



Birmingham City Council

Alternative Provision Strategy, 2025 – 2028

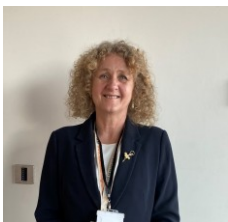
Contents

- 1) Introduction: Vision for Alternative Provision in Birmingham
- 2) Alternative Provision Overview
- 3) Confronting Challenges
- 4) Suspension & Exclusion Data
- 5) Sufficiency of Alternative Provision across Birmingham
- 6) Rationale for Change – Developing the Strategy
- 7) Key Priorities of the AP Strategy 2025 – 2028
- 8) Alternative Provision Directory
- 9) Local Authority Commissioned Alternative Provision
- 10) Quality Assurance of Alternative Provision
- 11) Reintegration & Destination Pathways
- 12) Governance & Oversight

1. Introduction: Vision for Alternative Provision in Birmingham



Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families - Birmingham City Council



Director for Children and Families - Birmingham City Council

On 21 June 2023, Birmingham City Council committed to joining UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities & Communities Programme, placing the lives of children and young people at the heart of all its policies and practice. The programme aims to create 'cities and communities in the UK where all children, whether they are living in care, using a children's centre, or simply visiting their local library, have a meaningful say in, and truly benefit from, the local decisions, services and spaces that shape their lives.'¹

That same connected commitment is driving forward the city's ambitious **Alternative Provision Strategy** to better serve the needs of all children, young people and their families who find themselves, for many reasons, on the edge of the mainstream education system, out of education, disengaged or disaffected, or unable to attend school for physical or mental health reasons.

This strategy is closely aligned to **Birmingham's SEND Strategy, 2023 – 2028**, which sets out an intent to work with all children young people with SEND to enable them to thrive and lead happy, healthy, independent and fulfilled lives.

We would like to thank everyone that has contributed to this strategy. We are committed to working in partnership, as a whole system, so that all our children and young people thrive.



¹ UNICEF UK's Annual Report 2023



2. Alternative Provision Overview

Alternative provision (AP) is education arranged by local authorities or schools for pupils who, due to reasons such as exclusion, illness, or other circumstances, would not otherwise receive suitable education. It can also be used by schools to educate pupils on suspensions or those directed to off-site provision to improve behaviour.

The landscape of Alternative Provision has changed rapidly in the past decade, with a spotlight on this aspect of educational provision in the publication of the Department for Education's SEND & Alternative Provision Green Paper in March 2022. In March 2023, the SEND & AP Improvement Plan was published, setting out a clear programme of reform in key aspects of Special Educational Needs (SEND) and AP provision.

Key features of the SEND & AP Improvement Plan, March 2023, include:

- The development of voluntary national standards for unregistered Alternative Provision, published in August 2025
- Clear expectations for what support should be available for children and young people (CYP) in need of Alternative Provision
- Reform to Education, Health & Care Plans
- A three tier Alternative Provision system, targeting early support and intervention within mainstream schools, time limited placements and intervention in off-site AP, and longer-term placements with a focus on reintegration to mainstream or progression to post-16 destinations, for those who need more intensive or longer-term support.
- The development of local SEND & AP Partnerships, bringing together all partners across education, health & social care to plan for and commission support more effectively at the local level
- Funding reforms, developing an improved system of funding bands to support consistent national standards, with a review of funding for Alternative Provision.

3. Confronting Challenges

We cannot hold realistic ambitions for the future, if we do not, first, understand and acknowledge the past. In setting out **BCC's Strategy for Alternative Provision, 2025 – 2028**, senior leaders collectively acknowledge the fragility of previous commissioning arrangements that have failed to keep pace with changing needs, and with the impact of national and global emergencies. Weaknesses in systems and processes have meant that not all children and young people's needs have been identified or responded to in a timely manner.

As we approach a new academic year, 2025 – 2026, this authority reaffirms its commitment to supporting all children and young people, who, for many reasons, find themselves lost in an education system that has failed to meet individual needs at vulnerable times.

Past policy initiatives set against a rapidly changing educational policy landscape, the cost-of-living crisis and the legacy of the global pandemic, Covid-19, (2020 – 2022), all impact upon the present day, and upon the authority’s capacity to meet the needs of all children and young people for whom it has a responsibility.

Challenges take many forms, both internal and external. Challenges come in the form of adverse life events, that bring an end to the hopes and aspirations of individuals and of families. During the pandemic years, many families were at high risk of serious health conditions, bereavement, job losses and financial insecurity. Isolation, hardship and mental health difficulties became a feature of the social landscape during the years of lockdown and restrictions on social activity.

Challenge comes in the difficult decisions councils make to balance accounts, to deliver financially sustainable services that are meaningful for children, young people, schools and families. Challenge comes in the seemingly random turn of events that see one child succeed and thrive, academically and socially whilst another, in the same learning environment, struggles to achieve or else fails to attend school regularly, or engages in behaviour that is difficult to support and manage in the mainstream classroom.

As an authority, Birmingham City Council has a responsibility to ensure these challenges are understood and taken account of in the design and delivery of specialist and universal services. Understanding the myriad challenges faced by young people and their families is crucial the delivering services that truly support children and young people, at each stage of their life.

1. Suspension and Exclusion Data

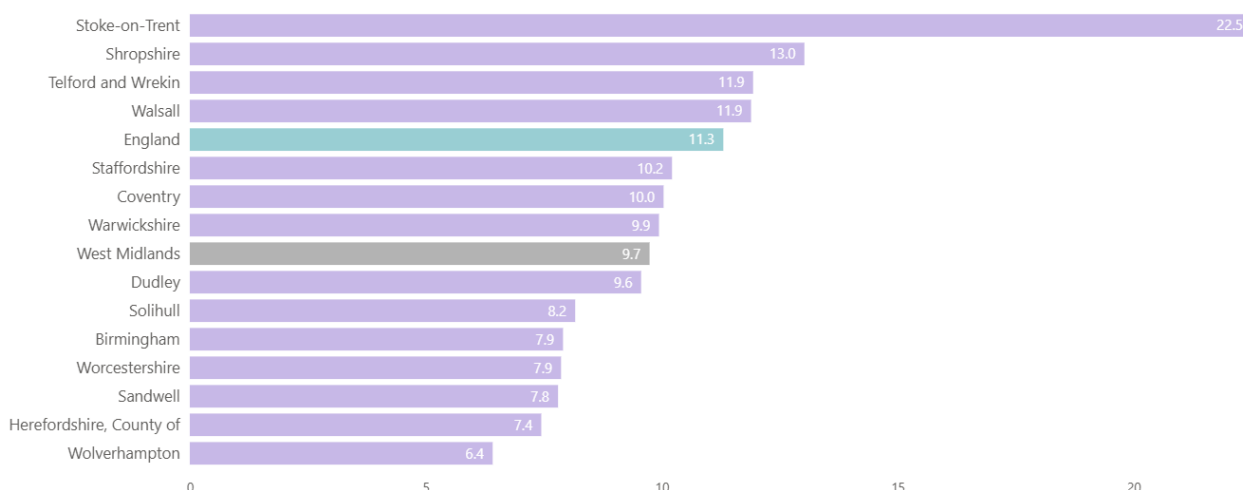
Birmingham has made progress in recent years in reducing the rates of suspensions, (previously known as fixed term exclusions) for children and young people. Exclusions drive the need for alternative provision where children and young people can no longer be educated in their home school.

In some instances, Birmingham is out-performing national and statistical neighbours in rates of suspension.

Total Suspension Rate

Overall Rates per LA - Benchmarked against WM & England

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However, with regards permanent exclusion (also known as PEX), Birmingham has higher than average rates for exclusion, compared across the country, and with neighbouring local authorities. These single-issue places a burden on the authority in increased, and increasing, demand for suitable alternative provision.

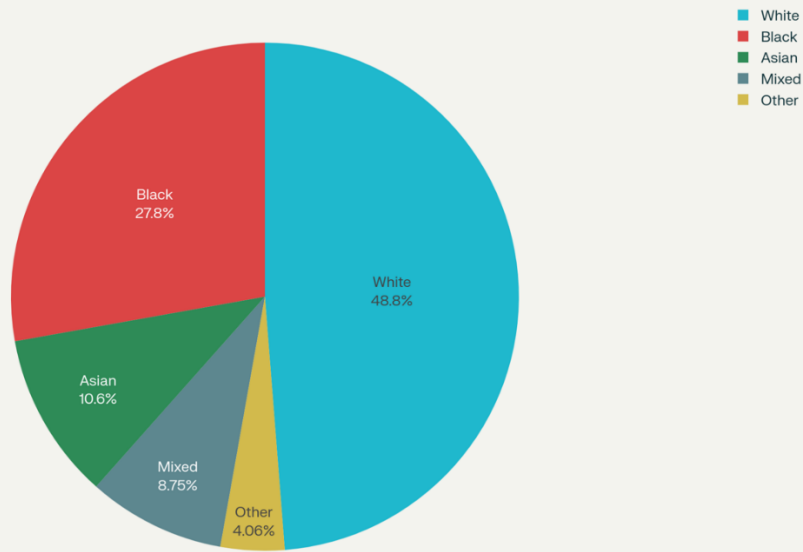
The most frequent cause of permanent exclusion is due to disruptive behaviours, followed by physical assault, verbal abuse, and use of a weapon.

	Exclusion code for PEX 24/25													
Year group	BU	DA	DB	DM	MT	OW	PA	PH	PP	SM	TH	VA	VP	Grand Total
Rec			1			1	4							6
1			3			1	10		1	1				16
2			8			1	8		1			1		19
3			5			1	6		4					16
4			7			1	9							17
5			7			2	6		1	1			1	18
6			5			7	3			1		3	1	20
7	1		19			7	10	1	3	3			1	45
8		3	38	1		7	10		11			4		74
9		8	56		1	34	18		16	3	3	6	3	148
10	1	25	41	4	1	15	10	1	17	1		12	4	132
11	1	24	14			9	4		3			1	1	57
Total	3	60	204	5	2	86	98	2	57	10	3	27	11	568

Data gathered for Department for Education shows that, of those children and young people permanently excluded:

- 74% of all permanent exclusions were male
- 74% of all exclusions were from secondary schools
- 25% of all exclusions were from primary schools, with 1% from specialist provision
- By ethnicity, 43% are of White heritage, 19% Asian, 19% Mixed heritage, 14% Black

Birmingham Exclusions by Ethnicity 2023-24



For the year 2023 – 2024:

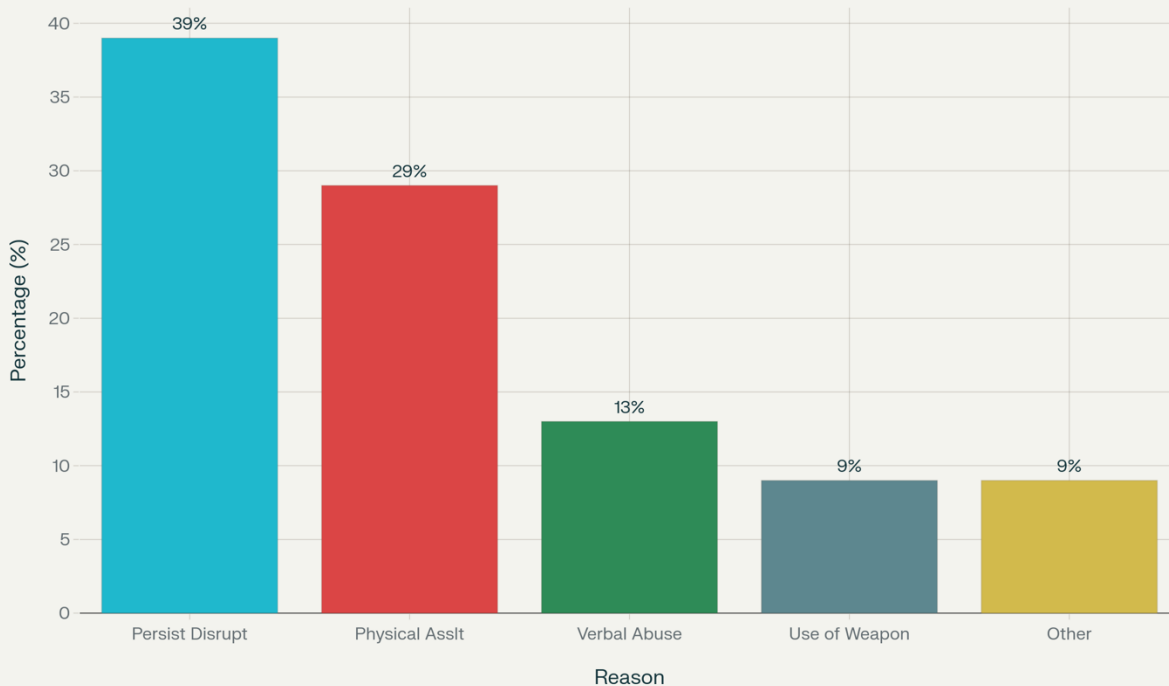
Birmingham reported a 16% increase in the number of permanent exclusions from the previous year

Rates remain highest amongst male students in Years 9 & 10 of secondary education

Those young people with SEND, or from disadvantage backgrounds, feature highly in exclusion figures

Persistent Disruptive Behaviour is the most frequent reason given for PEX

Birmingham Exclusions 2023-24



Bar Chart: Reasons for Permanent Exclusion in Birmingham (2023-2024)

2. Sufficiency of Alternative Provision across Birmingham

Data gathered from several sources, including a survey to all schools across the city on their use of directly commissioned Alternative Provision, weekly data on suspensions and permanent exclusions, and the number of referrals to the section.19 duty panel for young people out of education for health reasons, all contribute to an oversight of need for alternative provision.

As an authority, we know that:

- Birmingham has higher than national average rates for permanent exclusion
- There is consistently a shortfall of places in the local authority commissioned Alternative Provision, City of Birmingham Schools for CYP who have been permanently excluded from school
- Key months for demand for 6th day placements following permanent exclusion are December, April, May & June, based on data for the period Sept 2023 – July 2025
- These peak times for exclusions are consistent across primary, KS3 and KS4
- An increasing number of schools are directly commissioning Alternative Provision to meet a range of needs, which include persistent disruptive behaviour and physical assault
- There are city wide gaps in provision for primary aged pupils with permanent exclusion
- There is a 25% growth in referrals for CYP not attending school for health reasons for the period 2024.- 2025, compared to 2023 – 2024
- There is paucity of Alternative Provision for young people entering Key Stage 3 or that supports transitional needs from primary to secondary education
- There is a need for increased AP capacity around social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH)

Current position of Alternative Provision in Birmingham

1 Peak Exclusion Rate

Permanent exclusions have reached their highest rate in nine years, increasing to 378 as of July 2025.



2 Provision Shortfall

40% of referrals to the statutory s.19 panel require a type of Alternative Provision that is not currently available or commissioned.

3 Vulnerable Groups

74% of excluded students are eligible for free school meals (FSM)
75% of exclusions are male pupils



4 Year Groups

Secondary year 8-10 dominate need.
Rising levels in primary especially in year 6



5 Drivers of Need

Exclusion:

1. Persistent disruptive behaviour
2. Physical assault
3. Verbal abuse / threatening behaviour

Section 19

1. Anxiety
2. ESBA



3. A Rationale for Change – Developing the Strategy

At one time it was right for the authority to invest in the commissioning of two main sources of Alternative Provision for CYP across the city of Birmingham. These settings, City of Birmingham Schools and James Brindley Academy, have become the mainstay of the Alternative Provision commissioned by the authority over the past decade.

Whilst longer term placements create stability for some young people and allow many to thrive in a new learning environment, it is not the intention that Alternative Provision becomes a destination, nor that long term placements are the only available route to access education.

Alternative Provision is a short-term intervention, designed to provide the assessment, intervention and support that allows a young person to resume their educational journey in the setting that is most appropriate to their needs, which may encompass mainstream or specialist educational provision.

Evidence indicates that previous arrangements for local authority commissioning of AP can no longer meet the needs of the whole population of Birmingham's children and young people and that a greater breadth of commissioned AP is needed to ensure -

- a. That the authority meets its statutory duties around permanent exclusion and around Section 19 duty for CYP who cannot attend school for physical or mental health needs;
- b. That all children & young people have access to the right support, in the right place and in a timely manner, so that needs are understood, addressed and met before needs escalate or increase in severity.

BCC is firmly committed to the widespread systemic and cultural change needed to ensure that every child is supported, by the right educational setting and relevant services, at every stage of their educational journey.

4. Key Priorities of the Alternative Provision Strategy 2025 – 2028

In considering the key priorities for Birmingham's Alternative Provision Strategy, account has been taken of the views of a range of stakeholders, including schools, Alternative Provision settings, local area partners and the parent-carer community. The priorities address sufficiency shortcomings and allow the authority to better meet its statutory duties, not only for the present, but over the coming years, based on all available data and sources of intelligence.

- 1) A range of Alternative Provision commissioned to support mainstream settings, through the provision of targeted AP support to address the needs of children & young people at risk of disengagement or exclusion, delivered in the school setting (**Tier One AP**). Schools will work in partnership with local authority commissioned AP which may support workforce development, offer one to one or group-based support, therapeutic approaches and other strategies to address individual needs and help prevent the need for suspensions or permanent exclusion
- 2) Time limited placements in off-site Alternative Provision settings (**Tier Two AP**), to assess and address the young person's needs, with an expectation of a return to mainstream setting, transition to specialist provision or other destination, according to need. In accordance with Dept for Education guidance on use of Alternative Provision, these arrangements will be reviewed termly.
- 3) Transitional support from AP providers to progress transition arrangements, (**Tier Three AP**), working in partnership with the home school, post-16 setting, or other destination, to ensure the child or young

person has the best possible chance of succeeding in the new setting. This will be an especially valuable intervention for young people who have been out of education for some time, or for whom, health needs, including mental or physical health, have prevented full time school attendance.

- 4) Increased capacity in the commissioning of AP to support young people's **Social, Emotional & Mental Health** needs (SEMH), both in mainstream and specialist school settings. This AP provision will work alongside health providers and other specialist services to develop planned programmes of intervention, support for adaptations in the school setting, health care plans and other needs. This commissioned AP may be utilised following outcomes at weekly s.19 panel meetings.
- 5) AP commissioned by the local authority to **meet statutory duties** around permanent exclusion and s.19 duties, to include APs with capacity to respond to urgent need placements in a timely manner. Where currently the commissioned Alternative Provision is frequently at capacity, newly commissioned AP will ensure there is sufficiency of placements, and capacity to match AP to individual needs.
- 6) A breadth of AP that **supports all year groups**, including primary aged children, and meets all needs, which include academic, vocational and therapeutic needs. Where there is a strong and good quality academic AP offer across the city, this has been steered towards the 14 – 16 age group, leaving many young people without suitable alternative provision. New commissioning arrangements will ensure equity of access to alternative provision.
- 7) There will be a **strengthened therapeutic AP offer**, which may be part time, offered on or off the school site, so that children, young people and families can receive specialist support as a preventative measure, before reaching crisis point. This commissioned Alternative Provision will run in parallel to the mainstream educational offer and be a constant feature for schools and families city wide.
- 8) A **locality model of commissioned AP** will better support children and young people, many of whom travel long distances to reach their current AP setting, or face early starts and long school days to attend an AP, factors which, over time, impact on attendance and engagement. Ensuring there is a range of high-quality alternative provision in each locality will significantly improve attendance, outcomes, academic attainment and long term opportunities.

5. Alternative Provision Directory

Alternative Provision has been a feature of the education system since the Education Act 1996, when local authorities first established state-funded Pupil Referral Units to meet the needs of children of compulsory school age who, by reason of illness, exclusion or other need, could not receive suitable education unless such arrangements were made. PRUs were defined as educational institutions and given clear legal status, ensuring that all children, regardless of their circumstances, had access to education.

Many services and provisions fall under the canopy of Alternative Provision, where once that definition, enshrined in the Education Act 1996, referenced Pupil Referral Units as the primary and often single point of support for children out of education. The Education Act 2002 gave schools the power to direct children and young people to alternative provision.

There is a breadth and diversity of Alternative Provision that has grown exponentially over the past decade, and with increased pace since the publication of the Dept for Education's SEND & AP Improvement Plan in March 2022. Services that previously, may have had little engagement with children or young people permanently excluded, now see this cohort of children as their focus, with a diverse workforce attracted to working in the sector.

In this rapidly changing landscape, it is more important than ever before, that this authority is alert to the provision that supports, protects and nurtures children and young people not attending mainstream education, or those at risk of exclusion, or absent from school and unable to attend due to health reasons.

This breadth of provision will be captured in the development of a Birmingham City Council AP Directory. (November 2025)

This breadth of Alternative Provision includes the following types of service:

- **Local authority-maintained Pupil Referral Units –**
 - City of Birmingham Schools
 - James Brindley Specialist Academy & Hospital School
- **Ofsted Registered Alternative Provision including AP Free Schools**
- **None school based Alternative Provision**
- **Online or hybrid Alternative Provision**
- **One to one or small group tuition, in person or online**
- **Vocational training courses**
- **Therapeutic support programmes**
- **Mentoring programmes which may be delivered as part of a package of support**

6. Local Authority Commissioned Alternative Provision

Department for Education guidance and consultations on SEND and Alternative Provision point to a need for a three-tier model for commissioning Alternative Provision, which may be commissioned directly by schools or by the local authority.

This model of service delivery is being adopted across the city of Birmingham. It will shape the future of support and intervention for CYP currently attending mainstream settings and at risk of exclusion; those who are between educational placements; those attending AP full time or part-time, and those who are waiting to reintegrate back into mainstream settings, or transition to new destinations.

A three-tier model for alternative provision

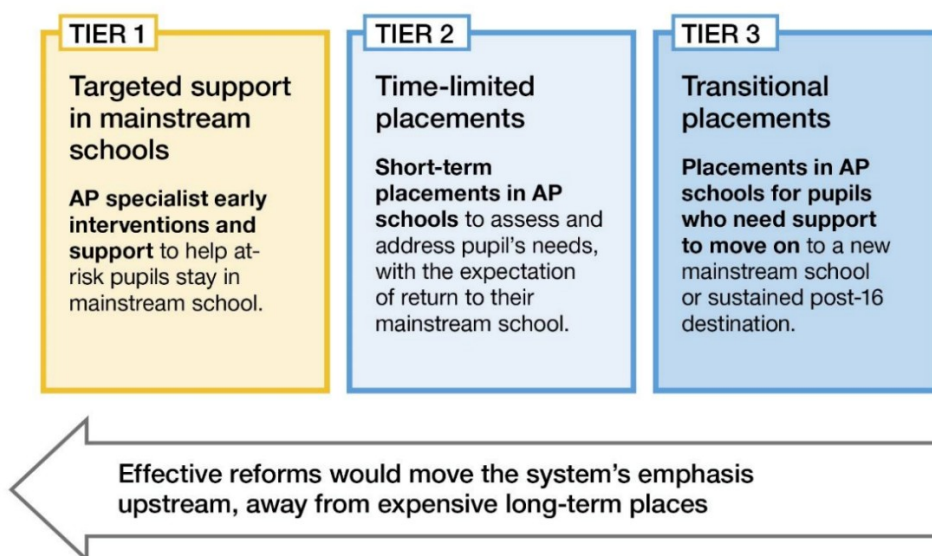


Figure 2: A three-tier model for alternative provision

Many of the AP Providers commissioned by the authority will already be known to schools across the city, some of whom will have their own direct commissioning arrangements with the provider. A new, partnership model of working will foster greater connectivity, increased communications between schools, AP Providers and the local authority, and support a greater oversight of vulnerable children and young people.

Linking back to the key priorities, this model of delivery of commissioned AP is designed to support schools and families at an earlier stage of intervention.

The key priorities for the AP Strategy serve five main goals:

- 1) The reduction of permanent exclusions across the city and increased inclusivity in mainstream school settings
- 2) Enabling the authority to meet its statutory duties around permanent exclusion and around s.19 duty in respect of CYP absent from school for health conditions
- 3) Increasing sufficiency of AP that meets the breadth of needs identified in CYP from primary school through to post-16
- 4) Fostering a swift response for urgent placements, for reasons of health or exclusion, minimising disruption to a young person's educational journey
- 5) It provides a cost-effective solution to reducing spend on crisis-driven placement demands, and investment in pro-active interventions and early help programmes of support.

7. Quality Assurance of Alternative Provision

In setting out an ambitious plan for the future of Alternative Provision, BCC commits to the quality assurance and monitoring of AP providers whether commissioned directly by schools or by the local authority. The form and approach taken to quality assure providers is set out in detail in the **Quality Assurance Framework for Alternative Provision** (scheduled October 2025).

This framework sets out the following processes:

- Identifying quality standard themes for both Ofsted registered and unregistered AP
- Establishing a set of quality standards for all Alternative Provision
- Setting out an audit methodology, detailing a set of processes to ensure consistency of approach to the quality assurance of AP settings
- Developing a QA audit tool, and QA audit database to capture audit outcomes
- Establishing a clear process, or flowchart, of actions leading up to QA audits and post-audit that is transparent, agreed with AP partners, and aligned to best practice nationally
- Updates to the AP Directory of QA audit outcomes, with an audit statement sharing findings through a series of positive statements
- Where the QA audit identifies areas of concern or significant weakness, the AP Provider will be notified, which may lead to a decision not to publish the provision in the AP Directory, until a subsequent audit is carried out
- A partnership approach between the authority and the AP provider towards improvement, service development or expansion, or pilot projects to address specific needs

Alternative Provision plays a vital role in helping prevent school absence, reduce exclusions, and ensure children and young people are reintegrated back into mainstream settings at the earliest, and most appropriate point, to continue their educational journey with least disruption.

8. Reintegration and Destination Pathways

Reintegration is a crucial element of use of Alternative Provision, whether commissioned by schools or the local authority. It is never the intention that AP should be used for long term placements, nor that there is a disconnect with the commissioning body.

Placing reintegration at the heart of the city's Alternative Provision Strategy means ensuring that every child or young person is given the opportunity to re-engage with learning, safely and successfully, when the time is right for the transition to take place.

For those CYP who have missed crucial education for health reasons or through exclusion, it is important that there is support in place to help them transition back into a mainstream setting as soon as possible. Effective reintegration not only restores access to high quality education but also promotes belonging, stability and positive future outcomes. Where time out of education has been for a longer duration, there is greater need for careful transition planning, which may include a phased reintegration taking place over several weeks.

In other cases, it may be that the young person transitions to a college setting, to training or employment. Whatever the destination, successful transition planning requires consistent collaboration between schools, families, the local authority and its local area partners. It must focus both on addressing both academic attainment but also wider issues of emotional wellbeing, any special educational need the young person may have or other vulnerability.

Reintegration is not simply about a return to school but about building confidence, fostering resilience, and ensuring continuity of support so that young people can thrive in education, in their communities, and in their future lives.

re that its implementation is clearly communicated, is accountable and remains at all times, responsive to the needs of all children, young people, schools and families.

The strategy should be reviewed annually within its three-year cycle, with each review considering the impact of actions taken, identifying emerging challenges, and adapting priorities where needed. Input from schools, families, young people and local area partners will inform the review process to ensure the strategy remains relevant, inclusive, and focused on improving outcomes for all children and young people requiring Alternative Provision.

This strategy is closely aligned to existing policies and strategies within the authority, referenced below,

Related Policies

Links to:

SEND Strategy 2023 – 2028

Change for Children & Young People, 2023 – 2028

Link to DFE None School Based AP Standards