


## executive summary

# alternative provision for young people with special educational needs

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In his review of alternative provision, the government's expert adviser on behaviour, Charlie Taylor, acknowledged that 'the boundaries between alternative provision and special educational needs (SEN) provision are blurred' (Taylor, 2012, p. 5). The difficulty in distinguishing between the two types of provision is illustrated by the statistic that over three-quarters of pupils accessing alternative provision, through Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), have a recognised special educational need (Taylor, 2012). Furthermore, it is widely understood that for many young people in alternative provision, their full range of needs may not have been identified, as social, emotional and behavioural issues often mask underlying learning difficulties or disabilities.



This study, commissioned by the LGA, explores the ways in which young people with SEN (up to age 19) access and engage in alternative provision in five local authority areas. Case studies were selected to reflect various approaches to, and manifestations of, alternative provision for learners with a wide range of needs. Data collection took place between November 2011 and February 2012 and involved face-to-face interviews with a mix of professionals and young people. The findings of this study form part of the LGA's response to the government's consultation on alternative provision reforms.

## **Differences in alternative provision for young people with SEN**

There is no obvious segregation between alternative providers that are commissioned to work with learners with SEN. However, there are situations when the conditions and difficulties presented by learners require differentiated provision. It may, for example, become much more important in the commissioning of alternative provision for learners with SEN to consider factors such as: group composition; the duration and timing of sessions; the specialist skill sets of staff; the cognitive and physical requirements of activities; and the actual settings and locations in which provision takes place. Additional considerations relate to the wider support required to facilitate young people's access to, and participation in, appropriate alternative provision, which may not apply to other learners without SEN attending the same provision. Overall, as the complexity of SEN increases, there are likely to be greater limitations on the choices of alternative provision that can be effectively accessed.

## **Finding and commissioning alternative provision for young people with SEN**

Effective commissioning is based on identifying and securing alternative provision that matches the identified SEN of young people. It also ensures there is appropriate differentiation in the provision available to meet the breadth and complexity of needs presented by individual learners. Personalised learning packages of provision are considered particularly effective for young people with SEN and effective commissioning is central to this. Tailored provision can be achieved through moving away from the block purchasing of alternative provision places, in favour of selecting a combination of elements of provision to establish a bespoke offer for young people. Underpinning this is the extent to which those responsible for commissioning know, and understand, the needs of individual young people.

## **Monitoring and quality assuring alternative provision for young people with SEN**

The effective quality assuring of alternative provision for young people with SEN is multi-dimensional and takes place before and during the provision's operation. It is enhanced when those supplying alternative provision and those commissioning or overseeing it, work together to develop the quality of the provision on offer. There is a strong view that quality assurance has to relate to outcomes and cannot be regarded, or undertaken, as a tokenistic process. In some of the case-study areas, quality assurance procedures have led to the decommissioning of individual providers delivering to young people with SEN.

## Elements of successful delivery of alternative provision for young people with SEN

The following key features have a cumulative effect on the successfulness of alternative provision for young people with SEN:

- **Characteristics and ethos of the provision:** Alternative provision for young people with SEN is successful when it achieves a shared ethos to focus on the individual needs and interests of learners and their achievement of realistic and meaningful outcomes. This is underpinned by ensuring parity in the quality of provision available to those with SEN, compared to other groups of learners. Other effective characteristics relate to the ambience and environment, group size and composition, and high quality staffing.
- **The composition of the alternative provision offer:** It is vital that the composition of the alternative offer being considered fits appropriately with, and supports, a learner's educational entitlement; adequately reflects the learning capacity and capabilities of individuals and incorporates a young person's interests.
- **The nature and content of alternative provision:** Local authorities and schools can offer flexibility in their approach to alternative provision by drawing on a range of providers, which offer young people with SEN a variety of educational and vocational opportunities in different environments. Provision typically includes a combination of subject learning and functional skills; vocational learning; and personal and social development.
- **Relationships, joint working and information exchange:** Where young people with SEN access alternative provision and remain on the roll of a mainstream school, special school or PRU, it is essential that close links are maintained between staff across all these settings. Close links and communication between local authority personnel, education staff and alternative providers are also central to ensuring that alternative provision for young people with SEN is commissioned, delivered and monitored effectively.

## Future influences and pressures in delivering alternative provision

Changing economic and policy contexts are identified as having impacts for alternative provision. Key pressures arise from:

- the fragmentation of roles and responsibilities for alternative provision between maintained schools, academies, PRUs and local authorities and the impact of such changes on the continuing role of local authorities in the coordination of alternative provision for young people with SEN
- the possible reduction in the overall availability of funding for alternative provision and the introduction of different ways of managing and distributing funding
- variations in the interpretation and application of inclusion policies that may result in alternative provision being sought mainly for young people with the most complex and challenging needs
- the viability of small, specialist alternative providers who are unable to meet new national requirements for inspection.

## Further information

For more information about this report visit  
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