

Doing things differently
*AP free schools
in practice*

FEBRUARY 2026

New
Schools
Network

Executive Summary

Alternative Provision (AP) supports pupils who cannot attend mainstream or special schools due to exclusion, illness or unmet need. AP is a vital but neglected part of the education system.¹ As one school leader described, pupils in Alternative Provision are “easily forgotten because they are out of sight and out of mind”.

Despite serving some of the most vulnerable children, AP operates without clear national standards, consistent accountability or reliable data. Successive reviews, from the Taylor Review (2012) to the SEND and AP Improvement Plan (2023), have recognised the need for reform but many of the proposed changes have not been implemented.

This report argues that AP free schools should play a central role in improving the system. AP free schools are newly established provision by Trusts or groups of teachers with deep understanding of both mainstream schooling and the pupils who cannot currently succeed within it. They embed reflective practice and innovation within a school-led model.

Although they represent just 16% of state-funded AP, evidence in this report shows that AP free schools:

- **Achieve better attendance**, outperforming other forms of state-funded AP between 4 and 14 percentage points.
- **Deliver better post-16 destinations**, being the only state-funded AP that sees a majority of students in education, employment or an apprenticeship a year after leaving.
- **Are more likely to be judged outstanding by Ofsted**, combining academic ambition with tailored pastoral support.

Despite this, the future of AP free schools is under threat with the Government seeking to divert funding from 20 projects in the pipeline to fund the creation of specialist places elsewhere.

The Government’s recent emphasis on internal AP and SEND hubs within mainstream schools does not remove the need for sufficient high-quality Alternative Provision outside mainstream schools. High-quality AP schools are not a retreat from inclusion but an essential part of an inclusive system. But with less than 17,000 places as state-funded Alternative Provision (PRUs, AP Academies and AP free schools) it is impossible for Local Authorities to meet their statutory obligations within the registered state provision. The rising numbers of pupils requiring Alternative Provision means investment decisions are not an “either/ or” choice.

“ *The future of AP free schools is under threat with the Government seeking to divert funding from 20 projects in the pipeline to fund the creation of specialist places elsewhere.*

The forthcoming Schools White Paper offers a critical opportunity to address these issues. With the right reforms, Alternative Provision- and AP free schools in particular- can function as a stable, accountable and effective part of an inclusive education system.

Recommendations:

The right practice

- **Every pupil in AP registered at a state-funded school:** Local Authorities should only be able to discharge their s.19 duty in state-funded institutions. All pupils should be registered at a state-funded school, with the school able to commission support from external providers and held accountable for it.
- **System wide definition for AP:** The Government should use the Schools White Paper to articulate the clear and distinct role of Alternative Provision in the education system.
- **National standards for AP:** The Government should consult on National Standards for Alternative Provision, based on evidence with clear expectations about educational quality and successful long-term outcomes and Ofsted should inspect against them.
- **Continuing to build the evidence base:** AP providers should rigorously evaluate, monitor and share the findings of their programmes and approaches. The Government and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) should sponsor further research into effective practice in AP and findings of what works should be disseminated through behaviour hubs and Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams.
- **Better data for system use and accountability in AP:** The Government should host a full live dataset of all registration marks in AP and develop a performance framework focused on progress for use in Alternative Provision.

The right provision

- **More AP free schools – opening the pipeline and sponsoring further waves:** The Government should fund the completion of the 20 AP projects in the free school pipeline currently under review by Local Authorities and set clear timelines for opening. The Government should sponsor further waves of AP free schools explicitly designed to test and scale innovation, supported by rigorous evaluation.
- **Increase primary AP capacity by better utilising current school infrastructure:** Where rolls are falling, Trusts and Local Authorities should consolidate their primary provision, and use any underutilised part of the school estate to provide more primary AP, facilitated by Government investment.
- **Extend support for pupils in Alternative Provision to post-16.** The Government should support Local Authorities with a test and learn programme to test effective ways to support sustained post-16 outcomes after AP, including options to extend state-funded Alternative Provision to KS5 to those without EHC Plans.



High-quality AP schools are not a retreat from inclusion but an essential part of an inclusive system.

Introduction

In 2012 the first four Alternative Provision free schools opened. Since then a further 50 AP free schools have open their doors across England - some of these are part of wider trusts, some AP only trusts and some single academy trusts. Together, they account for roughly 16% of what is classified as 'state-funded Alternative Provision'. Whilst every region of the country now has at least one AP free school, they represent a small proportion of overall provision. As with mainstream free schools, however, AP free schools are driving innovation to improve outcomes for their pupils.

This project uses publicly available data from the DfE, additional data provided through FOI requests, alongside analysis of AP free schools Ofsted reports and conversations with AP school and Trust leaders.

Many of the schools visited and analysed for this report are providing second chances, fresh starts and a different approach to pupils for whom mainstream education had not worked. This different approach re-engages the student and identifies and works through many of the barriers that stand between them and accessing education.

School leaders and staff in AP speak of the joy of every day being different, but do not sugarcoat the complexity of the profile they are dealing with. Like all schools, attendance is a key problem but one exacerbated by the fact pupils attending AP may have months, if not years of non-attendance behind them.

This is not a report into how or why a pupil arrived in AP but is focused on the experience they have at their AP free school. We will highlight innovations devised by AP free schools in a system where outcomes are far below what we should hope for the country's most vulnerable children.

With the Government's Schools White Paper on the horizon, and the future of 20 AP free school projects hanging in the balance, now is an apt time to consider the contribution to the education system of the 54 AP free schools that have opened.

What is *doing things differently*?

The *doing things differently* series from the New Schools Network aims to codify the innovations that the free school movement have brought to the education system in the last 15 years. Making up 768 of 24,000 schools in England, free schools punch above their weight and outperform other non-selective mainstream state schools. The mission of the New Schools Network remains ensuring every child has access to a good school and through identifying and championing the innovations free schools have brought to the system, we hope more children can have the benefit of one.



Chapter 1:

The context

What is Alternative Provision?

Statutory guidance describes AP as “education arranged by Local Authorities for children of compulsory school age who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; Alternative Provision can also be used by schools for children on a suspension (fixed period exclusion); and for children being directed by schools to off-site provision to receive education intended to improve their behaviour.”²

As this suggests Alternative Provision is not a single offer and includes long term placements; short-term placements designed as an intervention to prepare pupils to return to mainstream education; and outreach services to mainstream schools to help support pupils to stay in school.

Pupils can move into AP settings at any age and at any point in the year. They may sit their exams there or could have a temporary placement ahead of moving back into mainstream or on to other specialist education before the end of year 11. This means unstable funding for AP schools and providers alongside local variation in the support services available to them.

The fragmented nature of LA-led commissioning means 156 distinct AP strategies operate across the country. Approaches range from reactive models- using AP to fulfil statutory duties to provide places for permanently excluded pupils or those who refuse mainstream schooling- to proactive interventions that work alongside mainstream schools to prevent exclusions and strength behaviour support, which also offer outreach services.³

A note on the data

Data on Alternative Provision and the pupils it serves is notoriously bad.⁴ DfE statistics are drawn primarily from the January school census, but multiple factors confuse the picture: AP placements may be full or part time; pupils may remain dually registered with mainstream schools; and the fluid nature of AP means not all pupils are captured at a single census point. Data on school-commissioned AP has only been collected since 2022/23.

FFT Education Datalab has highlighted that official figures under-estimate the number of pupils in AP, as those with subsidiary registrations are excluded.⁵ The Department for Education in 2023 pledged to set up an expert group to help improve Alternative Provision data and performance information at both provider and local levels.⁶

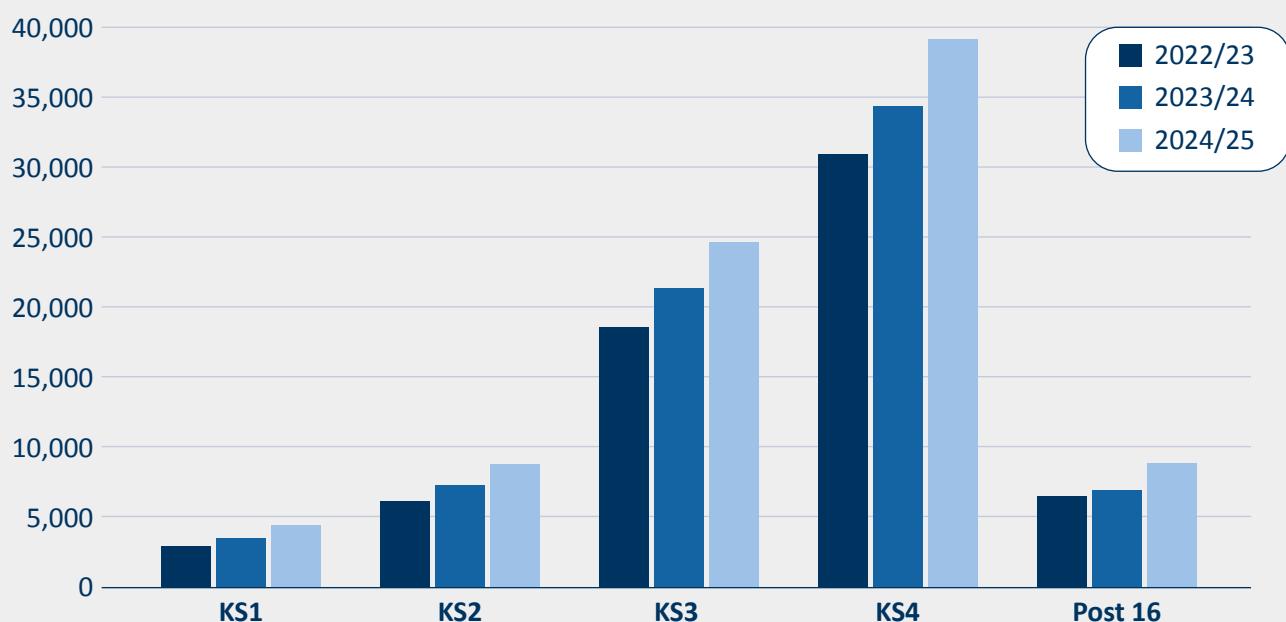
While existing data cannot provide a comprehensive picture of provision or outcomes, it does offer useful snapshots from which broader trends can be identified.

The need for AP

The 2024/25 snapshot showed that Local Authorities commissioned Alternative Provision for 58,450 pupils⁷ and schools commissioned Alternative Provision for 27,880 pupils.⁸ Taken together that is a **31.8% rise** over the preceding three years.

Whilst the majority of AP is used to support pupils in Key Stage 3 and 4, the rise in demand for or use of Alternative Provision is sustained across primary, secondary and post-16.

Chart 1: Total AP commissioned (School + LA) by Key Stage ⁹

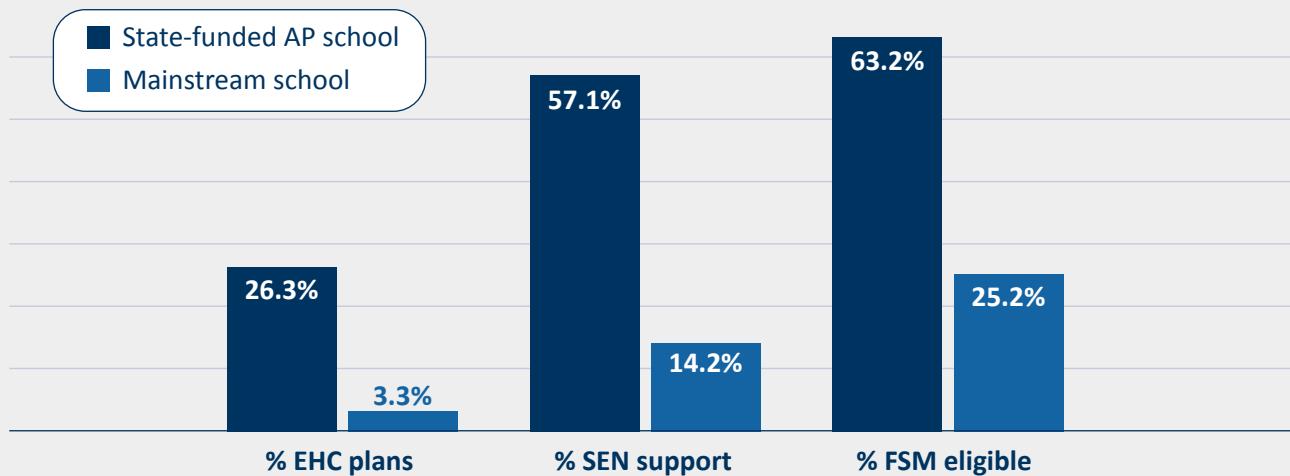


In the latest snapshot (2024/25) the majority of school commissioned placements were for off-site behavioural support.¹⁰ 78% of placements commissioned by Local Authorities under their s.19 duty were at Alternative Provision settings named on the pupil's EHC plan, with only 5% of placements being the result of a permanent exclusion.¹¹ As the high number of EHC plan placement suggests, pupils in Alternative Provision have a high level of need and significant vulnerabilities.

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Chapter 1: The Context (continued)

Chart 2: The profile of pupils in Alternative Provision is more complex (2024/25)¹²

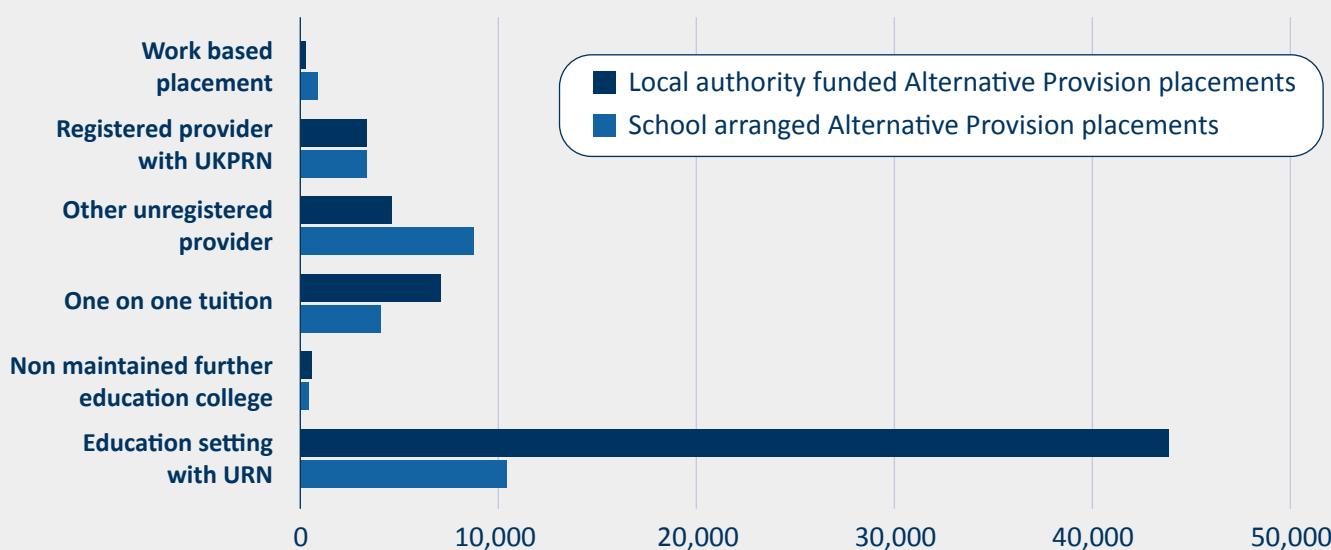


The supply of AP

The DfE collects data about what kind of provision pupils receive in AP – although at a very high level of detail. The categories include:

- Education setting with a Unique Reference Number (URN) – i.e. a school or college, but not broken down into mainstream, AP or special or clear whether the placement is in the state or independent sector.
- Non-maintained further education college – i.e. privately run colleges.
- One to one tuition.
- Registered provider with UK Provider Reference Number (UKPRN) – i.e. the institution is a registered learning provider.
- Work based placement.
- Other unregistered providers.¹³

Chart 3: Setting type for Local Authority and School funded AP placements (2024/25)¹⁴



Whilst most placements sit in ‘education settings with a URN’, this category masks wide variation, spanning mainstream schools, state-funded AP and independent schools.

Of the 54,000 pupils in education settings with a URN, 16,643 pupils recorded as attending state-funded Alternative Provision, made up of 334 Pupil referral units, AP free schools or AP academies.¹⁵

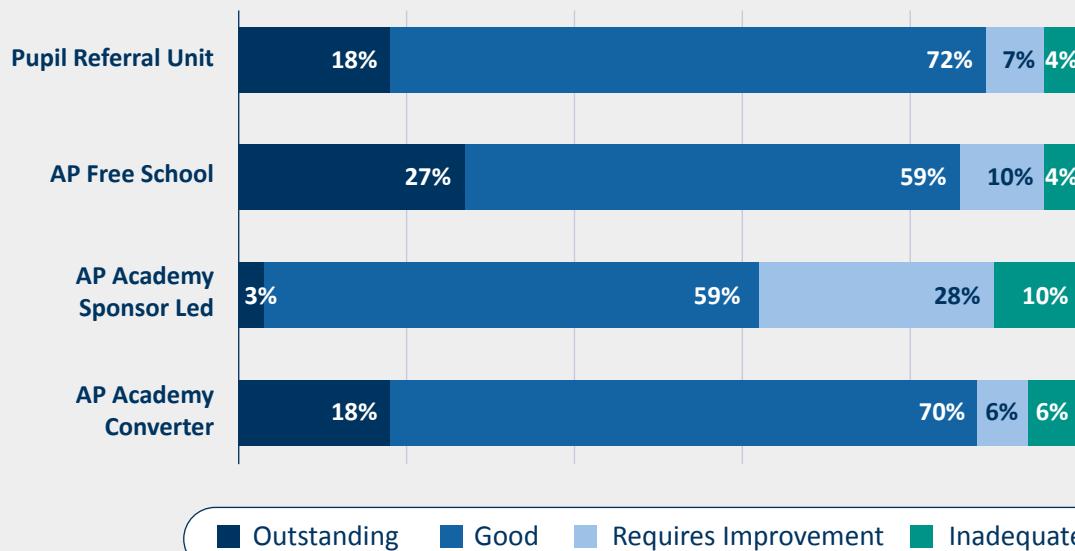
Whilst all Alternative Provision is funded by the state – either through school budgets or council high needs budgets – only a minority of pupils in Alternative Provision are educated in what is defined as “state-funded Alternative Provision”. In 2023 Ofsted estimated that **37% of placements in AP were in state-funded schools** – compared to 46% in independent schools and 17% in unregistered provision.¹⁶

The quality of AP

Ofsted’s most recent thematic review of Alternative Provision stated “it is less likely to be offering an equally good or better quality of education than its mainstream counterparts”. It cited “a lack of national standards and a lack of clarity on responsibilities for AP commissioning” alongside “underdeveloped strategic planning, an insufficiently clear purpose of AP and a lack of monitoring of children’s outcomes” as leading to inconsistent and ineffective practice in a system “in desperate need of reform”.

At the same time, the review acknowledged examples of strong practice. Inspection outcomes reflect this complexity. Of those Alternative Provision settings inspected before the removal of single-word judgements, 86% were rated Good or Outstanding, compared with 90% of mainstream schools.¹⁸ However, these headline ratings mask significant variation in quality and purpose across the sector. Within this context, AP free schools were much more likely to be judged Outstanding than other types of state-funded Alternative Provision.

Chart 4: Ofsted judgements of State-funded AP (August 2024)¹⁹



What outcomes do students in AP get?

Below is an analysis of DfE data reflecting: (i) engagement in education, measured by attendance and (ii) Post-16 outcomes, across state-funded AP schools as a means of building a picture of quality.

Alternative Provision schools are “poorly served” by the current published measures of pupil

attainment at the end of Key Stage 4.²⁰ School level performance data is not available – although it would be unlikely to show a true picture of school performance, as children in AP attend for different periods of time, have a wide range of needs and AP settings have varying levels of capacities and scale.

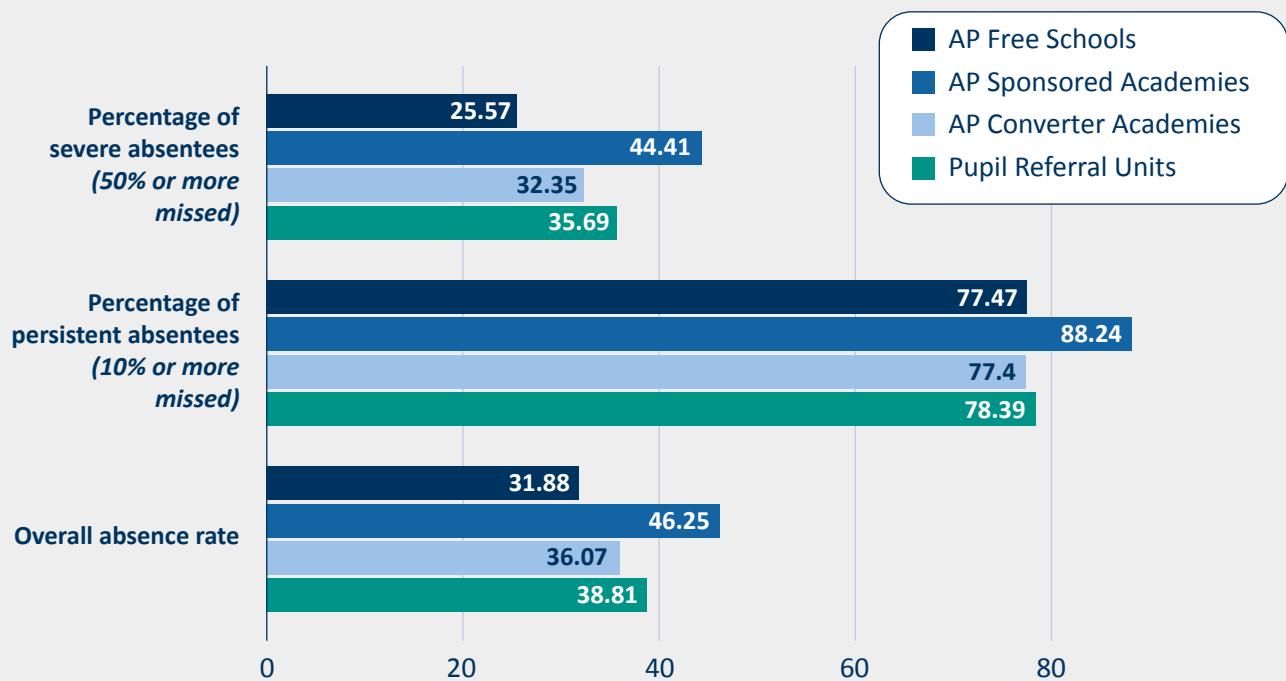
Attendance

Attending school is fundamental to outcomes. In primary missing 10 days of year 6 reduced the likelihood of reaching the expected standard by around 25%. In secondary missing 10 days of year 11 reduced the likelihood of achieving grade 5 in English and Maths by around 50%.²¹ Many pupils spoken to for this project had spent a lot of time outside of school before moving to their AP free

school. The Youth Endowment Fund also emphasise that attending school is a protective factor against becoming involved in serious violence.²²

In 2023/24, AP free schools had much lower levels of severe absence than other AP schools and a similar level of persistent absence, which resulted in a considerably lower overall absence rate than other types of state-funded Alternative Provision.

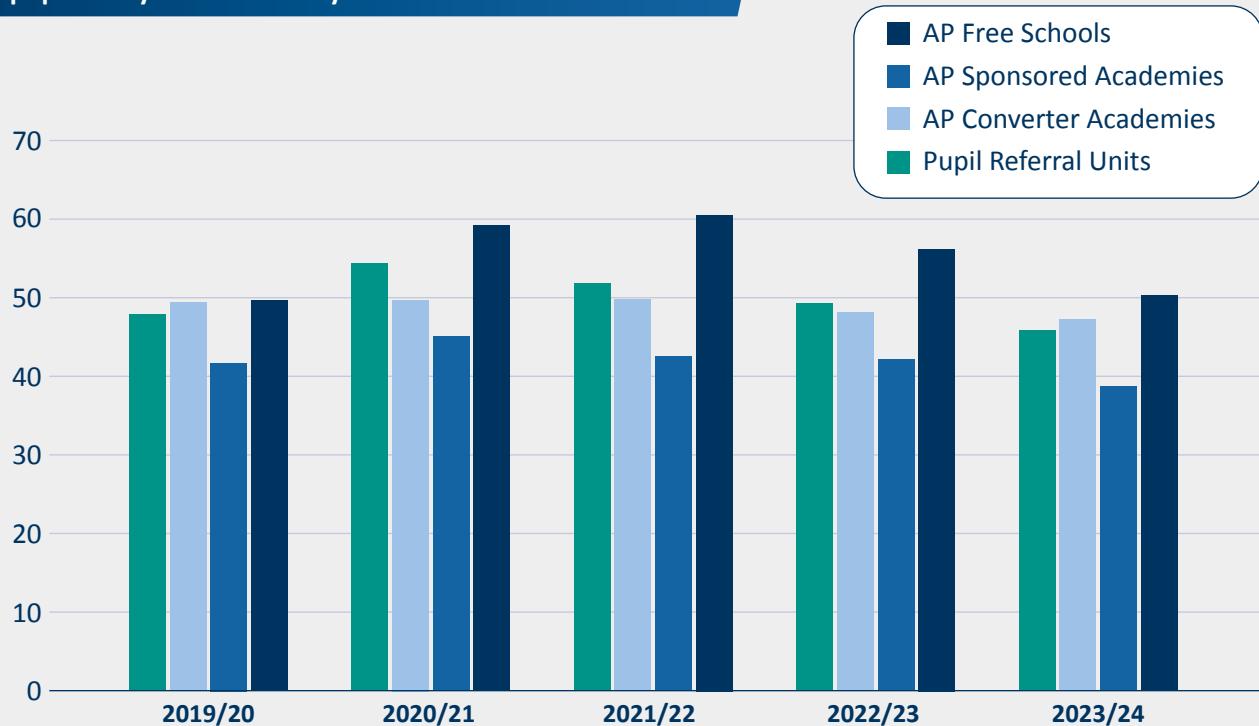
Chart 5: Absence levels in state-funded Alternative Provision 2023/24²³



Post-16 Destination measures

Leavers from AP free schools were more likely than leavers of other types of state-funded Alternative Provision to be in sustained education, employment and apprenticeships a year after leaving. In both 2022/23 and 2023/24 they were the only type of state-funded AP who saw over 50% of their former students in sustained education, employment & apprenticeships a year after leaving Key Stage 4.

Chart 6: Sustained education, employment & apprenticeships of pupils the year after KS4 by State-funded AP²³



Chapter 2: What are AP free schools getting right?

Across Alternative Provision, smaller class sizes, within a smaller environment than mainstream schools and a lower student teacher ratio is the bedrock of the model.

Department for Education research into effective AP highlights the importance of small-group instruction and tailoring lessons to individual needs, underpinned by the formation of strong relationships between staff and pupils.²⁵

AP free schools do not depart from this model – but in many ways they have supercharged it. In this chapter we will look at what AP free schools are getting right from a combination of analysis of the latest Ofsted reports for all 54 open AP free schools and interviews that have been carried out with a range of free schools for this report.

Mission-driven leadership with high expectations

Every single school leader and teacher I spoke to in AP was on a mission. They had come into the Alternative Provision sector – sometimes directly, often from working in mainstream schools – to provide support and an education to the pupils who need it most.

While provision varies, a consistent ethos emerges: meet the pupil where they are, have high expectations and support the pupil to meet them.

 “These are not badly behaved, naughty children. They’re the product of a traumatic background and have an inability to communicate what they need. Accepting that doesn’t mean we are lowering standards. We expect everyone to come up to standard.”

Principal - St. Wilfrid’s

 “Effective AP is building respectful relationships based on clear and consistent boundaries. The clear voice of the student is sought but not bent to and there is high aspiration for academia, but we are not unrealistic about performance.”

Principal - Boxing Academy

School leaders wanted their school to be the dependable, structured and safe institution that the pupils could rely on.

A clear focus on teaching and learning

Of all state-funded Alternative Provision, AP free schools are the only AP institutions with school in their name. Being a school with a focus on teaching and learning is at the heart of these AP free schools.

“The school is not a youth club or a holding space, we work hard for pupils to have aspirations.”

Head - The Fermain Academy



English and Maths are prioritised, alongside building up aspiration in pupils and finding pathways into work, training or further study. Ofsted inspection reports repeatedly highlight the “ambitious” curriculum in multiple AP free schools both for academic and qualification outcomes and for personal development.²⁶

Reading emerges repeatedly as a decisive factor in effective AP provision. Inspectors frequently note:

- Early identification of reading gaps
- Use of phonics where appropriate, including for older pupils
- Integration of reading, vocabulary and oracy across the curriculum.

At **Springwell Alternative Academies**, for example, early assessment of reading ability and structured phonics support alongside consistent, skilled support from staff means that pupils develop as fluent, confident readers.²⁷

Building skilled, multidisciplinary teams

A focus on a skilled and dedicated workforce is central to every good AP free school.

Whether it is specialist teachers who are focused on the academic progress the students are making, trained pastoral staff to support pupils through mentoring or additional auxiliary staff brought in to provide specialist services, AP leaders were clear that the team made the school.

“Pod leaders are at the core of the offer at the Boxing Academy – they provide a strong mentor to re-engage and guide the pupils.”

Principal - Boxing Academy



“Employment of highly qualified teachers changes the dynamics of what you expect to see. We are creating a culture of highlight qualified staff. You need to nurture and invest in staff.”

Head - Education Links

Chapter 2: What are AP free schools getting right? (continued)

Each school has a different set up or emphasis on how the staff would support pupils. Whether it was the pod leaders in the **Boxing Academy** or the Progress Leaders at **Westside**, in many AP free schools classroom management was led by someone other than the teacher – so that the teacher could focus on teaching and learning.

School leaders agreed it was imperative that AP attracted and retained the best teachers. One of the design principles of high impact free schools²⁸ is recruiting to the values that the free schools hold – many AP free schools spoke of the teams that they had curated: taking time to find the right person for the job so that the pupils were best served and then retaining that talent.

Investment in training and professional development

Staff development is a notable strength across AP free schools, with school leaders investing in training to continually upskill their staff. Over a quarter of recent Ofsted inspections explicitly identify training and CPD as a strength- a significant proportion given that inspectors typically only comment on CPD when it is demonstrably effective.

At the same time, leaders acknowledge the limited evidence base of effective practice in AP compared to mainstream education. Some AP free schools are actively working to close this gap:

- **Westside AP Free School** in London developed the Westside+ programme of support, through which it identified and codified effective practice, building a shared and growing body of knowledge.
- **St. Wilfrid's** is engaged in long-term research with the University of Sheffield on speech and language support.
- **The YES Trust** are involved in a Trust wide research project, working with the National College of Teaching to codify practice.
- **The Fermain Academy** are developing their own set of one-pagers – inspired by Jamie Clark to develop evidence informed summaries that can support teachers in AP settings.

For those AP free schools in Multi-Academy Trusts, staff benefitted from and contributed to trust wide CPD. This collaboration across the trust built up understanding of the role of Alternative Provision.

“We have an extensive Professional Development programme. Staff partake in NPQs external PD - but we customise and develop our own expertise and evolve practices. It is so important that we support staff to grow because sustainable impact depends on stable and forward thinking teams.”

Head - Westside

“We offer Trust wide CPD - to be an effective teacher is to be an effective teacher, whatever the setting. Training and learning is reciprocal in nature - mainstream teachers in the trust benefit from learnings in AP and vice versa.”

Head - BBIH

A culture of reflection and innovation

The free school model has often been used to test new approaches to teaching and learning, school structure and culture. Flexibility is inherent to Alternative Provision – due to fewer restrictions around curriculum, less accountability through performance tables – which enables a setting to reflect the need of their pupils. The very name Alternative Provision suggests a system which is doing things differently to the mainstream education system.

“We have a culture of constant reflection and test and learn. No part of the school comes from the idea that “we do this because this is what a school does”.

Principal - Boxing Academy

“There is lots of autonomy within the trust but also accountability and reflective practice to ensure continuing adherence to our core values. We are continually reflecting on the curriculum offer and the teaching and learning to ensure pupils are engaged.”

Trust leader - YES Trust

At **Solihull Alternative Provision**, nurture groups were developed following a successful pilot that improved engagement and attendance among Year 10 pupils. Groups remain in a single classroom with a consistent pastoral lead while teachers move between them, reducing challenging transitions. Nurture lessons model supportive home environments, build cultural capital and increase adult support through a dedicated pastoral manager working alongside heads of year.

At **Education Links** every child – irrespective of official statementing – has a passport that details their needs, highlights what they like, their background and aspirations. This means that every teacher can understand the needs.

In many of the AP free schools innovation and reflective practice was baked into their culture. While Ofsted does not routinely comment on innovation, some inspection reports explicitly highlight innovative models or reflective leadership. Where this language is used, it is closely linked to effective multi-agency working, curriculum design, and sustained improvements in pupils' outcomes.

“Innovation is front and centre and needs to be in a dynamic and complex model of AP... There is a constant culture of reflection and solutions focused mindset.”

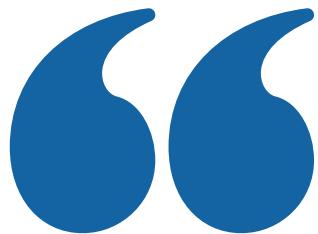
Head - Westside



Measuring progress and supporting outcomes

Progress is a core success indicator for AP free schools. Pupils often arrive after significant disruption to their learning have spent time out of education. For AP free schools this low starting point does not impact their aspirations for their pupils learning, with their driving mission seeking to ensure pupils make progress and achieve sustainable outcomes. However, there is currently no shared framework for measuring progress in AP.

Beacon Business Innovation Hub (BBIH) track their pupils to establish high expectations and use targets to support progress. **Westside** have created the ‘Westside 7’ performance measure designed to develop and track a child’s progress. **The YES Trust** argue that objective baselining of a pupil when they enter AP is necessary to ensure that it is possible to measure whether a pupil’s experience in AP has added value.



“What AP gives you is the opportunity to look at each child and work out what fits for them. All we are looking for is progress. We take the time to understand the barriers to learning and then overcome them.”

Head - BBIH

Vocational learning is widely used to support engagement, but not at the expense of core academic subjects. At **Solihull Alternative Provision**, careful timetabling ensures pupils access vocational training without missing core lessons, supporting transition to college, traineeships or apprenticeships after Key Stage 4.

At **St Wilfrid’s**, off-site vocational provision is similarly timetabled to protect core subjects. Although unregistered, the provision is quality assured through inclusion in school CPD, daily staff oversight if needed and clear links to accredited qualifications, such as food hygiene and health and safety available through the social enterprise café.

“Every child has 1 day of vocation training off site timetabled. This means no child is missing core curriculum and also gives pupils a foot in the door for post-16 opportunities.”

Head - Solihull AP

*“This school has changed his life. He was stuck...
They understand your children like no-one else.
You’ve given me my son back.”*

Parent – St. Wilfrid’s



At BBIH, the **Beacon Academy Trust** is utilising every opportunity to provide a broad and balanced curriculum with English and Maths at its heart, providing vocational and work-related elements so they are not teaching pupils the abstract but relating it to practical applications. The Trust has opened an on-site nursery supporting childcare qualifications and is developing partnerships, including with a local care home, to create health and social care training opportunities.

The **YES Trust** has developed links with local employers, working with them to build work experience into a student’s timetable whilst at school, so the student can get to know the business and school staff can support the student. YES Trust work with employers to ensure that the qualifications offered by the schools are those needed by employers to better prepare students for working life.

“We track NEETs for 3 years after they leave the YES Trust. We keep them on roll until the end of the first term of Y12 to make sure no-one is lost in the college drop off. And we are open in the Summer for 2 weeks to support the post-16 transition.”

Trust Leader - YES Trust





Chapter 3:

The AP projects in the free schools pipeline



“Some pupils are never going to make it in mainstream school. There is nothing wrong with them, they just need something different.”

Head – Solihull AP

Ahead of the Schools White Paper, the Government has signalled a preference for expanding internal SEND and AP units within mainstream schools as a route to greater inclusion. As part of this approach, the Government paused 20 Alternative Provision free school projects on 12 December 2025. These projects would have created over 1,700 state-funded AP places at new provision. Instead, Local Authorities have been offered funding to develop specialist provision through resource provision or expansion of existing provision.

Inclusion should be defined by whether pupils receive education that meets their needs, not solely by whether they remain in a mainstream setting. For many pupils, high-quality Alternative Provision offers the most inclusive and effective route to re-engagement, learning and long-term outcomes. Leaders interviewed for this report were clear that, when pupils arrive in Alternative Provision, mainstream education is often no longer suitable.

This report demonstrates growing demand for Alternative Provision and shows that AP free schools outperform other state-funded AP on attendance and post-16 outcomes, whilst also driving innovation across the sector. The 20 paused projects were partnership bids between trusts and Local Authorities, designed to address gaps in local provision and raise standards.

Half of the AP free schools in the pipeline are in Local Authorities where children are currently placed in settings which are not registered schools, because of a lack of provision. Two of the council areas have no state-funded Alternative Provision at all. The lack of state-funded capacity makes it difficult for Local Authorities to meet their statutory obligations within the registered state provision.



“For 10 years we've been laying the foundation and it's upsetting that the Government have come in and said that mainstream can do it better.”

Trust leader

Chapter 3: The AP projects in the free schools pipeline (continued)

The following table shows the 20 projects, the capacity they would have provided, the existing state-funded capacity in the local authority along with the number of pupils in AP who were not placed in an educational setting (provision with a URN) in 2024/25.

Project name & Trust	Age & no. of places ²⁹	Local Authority	Total placements in AP by Local Authority ³⁰	Pupils placed by LA NOT in Education settings	Total headcount at existing state funded AP in LA ³¹
Delta Barnsley AP Free School Delta Academies Trust	8 to 16 100	Barnsley	389	110	42
Sulis Academy Midsomer Norton Schools Partnership	4 to 16 55	Bath and North East Somerset	203	77	0
Mansfield Health Academy The Sea View Trust	7 to 16 48	Blackpool	235	54	130
Delta Calderdale AP Free School Delta Academies Trust	8 to 16 125	Calderdale	236	36	74
The Engage Academy Youth Engagement Schools Trust	11 to 16 120	Cheshire East	785	171	49
Cumberland Alternative Provision Cumbria Education Trust	11 to 16 70	Cumberland	166	64	144
Turning Point The Constellation Trust	7 to 19 80	East Riding of Yorkshire	322	229	127
Jude's Academy Alternative Learning Trust	11 to 16 80	Kent	2,715	349	50
Delta Kirklees AP Free School Delta Academies Trust	8 to 16 125	Kirklees	244	4	117
Bowden Academy Raleigh Education Trust	7 to 16 100	Nottingham	157	66	434

Project name & Trust	Age & no. of places ²⁹	Local Authority	Total placements in AP by Local Authority ³⁰	Pupils placed by LA NOT in Education settings	Total headcount at existing state funded AP in LA ³¹
River Tees Academy River Tees Multi-Academy Trust	11 to 16 50	Redcar and Cleveland	123	0	85
Minerva AP Free School Minerva Learning Trust	4 to 16 120	Sheffield	150	45	210
Delta Stockton AP Free School Delta Academies Trust	11 to 16 100	Stockton-on-Tees	227	44	67
The Link Academy Youth Engagement Schools Trust	10 to 16 120	Stoke-on-Trent	813	109	1
EEGT Suffolk AP Free School Eastern Education Group Trust	14 to 19 90	Suffolk	876	299	20
Olive AP Academy – Tilbury Olive Academies	11 to 19 70	Thurrock	119	75	65
Mulberry Learning Village Mulberry Schools Trust	5 to 19 100	Tower Hamlets	188	33	106
Kithurst Academy The Beckmead Trust	9 to 16 80	West Sussex	1,506	419	244
Impact Academy Wigan The Bolton Impact Trust	11 to 16 48	Wigan	330	91	145
Alternative Free School for Wiltshire REAc South Academy Trust	5 to 16 80	Wiltshire	716	334	0

Chapter 4: Reform in Alternative Provision

From Charlie Taylor's review of Alternative Provision in 2012 to the 2023 SEND and AP Improvement Plan, Government reform of the AP system has not been fully realised.

At the same time, outcomes for pupils in Alternative Provision remain unacceptably low after 11 years of state-funded education.

The upcoming Schools White Paper is a key opportunity for the Government to articulate the role Alternative Provision should play in the wider school system.



Recommendations:

AP free schools should sit at the heart of reform based on clear expectations of doing the best for pupils, freedom about how to do it supported by evidence-informed best practice and clear accountability through data and rigorous inspection.

The following proposals, focused on getting the right provision and the right practice, are designed specifically to facilitate that goal.

1 *The right practice: Every pupil in Alternative Provision registered at a state-funded school*

Every pupil in Alternative Provision should be enrolled in a state-funded school. This is already the case for pupils in school commissioned AP, but it is not for those in Local Authority placements which can lead to low quality provision with little accountability.

All Local Authority placements should be made in a state school – either a mainstream, special or AP – rather than in independent or unregistered provision. Unregistered provision may complement education, but it should never replace it. Where the placement is in an AP school – whether it is a PRU, AP Academy or AP free school – it should hold the single registration for that pupil, be responsible for their safeguarding and outcomes.

Mainstream and AP schools should continue to be able to commission support from external help – including unregistered providers – and continue to assure its quality and utility. Ofsted should continue to inspect external provision as part of the school's assessment.

“*There is
a need for
national AP
infrastructure – there is no
data, no central entitlement
for pupils or quality
assurance of provision.*”

Head - BBIH

- Local Authorities should only be able to discharge their s.19 duty in state-funded institutions.
- All pupils should be on the roll of a state-funded school and that institution should have responsibility for safeguarding and quality of provision.

2 *The right practice: System wide definition for AP*

“There was real and pressing need for definition in the AP and special sector to define what settings are for, with a clear statement of purpose and intent for each of these settings... The status quo is unclear - especially for Alternative Provision.”³²

The Children’s Commissioner

Alternative Provision caters for all sorts of pupils who cannot access mainstream education- from excluded pupils to school refusers. It can support pupils for a short period, or for multiple years of their education.

One AP leader expressed how the system had grown organically, with no clear purpose. There are concerns about blurred boundaries between AP and SEND provision, and mixed views on the emphasis on reintegration – especially for pupils in KS4.

The Government should seize the opportunity in the White Paper to state that all pupils should lay out the role that Alternative Provision schools in the wider education system, resolving the tensions that exist between national and local policy – around permanently exclusions, behaviour management and expectations around reintegration.

- The Government should use the Schools White Paper articulate the clear and distinct role of Alternative Provision in the education system.
- The Government should clarify in guidance that when a pupil is in full time AP in KS4, reintegration into mainstream should not be the aim but a focus on KS4 qualifications.

3

The right practice:

Clear national standards, based on evidence with clear expectations about educational quality and successful long-term outcomes.

Alternative Provision educates some of the most vulnerable pupils in the system yet operates without national standards. Local commissioning has produced 156 different AP approaches, resulting in wide variation in quality and expectations. Whilst there is some fantastic work being done, there are several cold spots in AP provision³³ where pupils have little chance of receiving a quality education.

Leaders consistently report provision where expectations were set far below pupils' capabilities, often going unchallenged by the wider system because pupils were seen as "difficult".

The Government should use the Schools White Paper to set clear national standards for Alternative Provision. These standards should be based on evidence informed best practice around entitlements and outcomes, responsibility and budgets.

Evidence on "what works" in Alternative Provision remains limited and underdeveloped compared to mainstream education. Having previously sponsored and published research on best practice in AP settings, the Government should continue to sponsor research into the evidence gaps that exist in AP.

“

"We would welcome National Standards. It would be useful to have data to help the school benchmark performance with similar schools and encourage conversations with others about improving practice. It is important to be clear on curriculum expectations"

Head - BBIH

NATIONAL STANDARDS

- The Government should consult on National Standards for Alternative Provision based in the latest evidence of what works. These standards should be regularly updated to reflect the evidence.
- Ofsted should reflect those National Standards in their inspection framework and inspect against them.

CONTINUING TO BUILD THE EVIDENCE BASE

- Where there are evidence gaps the Government should sponsor further research into best practice.
- Trusts and AP providers should rigorously evaluate, monitor and share the findings of their programmes and approaches, and support the further development and evaluation of best practice within their Alternative Provision.
- The EEF should fund research projects into effective practice in Alternative Provision.
- The Government should disseminate sector findings of what works through behaviour hubs and RISE teams.

4

The right practice: More and better data both for system use and accountability – with a focus on progress.

There are significant data and evidence gaps in national and local data which impede efforts to understand current practice and make meaningful and sustainable system improvement. The Government itself recognised in 2018 that “there is no systematic way of identifying and celebrating effective practice in AP.”

Some AP free schools are already developing progress measures. Government should build on this work, alongside partners such as FFT Education Datalab, to create consistent tools for improvement and accountability.³⁵



“There have been calls from many quarters over the years for a consistently used, universally applicable, comprehensive and systematic approach to evaluating and improving AP quality.”

Dennis Simms, IntegratED³⁴

- Given the fluidity of the pupils – and their vulnerability to falling off school rolls – the Government should host a full live dataset of all registration marks in AP.
- The Government should develop a performance framework focused on progress for use in Alternative Provision.

5 *The right provision: More AP free schools – opening the pipeline and sponsoring further waves*



“High-quality Alternative Provision and special schools are a critical part of an inclusive education system... for some children, AP is the first setting where they have felt happy and engaged in school.”³⁶

The Children’s Commissioner

The lack of state-funded capacity makes it difficult for Local Authorities to meet their statutory obligations within the registered state provision. The 20 AP free schools already in the pipeline should be the first step in expanding state-funded provision. They are located in areas of clear need, where pupils are currently placed outside educational settings altogether.

Demand for Alternative Provision is rising and if this is not built in the state sector then more vulnerable pupils will be placed in expensive independent or in unregistered provision, where quality is extremely mixed.

Investment in mainstream schools is welcome, but it will never remove the need for high-quality Alternative Provision. That place should still be a school: one that takes a different approach, but keeps learning and progress at its core.

The Government should sponsor future waves of AP free schools, specifically including requests for bids which focus on developing new approaches, reflective practice and embedding and developing research into what works.

“We have to do things differently for our children. We cannot do what’s been done before because that hasn’t worked.”

AP Trust leader



- The Government should fund the completion of the 20 AP projects in the free school pipeline currently under review by Local Authorities.
- The Government should work with Local Authorities and Trusts to set ambitious targets for their opening to get the schools providing capacity as soon as possible.
- The Government should hold future waves of AP free school competitions with the explicit aim to develop and trial innovation within AP, supported by rigorous evaluation.

6

The right provision: Open more primary Alternative Provision and utilise the current school estate to do it.

Pupils are presenting with complex needs and challenging behaviours earlier in their school careers and AP system leaders have spoken about the increased need for Alternative Provision that can cater to primary children.

Falling primary rolls create an immediate opportunity to repurpose underused school buildings for Alternative Provision, with Government support.

- Trusts and Local Authorities should consolidate their primary provision, and use any underutilised part of the school estate to provide more primary AP.
- The Government should facilitate the adaptation of primary schools to be suitable for use as Alternative Provision primaries.



“There is a desperate need for more Primary Alternative Provision”
AP System Leader

7

The right provision: Extend Alternative Provision to post-16.

Many AP free schools already support pupils beyond 16 but do so without funding or formal recognition. Similarly, not all pupils will be suited for college post-16 but currently only those with an EHC plan have provision facilitated for them. One school leader highlighted that post-16 they have pupils that will be moving into supported housing / independent care arrangements and want to ensure they continue on their education journey.

The number of pupils in Alternative Provision post-16 is rising and behind that is a clear need for something different than college provision or entry to work through a traineeship or apprenticeship. Pupils who have experienced Alternative Provision are significantly more likely to become NEET.³⁸ With NEET levels already high³⁹, the Government must support sustained post-16 pathways for this group. This should include extending Alternative Provision into Key Stage 5 without requiring an EHCP and supporting best practice that exists in the sector for continued support once leaving AP.

- The Government should support Local Authorities with a test and learn programme to test effective ways to support sustained post 16 outcomes after AP, including options to extend AP provision to KS5.

Methodology

General note on charts:

The majority of charts generated for this project use publicly accessible data from the DfE website ([Explore our statistics and data - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)). Where this is the case the publication source (with a hyperlink) and relevant dataset are referenced in the footnotes. Where appropriate, the link included at the end of the reference is a generate sharable link from the DfE data tables regarding the specific data represented in the chart. Where two data sources in one chart, the footnote will contain information for both sources.

On methodology for specific charts:

- **Chart 1:** The Chart added school commissioned and LA commissioned AP statistics. Data was provided by age and was collated into key stages on the following aged basis: (i) KS1 – ages 5 to 7; (ii) KS2- ages 8 to 10; (iii) KS3 – ages 11 to 13; (iv) KS4 – ages 14 to-16; (v) Post-16 – ages 17 – 19 plus.
- **Chart 4:** Does not use the latest Ofsted inspections results but takes the findings of the last management information before the Government dropped the single word judgements in September 2024.
- **Chart 5:** Using the latest full-year data on absence by school level available (2023/24), linked data on schools by URN and then filtered for state-funded AP. Link provided in footnote is to school level data catalogue.
- **Chart 6:** Used FOI data from the Department for Education.

Ofsted analysis:

Analysis of the most recent published Ofsted inspection reports available for all AP free schools – available here. Ofsted reports were not available for Laurus Grace, New Horizons Academy, North Star 265° and Unity Academy at the time of analysis. Horizons Therapeutic Education Trust was excluded as it is a trust-level entity rather than a school.

Interviews with AP School leaders:

The Principals or Heads of 7 of the 54 open AP free schools (13%) were interviewed for this report. An attempt was made to represent a diverse sample regarding geography (4 regions), SATs/ MATs and educational phase. Alongside this two AP only Trust leaders, an AP systems leader and a former AP free school Head were interviewed. Pupils and teachers on several site visits but not enough data was collected to create anything like a representative enough sample to utilise for this report. The quotation of one mother is included as one does not forget a mother hugging you with tears in her eyes, asking you to make sure more parents and children get the opportunity to go to “a school like this.” Thank you to all interviewees for their time and contribution to this report.

Photos:

Thank you to St. Wilfrid’s Academy, The Boxing Academy and The YES Trust for permission to use their images in this report.

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