



IntegratED

Alternative Provision Quality
and Improvement Roundtable

2024

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants who participated in the roundtable discussions on Alternative Provision (AP) quality. Your valuable insights, experiences, and thoughtful contributions have enriched our understanding of the challenges and opportunities throughout the AP sector.

Attendees

27.11.2023 Roundtable

Charlotte Barton, Progress Schools

Anthony Benedict, Tameside Pupil Referral Unit Service

Jeremy Dodd, The Avenue Centre for Education and Evergreen

Christina Jones, River Tees Multi-Academy Trust

Susie Besant, One-Eighty

James Gibson, Becton School

Rob Gasson, Wave Multi Academy Trust

Emma Bradshaw, Alternative Learning Trust

Debra Rutley, Aspire Schools

28.11.2023 Roundtable

Helen Casson, Wave Multi Academy Trust

Helena Boast, Olive Academies

Richard Bottomley, Bradford AP Academy

Nic Brindle, The Yes Trust

Sarah Johnson, Phoenix Education Consultancy

Roundtable Context

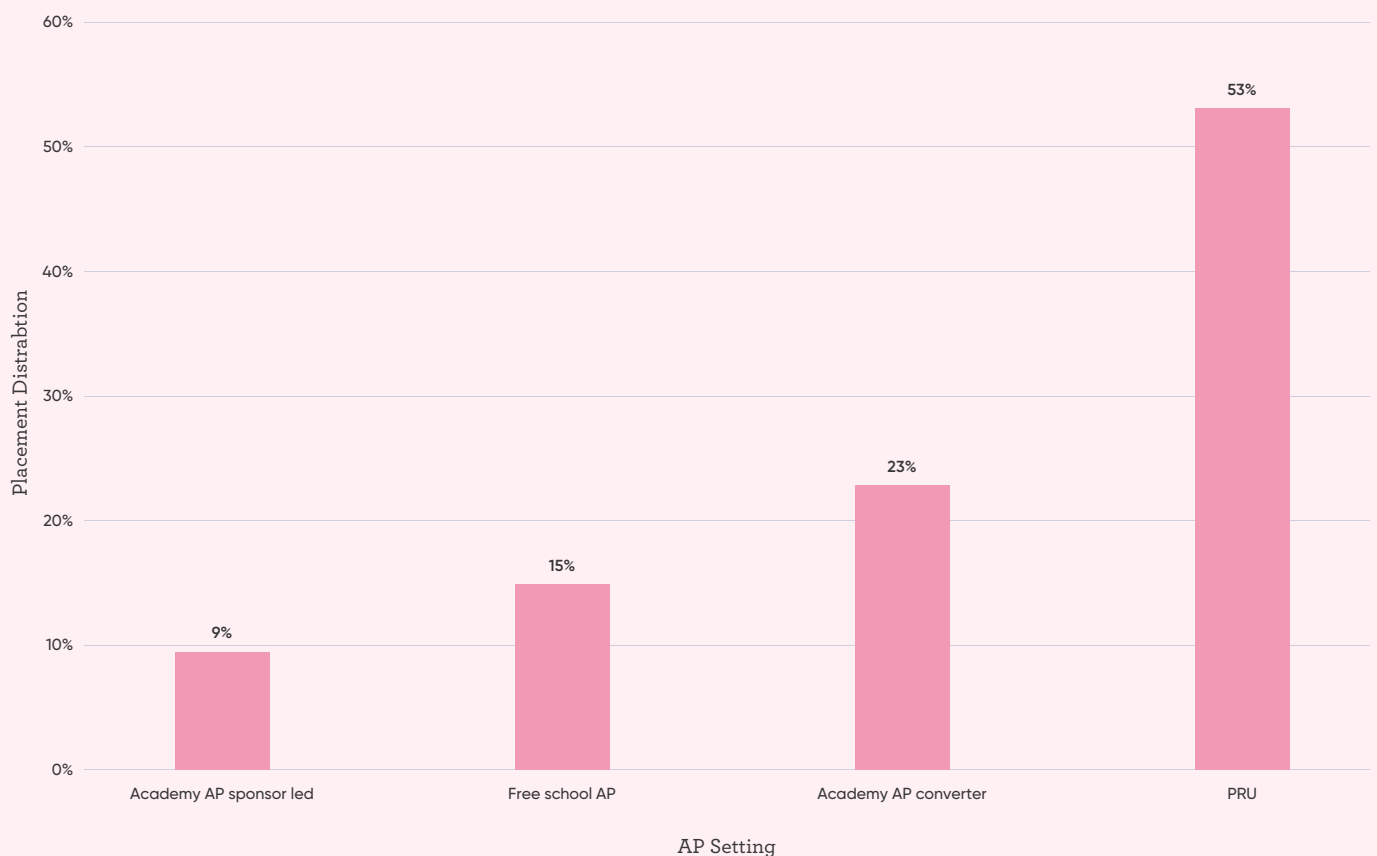
Alternative Provision (AP) is education provision arranged by local authorities or mainstream schools for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness, or other reasons, are considered unable to attend mainstream or special school.

These pupils are typically some of the most vulnerable, including those with social, emotional, and mental health needs, and those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences. More than half of the pupils in state-funded AP schools (57.8 per cent) qualify for free school meals, which is in stark contrast to the broader school population, where the proportion stands at 23.8 per cent.¹

According to the Department for Education (DfE), the number of pupils in state-maintained AP schools surged by 13 per cent from last year, reaching 13,191 in the 2022/23 academic year.²

There are various types of state-maintained AP. The DfE's latest statistics show that, of the 335 state-maintained AP settings in England, PRUs represent over half of state-maintained AP placement settings (53 per cent).³

Types of State-Maintained AP



1 Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics, June 2023](#).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

Roundtable Context

Roundtable Scope

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) – the hub organisation for IntegratED – hosted two roundtables on November 27th and 28th 2023 to discuss how AP quality metrics are used, shared, and standardised across settings. Different forms of provision were represented across both roundtables.

These discussions followed the publication of IntegratED's report *Alternative Provision Quality Metrics: Establishing a Baseline for Good Practice*.⁴ The report findings explored perceptions of the DfE's three-tier model, the five metrics for quality assurance, and the methods of data collection. Key insights reveal the use of various metrics for assessing progress, a focus on post-16 destinations, and the critical role of effective communication with mainstream schools in supporting successful transitions for referred pupils.

Bringing together a variety of providers, the aims of the roundtables were to explore the report findings and opportunities for policy reform.

As part of the CSJ's ongoing work on AP quality, these roundtable discussions were a scoping exercise for the next phase of research.

AP Quality

Discussions regarding the quality of education in AP brought attention to the inherent complexities in defining and assessing educational standards. Participants acknowledged that the conventional metrics and assessment methods employed in mainstream education systems do not effectively account for the diverse needs and circumstances of pupils in AP.

One challenge identified was the heterogeneity of the AP pupil population. Pupils in AP have varied backgrounds with a broad range of educational requirements, behavioural challenges, and life experiences. This diversity complicates the establishment of a standardised set of criteria for measuring success and provision quality. Conventional benchmarks and metrics used in mainstream education are not always suitable for pupils in AP.

Moreover, the need to consider holistic development and personal progress in AP complicates the use of standardised testing as a primary measure of quality. Participants expressed concerns about reducing pupils' multifaceted progress to a set of standardised metrics. Providers emphasised that conventional assessment methods failed to adequately capture the unique circumstances and challenges faced by pupils in AP, such as trauma, medical conditions or behavioural issues.

There were mentions of providers collecting extensive data on pupils and the quality of provision. However, there was a shared sentiment that, despite the effort put into collecting this data by AP providers, there is little to no demand or inquiry from entities such as Ofsted and local authorities. Participants suggested that regulators have little interest in data beyond attendance. This lack of interest or acknowledgment regarding the data collected by AP providers raises questions about the visibility and recognition of their efforts in ensuring quality education and support for the pupils in their care. The roundtable discussions bring attention to this discrepancy, suggesting a potential gap in communication or understanding between AP providers and regulatory bodies.

In essence, the challenges measuring quality underscored the need for a more nuanced and individualised approach to evaluating success and progress in AP. The discussions emphasised the importance of recognising and valuing the diverse journeys of pupils, steering away from one-size-fits-all metrics and finding ways to effectively capture the holistic development and achievements of each pupil.

⁴ IntegratED, [Alternative Provision Quality Metrics: establishing a baseline for good practice, October 2023](#).

Roundtable Context

Early intervention

As well as considering AP, participants stressed the significance of early identification of potential issues that might lead to behavioural challenges or difficulties in mainstream education. Primary schools were identified as important settings for recognising signs of academic struggles, behavioural issues, or other challenges that might require intervention.

The emphasis was on implementing effective identification processes to target support at an early stage.

Relationships with the mainstream

The discussions on collaborating with mainstream schools and settings identified several key themes: strategic partnerships, shared responsibility, joint planning, trust-building, and the utilisation of external support services. Themes underscore the significance of effective collaboration as a cornerstone for providing holistic support to pupils transitioning between mainstream education and AP.

Participants highlighted the need for strategic collaboration between AP providers and mainstream schools to ensure smooth transitions between education settings for pupils. Participants stressed the importance of establishing clear and open lines of communication to share information about pupils' needs, progress, and challenges.

Conversations also brought attention to responsibility for pupil well-being. Both mainstream schools and AP providers were acknowledged as having a shared responsibility for ensuring the overall well-being and educational progress of pupils. Collaborative efforts were considered essential, particularly for addressing the diverse needs of pupils at risk of exclusion.

Collaboration between mainstream settings and APs enables joint planning and appropriate intervention strategies for pupils. Participants recognised that combining the expertise of mainstream educators and AP specialists allows for the development of comprehensive and targeted approaches to address behavioural, academic and other related challenges. Collaborative planning aims to establish a cohesive support framework tailored to the individual needs of pupils.

Building trust and understanding between mainstream schools and AP providers was identified as integral to effective collaboration. Participants discussed the importance of open dialogue, shared training opportunities and joint professional development to enhance mutual understanding of each other's roles and challenges. Trust-building initiatives were identified as a key means of improving collaborative efforts.

Additionally, the discussions highlighted the value of using external support services to strengthen the overall support network for pupils. Engaging external specialists, such as mental health professionals or educational psychologists, in collaboration with mainstream schools and AP settings, was recognised as a valuable resource for addressing complex needs.

In summary, discussions underscored the significance of strategic partnerships, shared responsibility, joint planning, trust-building, and the use of external support services in the collaborative efforts between mainstream schools and AP settings. Establishing effective collaboration serves as a cornerstone of holistic support for pupils navigating the transitions between mainstream education and Alternative Provision.

Commissioning

Participants highlighted the challenges associated with commissioning AP services, emphasising the variability in commissioning processes. This variability led to inconsistencies in funding allocation and resource distribution. The lack of a standardised approach across local authorities emerged as a significant obstacle, contributing to disparities in AP quality and provision.

Participants emphasised the importance of commissioning informed by data and outcomes. This includes data-informed commissioning processes, stressing the need for comprehensive data collection and analysis to inform commissioning decisions. Utilising outcome data, including educational and well-being indicators, was proposed as a valuable strategy for assessing the impact of AP services and guiding future commissioning decisions.

Roundtable participants advocated for collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders, including local authorities, schools, and AP providers. Providers called for increased dialogue and partnership to develop cohesive commissioning strategies. Collaboration should aim to align the goals of different stakeholders and foster collective responsibility for the well-being and educational outcomes of pupils in AP.

Accountability System

Participants raised concerns about the current accountability system, particularly its emphasis on GCSE outcomes, and how it affects the quality and effectiveness of AP. The rigid focus on traditional academic measures was seen as insufficient in capturing the diverse needs and achievements of pupils in AP settings.

Roundtable participants considered the limitations of using GCSE metrics as the primary indicator of success in AP. Discussion underscored the inadequacy of applying standardised assessments designed for mainstream education to the unique circumstances and requirements of pupils in AP, given the one-size-fits-all nature of GCSEs.

Ofsted's role in evaluating education quality across various settings, including AP, was a focal point of discussion. Participants acknowledged its importance but raised concerns about its applicability and adaptability. They advocated for a nuanced and context-specific evaluation approach.

There was a call for a customised inspection approach. Participants expressed the need for an inspection framework that recognises the specific goals and achievements of AP. Tailoring the inspection process to better capture the diverse outcomes, interventions, and pathways within AP settings was proposed to ensure fair and accurate evaluations.

Participants stressed the significance of adopting a broader set of outcome measures, including social and emotional well-being, engagement, and progression routes. Both roundtables acknowledged the challenge of striking the right balance between standardised accountability measures and the flexibility required to meet the diverse needs of pupils in AP. The tension between demonstrating academic progress and providing tailored, supportive interventions prompted reflections on how the accountability system could better accommodate the unique context of AP.

There was a suggestion that schools might be more inclined to off-roll pupils, particularly those in year eleven, before the census date in January than at any other time of year. This is because the results of these pupils count towards the school's performance data if they are recorded as on the school roll at the time of this census date. Financial incentives were identified as a contributing factor for excluding pupils at this time, as schools receive pupil premium funding for pupils on the census until January, which is essential for their budgets and resources.

It was also suggested that schools might make decisions about off-rolling around Christmas, at the point that exam preparation typically starts. One participant proposed that schools should be held accountable for the outcomes of pupils that move into AP for three years, incentivising better communication with the next provider and ensuring a positive impact on the child's education. The idea would be to make schools responsible for pupil outcomes even after they leave, fostering a sense of accountability and improving transition planning for the pupil.

Conclusion

This was a scoping exercise in which we discussed whether reform is needed. As such, policy recommendations cannot be made at this stage.

Our roundtable discussions highlighted the following areas of concern that require further investigation:

1. Funding and Resourcing:
 - Both roundtables touched upon the critical issue of funding and resource disparities between local authorities, emphasising the impact on the provision of AP.
2. Fragmentation in the Education System:
 - The AP landscape is so diverse that creating standardised quality metrics across all forms of provision is difficult.
3. Adapting to External Pressures:
 - The impact of external pressures, such as changes in behaviour and the aftermath of COVID-19, emerged as a cross-cutting theme in both roundtables.
4. Concerns about Standardised Testing:
 - Participants expressed concerns about the potentially negative impact of standardised testing, particularly in the context of teaching to the test and the unique needs of pupils in Alternative Provision.
5. Focus on Individual Pupil Journeys:
 - There was a shared sentiment about the importance of focusing on individual pupil journeys rather than relying solely on standardised metrics.
6. Inconsistencies in Policy and Practice:
 - Discussions touched upon contradictions and tensions between different educational policies and practices, particularly surrounding inclusion.
 - Despite AP providers collecting data on pupils and provision quality, there is a lack of interest or inquiry from entities such as Ofsted and local authorities.
7. Calls for Coherence and Clear Vision:
 - Participants expressed the importance of coherence in educational policies and a clear vision to guide schools, especially in the context of variations in funding and resourcing.

Outstanding Considerations

This is not an exhaustive list but highlights some of the key discussion takeaways:

- Some questions remain open. For example, what specific inspection elements should Ofsted consider when visiting AP settings?
- Although specific policy recommendations were occasionally suggested, this brief session primarily underscored the necessity for more in-depth evaluation of the issue and a thorough exploration of potential policy solutions.
- To progress the conversation, further exploration of successful interventions, innovative metrics, and stakeholder perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of AP quality.