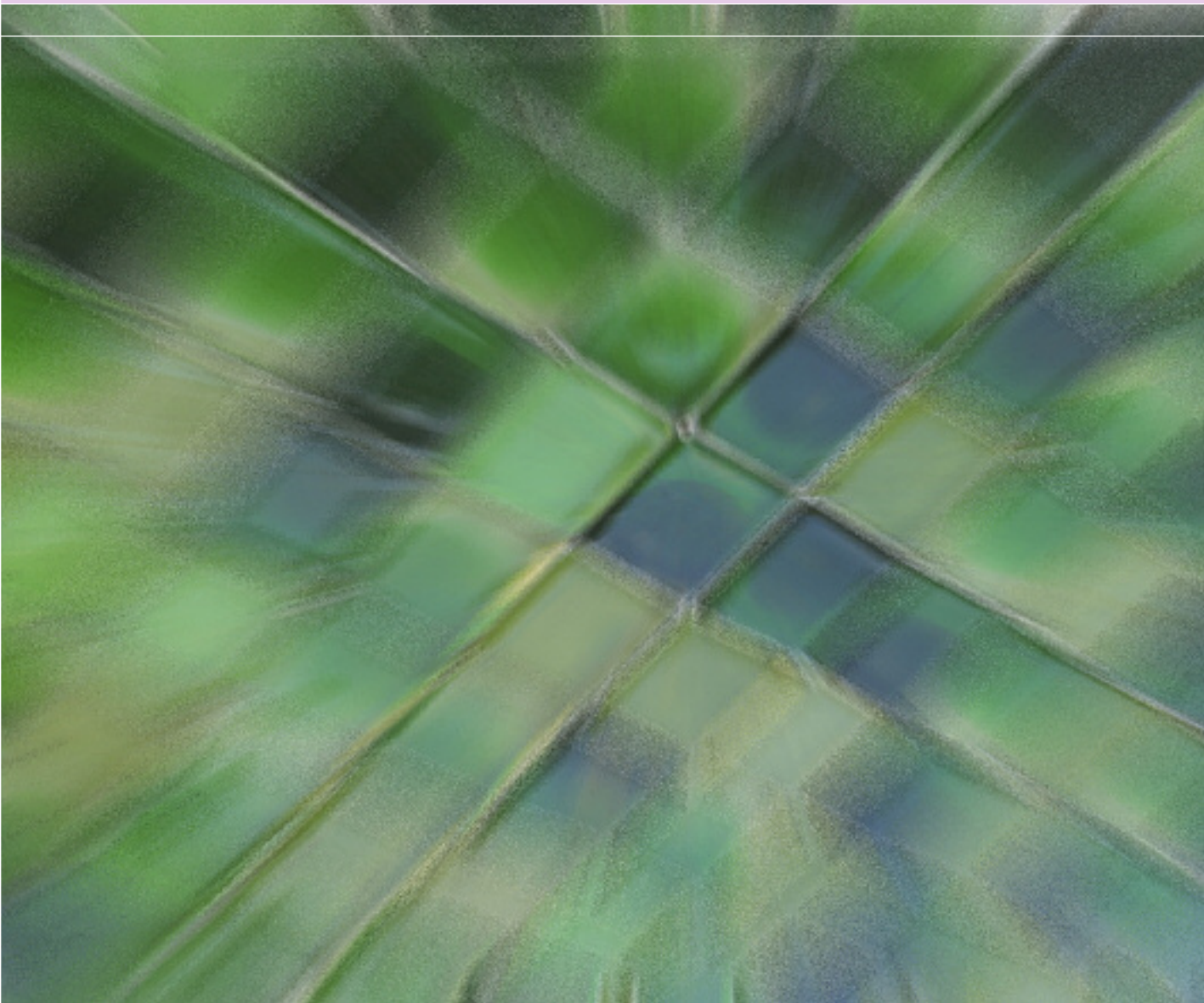


alternative provision for young people with special educational needs

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alternative provision for young people with special educational needs

Kerry Martin
Richard White

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Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Executive summary	v
1 Introduction and context	1
1.1 The research process	2
1.2 Scope of the report	2
2 The interface of alternative provision and SEN	4
2.1 The characteristics and needs of learners with SEN accessing alternative provision	4
2.2 The roles and functions of alternative provision	4
3 Finding and commissioning alternative provision for young people with SEN	7
3.1 Finding appropriate alternative provision for young people with SEN	7
3.2 Approaches to commissioning alternative provision for young people with SEN	8
4 Monitoring and quality assuring alternative provision for young people with SEN	10
5 Elements of successful delivery of alternative provision for young people with SEN	13
5.1 Characteristics and ethos of the provision	13
5.2 Composition of the alternative provision offer for young people with SEN	15
5.3 The nature and content of alternative provision	18
5.4 Relationships, joint working and information exchange	21
6 Differences in alternative provision for young people with and without SEN	23
7 Future considerations in delivering alternative provision to young people with SEN	25
References	27

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Executive summary

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 will 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 lead 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.

1 Introduction and context

There are various definitions and understandings of alternative provision operating at school, local authority and wider policy levels. Throughout this research, the term alternative provision is broadly applied to include provision generally delivered away from school sites to pupils who: a) have a Special Educational Need (SEN) which cannot be met by their school alone; b) have behaviour or attendance difficulties; c) have been excluded from school; d) choose to pursue an alternative curriculum option, usually vocationally related; and e) experience various combinations of these circumstances and situations. The lack of a single descriptor which is universally acknowledged and consistently applied reflects the wide variation in approaches to providing support to this range of young people.

Alternative provision also varies greatly in how it is delivered: this can be in, and through, pupil referral units (PRUs), home teaching services, virtual (or e-) learning centres, boarding schools, further education colleges, voluntary or private-sector organisations and multi-agency initiatives (DfE, 2011a). There can be a great deal of interconnectivity within the broad spectrum of alternative provision available. For example, PRUs can constitute an alternative provision offer in their own right and also act as commissioners or buyers of alternative provision from external sources. Young people can access alternative provision full time or part time, and can also participate in activities on a sessional basis, as required. Alternative curricula are many and varied and include vocational and work-related activities, personal and social learning, as well as more academically focused content.

In his review of alternative provision, the government's expert adviser on behaviour, Charlie Taylor, acknowledged that 'the boundaries between alternative provision and SEN provision are blurred' (Taylor, 2012, p. 5). The difficulty in distinguishing between the two types of provision is illustrated by the following statistics, which reveal that the majority of young people accessing PRUs have an identified SEN. In 2008, 75 per cent of pupils in PRUs had special

educational needs (62 per cent without statements; 13 per cent with statements) (DCSF, 2008). This increased slightly in 2011 to 79 per cent (Taylor, 2012). It is also widely accepted that for many young people placed in alternative provision, their full range of needs may not have been identified, as social, emotional and behavioural issues often mask underlying learning needs or disabilities.

The SEN Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability - A Consultation*, stated that 'high quality alternative provision is key to ensuring that excluded pupils with SEN fulfil their potential' (DfE, 2011b, p. 72). The quality of alternative provision, however, appears to be mixed, with significant proportions of PRUs judged outstanding by Ofsted and many others judged inadequate (Ofsted, 2010). One of the main concerns about alternative provision relates to the apparent low numbers of pupils gaining qualifications at GCSE level. Recent statistics, for example, show that only 1.4 per cent of young people in alternative provision in the academic year 2009/10 achieved five or more GCSEs at grade A*-C, or equivalent (including English and mathematics GCSEs or iGCSEs). This compares with 53.4 per cent of young people in all schools in England (DfE, 2011c).

The Importance of Teaching: the Schools White Paper (DfE, 2010) set out the government's aims to improve outcomes for learners accessing alternative provision and the Education Act 2011 established a legislative basis for these changes (England and Wales. Statutes, 2011). They include allowing PRUs to pursue academy status, permitting other alternative providers to establish free schools, and enabling PRUs to be given delegated budgets. Alongside wider moves towards increasing schools' responsibility for excluded pupils, the full implementation of these proposals will mean significant changes for local authorities, and will see their role as direct providers of alternative provision diminish.

Taking forward the agenda outlined in the *Importance of Teaching: the Schools White Paper*, combined with

the recommendations of the Charlie Taylor (2012) review, the government has published, for public consultation, its proposed reforms to raise standards in alternative provision. The findings of this study, which aims to explore approaches to alternative provision specifically in relation to young people with SEN (up to age 19) will form part of the LGA's response to this consultation. In addition, the distinctive features and key elements of effectiveness of alternative provision for young people with SEN, presented in this report, are intended to provide insights and learning for those working in the sector.

1.1 The research process

The NFER team gathered data between November 2011 and February 2012, interviewing 42 people, a mix of professionals and young people, from five local authorities. The sample of local authorities includes urban and rural, unitary and county councils, and covers four English regions: the North East, the South East, the West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humber. The five case-study areas were selected to reflect various approaches to, and manifestations of, alternative provision. They include:

- **Case study 1:** A local authority-wide approach to the promotion of a personalised offer through alternative provision.
- **Case study 2:** A pilot approach based in a PRU delivering resource intensive support to learners with SEN.
- **Case study 3:** A local authority-wide approach to delivering alternative provision based on the central commissioning and brokering roles fulfilled by a PRU.
- **Case study 4:** A specialist independent provider offering alternative provision opportunities and activities to a broad spectrum of learners (aged 14–25), commissioned directly by mainstream schools, special schools and PRUs.
- **Case study 5:** A mainstream school accessing alternative provision to meet the needs of a specific group of learners with SEN.

Qualitative interviews were conducted, largely face to face, with:

- 28 professionals across five local authority areas. They include local authority staff, school staff (from mainstream and special schools and PRUs), and alternative provider staff (from the private and third sector). They work in a mixture of operational and strategic roles and have varying levels of responsibility and direct contact with young people.
- 14 young people across three local authorities. These young people, four female and ten male, range from 14 to 19 years of age. Almost all have a learning difficulty or disability (including, for example, Dyslexia, Conduct Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autistic Disorder and Asperger Syndrome). In some cases, this is in combination with other forms of disability or mental health issue. Within this group of young people, some attend mainstream schools, special schools or PRUs, and access elements of their curriculum through externally sourced alternative provision. For others, alternative provision constitutes their full-time learning offer.

Due to its size and composition, the sample and findings should not be considered representative of the way alternative provision is used to meet support for young people with SEN nationally.

1.2 Scope of the report

This study explores the ways in which young people with SEN (up to age 19) access and engage in alternative provision in five local authority areas. The focus of this research starts from the stage where a decision has been made that some form of provision is required to meet the needs of these learners in addition to, or as an alternative to, their principal educational offer. This research aimed to collect the views of professionals and young people in relation to the following key themes:

- The interface of alternative provision and SEN (Chapter 2)
- Finding and commissioning alternative provision for young people with SEN (Chapter 3)
- Monitoring and quality assuring alternative provision for young people with SEN (Chapter 4)

- Elements of successful delivery of alternative provision for young people with SEN (Chapter 5)
- Differences in alternative provision for young people with SEN (Chapter 6).

The report concludes with Chapter 7, which reflects upon the views of professionals across the five case-study areas on the future influences and pressures that they may face in delivering alternative provision to young people with SEN and identifies lessons learnt from the research.

2 The interface of alternative provision and SEN

The following sections explore the interface of, and relationships between, alternative provision and SEN in five case-study areas. It provides an overview of the wide-ranging needs and characteristics of young people and the roles and functions of alternative provision in supporting them.

2.1 The characteristics and needs of learners with SEN accessing alternative provision

Alternative provision is sought for a wide range of young people with a broad spectrum of needs and difficulties that may challenge their ability to maximise their potential in school and other educational settings. Alternative provision can be used, for example, to support young people who require help to meet specific aspects of their learning needs, as well as those who require support to (re-)engage with learning and to develop socially and emotionally. The balance of learning-focused and engagement-focused needs varies, and for individuals may be liable to change over time.

Alternative provision is generally considered to be associated with young people who present with

behavioural difficulties and who have been, or are at risk of, exclusion from school. It is, however, increasingly recognised that behaviour-related difficulties often stem from, and are manifestations of, particular learning needs that may have been undetected or unsupported in young people's previous educational provision (see Chapter 1 for details).

2.2 The roles and functions of alternative provision

Given the wide-ranging characteristics and needs of young people with SEN, alternative provision is effective when it consists of, and provides, a continuum of provision accessed and delivered in a variety and combination of learning environments. Within this, alternative provision is often sought when the current services and provision being delivered are considered unable to adequately address learners' needs.

We get referrals from schools where they have used all the support they can get in school for young person with LDD [learning difficulties and disabilities] and they've come to us to look for AP [alternative provision].

Local authority staff

Characteristics and needs of learners across the five case-study areas

Alternative provision is being used with the following groups of learners across the five case-study areas:

- young people with a statement or diagnosis SEN
- young people receiving support at School Action/School Action Plus level
- young people without a statement or diagnosis SEN, but presenting with additional needs
- young people excluded or at risk of exclusion from school
- young people requiring support in preparation for transition to future stages of life and learning.

The types of needs and difficulties of the young people include (in rank order):

- social, emotional and behavioural difficulties
- cognitive and communication difficulties
- physical difficulties.

It is important that alternative provision is not regarded, or used, as a provision of last resort for young people with SEN. It should be accessed proactively and strategically to support young people in maximising their learning and developmental opportunities and experiences: 'we don't see AP as a desperate measure, it's more valuable than that' (School staff). Much of the value of alternative provision comes from its role in supporting and strengthening the existing connections that young people have with school and learning, as well as in countering young people's emerging or increasing disengagement. Alternative provision opportunities, especially vocationally-orientated activities and content, provide a means of delivering a curriculum offer that can motivate and support young people's participation in a variety of appropriate learning activities and environments.

One boy is starting to disengage, [from school] but he will attend his two days a week at his construction placement. He's leaving in May, and is starting to disengage with school, so the AP is really helping him to do something useful and to keep a connection with the school.

School staff

As well as maintaining a connection with education and learning, alternative provision is used to broaden the learning offer to a young person, by enhancing and adapting the curriculum available. This can include, for example, providing opportunities to pursue a wider range of accreditation options and access further opportunities for personal, social and emotional development. Alternative provision can thus provide the necessary infrastructure, resources and experiences enabling innovative, tailored and personalised packages of support to be built for individual young people with SEN. Together, this may increase opportunities for learners to participate and succeed in areas that might have otherwise been unavailable to them.

We go outside [for additional provision] because most of the young people will not be able to access a 'normal' curriculum based on five days a week, doing ten GCSEs. We [the PRU] deliver the core subjects, then we look outside for more meaningful provision around vocational aspects.

School staff

Many young people with more complex learning needs will attend special schools or other specialist educational provision, such as private residential schools. As part of their core offer, these establishments may provide some of the activities typically offered by alternative providers, such as opportunities to develop independent living skills in a purpose-built facility, or gaining work experience and employability skills on site. However, there are some instances where there is added value in providing these activities through alternative education providers:

We've got a group of six girls here who were really interested in doing hair and beauty. We tried to do something like that ourselves in school, but we now go to a private provider. The girls really get a lot from going out into the real world, not wearing their uniform and feeling like really getting involved when they go to the salon. Even though they can't cut anyone's hair, they really benefit from being in that atmosphere in lots of ways.

School staff

In addition to expanding the core educational and learning offers available to young people with SEN, the effective use of various forms of alternative provision can support their preparation and readiness for the transition to subsequent progression routes and pathways. Alternative provision is thus used to enhance young people's inspiration and motivation, as well as providing experiences of workplace participation and introductions to particular vocational or further education-related routes and destinations.

AP is really good because it gives kids a chance to try things. A lot of girls think they want to be hairdressers and do hair and beauty, they try it out and then realise that they hate it. So it acts as a good taster for them.

School staff

Hence, a key strength of alternative provision is that it provides young people with relatively 'risk-free' opportunities to engage in new activities and experiences that they may then decide they would like, or would not like, to pursue further. They can trial certain vocational or learning experiences, without having to formally commit, giving them the opportunity to make informed realistic choices about the appropriateness of these activities for their future destinations.

In the most complex situations, alternative provision is being used to provide intensive support to facilitate a one-to-one curriculum and therapeutic interventions for young people with severe and multiple needs, so reducing the need to look for specialist out of authority placements. In these circumstances, alternative provision is used to maintain learners' connection with local services and also with their communities, and possibly with their homes and families.

If kids are coming to us, it's really as a last resort. There's very little else left in the authority that can support them. If kids come to us, we just have to keep trying, keep looking, keep assessing, looking for new strategies and providers to engage them because there is nowhere else for them to go, other than out of authority provision or private education.

Alternative provider

Alternative provision for young people with SEN is also used to provide an additional element or activity from which they may benefit, such as a 'time-out' function.

Here, alternative provision activities simply constitute something learners can enjoy, away from the normal, everyday pressures and difficulties they face.

Some providers offer an environment where young people's self-esteem and self-confidence can be built. They don't do any core subjects there, they just work with them on this little farm and build up their confidence.

Local authority staff

Finally, for some young people with SEN, alternative provision can provide a stepping stone in their transition to adulthood and independent living. In this way, alternative provision is used to expand the duration of the offer for learners post-16, providing a continuum of support for those who still require the nurturing and development opportunities that such provision delivers. In these cases, provision might no longer be conceptualised or labelled as 'alternative' but rather as sitting within the overall offer for young people with SEN up to age 25.

Roles and functions of alternative provision

In one case-study area, a farm-based alternative provision is regarded as particularly valuable in offering young people a broad spectrum of interconnected learning and developmental experiences that complement other elements of their learning, support their personal and social development, and help prepare them for future transitions. The multi-layered roles and functions of this provision are highlighted in the comments of two learners, aged 14 and 15:

Learner 1

I've been coming here for a couple of months. I still go to school three days and do my maths and English and that. I'm OK at school, but I'm happier now. I learn a lot more. They talked to me about it, told me what it was all about. They told me I could work with the animals and I thought it sounded good. I came for a visit and thought it looked OK. I like it 'cos you get to do different things and go with different people on different days, like working with sheep one day and doing the eggs another day. When I'm older, I want to work with animals anyway. There's an animal section here where you have to feed them, change their beds and that, to look after them. Dad used to work on a farm, so he thinks it's good.

Learner 2

I didn't like it at school, teachers were snotty all the time, but I'm treated better here. They treat you like normal people. I was quite bad at school, to be honest, but I'm better here. They don't have a go at me all the time if I'm in a bad mood, they'll just leave me alone for a bit then see if I'm OK. I can talk to them if I want. School was just boring. Here you're doing something all the time so it's more interesting. I might get a job here when I leave. I either want to work here, or work outside somewhere. Now I know what you have to do to work on a farm and how to get on with people and not argue all the time.

3 Finding and commissioning alternative provision for young people with SEN

The following sections focus on ways in which alternative provision for young people with SEN is identified and commissioned across five case-study areas. The components of effectiveness in these processes are discussed.

3.1 Finding appropriate alternative provision for young people with SEN

Alternative provision for young people with SEN is identified in a variety of ways and is purchased and commissioned by local authorities, schools and PRUs (see section 3.2). Alternative provision can be sourced through brokers, such as local authority staff with responsibility for inclusion, 14–19 and SEN, for example, or through seeking information and advice from colleagues in schools, PRUs and other educational establishments. Provision may also be identified through participation in networks and communities of

interest, such as those offering support for people with specific needs and disabilities. Directories and approved provider lists have been created that map the range of alternative providers operating in a local area, providing a useful resource for those wishing to fund and commission alternative provision (see the boxed example below).

Ongoing enquiries, conducted by the local authority, school, and PRU staff ensures that locally available provision is constantly able to respond to the dynamic and possibly changing needs of young people with SEN. Through dialogue between young people, parents/carers, educational providers and local authority personnel, awareness of newly identified needs can trigger the search for additional suitable provision. This may include identifying new providers as well as exploring the ability of existing trusted and established providers to develop their offer to cater for these additional needs.

A directory of alternative providers

In this case-study area, a directory of locally available provision has been created by the local authority and is seen as being a particularly valuable tool in the identification and mapping of the range of alternative providers operating in the county. The directory details the types of activities and content on offer, the accreditation opportunities available and the nature of outcomes anticipated for young people. Hard copy and electronic web-based versions of the directory have been produced to support staff in their discussions with young people to determine the most appropriate package of activities for them.

Moving beyond the basic listing of providers, the directory serves to inspire confidence in potential commissioners that the providers included offer tried and tested provision and that certain standards of quality have been met. Inclusion in the directory, for example, depends on adherence to conditions of service that require providers to ensure: there is compliance with health and safety, child protection and safeguarding standards; that all staff have the relevant skills, experience and qualifications; that financial accounting systems are in place; and that all necessary data and information will be shared, as appropriate. Equally, inclusion in a directory may also serve to demonstrate that providers will offer suitable accreditation and opportunities for young people's progression and development.

Alternative providers are typically identified for inclusion in the directory by the local authority's strategy and commissioning team and the Connexions service. Providers are also recommended from within the wider network or community of alternative providers, commissioners and buyers who have in-depth knowledge and personal experience of the ability of particular providers to meet the specific needs of individual young people. Providers themselves can also make requests to be included in the directory.

CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE

3.2 Approaches to commissioning alternative provision for young people with SEN

Alongside the mechanisms of finding and sourcing alternative provision, there are different dimensions and aspects underpinning effective commissioning. Notwithstanding the specifics of the approach employed, it is essential that commissioning is coordinated and purposeful and that an individual or group has oversight of, and responsibility for, the quality and appropriateness of the provision sought. Effective commissioning depends on all involved advocating for, and promoting the best interests of young people with SEN and ensuring that alternative provision is meaningful and not tokenistic.

Our recruitment team, consisting of curriculum advisers, went out and identified the potential alternative providers. We were always saying, 'how does this enhance the curriculum, where is the accreditation, where are the learning outcomes?' We're absolutely clear this isn't about babysitting.

Local authority staff

Across the case studies, three main approaches to commissioning alternative provision are evident:

- a centralised approach
- a partnership approach
- direct commissioning.

Within a centralised approach to commissioning, a single agency, service or individual is responsible for identifying, commissioning and managing the alternative provision within the local authority. In this way, there is a concentration of knowledge, skills and experience that can ensure consistency in the quality and appropriateness of provision sourced and delivered to young people in the local area. An example of this approach in the case studies involves a local authority PRU holding the commissioning responsibilities for securing alternative provision for pupils on its roll, as well as for those pupils referred from other schools within the authority.

We [the PRU] then take responsibility of all of the AP, so if after a week, the child no longer accesses the provision, it's up to us to set up an alternative, it's not down to the school. Schools don't have to deal with the placements breaking down.

School staff

Within a partnership approach to commissioning alternative provision for young people, collaborative mechanisms facilitate the joint working of schools operating within area-based structures, such as District Inclusion Partnerships. Such partnerships, where schools are joined by other local agencies and service providers, can be managed by secondary school headteachers and are responsible for providing suitable provision through funding devolved from the local authority. In situations where the responsibility for commissioning is accompanied by devolution of funding, as opposed to a full delegation, senior local authority personnel may retain a considerable strategic role. In this approach, decisions about the type of alternative provision to be purchased are locally grounded and based on agreed understandings of local needs.

We [the local authority] manage the budget on behalf of the eight District Inclusion Partnerships. All the transactions, paying the AP providers, that's done by the local authority. The chair of each partnership, a secondary headteacher, gets to see copies of all these transactions. They keep tabs on it and tell me what provision they want to commission and how they want to spend the money.

Local authority staff

Alternative provision is also commissioned directly through school representatives drawing on their personal connections and networks of providers to source and secure appropriate provision for young people with SEN. When a need is identified, a known provider is contacted directly, the needs of the learner are discussed, and if suitable, an agreed package of provision is purchased. This place is funded directly through the individual school or, if appropriate, other statutory bodies, such as children's services.

3.2.1 Elements of effective commissioning

Within the different approaches to commissioning across the case studies, several key strands of effectiveness are apparent. It is critical that effective commissioning is based on identifying and securing targeted 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. This can involve commissioning from a wide variety of specialist providers, as well as individual providers that are able to offer a range of approaches in their own right. An essential component rests with the skills, knowledge and experience of commissioners to recognise any potential gaps in provision and to proactively recruit and source new potential providers to maintain the appropriateness and quality of provision on offer.

When we're looking for AP, we're looking for a range of providers so we've got a raft of things to call on. We don't put all our eggs in one basket. One size does not fit all, especially with kids with SEN.

School staff

We're looking for providers who can offer levels of provision. We're looking for a provision who can offer something for groups of learners and also for pairs and individuals on a one-to-one basis. Also, we need to ask providers if they can offer higher levels of supervision if the particular young person needs it.

School staff

As discussed in section 2.2, personalised learning packages of alternative provision are considered particularly effective for young people with SEN and effective commissioning is central to supporting the principle and practice of providing an individualised offer. 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. Central to the effectiveness of this approach is the extent to which those responsible for commissioning know, and understand, the needs of individual young people. This approach is underpinned by strong communication and the development of close working relationships between commissioners, referrers and potential suppliers of alternative provision.

The PRU staff are heavily involved with the students and can understand which provisions may be suitable for each student rather than commissioning 20 places from a college, or ten places from a vocational skills centre.

Local authority staff

However, there can be significant implications and challenges associated with this approach, based on costs and the critical mass requirements underpinning providers' sustainability. Commissioners may be faced with trying to reconcile or balance the tensions between ensuring the continuation of small, specialist providers through pre-buying places on a termly or yearly basis, and the ability to create bespoke, personalised provision as and when required.

To be sustainable, providers need to know they have a certain number of places. I know I have to send 15 kids a week to [name of provider]. If not, he can't function.

Local authority staff

A lot of the AP provision are very small set-ups, they are passionate about what they do, but they haven't got any capital behind them. There might be three or four providers I'd like to look at but they can only work with us if we can guarantee them we'll take 20 places a week. I might only want five. Alternative provision could become driven by what is available rather than by the needs of the young people.

Local authority staff

4 Monitoring and quality assuring alternative provision for young people with SEN

The following section focuses on ways in which alternative provision for young people with SEN is monitored and quality assured across five case-study areas. The components of effectiveness in these processes are discussed.

Across the case studies, there is a view that robust approaches to quality assurance have actively been developed in response to the historical poor performance of some providers and the unsatisfactory outcomes generated for young people.

Tracking and accountability is such a big part of it now. Before we had these QA [quality assurance] procedures it was shocking. If kids were behaving badly, providers would just send them home, not tell the PRU or the school. We had no idea what they were doing, no measure of the progress they were making.

School staff

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. At one level, quality assurance of the provision put in place for young people is inextricably linked with the nature and effectiveness of the commissioning process (see Chapter 3). A commissioning approach containing the necessary checks and balances contributes significantly to ensuring that the alternative provision potentially available to young people is of appropriate quality and will help to deliver the desired outcomes for them. Effective commissioning processes, for example, involve the development of clear insights into

the details of the offer made by different providers, which form the basis of establishing thresholds of expected standards of provision that can be measured.

We're very strict about what we specify in the tendering process, it's the first round of QA. Prospective providers have to demonstrate that they have all the right policies in place, risk assessment procedures, staff qualities and experience.

Local authority staff

It is important that evaluation, monitoring and other QA processes are inclusive and collaborative, whereby providers themselves have a central role and are fully engaged and committed to ensuring high quality provision. Effective quality assurance depends on open and comprehensive communication and clearly articulated expectations. This is multi-dimensional where commissioners, funders and providers are all clear about their roles and responsibilities and those of others. Such expectations are generally formalised within the tendering processes and agreements underpinning commissioning, and these expectations may form a baseline against which performance and quality can be subsequently assessed.

The schools now know and understand what we [commissioners] expect from an alternative provider. There is a clear understanding of what is on offer and the level of provision to be expected from the schools buying into these provisions.

Local authority staff

CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE

A partnership approach to monitoring alternative provision

In this case-study area, curriculum managers from area-based school partnerships meet regularly to discuss their schools' alternative provision requirements and to share out quality assurance responsibilities so that each provider isn't getting a visit from five schools and a PRU (Local authority staff). During the course of monitoring visits to providers, assessments involving session observations and 'behaviour walks' provide opportunities to collect information, which is then shared at the curriculum managers' meetings.

Reporting systems to monitor young people accessing alternative provision

In this case-study area, the local authority has developed a robust reporting system to monitor learners attending alternative provision: 'We have weekly monitoring sheets that give the providers the opportunity to comment on how well the young people have done that day in that session' (Local authority staff). The local authority employs a member of staff to oversee alternative provision and liaise between schools and providers. This individual ensures that monitoring forms are completed and sent to school where the pupil is on roll. Any issues raised by schools are collated and fed back to the provider via that member of staff. In addition to the weekly monitoring forms, the local authority has also developed a tracking sheet specifically for pupils with a statement of SEN. Providers are asked to track the progress of individual students on a termly basis:

We ask them to comment on, where were they at the beginning of term when they started, have they met all their targets in relation to interaction with other students, motivation, reliability, punctuality, attendance. Is this above what was expected for them to achieve?

Local authority staff

Once alternative provision is commissioned and in place, quality assurance continues through ongoing monitoring, evaluation and accountability processes. The commissioners and funders of the provision, who may also have responsibility for the outcomes of the young people, are regarded as being best placed to ensure that alternative provision is meeting the young people's needs. Furthermore, distributing responsibility for quality assurance between individuals and institutions, especially schools and groups of schools, within an area is seen as an effective and efficient means of overseeing the quality of provision.

Effective quality assurance and monitoring focuses on how the alternative provision actually operates and delivers once it has been commissioned. Investigations will generate insights into, for example: what the teaching and learning experiences are for the young people; how their behaviour is approached and managed; how their other needs are met; and the nature and appropriateness of outcomes delivered.

The whole process of quality assurance is also enhanced when those supplying alternative provision and those commissioning or overseeing it work together to develop the quality of the provision on offer. In several case-study areas, for example, the local authority is proactive in encouraging and supporting alternative providers to undertake training provided by,

or through the authority, to build their capacity and improve their ability to meet the needs of young people with SEN. As a result, there is increased confidence across authorities and schools that the wide range of providers are all equally equipped to work effectively with young people with diverse needs.

We actually trained some of the providers. A construction-based provision got training from the PRU about monitoring and tracking systems, so they can now feedback effectively about what the young people are doing and what progress they're making against their targets.

Local authority staff

We expect them to provide members of staff to attend our training two or three times a year. Carousel training has been arranged, so several different agencies will come in and offer training on that day. Quality assurance benefits from this, as we'll talk with the providers about different issues, like reporting, monitoring, and accountability.

Local authority staff

Providers have highlighted that they'd like to know a bit more about SEN, especially autism and dyslexia. We'll try and organise the training, but we'll source it externally if we can't provide it ourselves.

Local authority staff

A final element underpinning the effectiveness of quality assurance relates to the consequences and implications of under-performance of providers. 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 de-commissioning of individual providers delivering to young people with SEN.

In our agreements with providers, we have a very strict list of things they have to comply with. In one case, the provider had stopped communicating with us, and when we went to do our monitoring visits, we didn't like what we saw; kids not being challenged for bad language and inappropriate behaviour and they were letting them do what they wanted. We tried to support providers and help them, but nothing changed. We gave them notice to improve, but they hadn't delivered, so we were forced to cancel the contract. We couldn't continue to send kids to a provision that wasn't right.

Local authority staff

Similarly, in several case-study areas, as a result of quality assurance processes, significant changes in the composition of alternative providers and the approach to the delivery of alternative provision have occurred. In one authority, for example, the evolution of the commissioning approach is leading to a significant overhaul of the amount, nature and sources of alternative provision provided. As a response to the perceived limited supply of high quality, appropriate provision, a decision has been taken to focus more on developing in-house capacity to meet the needs of these young people, drawing on specialist provision only in specific circumstances.

Basically, the schools have had their fingers burned by poor AP providers in the past. We've had enough years to have tried them, assess their outcomes and now they're being rejected and we're trying something else. We now realise that one of the biggest problems of AP providers is that they're not able to manage the behaviours of the students.

Local authority staff

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

This chapter focuses on the key factors identified as contributing to the effectiveness in the delivery of alternative provision for learners with SEN across the five case-study areas. Elements of effective delivery include:

- characteristics and ethos of the provision
- composition of the alternative provision offer
- nature and content of the provision
- relationships, joint working and information exchange.

Together these have a cumulative effect on successful alternative provision for young people with SEN. The following sections explore these key features in detail.

5.1 Characteristics and ethos of the provision

Alternative provision for young people with SEN is successful when it achieves a shared ethos and outlook among staff, young people and their parents/carers to focus on the individual needs and interests of learners, and their achievement of realistic and meaningful outcomes. This includes, for example, helping young people to: gain appropriate and relevant qualifications; develop social and life skills; address behaviour and communication issues; progress into further education; employment or training; and prepare for independent life and living.

Effectiveness is underpinned by a shared commitment to ensure parity in the quality of alternative provision available to, and accessed by, young people with SEN, compared to other groups of learners. Alternative provision needs to be aspirational and appropriately challenging to support young people in maximising their opportunities and life chances.

We look for meaningful outcomes that will be delivered to the young person accessing that provision.

We're not looking for something that will just contain them until they're old enough to leave school.

Local authority staff

The ambience and environment of alternative provision is also key. It is critical that all alternative provision is subject to stringent health and safety checks and risk assessments to ensure that young people with SEN are placed in a safe environment. Establishing clear rules and expectations around young people's behaviour and conduct, which all staff support consistently, helps to maintain constructive and effective learning contexts. This, in combination with the promotion of a nurturing and caring atmosphere, serves to counteract feelings of failure and difference that some young people with SEN in alternative provision may experience.

We have flexibility so we can change things around. If they don't want to do something one day, we can offer them another activity. We are trying to prepare them for their next steps, they have to understand sometimes they will have to do things they don't want to do and AP can help them understand why the rules and structures are there.

Alternative provider

Delivery of provision in a high quality physical environment also helps to create a positive atmosphere, where young people feel comfortable, secure and valued. While the type of environment differs depending on the nature of alternative provision and the specific needs of a young person, practical and vocational settings, as well as 'college style' environments, are felt to be particularly effective for many young people with SEN.

Alternative provision can be really effective when it provides the child with somewhere they can go for a break from what is the norm of what they usually experience in school. What they really need is something different that takes them out of where they are, and gives them something different to do.

Alternative provider

The location of alternative provision can also contribute to its success. Provision delivered in work-based community or multi-purpose settings, for example, in farms, garden centres and sports clubs, provides a contrast to the traditional school or PRU setting. Many learners respond well to the additional elements these environments offer, including the opportunity to learn outside, in large open spaces and engage with members of the public. Similarly, settings that enable young people to engage with others who have similar needs and abilities, as well as with peer role models who have successfully progressed through alternative provision, are beneficial.

The site is a community-based site and I rent out bits to other providers and community groups. It doesn't feel like a school. Schools haven't worked for these youngsters so there was no point in me putting them back into a school situation.

Alternative provider

We don't want to take too many (young people) or it will be replicating the classroom school environment with the same problems.

Alternative provider

Some alternative provision successfully simulates workplace settings, for example, where young people are able to experience vocational activities such as hair and beauty, construction and horticulture (see section 5.3 for further details of vocational learning content). Whilst this provision may take place outside of the school or PRU environment, there is additional value when these activities operate in 'real world' settings, as learners are aware that the work they are engaged in has implications and consequences that reach beyond their direct learning experiences. For example, rather than acquiring painting and decorating skills in a training or workshop setting, the opportunity to develop and apply these skills in a commercial context may impact positively on their motivation, quality of work and feelings of achievement.

For other young people with SEN, alternative provision works best when it is delivered in their regular learning environment as these are places that learners are familiar with and feel comfortable in. New settings, for example, may present accessibility issues for those with physical disabilities and for young people with

conditions such as Asperger Syndrome, changes to routine can be difficult. Equally, for some schools, their desire to provide consistency in their approach to care and support means that young people accessing alternative provision off site may not be seen as the most suitable option. Some providers have overcome this by tailoring their provision, delivering it on the school or PRU site. Once learners have built relationships with the providers, it may be appropriate to introduce them to new learning environments. Additional resources can be put in place to help to support this, for example, where teaching assistants or key workers accompany a learner to the new setting. In this way, alternative provision can also help prepare young people with SEN for transition to future progressions.

The providers are flexible enough to say 'we don't need to be in a specific place'. Some of it is about developing things in-house with the support of providers.

Local authority staff

For a small number of young people, individual home tuition and e-learning may also be used as a form of alternative provision, where the specifics of their special needs present challenges for their meaningful engagement and participation in school, PRU and alternative provider settings.

High quality staffing is also a key characteristic of effective delivery in alternative provision. Young people with SEN often have complex needs that demand specialist skills and attributes from the staff who work with them. The staff who work in alternative provision come from a variety of different backgrounds including, for example: qualified and non-qualified teachers; college tutors; trainers; youth workers; artisan tradesmen and women; and small business owners. As a result, their approach to supporting and engaging learners can vary considerably. This diversity is recognised as a strength, as staff bring with them different sets of skills in relation to teaching and learning and in their approaches engaging, nurturing and supporting young people. Within the overall portfolio of alternative provision, across a local area and within particular settings, these broad skill sets can be drawn upon to provide the appropriate support to cater for individuals' specific needs.

The providers are very committed, they're passionate, they're from that industry themselves so they know their stuff. They treat the young people as work colleagues. The young people generally respond to that very positively.

Local authority staff

Alternative provision is more relaxed, some staff come from a teaching background, but a lot of them don't, so the youngsters don't feel like we are replicating school.

Alternative provider

For our most complex kids, we [the PRU] deliver the majority of the core educational offer to them. We can do that with the right level of experience, to the right level that is required for that child. Often being a teacher is beneficial, depending on the child's SEN. Although alternative providers have a good range of skills, sometimes, there are things that teachers have learned over many years that really make the difference, it is a very skilled job.

School staff

Quality relationships between staff and young people contribute to the efficacy of alternative provision for young people with SEN. Where staff have an individual and flexible approach to working with learners, it helps to establish trust, respect and confidence, creating a positive learning context. These relationships are also built on the positive reinforcement and encouragement of young people. Staff may act as role models, motivating and inspiring young people and fostering their self-belief. This may include challenging some of the commonly held perceptions about their special needs and disabilities, and their ability to achieve, succeed and progress.

It's part of their individual package, it's a positive, not a negative and we help kids to see it as something positive for them.

School staff

Effective relationships are also developed through the appropriate mix of staff and young people both in one-to-one and in group-work sessions. Within a provision, young people may form positive connections with individual members of staff and through this, relationships develop, leading to greater mutual

understanding of young people's needs and staff members' capacity to support them. This situation should be regularly reviewed, however, to ensure that any changes, such as deterioration in the relationship, or the emergence of overdependence, can be resolved proactively to maintain the ongoing success of the alternative provision experience.

A further characteristic of successful alternative provision is ensuring appropriate group size and composition. For learners with SEN, a high staff to pupil ratio is often necessary. In some cases, there is one-to-one work, in other situations small groups of learners work successfully together. In order for this to work well, consideration of the characteristics and needs of individual young people, and the dynamic of the group as a whole, is of central importance. An effective element of ensuring constructive group composition is to involve young people in the decision-making process. Equally, staff should have access to the necessary background knowledge and information about learners on which to make informed decisions about grouping arrangements.

5.2 Composition of the alternative provision offer for young people with SEN

There is a wide range and combination of reasons why young people with SEN require alternative provision. For some learners, alternative provision will be used to foster their engagement with learning and for others it will be used to supplement their wider learning needs (see Chapter 2, on the roles and functions of alternative provision for further details). In order for alternative provision to be a success for such a wide range of young people with a variety of needs, it is vital that the composition of the offer being considered takes into account the following overarching principles. The alternative provision offer should:

- fit appropriately with, and support, a learner's educational entitlement
- adequately reflect the learning capacity and capabilities of individuals
- incorporate a young person's interests.

5.2.1 Ensuring alternative provision fits appropriately with, and supports, a learner's educational entitlement

There is great variation in how young people with SEN engage in alternative provision. For some learners, alternative provision may be sought to deliver the whole of their educational entitlement and they will attend on a full-time basis. For others, alternative provision is provided in conjunction with their core curriculum, which they access through other educational settings, such as a mainstream school, special school or PRU. For these learners, alternative provision constitutes a much smaller proportion of their total learning offer. By examining and taking into account the learning a young person has accessed or is accessing, helps to ensure that any alternative provision put in place forms part of a rounded curriculum offer, so that young people are being appropriately developed, challenged and supported in all their learning needs.

We look at everything a young person is accessing and then think about what gaps we need to fill. For these kids it avoids life skills being the default option. Often, when we start to look at the situation we find that they've been getting the same life skills or vocational type stuff for years, they need a broader offer than that and we also need to make sure they're not repeating stuff.

Local authority staff

5.2.2 Ensuring alternative provision appropriately reflects the learning capacity and capabilities of individuals

When considering the alternative provision offer, it is important that all information sources, which provide relevant details about the capacity and capabilities of the learner, are gathered, analysed and used, as the basis for developing an appropriate alternative provision package. This includes, for example, the use of referral forms, Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), statements of SEN, Common Assessment Frameworks (CAFs), as well as professionals' knowledge and understanding of the young person. Together, this information helps to: ensure clarity regarding the nature and implications of learners' special needs;

identify additional support that may be required to facilitate or enhance their access to alternative provision and the course content; and discover particular aspects of provision a learner might respond particularly well to.

Across the case-study areas, however, providers report receiving variable data about a young person before they access their provision and in most instances, as part of the induction process, conduct their own assessments of young people in order to gather the necessary background information about their learning needs and capabilities.

Having background information is useful but we don't always get it from the referrer. Sometimes that is because the referrer doesn't want us to prejudge the learner.

Alternative provider

We don't want to know their life history but we need to know the relevant stuff. You need to know about their needs and behaviours because you need strategies in place to cope with them.

Alternative provider

5.2.3 Ensuring alternative provision incorporates a young person's interests

It is also critical that young people's views are of prime consideration in determining the nature and content of the alternative provision offer to be made. Commissioners, schools and providers need to undertake meaningful conversations and dialogue with young people and their parents/carers about the alternative provision they may be interested in and feel is most suitable. For some young people with SEN, especially those with communication difficulties, they may require support from an advocate to help them convey their views and interests. For others, staff may need to work with them to build their confidence and understanding of their own capabilities before they can meaningfully decide.

Our youngsters often have not been in school for a long while, because of being bullied, they have autism, mental health issues, they may have even been in custody. We need to build up relationships and hook them in by focusing on the things that they are keen on, to motivate them.

Alternative provider

Conversations with young people to determine their alternative provision offer

There are numerous ways in which young people's perspectives on alternative provision are sought and reviewed to ensure that the provision offered is, and remains, the most appropriate. These conversations help to foster feelings of empowerment among young people that their views are at the heart of any decision-making process. Across the five case studies, examples include:

- **One-to-one conversations** with young people, conducted by a teacher or key worker whom they have an established relationship with. Young people's skills and strengths are highlighted and their interests and aspirations are discussed. Possible alternative provision activities are introduced and expectations of the providers are explained. Young people can feedback on the suitability of the provision that has previously been accessed or trialled and a joint decision on the alternative activities to be pursued can be reached.
- **Young people's discussion groups** are used to explore options for alternative provision among small groups of learners with similar needs. A teacher or key worker will facilitate a discussion where young people describe their interests and aspirations and the types of activities they would like to engage in. Where young people share an interest or desire to explore a particular type of alternative provision, arrangements can be made for them to trial activities together to reduce isolation and encourage attendance.
- **Family-focused conversations** with young people and their parents/carers in an appropriate setting, including the family home, are facilitated by a professional known to the young person and the family. These discussions are used to reinforce the message of why alternative provision might be beneficial. Young people's interests and aspirations are discussed and parents' perspectives and expectations are explored. Together a joint decision can be made about the choice of alternative provision. The responsibilities and expectations of both the young person and their parents/carers in relation to the placement are clearly defined, and agreed, to help ensure its success.
- **Multi-agency meetings** with relevant professionals, and where appropriate, parents/carers and young people, are held to discuss alternative provision options. These can take place alongside other meetings such as annual reviews of SEN statements, for example, or arranged on an adhoc basis. Learners can present their own views or an advocate can put them forward on their behalf. This ensures young people's opinions are the centre of any decisions made. The roles of individual stakeholders in supporting young people to successfully access and engage in an alternative provision placement are agreed so that they can be drawn upon quickly as possible, as and when required. Expectations and desired outcomes of the alternative provision placement are recorded so that they can be reviewed over time to ensure the placement stays on track.

We had one conversation with a young man at the end of year 11 about progression and he'd suddenly decided that he wanted to do motor mechanics and we said 'why didn't you tell us earlier?' He told us he didn't think he was up to that. So, in terms of conversations with young people it is about teasing this out.

Alternative provider

Whilst it is important, wherever possible, to involve young people with SEN in the decision making about the type and composition of the alternative provision they will access, they often require support to form realistic aspirations for both their immediate learning and future life. It is important that staff and their parents/carers support aspirations whilst being honest about their expectations and provide alternative options where possible.

You do have youngsters with expectations you know you can't fulfil. We had an Aspergers boy and he'd been in the army cadets and they were building up his expectations, but I know he can't go into the army. So, we help him to focus on his other strengths too, such as IT.

Alternative provider

Learners have very unrealistic expectations, not just about their learning but about their job prospects. One of our main jobs is to keep them grounded and build their employability skills.

Alternative provider

Providing young people with opportunities to access taster courses helps them to make informed and realistic choices about the type of alternative provision they would like to pursue. This may involve them accessing a range of learning programmes at a local college or from work-based and vocational providers, for example. For students with physical disabilities or those with conditions who find change difficult to cope with, providers can visit them at their school or PRU to demonstrate taster activities.

One of the EBD [Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties] schools ran a session where they invited all the providers in and all the youngsters had tasters of what those providers could do. About eight providers were involved.

Local authority staff

We deliver tasters, we do not profess that they are going to become qualified plumbers. What we say is, 'this is what plumbing is all about, if you don't like having your hand down a toilet, plumbing isn't really for you'. What we are hoping is that we will introduce them to college courses; we look at their next steps.

Alternative provider

5.3 The nature and content of alternative provision

Having considered all of the available information and discussed needs and wants with a young person and their families, a personalised learning offer can be constructed. In order to meet the requirements of learners, local authorities and schools can offer flexibility in their approach to alternative provision by

drawing on a range of alternative providers offering young people a variety of educational and vocational opportunities. This provision typically includes a combination of: subject learning and functional skills; vocational learning; and personal and social development. These can take place in various environments and can be delivered by different providers.

As discussed in section 2.2, personalised learning packages involving alternative provision are considered to be particularly effective for young people with SEN. Across the case studies, there are many illustrations of why bespoke, tailored packages of provision are necessary, and how they are constructed from the range of alternative provision offers available.

They are such individual characters; we couldn't do the same package for another child, even if they have similar needs. It has to be bespoke; we build it around the child. That's why it's essential there's a bank of providers that you can trust.

School staff

We always try to be flexible. If a kid comes up with something and we can't access it, we have to try and think about how we can make it happen. We have been quite creative in the past.

Local authority staff

Subject learning and core skills can be delivered to young people with SEN through a variety of routes including through the school or the PRU at which the pupil remains on roll, or via the alternative provision that they are attending. Notwithstanding this potential variance, it is essential that within any individual learning offer, a young person's educational entitlement, especially numeracy and literacy, is met to the same standards no matter where, or how, that provision is delivered. A key strength of alternative providers is that they can integrate core and functional skills acquisition, including numeracy and literacy, team working, and problem solving, within other aspects of their delivery of practical and vocational learning.

The provision of a bespoke offer to support learners' needs

In one case-study area, a PRU has successfully built a portfolio of support around a young person with a statement of SEN who was referred to the provision because he was at risk of permanent exclusion from mainstream school. This young person has Asperger Syndrome and is classified by staff as being 'high functioning'. He presented with inappropriate language and behaviour and an unwillingness to do anything he did not want to do. Following appropriate assessment and conversations with the learner and his family, his academic needs were identified and a resource-intensive strategy developed, focusing on the provision of one-to-one tutoring in a specific A-level subject. Considerable time and effort underpinned the identification of a tutor with the suitable skills, personality and ability to successfully engage and support this learner's academic achievement.

I tried several very good tutors, but I knew none of them would be able to challenge and motivate him. Then we found this one tutor. He came out and met [the learner] and they hit it off straight away. The tutor was bowled over by [the learner's] ability and made a commitment to do whatever it takes to make certain he meets his potential.

School staff

Other support is in place to promote this academic progress, including a flexible approach, to wearing uniform and the structure of the school day. In addition, social and emotional development is promoted through inclusion in a nurturing-focused tutor group. On-going discussions with a nearby secondary school are taking place to facilitate this young person's re-engagement into mainstream education.

Alternative provision can also be used to construct a personalised offer through the delivery of vocational opportunities, encompassing a broad range of work-related subject areas including, for example:

- animal care
- business administration
- careers education
- catering and hospitality
- construction
- customer service
- employability skills
- health and social care
- enterprise
- hair and beauty
- horticulture
- ICT
- motor vehicle/bikes
- music and creative
- retail
- sport and leisure.

Vocational learning opportunities enhance young people's practical skills and knowledge. They are often effective for young people with SEN, as the skills and competencies they develop in a particular vocational area are portable, and can be transferred and applied

in a range of different environments. This type of alternative provision can help young people to develop their employability skills and aspirations, as well as prepare them for post-16 progression.

We integrate all the students into the main workshop so these students are often with older kids so they can see people who have gone through the system and are progressing on to apprenticeships, so they see the potential opportunities.

Alternative provider

For some young people with SEN, alternative provision is required to support their personal and social development. Such aspects of learning and development may be embedded in a wide range of activities offered through alternative providers, and the need to access these will depend on the individual requirements of each learner. Activities may include, for example, helping a young person to deal with specific issues such as: personal safety; social skills; friends and relationships; bullying; peer pressure; and life and independent living skills. In addition, young people with SEN may also access extra-curricular activities to facilitate and increase opportunities for social

interaction through, for example, participating in sports, adventure activities and volunteering.

They don't know how to get around, they don't know how to fit in socially in different groups and settings. We don't focus on telling them that they have to hit this particular target in order to access a particular course. We're telling them, 'we need you to: turn up on time, fit in with the behaviour codes at the placement and do the work that you're given'.

Alternative provider

Our work is about education for life, not necessarily for a job. We help young people to have a better quality of life because they can do jobs like cutting grass for themselves and friends.

Alternative provider

The programme we offer is personal and social development with a vocational option of horticulture. I don't see them all being horticulturalists, I see it as a much broader thing. What I'm trying to give them is life skills, it's giving them a taste for things. Hopefully when they come out of school, they may have an interest in working with their hands and I'm not convinced they would have got this elsewhere.

School staff

Alternative provision should provide opportunities for appropriate achievement and accreditation across the broad range of curriculum content and activities delivered including academic and vocational learning, and personal and social development. It is, however, essential that such accreditation is meaningful, relevant and transferable to enable young people to move forward successfully into post-16 provision or employment. Across the case-study areas, alternative providers typically adopt accreditation regimes that are based on unitised and evidence-based learning. Building up individual units of accreditation in this way is often more manageable for young people with SEN. In addition, units of work achieved across a range of different learning environments and settings can also be combined to lead to a wider qualification. This approach is particularly useful for young people who find it difficult to stay in a particular provision for a significant period of time.

Previously, they left us with a certificate saying they had done tractor driving, the certificates meant nothing. Now, with the National Open College Network (NOCN) units, they will have accreditation to say that they have skills in customer relations and health and safety in the workplace.

Alternative provider

We're working in much more of a partnership with the schools, they do some of the credits and we do some of the credits. We blend in so that it maximises the outcomes for the learners. We are all extremely flexible, we can look at all the units of credit that are available and think we could do that if the learners are interested in it.

Alternative provider

When they gain their units or credits for the work they've done, their confidence is increased which enables them to be stretched and achieve more academically. Pupils can then see that alternative provision results in learning outcomes in the same way as mainstream learning, but in an environment that is better suited to their individual needs.

School staff

The following boxed example on page 21 draws together different strands and characteristics that in various combinations can culminate in creating effective alternative provision content for young people with SEN.

5.4 Relationships, joint working and information exchange

For young people with SEN accessing alternative provision and remaining 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. A designated person in school, for example, can help sustain effective links, through attending review meetings, visiting young people at the alternative provision and feeding back information about their progress to other school staff. Close links and communication between local authority personnel, school staff and alternative providers are central to ensuring that alternative provision for young people with SEN is delivered and monitored effectively (see Chapter 4).

Ensuring the effective content of alternative provision

It is apparent across the case-study areas that in order for the content of alternative provision to be effective for learners with SEN, the following conditions need to be met. The content of the provision should be, where possible:

- **Readily available and easily accessible:** so that programmes and activities can be accessed at the time when they are needed the most. This includes, for example, alternative providers having rolling intakes and offering flexible timetables to respond to the immediate needs of young people.
- **Integrated into the timetable:** where alternative provision is accessed on a part-time, or sessional basis, it should be planned and formally integrated into the timetable to ensure that core elements of the curriculum are not disrupted and to promote and validate alternative provision as a credible activity.
- **Congruent or connected with other elements of a young person's learning offer:** where alternative provision fits with the overall approach taken to meeting a young person's needs, providing consistent messages about education and behaviour.
- **Linked to the wider curriculum:** where alternative provision is accessed on a part-time or sessional basis, the activities taking place in alternative provision should relate to and reinforce learning taking place back in school or at a PRU.
- **Flexible:** where there is adaptability in the content and learning environment allowing for choice and change but operating within, and reinforcing, the necessary structures and boundaries to promote consistency within young people's learning experiences.
- **Supported by additional strategies and resources:** to reduce potential challenges and barriers to young peoples successful access to alternative provision.
- **Monitored and reviewed:** so that the content of alternative provision remains appropriate suitable to meet learners' ongoing needs.

Well-developed relationships can support effective information exchange, underpinning the flow of appropriate referral information to providers, and the transfer of learners' performance and outcomes data back to schools and commissioners of the provision.

When we get a referral from a school asking for some AP package to be put together for a young person, I demand that the school sends me all the information they have on that child, what they're like academically and what their needs and interests are. The schools understand that I'm not just wanting this information for the sake of it. In return, I demand that the providers I work with commit to providing regular, meaningful information and feedback.

Local authority staff

Individual learner profiles for young people with SEN that are used to record and share key information within school settings also provide a useful means of

wider dissemination to the alternative providers that young people access. Such documents, compiled by specialist school staff, including special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs,) for example, in conjunction with the learner, contain essential details of how a particular young person prefers to learn, the types of situations they find challenging and the appropriate approaches that are effective in supporting them. A willingness from all parties working with these learners to both share and respond to this information, and modify their offers and approaches accordingly, can support the effectiveness of the provision in place.

Forging closer links between school-based learning and external alternative provision environments can help to reduce young people's feelings of isolation. Some learners may welcome and benefit from the regular presence of familiar, trusted members of school staff whilst attending an alternative provision. Similarly, ongoing support from, and opportunities for

communication with, alternative provision staff in a school setting may help some learners to maximise their achievements in that environment.

The promotion of close working partnerships between providers and schools also has the potential to reduce the isolation of staff working within alternative provision and provide them with opportunities for professional development. Equally, schools and alternative providers can offer mutual support and share good practice, for example, in their approaches to behaviour management. Local authority joint training programmes also provide opportunities for mainstream and special school staff to work alongside alternative providers facilitating the strengthening of relationships and mutual understandings. In this way, the overall quality of the combined support for young people with SEN can be improved.

Positive links between alternative providers can also enhance the effectiveness of provision for young people with SEN. Formal and informal networks of providers can increase learners' access to a broader range of activities. For example, links between private providers and local colleges can enable young people to participate in taster activities, which raise their

awareness of post-16 opportunities. Such linkage may also help prepare young people in their future transitions to new provision. Also within these networks, knowledge, practice and resources, such as monitoring documents and self-evaluation procedures, may also be shared helping to improve the consistency and the overall quality of alternative provision available locally.

Parents and carers are recognised as having a key role to play in their child's learning and, within alternative provisions, should be involved at all stages. In some cases, this is particularly difficult for providers and schools due to a lack of contact with, or support from, parents. In addition, some parents and carers have learning difficulties or disabilities, which further challenge these relationships. However, when parents are involved, or issues at home are addressed, young people's needs can be met more effectively. In order to support parents' involvement, providers must include them in discussions about alternative provision from the earliest referral stage and provide them with appropriate information about the provision. In order to encourage their ongoing involvement, providers should feedback about the achievements and progress made by their child, as well as highlighting problems where they arise.

CASE-STUDY EXAMPLE

Joint working and collaboration to ensure appropriate needs are met

In this case-study area, a specialist independent provider offering a holistic range of educational, social, behavioural, vocational and therapeutic interventions works cohesively with other providers and agencies to ensure learners' SEN needs are appropriately met.

In the case of one particular learner aged 16, with learning difficulties and health-related conditions, a range of approaches are in place to identify and meet her immediate and future needs. The overall package of support is managed by her school although she has not attended for several years as a result of an anxiety condition. The provision is funded through several local authority budgets. Alternative provision activities have been designed, in full consultation with the learner and all relevant agencies to help support post-16 transition. These include: access to suitably differentiated academic content, supported and over-seen by specialist school staff; opportunities to experience vocationally based training, such as small animal care and horticulture; and opportunities to build social and emotional resilience through accessing community-based activities such as attending a local weight loss programme with a key worker. In this way, there is joint responsibility for meeting the needs of this young person, and the coordinated, collaborative approach provides an effective alternative to seeking an out of authority residential placement.

6 Differences in alternative provision for young people with and without SEN

As set out in Chapter 1, it is widely accepted that a significant proportion of young people accessing alternative provision have some form of special need, whether formally diagnosed or not. On the surface, it may appear that there are few differences in the provision available to young people with SEN. There is no apparent segregation between the providers that are commissioned to work with learners with special needs and those without, across the case studies. As long as personalisation remains at the heart of the alternative provision offer, the same providers and provision may be drawn upon regardless of the classification of a young person's needs.

All of the kids that come to us have special needs as such, but the scale is massive. Some young people are at P level, some are at GCSE, A to C level but they have behavioural issues. There are also those with learning difficulties, statemented children and non-statemented children. All of those share the same provision.

Alternative provider

There is no difference [in alternative provision], SEN covers such a broad spectrum, you have to get to know their needs by getting to know the child. A statement may help but you have a preconceived view after reading that, it's not always beneficial.

Alternative provider

Providers are all at the same level, they can manage all the different types of needs of the young people. So, alternative provision for those with SEN can be drawn from exactly the same pool of providers as for those without SEN really, giving us a good range of high-quality providers to work with.

Local authority staff

However, operating within the principle of personalisation there is recognition across the case studies that there are situations when the range and complexity of the conditions and difficulties presented by learners require differentiated provision. For example, a young person with social and emotional difficulties may require a different type of approach

and provision to that commissioned for those with behaviour-orientated needs. Providers do not typically advertise or promote themselves as working solely with young people with a particular type of SEN. However, schools and local authorities do seek out and commission providers that they understand are best placed to support and offer the most suitable environment to particular groups of young people with specific needs.

As the complexity of need increases, there are likely to be greater limitations on the choices of alternative provision that can be accessed. It may, for example, become much more important to consider factors such as: group composition; the duration and timing of alternative provision 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. Having fully considered these, the range of suitable alternative provision available to be commissioned for these young people could narrow.

Special schools tend to work with the same AP as the PRUs, which would suggest that either they don't need anything different or there aren't actually very many private providers who specialise in this area.

Local authority staff

There are additional considerations relating to the wider support required to facilitate young people's access to, and participation in, appropriate alternative provision that may not apply to other learners without SEN attending the same provision. This can include, for example, the high levels of accompaniment that may be needed to ensure a learner's safe and productive involvement in activities.

Essentially provision will operate in the same ways but might be tailored in order to accommodate need, especially if a young person has a statement. They might need a learning mentor or a support worker to help them.

Local authority staff

In addition, much specialist provision also relies on a high staff to learner ratio and accordingly is more expensive. Young people with specialist SEN needs may also be more suited to very small provisions with low numbers of learners. Here, the unit cost is usually higher than provision for groups of young people with

lower staffing ratios. Together, these circumstances can influence the strategic and resourcing decisions that commissioners and buyers of alternative provision have to make and this may influence the range and nature of provision young people with SEN can access.

7. Future considerations in delivering alternative provision to young people with SEN

This study aimed to explore various approaches to supporting young people with SEN through the delivery of alternative provision and to identify distinctive features together with key elements of effectiveness. This final chapter presents perspectives on the wider contexts in which alternative provision is currently operating and reflects on the lessons and learning that can be taken forward.

Various influences and pressures are identified across the case-study areas that may have potential implications for the future effective delivery of alternative provision for young people with SEN. Many of the issues identified are associated with changing policy contexts and current proposals for reforming alternative provision. Of particular concern is the fragmentation of roles and responsibilities for alternative provision between maintained schools, academies, PRUs and local authorities, as national reforms to raise standards across the sector become embedded. At the heart of this, is the impact of such changes on the continuing role of local authorities in the coordination and quality assurance of alternative provision for young people with SEN, which have been highlighted as effective features throughout this report.

Key pressures also arise from the possible reduction in the overall availability of funding for alternative provision and the introduction of different ways of managing and distributing funding, such as delegation or devolution to schools from local authority control. These situations are identified as possibly leading to cost-driven changes in the composition of young people accessing alternative provision, as schools controlling their own budgets may, for example, decide on financial grounds not to seek and pay for external provision for certain learners, but focus instead on meeting these needs themselves. As well as financial considerations, variations in the interpretation and application of inclusion policies may encourage schools to strive towards retaining young people with various SEN needs on roll and onsite, resulting in alternative provision being sought mainly for young people with the most complex and challenging needs.

Similarly, national developments in inspection approaches and regimes are identified as potentially impacting on the quality assurance of alternative provision for young people with SEN. A national register of alternative provision and associated Ofsted inspection requirements could help ensure that alternative provision is subject to regular monitoring and assessments. However, there are concerns that smaller, specialist alternative providers not registered with Ofsted, may thus not be eligible for inclusion on the register, and as such, may not be commissioned in future, despite providing a valuable and effective offer to learners with SEN.

In a related way, there are concerns that changes in national approaches to assessment involving moves away from modular, towards linear, assessment programmes may have implications for the academic outcomes achieved by some learners with SEN accessing alternative provision. There is a view that qualification and award schemes that afford learners flexibility are particularly effective in supporting their access to academic success.

Further considerations that may influence the interface of alternative provision and SEN relate to information derived from the case-study areas, which suggests that there is no discernable or distinct 'type' of alternative provision specifically for young people with SEN. Generally, there is a perception that this is beneficial, allowing for suitable provision to be drawn from within the whole range of alternative provision available. However, while a wide variety of alternative providers means there are considerable choices available to develop a personalised, bespoke offer for learners, a potential challenge could be that providers less suitable for meeting the needs of young people with SEN could also be commissioned. This is, of course, applicable for all young people accessing alternative provision, but especially so for those whose SEN needs may make them increasingly vulnerable.

To sum up, this research highlights various situations and activities that, if continued, will contribute to

enhancing alternative provision's ability to offer effective, appropriate and meaningful support to a wide range of learners with SEN in diverse and creative settings. Principally, these include:

- The need for further development of closer working relationships between all engaged in supporting learners with SEN to continue to bring together those acting as commissioners, buyers and providers of alternative provision. This cross-sector approach may ensure that the focus of alternative provision, and the associated processes of commissioning, referral and accountability, remain centred on meeting the needs of young people.
- Continued promotion of the need to ensure that alternative provision for young people with SEN will deliver the optimum appropriate outcomes. This may involve the requirement on providers to deliver suitable accredited content that supports learners' future progression pathways. Equally, efforts should be made to adequately monitor and assess outcomes and impacts secured for young people that are not subject to formal accreditation or evaluation processes. Distance travelled by the young people, and value-added outcomes generated through alternative provision must be measured in a meaningful way.
- Increased joint working approaches between schools and alternative providers may contribute towards the sustainability of alternative provision. Alternative providers may be able to work with schools to enhance their ability to offer some elements of provision on the school site, potentially broadening the reach of this provision.
- Closer dialogue and communication between alternative providers, special school, PRU and local authority staff, may contribute towards closer integration of specialist knowledge from the special school/education sector and the expertise embedded in the alternative provision sector. This may facilitate mutual understandings of what the needs and difficulties of these young people are, and how they can best be met.
- Increased efforts to support ongoing capacity building and skill development amongst providers, through, for example, accessing training delivered by those with specialist knowledge of specific SEN conditions and difficulties and the appropriate strategies to address and manage them.

Whilst, every effort needs to be made to ensure the provision is fit for purpose to maximise young people's learning experiences and outcomes, alternative provision should not lose sight or focus on the core values and essence that makes such provision 'alternative' and unique.

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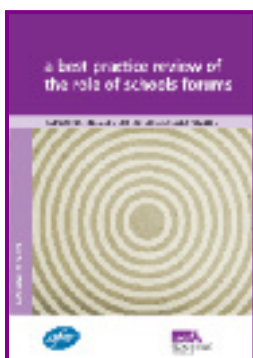
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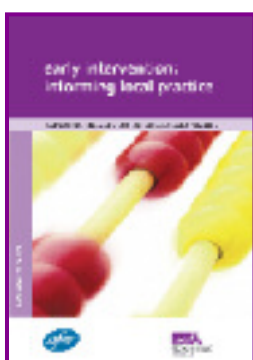
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Hidden talents: a statistical overview of the participation patterns of young people aged 16–24

This report offers a start point for the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned research to inform the Hidden Talents programme. It reviews available statistics, data and commentary to establish what can be reasonably deduced to inform policy in response to young people aged 16–24 years who are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

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Early intervention: informing local practice

The findings from this review of literature shows that the case for investing in early intervention approaches to improve outcomes for children and families and in bringing about cost savings in the longer term is widely accepted and supported. More needs to be done within the UK to identify and evidence the extent of potential cost savings, this will help enable policy makers and local commissioners to make informed commissioning decisions.

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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 SEN provision are blurred' (DfE 2012, p.5). This study explores the ways in which young people with SEN access and engage in alternative provision in five local authority areas.

It covers:

- The interface of alternative provision and SEN
- Finding and commissioning alternative provision
- Monitoring and quality assuring alternative provision
- Elements of successful delivery of alternative provision
- Differences in alternative provision for young people with and without SEN
- Future considerations in delivering alternative provision to young people with SEN.