by all parties. In addition to information from schools at the point of referral, consideration needs to be given to how progress will be reported to schools by providers; common systems would enable a standardised approach. Such protocols would mean improved tailoring of the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils, and improved monitoring of progress.

3. To develop a facility to oversee primary-aged pupils accessing alternative provision.

This should include helping to identify the scale and type of need, sourcing providers, and establishing processes linked to allocation, monitoring and quality assurance. Due consideration needs to be given to the geographical spread of providers; extensive travel is a more significant problem for younger pupils. The case studies and feedback from primary schools indicate the need for distinct provision; this is not simply about existing providers expanding. Furthermore, the recommendation is made that the primary aspect not be automatically subsumed into the existing framework, at least not without increasing capacity. A Primary framework should support QA of provision to ensure that the quality of education and safeguarding are monitored whilst remaining cognisant that it isn't our ambition to increase the number of primary pupils accessing AP.

4. To increase the range, capacity and type of alternative provision at all key stages.

Due regard needs to be given to geographical location and transport links. This would help to increase attendance and punctuality, improve engagement, reduce safeguarding risks, and better meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable pupils in the city. Models of a more peripatetic approach to the delivery of alternative provision need to be explored and developed. Whilst this will not meet the needs of all pupils, it may serve to provide a more short-term and cost effective solution for some.

5. To improve the availability and use of assessment of need when a young person accesses alternative provision.

The use of assessment must be improved so that pupils have the opportunity to make progress against appropriate learning goals. This has implications for both the expansion of available provision, to include access to high quality assessment and therapeutic provision and the development of referral processes to capture available information.

6. To rethink the way that SCC resources and supports the AP Framework.

The local authority needs to develop and adopt a more effective way of sharing information between different teams. This improved sharing of information would help impact the placing of pupils, the quality of the curriculum they access, improve communication, be more cost-effective and allow the more meaningful use of data to inform strategy. In considering this recommendation, the local authority may wish to consider the proximity of the team to teams which are education focused and those working routinely with vulnerable learners.

The current team overseeing the alternative provision framework would benefit from some additional data resource. This would enable the more effective and timely use of data and help support in gathering increased metrics about the cohort accessing alternative provision, success rates and destination data.

7. To review the approach to provider contract renewal and enhance the QA process.

The process of renewal to the approved provider framework needs to be reviewed. There needs to be a greater appreciation of the pressures facing providers, all which are ultimately small businesses. A new approach to the renewal contracts, which still facilitates new providers joining the framework, is needed. The current model of reapplication is having a detrimental and significant effect on the retention and recruitment of staff, and as a consequence, on the quality of provision. A balance needs to be achieved between the need for commercial compliance and stability for providers; all agencies need to consider the potential impact on pupils. The responsibility for safeguarding and other checks needs clarifying and emphasising. Any 'due diligence' should identify where the liability for risk lies.

The quality assurance process should be reviewed and consideration should be given to the frequency and range of support and challenge for providers. Visits from different teams in the local authority to providers also need to be consolidated. The increased sharing of information would create efficiencies and provide a more holistic view of each provider. The local authority and the inclusion centre need to review the use of separate contracts. The current arrangement creates inconsistency, and leads to a lack of clarity as to where the responsibility for appropriate checks and monitoring lies. The notion of these contracts being linked to different costings gives rise to a review of the funding mechanism as a whole.

8. To consider the capacity and role of the Sheffield Inclusion Centre.

Consideration needs to be given to the capacity and single-site nature of Sheffield Inclusion centre. At the time of the review there were 219 pupils on roll at SIC. The number of places available is 170. This excess of pupils means that SIC is highly reliant on alternative provision. In addition to significant costs, this adds complexity to mapping the curriculum, monitoring progress and securing attendance.

9. To consider the changing landscape of education with the city and its impact on alternative provision.

The review, along with other information, shows an increasing number of multi-academy trusts and schools are setting up their own form of alternative provision, or are brokering contracts directly with providers. The new Education Inspection Framework has a clear focus on providing an appropriate curriculum for all and for the scrutiny of pupils who access education in another location. The framework for providers needs to adapt itself to accommodate the impact of these changes. The local authority should consider how it can provide a city-wide view of alternative provision, be it through the framework or otherwise.

10. To explore the benefits of collaboration between AP providers.

There is some benefit to exploring increased collaboration between providers. This might create a more diverse curriculum offer across the city with more specialisation. Working together could give rise to combined offers of a more complementary curriculum, which has a

greater potential to meet the needs of pupils. Providers could also explore what efficiencies they might make through economies of scale, akin to how some multi-academy trusts operate.

11. To further investigate areas which were identified during the course of the review and deemed worthy of further investigation and action.

- Greater information is required into which students spend the most time accessing alternative provision, understanding their characteristics and in ensuring that no alternative provision is used a substitute for a school. Further investigation of how providers can become registered schools would help inform the sector and potential future strategy.
- The charging model for alternative provision has not been reviewed for some years. Currently, schools pay £50 per pupils for each day of alternative provision placed through the local authority, and providers receive £43. The difference is retained by the local authority for the running of the provider framework. The growing number of private contracts between schools and providers, is due in part, to the ability to negotiate costs. The current funding model needs to be reviewed and the scope of this should include a more flexible model of funding, comparative rates in other local authorities, and discussions with providers and schools.
- Feedback from the alternative provision sector indicates that referrals for those deemed as Children Missing from Education (CME) arrive at providers after 50 days. The origin of this 50-day limit is unclear. The Progressions team at the local authority are not involved in the placing of CME students. Further investigation is required to ascertain more information about the numbers of CME students, the time from which they become known to the point of accessing some form of education, and any underlying reasons for this.
- Sheffield has 850 young people who are deemed as being children looked after (CLA). Around one third of these have an EHCP. There is a recognition that others may require similar plans, but the sometimes transient nature of these vulnerable students, coupled with the length of time required for an assessment of need, means that many may not be receiving the support they are entitled to. The Virtual Schools team currently has an allocation of 0.1 FTE of a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO). Further investigation is required into how to better meet the needs of CLA who might have special educational needs and the resource and strategy required to carry this out.
- Further consideration of the role that alternative provision plays in the education of all pupils with SEND, including those with EHCPs, would be beneficial. The potential vulnerability of pupils with SEND was a recurring theme in this study.
- Further investigation is required to study the use of alternative provision at Post 16. This review has focussed on pupils using alternative provision up to 16. The consideration of the outcomes and destinations at Post 16 would help to inform the development of a more seamless and coherent model for alternative provision. The role that local partners might play in these developments should be considered.

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Thanks to

A Mind Apart

Aspiring Communities Together: Hadfield Centre

Athlestan Primary School

Bents Green School

Centre for Social Justice

Chaucer School

Community Cohesion and Progression Team, Sheffield City Council

Endeavour

FFT Education Datalab

Manor Lodge Primary School

Meadowhead School

Prevention and Early Intervention Services, Sheffield City Council

Reintegration and Exclusion, Sheffield City Council

Sacred Heart School

Sheffield Inclusion Centre

Stocksbridge Junior School

Whirlow Hall Farm Trust

Woodthorpe Primary School