

Children's Services

222 Upper Street N1 1XR

Report of: Corporate Director of Children's Service

Meeting of: Children's Service Scrutiny Committee

Date: 24 February 2025

Ward(s): All

Subject: Persistent Absence at Secondary School (Alternative Provision)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Alternative Provision (AP) plays a crucial role in the education system by providing tailored educational opportunities for students who are unable to thrive in mainstream schools.
- 1.2 Children can arrive in AP through several routes.
 - Permanent exclusion from school
 - Via a 'managed move', where the pupil transfers to AP voluntarily, often to prevent exclusion and provide a fresh start.
 - A referral can be made, where the pupil remains on the roll of their current school but receives some or all of their education off-site
 - Governing bodies of maintained schools have the power to direct a student off-site for education to improve his or her behaviour. This is not a permanent exclusion. Under this power the student would have a right to return to school once the targets for improved behaviour have been met.
 - Pupils with medical conditions that prevent them from attending mainstream school may be placed in AP to ensure they continue to receive education tailored to their needs.
 - Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who struggle to thrive in a mainstream setting may be referred to AP where they can receive more specialised support.
 - In some cases, parents may request that their child be placed in AP if they believe it will better meet their child's educational needs.

- Schools can also commission places at Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), alternative provision academies, or free schools, using funding from their delegated budgets or high needs funding

1.3 AP aims to offer a supportive and nurturing environment where students can continue their education, develop essential skills, and prepare Introduction

2. The role of AP in the Education System

2.1 AP is designed to support students facing challenges that prevent them from accessing mainstream education effectively. These challenges can include behaviour that challenges, mental health concerns, SEND, or social and emotional difficulties.

2.3 The overarching goal of AP is to provide a nurturing and supportive environment where students can continue their education, develop essential skills, and prepare for future opportunities.

2.4 The SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (DfE) 2023 outlined several key points regarding AP:

National Standards:

The plan emphasised the creation of a national system underpinned by national standards for AP to ensure consistency and quality across the country

Local Partnerships:

The plan introduced local SEND and AP Partnerships that bring together education, health, and care partners to plan and commission support for children and young people with SEND and in AP.

Three-Tier System:

A three-tier AP system is proposed to provide tailored support based on the varying needs of students based on the varying needs of students. The tiers are designed to ensure that students receive the right level of support at the right time:

- **Tier One: Targeted Early Support within Mainstream Schools:**
This tier focuses on providing early intervention and support within mainstream schools to help students stay engaged and succeed in their current educational setting. The goal is to address issues before they escalate, reducing the need for more intensive interventions later on
- **Tier Two: Time-Limited Intensive Placements in Alternative Provision:**
For students who require more support than can be provided within a mainstream school, this tier offers time-limited placements in AP. These placements are designed to be intensive and focused, helping students to address specific challenges and prepare for reintegration into mainstream education or transition to other appropriate settings
- **Tier Three: Longer-Term Placements for Students with More Complex Needs** who may require longer-term placements in AP. These placements provide ongoing support and education tailored to the individual needs of the student, ensuring they receive the necessary resources to thrive

Early Intervention and Support:

The plan highlights the importance of early intervention and support to prevent exclusions and ensure that children receive the help they need as early as possible

A Positive View of AP:

The plan advocates for viewing AP as a positive option for many students, rather than the poor reputation it sometimes attracts. It aims to strengthen AP and ensure it is seen as a valuable part of the education system

These points reflect a national approach to improving AP, ensuring that it provides high-quality, consistent, and supportive education for all students who need it.

3. Alternative Provision in Local Areas in England: A Thematic Review

- 3.1 A recent thematic review by the Department for Education (DfE) (Feb 2024) highlights the importance of AP in ensuring that every child has access to a suitable education. The review emphasises the need for strong commissioning and oversight arrangements to ensure high-
- 3.2 The review involved six local areas: Bracknell Forest, Dudley, Hampshire, Leeds, Lincolnshire and Barking and Dagenham. These areas were selected based on a number of factors, such as regional intelligence and regional variety.
- 3.3 It highlighted the challenges faced by the AP sector, including increased pressures, lack of a regulatory framework, and inconsistent oversight. It emphasised the need for better commissioning and monitoring of AP to ensure high-quality education for all children.
- 3.4 The report identifies key issues such as the absence of national standards and unclear responsibilities, which the SEND and AP improvement plan also recognised.
- 3.5 The report recommended:
 - The Government establish clear national standards and guidance for AP.
 - Strategic planning and collaboration among education, health, and care partners is strengthened.
 - Enhance oversight of all children in AP, including those without an EHC plan or who are not in care.
 - Promotion of early intervention and better support for mainstream schools.
- 3.6 These recommendations are being followed through in Islington as follows:
 - Local Authorities are represented on the national steering group charged with developing those national standards by via our Assistant Director, Inclusion by invitation from the DfE.
 - Our local multi-agency SEND and AP Partnership Board keeps all provision under review.
 - Our Securing Education Board keeps oversight of children in AP other than those with a statutory plan, for whom the LA is responsible and monitor via statutory review, and this includes attendance data. For those who remain on a school roll (i.e.

dually registered), the parent schools retains responsibility for placement monitoring and quality assurance.

- Local Authorities in the North East London Area, including Islington, collaborate to keep the quality of AP provision in the region under review by sharing information on quality assurance visits as the most efficient use of resource.
- A key focus of the Council's SEND strategy is to promote early intervention and better support for mainstream schools.

4. Overview of local AP Providers

- 4.1 Islington currently commission Alternative Provision for children and young people from a range of providers as detailed in Appendix A.

5. Islington residents currently accessing Alternative Provision

- 5.1 Attendance rates at AP are generally lower than in mainstream schools locally and nationally for several reasons:
- **Complex Needs:** Pupils in AP will have more complex needs, including behaviour that challenges, SEND, or medical conditions, which can make regular attendance more challenging for them
 - **Previous history of non-engagement:** Many pupils in AP have a history / pattern of poor attendance and engagement prior to attending AP, including exclusion from previous mainstream school(s), so hard to re-engage.
 - **Personal Circumstances:** Pupils in AP may face challenging personal circumstances, such as family issues, mental health problems, or socio-economic disadvantages, which can affect their attendance
- 5.2 Attendance rates are also likely to vary across different AP providers due to the diverse needs and presentations of each student, and approaches taken. For example:
- **Specialised Support:** Different AP providers may offer varying levels of specialised support tailored to specific needs
 - **Programme Structure:** The structure and flexibility of the programs offered by AP providers can vary widely, for example some may offer part-time or flexible schedules to accommodate pupils' needs, which can impact overall attendance figures
 - **Engagement Strategies:** AP providers may use different strategies to engage pupils and encourage attendance. Innovative approaches, such as personalised learning plans or enrichment activities, can help improve attendance but may vary in effectiveness across providers and the needs of the child.
- 5.3 Given these factors, it is not reasonable to directly compare attendance rates between AP and mainstream schools. Pupils in AP often have significantly different backgrounds and needs, which can influence their attendance patterns.

5.4 Across the combined Autumn and Spring 2023/2024 terms, 81% of children educated in AP nationally (29,799 children) were persistently absent.

5.5 Attendance figures for Islington residents placed in AP this current academic year to date (5 Feb 2025) are as follows:

AP Provider	Location	No. attending	No. Persistently Absent	% Persistently Absent
CONEL	Haringey	6	5	83%
TLC Live Online Tutoring	Online	3	3	100%
City and Islington College	Islington	7	6	85%
The Boxing Academy	Hackney	4	1	25%
COLAMAT Apprenticeship Academy	Islington	4	4	100%
Individual Learning Programme	Islington	1	1	100%
The Arts Xchange	Islington	3	3	100%
Academy 21	Online	4	4	100%
Tutoring from Virtual School	Islington	3	0	0
Footsteps Trust	Hackney	6	5	83%
NRC Secondary	Islington	67	54	81%
NRC Medical (incl Hospital Class)	Islington	48	43	91%
National	England	29,799	24,137	81%

- 5.6 The DfE collects and publishes attendance data at various levels, including borough-level, which encompasses all state-funded schools, including Alternative Provision. The overall average attendance data for each local authority therefore includes data from APs that sit within their area.

6. Flexi-schooling

- 6.1 Flexi-schooling is legal but at the discretion of the headteacher. Schools are not obliged to accept such arrangements if requested. Children who are flexi-schooled are registered as full-time students at their school but are marked as 'authorised absent' on the days they are home-educated.
- 6.2 Flexi-schooling allows students to split their time between attending school and learning at home. It can provide a more adaptable schedule, accommodating individual needs and is a better alternative than Elective Home Education where there is no school attendance. Non-school days count as absence, however.
- 6.3 Flexi-schooling should only be considered if parents or carers specifically request it and should **not** be promoted by schools. Combining schooling and non-schooling education in any ratio is perfectly legal as long as the outcome is the provision of suitable full-time education for the child (ren), and the Local Authority must satisfy itself that this is so. However, the Headteacher must consider that there are exceptional circumstances before agreeing to the arrangement.
- 6.4 Any school, maintained or independent, may accommodate flexi-schooling if it wishes to, but no school is under an obligation to do so.
- 6.5 Flexi-schooling represents a significant commitment by both the school and parent or carer to work together to provide the child's education.
- 6.6 In deciding whether to agree to a flexi-schooling arrangement a Headteacher should consult the Local Authority for advice and should consider:
- Safeguarding
 - Current and anticipated level of educational attainment
 - If the proposed programme of activity is educational and appropriate
 - How the school will monitor the child's education at home to ensure it is happening and is effective
 - The critical aspects of the curriculum/teaching in school which will be missed and how these are to be addressed
 - The reasons for the flexi-schooling request;
 - The effect on the school organisation and any additional burden that would fall on school staff.
- 6.7 The school must inform the Local Authority of the flexi schooling arrangement within five school days. We have a local proforma which we ask schools to use for this purpose.

Alternative Provision providers accessed by Islington residents

Academy 21

- **Location:** Online
- **Courses:** Variety of subjects offered part-time, including FS and GCSEs
- **Notes:** Suitable for students unable to attend due to medical or mental health needs. It is the first online alternative provision to be accredited under the DfE's Online Education Accreditation Scheme (OEAS). Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - The high ambition and expectations at Academy 21 and that teachers create a positive learning environment
 - Safeguarding is a priority, with staff being fully informed of the vulnerabilities and needs of the pupils they teach.
 - Pupils are closely supervised, and any concerns are routinely flagged to leaders
 - Schools and local authorities value the quality of information received about pupils placed
 - The service is praised for its responsiveness and commitment to not taking on new pupils unless they can meet their needs

The Arts Exchange

- **Location:** Islington
- **Courses:** FS Maths and English or GCSE English, Maths with vocational courses in Creative Media or Performing Arts
- **Notes:** Closest Station – Old Street / Angel. Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - Arts Exchange provides a high-quality education, particularly in its specialist areas of creative and performing arts.
 - Pupils achieve well in these subjects due to the expertise of the teachers and the logical, effective teaching methods.
 - Pupils generally get along well with each other, and staff ensure a safe environment.
 - The school offers many enrichment activities beyond the classroom, such as residential trips and museum-based projects.

Big Creative Independent School

- **Location:** Waltham Forest
- **Courses:** FS/GCSE Maths and English with vocational courses in Creative Music Industry, Creative Digital Media, Skills for Employment, Training and Personal Development, and non-accredited courses in Sports, Science, Self-Development, and Multimedia workshops

- **Notes:** Small setting - FE college. Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - The curriculum is effective in re-engaging pupils through creative subjects like music and digital media but is not as broad as it should be.
 - Pupils generally behave well and appreciate the support they receive from staff.
 - The small class sizes and nurturing environment contribute to improved attendance and engagement.
 - The school successfully develops pupils' confidence, creativity, and communication skills.

Boxing Academy

- **Location:** Hackney
- **Courses:** GCSEs in Maths, English, Science (Biology), and Art with additional vocational courses in Sports and PSHE certification
- **Notes:** Non-contact boxing every day as part of emotional regulation, high level of pastoral support. Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - The Boxing Academy is judged 'outstanding' in all areas.
 - Staff prioritise pupils' social and emotional needs, nurturing their academic abilities.
 - Pupils are welcomed into a warm, nurturing, and respectful community.
 - Pupils learn self-discipline and respect, contributing to their personal success.
 - Pupils' self-esteem improves, and they begin to take control of their lives, studies, and well-being.

BSix Sixth Form College

- **Location:** Hackney
- **Courses:** FS/GCSE in English and Maths with vocational courses in Arts and Media, Vocational Studies (Business, ICT, Health and Social Care), and ESOL
- **Notes:** In-fil with 16-18yrs, only 4.5 days a week, no new enrolments after October half term. Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - The college provides a broad and balanced curriculum that meets the needs of its diverse student body.
 - Students benefit from high-quality teaching and support, which helps them to achieve well in their studies.
 - Some students do not attend regularly enough, which impacts their progress.
 - Students are well-prepared for their next steps, whether that be further education, employment, or training.

Capital City College (Holloway Road Campus)

- **Location:** Islington
- **Courses:** Accelerate Functional Skills, GCSEs, and vocational courses in Art & Design, Music Production
- **Notes:** Additional support for EHCP learners. Feedback from the most Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - The curriculum is well-designed and effectively delivered, helping learners gain relevant knowledge and skills.
 - Learners generally exhibit positive behaviour and attitudes towards their studies.
 - The college fosters a respectful and inclusive environment.
 - Students are well-prepared for their next steps, whether in further education, employment, or training.
 - The college offers a variety of vocational and academic courses that cater to the interests and aspirations of its students.

Footsteps Academy

- **Location:** Haringey
- **Courses:** 7 GCSEs, Level 1 Sports Leaders Award, Level 1 FA Coaching qualification, First Aid in the workplace L2
- **Notes:** Footsteps provides alternative education, through an academic curriculum including; GCSEs in Maths, English, Business Studies, Science, PE, RS, and Art, plus functional skills in maths and English. Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - The curriculum is well-planned and ensures that pupils gain the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve well
 - Staff are quick to address any instances of poor behaviour or bullying, ensuring a safe and supportive environment.
 - The school offers a range of enrichment activities that support pupils' personal development.
 - Pupils are encouraged to develop positive relationships and show respect and tolerance towards others.

New River College

- **Location:** Islington
- **Courses:** Children develop the core skills and knowledge they need to succeed in further education, employment or training, so English and Mathematics are a significant focus.
- **Notes:** Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - Leaders provide a well-thought-through personalised curriculum for each pupil.
 - Subject leaders work closely with teachers to ensure all pupils have access to the intended curriculum, including those educated off-site.

- Pupils feel safe and are encouraged to recognise risks to their well-being and keep themselves safe.
- The school offers a range of enrichment activities, such as adventurous outdoor activities, which boost pupils' confidence and self-esteem.
- Leaders are ambitious for all pupils and ensure the school offers a personalized curriculum tailored to individual needs.

The Complete Works (Shoreditch)

- **Location:** Hackney
- **Courses:** Highly individualised timetable offering full-time courses, including 1:1 tuition and vocational/creative sessions
- **Notes:** Flexible and tailored to the needs of each student. Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - Leaders provide a highly nurturing environment and promote a sense of community.
 - Pupils experience a broad range of creative arts, including animation, photography, and fine art, which boosts their confidence and allows them to express their views and emotions.
 - Professional relationships among pupils and staff are positive, contributing to a safe and supportive environment.

The Pears Family School (Islington)

- **Location:** Islington
- **Courses:** The Pears Family School is an Alternative Provision (AP) for children and their families with emotional and behavioural difficulties, offering a varied curriculum, based around the National Curriculum
- **Notes:** Feedback from the most recent Quality Assurance reports highlight:
 - Pupils receive high-quality education in core subjects such as reading, writing, mathematics, and science
 - Staff are highly skilled in supporting pupils' mental health and emotional well-being, building resilience and confidence.
 - The school offers systemic-focused workshops for parents, empowering them to support their children both at school and at home.

Background papers:

None.

Final report clearance:

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