

# CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Report subject	<b>Alternative Provision Improvement Plan</b>
Meeting date	15 September 2025
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>This report provides an update on the Local Authority's work to improve the quality, consistency, and oversight of Alternative Provision (AP) for children and young people who are unable to access mainstream education.</p> <p>In response to national policy direction and local priorities, the Council is developing a three-tier model of AP that promotes early intervention, targeted support, and specialist provision. The model is designed to reduce exclusions, improve outcomes, and ensure that AP is used as a short-term, purposeful intervention rather than a long-term destination.</p> <p>The report outlines the rationale for change, the options considered, and the preferred approach. It also sets out the implications of the proposed model in relation to sustainability, public health, legal compliance, workforce development, and commissioning. The report is presented for information only and provides an overview of progress to date and the next steps in implementation.</p>
Recommendations	<p><b>It is RECOMMENDED that:</b></p> <p>Members note:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the progress made in developing a three-tier model of AP in line with national guidance and local strategic priorities.</li> <li>the preferred model and the rationale for its selection, as set out in the options appraisal.</li> <li>the next steps in implementation, including further stakeholder engagement, development of service specifications, and alignment with wider SEND and inclusion reforms.</li> </ol>
Reason for recommendations	<p>The recommended approach reflects the Council's statutory duty to ensure all children and young people receive suitable education, particularly those unable to attend mainstream school. The proposed three-tier model of AP supports national guidance and local priorities by promoting early intervention, targeted support, and specialist provision.</p>

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Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Information

## Background

1. The Local Authority has a statutory duty under section 19 of the Education Act (1996) to arrange suitable and (normally) full-time education for children and young people of compulsory school age who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not receive suitable education.
2. The Department for Education (DfE) defines AP as education arranged by local authorities for children of compulsory school age who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; alternative provision can also be used by schools for children on a suspension (fixed period exclusion); and for children being directed by schools to off-site provision to receive education intended to improve their behaviour ([Arranging Alternative Provision, A Guide for Local Authorities and Schools, DfE, February 2025](#)).
3. The DfE also states special educational provision otherwise than at school arranged under section 61 of the Children and Families Act 2014 (EOTAS) are not a form of alternative provision. EOTAS under section 61 is arranged for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), typically with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, when it would be inappropriate for the provision to be made in a school, college or other educational institution; often due to the child's multiple and/or complex SEN.
4. In BCP, we include children and young people attending EOTAS as part of AP monitoring and tracking to ensure that there is robust oversight.
5. Our monitoring and tracking divides AP into three types:
  - a. State-funded AP schools, which includes pupil referral units, AP academies and AP free schools
  - b. School arranged AP
  - c. Local Authority funded AP in non-state funded provision, which includes:
    - i. Education for children and young people who because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education.

- ii. Educational provision for children and young people with an EHC Plan for whom it would be inappropriate for the provision to be made in a school, college or other educational institution.
6. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to strengthen the quality, consistency, and oversight of AP across the borough. The DfE's guidance [Arranging Alternative Provision, A Guide for Local Authorities and Schools, DfE, February 2025](#) states, 'commissioners responsible for arranging alternative provision should ensure that it is good quality, registered where appropriate, and delivered by high quality staff with suitable training, experience and safeguarding checks'.
7. The Government's [SEND and alternative provision improvement plan - GOV.UK](#) sets out its vision for a three-tier AP model with a focus on targeted support whilst children and young people are in mainstream school, to deal with needs early and reduce preventable exclusion. Time-limited or transitional placements into an AP setting will provide more intensive intervention or longer-term support where it is needed, before children and young people return to a new mainstream setting or progress to a sustainable post-16 destination.
8. This report provides an update on the work necessary to develop and deliver a three-tier model of AP. It outlines the rationale for change, the options considered, the progress to date, and the next steps. The model aims to improve outcomes for vulnerable learners, reduce exclusions, and ensure that AP is delivered in a way that is inclusive, effective, and aligned with the Council's strategic priorities.

## Context

9. In April 2025, our Children's Commissioning Service commissioned a needs analysis of BCP's use of AP. This is because our use of AP is rising and is above both regional and national rates.

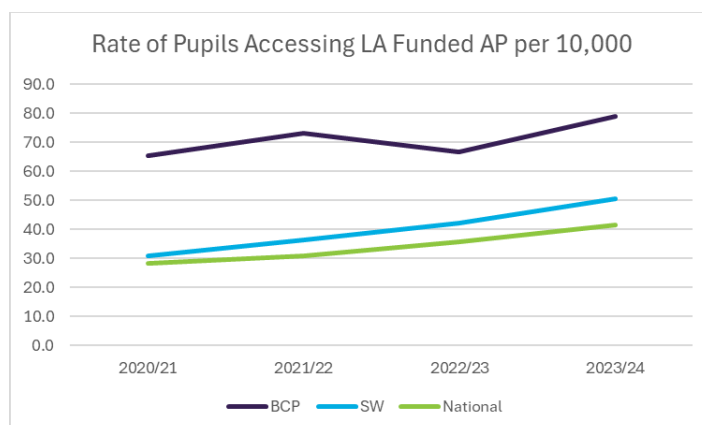
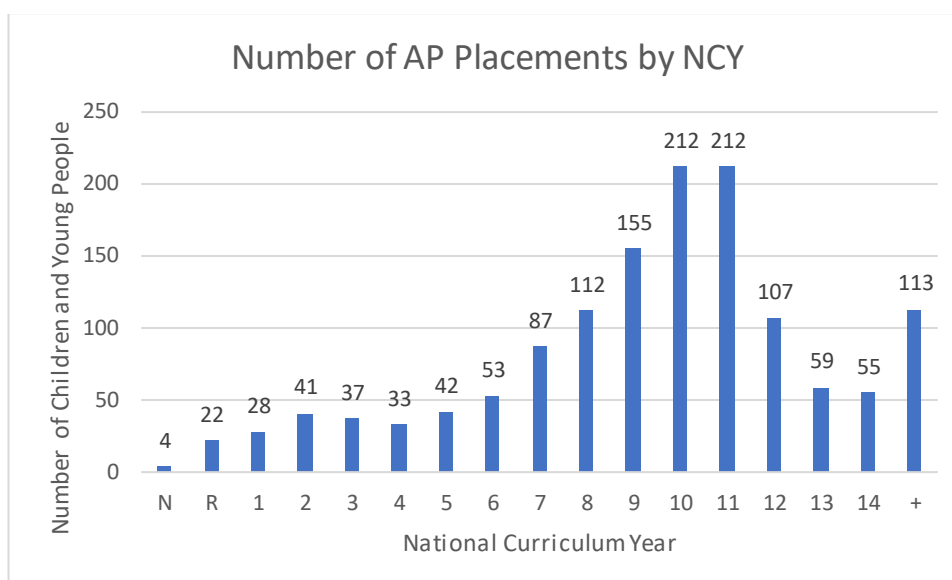


Figure 1: Rate of pupils accessing LA funded AP per 10,000

The needs analysis found:

- 95% of children and young people accessing AP have special educational needs, 86% have an EHCP and 10% have SEND Support
10. The largest areas of need are social, emotional and mental health, autism spectrum condition and speech, language and communication needs

- Around two thirds of our children and young people accessing AP placements are male
  - The peak age at which our children and young people start an AP placement is 13 to 15 years old
  - The average placement duration is 29 weeks. However, 15% of placements active in 2024/25 had been active for three or more years
11. There are key wards in BCP with higher numbers of children in AP, most significantly Kinson, Newtown and Heatherlands, Muscliff and Strouden Park, and Alderney and Bourne Valley
  12. The youngest children accessing AP were in year one
  13. At the end of May 2025, 1372 of our children and young people were accessing AP. We have used the end of May as a benchmark to give a more accurate reflection of AP usage because Year 11 children and young people would not be included in June and July due to their statutory education ending:
  14. 190 children and young people were accessing state-funded AP schools, 726 were accessing non-state funded APs and 472 were accessing placements in unregistered provisions (a small number of children and young people access more than one type).
  15. 65 children and young people were classed as EOTAS.
  16. 69 were children in our care, 32 had Children Protection (CP) Plans and 133 were Children in Need (CiN).
  17. 1114 children and young people had an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP), 41 were in the Education Health Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) process, 91 were identified as requiring SEND support and 126 had no Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
  18. 463 children and young people had an identified Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) need, 412 had a diagnosis of autism, 128 had a Speech Language and Communication Need (SLCN), 81 had a Physical Disability (PD) and 69 had Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD).
  19. 63% of the children and young people were male and 37% were female.
  20. Number of children and young people by National Curriculum Year (NCY)



21. Nationally, the percentage of pupils attending AP schools who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) was more than double the rate of the general school population (FFT Education Datalab, February 2024)

## Progress

22. This academic year we have visited the majority of AP Providers to review their provision which includes safeguarding, health and safety and outcomes for children and young people.
23. The LA is in the process of establishing an AP Framework which will support the delivery of quality assured provision that meets the individual needs of our children and young people. We hosted a successful market engagement event in June 2025, ahead of the launch of the Framework tender. In April 2025, we launched a Provider Forum to develop strong working relationships and share best practice.
24. In June 2025, we set up an AP working Group which is made up of representatives from the council, parent groups, mainstream educational settings, AP providers and specialist settings. The AP Working Group will develop a three-tier AP model which aligns with the national plan set out in the Government's [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities \(SEND\) and Alternative Provision \(AP\) Plan](#). Tier one will focus on targeted support and early help whilst children and young people are in mainstream school. Tier two will provide short-term, time limited or transitional AP placements with an expectation that children and young people will return to their mainstream school; whilst tier three will provide more intensive and longer-term support where it is needed to support children and young people to return to a new mainstream setting or sustained post-16 destination.
25. The AP working group is being supported by '[The Difference](#)'. 'The Difference' are an educational charity who aim to reduce lost learning in schools across the country. and recently published [What Works Four Tenets of Effective Internal Alternative Provision.pdf](#). We have also commissioned 50 places for school leaders on 'The Difference's' Inclusion Leadership Programme to develop whole-school inclusion across the conurbation.

26. We are in the process of implementing 'Welfare Call' which enables us to closely monitor the attendance of our children and young people accessing an AP who are not on a school roll and take swift action when required.
27. We have implemented the first iteration of an AP Panel to ensure there is a child-centred, efficient and effective process around decision making for local authority Section 19 commissioned AP placements.

### Next Steps

28. We are working with the Children's Rights and Engagement Team to capture the lived experience of children and young people to inform process, practice and delivery.
29. The AP Working Group will agree the vision for a BCP Three-Tier AP model in September and will develop a delivery plan throughout September and October.
30. The AP framework tender will launch in July, which will ensure contractual arrangements are robust and will set out clear data recording and sharing expectations, resulting in consistency of reporting.
31. The LA will continue to develop our oversight, monitoring and reporting in relation to AP with the first phase of development going live by the end of August.
32. We are working with Dorset Council Colleagues to develop an annual AP Provider safeguarding and quality of education audit and to improve reintegration rates from AP into mainstream education.
33. We are also developing a quality assurance process to monitor the reviews of individual children and young people accessing AP placements.

### Options Appraisal

34. In developing a revised model for AP, the Local Authority has considered two options to ensure alignment with statutory duties and best practice as outlined in the Department for Education's updated guidance (2025). The options that have been appraised are set out below.
35. **Option 1: Maintain the Current Provision Model.** This option would retain existing commissioned services without significant reform. While familiar to schools and providers, the current model has been found to lack strategic alignment with the SEND and AP Plan and does not adequately reflect the evolving needs of the local cohort. Feedback from stakeholders during the Discovery Phase highlighted limitations in flexibility, quality assurance, and reintegration pathways. This option was not pursued due to its inability to meet the ambitions of the local SEND and Inclusion Strategy. Additionally, the current model significantly impacts the High Needs Block (HNB) of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG).

Advantages:	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familiarity for schools and providers.</li> <li>• No immediate disruption to existing placements.</li> <li>• Minimal administrative burden</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not address identified gaps in quality, consistency, and reintegration pathways.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fails to align with the DfE's vision of AP as an intervention rather than a destination.</li> <li>• Limited capacity to meet increasing demand or support early intervention.</li> <li>• There is a significant cost to the HNB of the DSG.</li> <li>• In 2023/24, BCP's permanent exclusion rate was 0.17, which was above national (0.13), the Southwest (0.15) and statistical neighbour (0.12) rates.</li> <li>• In 2023/24, BCP's suspension rate was 13.88, which was above the national (11.31) and statistical neighbour (11.65) rates.</li> </ul>
<b>Reason for Rejection:</b> This option was not pursued due to its inability to deliver improved outcomes or meet the strategic objectives of the SEND and Inclusion Strategy. Stakeholder feedback indicated that the current model is reactive and lacks coherence.	

36. **Option 2: Implement a Three-Tier Model of AP** (*Recommended Option*)  
 In line with [national policy direction](#), the Local Authority proposes the implementation of a three-tier model of AP, comprising:

**Tier 1:** Early intervention and outreach support to prevent exclusion.

**Tier 2:** Short-term placements with targeted therapeutic and educational support.

**Tier 3:** Specialist AP settings for pupils with complex needs requiring longer-term provision.

37. This model promotes inclusion, timely support, and reintegration, and is underpinned by multi-agency collaboration. It reflects best practice emerging from pilot areas and aligns with the DfE's vision of AP as an intervention rather than a destination. The model also supports improved outcomes, better use of resources, and enhanced quality assurance.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligns with national policy and DfE guidance.</li> <li>• Promotes early intervention, targeted support, and reintegration.</li> <li>• Enables a graduated response to pupil needs.</li> <li>• Supports multi-agency collaboration and improved outcomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires initial investment in system redesign and workforce development.</li> <li>• Implementation complexity across tiers and settings.</li> </ul>
<b>Reason for Recommendation:</b> This option offers the most coherent and sustainable approach to improving AP. It reflects best practice from other local authorities and national pilots, and supports the Local Authority's ambition to deliver inclusive, high-quality education for all learners.	

## Summary of financial implications

38. The expenditure on AP is funded by the high needs block of the ring-fenced Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and is contributing to the accumulated deficit of £113 million for 31 March 2025. The deficit is projected to continue to grow each year as expenditure will be greater than the allocated grant funding.
39. There has been a sharp rise in AP spend over the last 3 years with it budgeted to rise further in 2025/26 as summarised in the following table:

AP Expenditure	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
	Actual	Actual	Actual	Budget
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Bespoke Packages – external providers	4,919	6,730	12,070	14,238
Place Funding – maintained and academies	2,460	2,409	2,528	2,666
Top up Funding – maintained and academies	1,210	3,359	5,039	4,500
Hospital Education – private providers	58	26	64	100
<b>Total Alternative Provision</b>	<b>8,648</b>	<b>12,523</b>	<b>19,701</b>	<b>21,504</b>

BCP Funded AP Places	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
(included in above table)	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Tregonwell Academy	560	467	400	400
Quay School - exclusions	614	656	684	709
Quay School - medical / hospital*	806	806	964	1,077
Christchurch Learning Centre	480	480	480	480
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,460</b>	<b>2,409</b>	<b>2,528</b>	<b>2,666</b>

\*The Quay school medical/hospital provision includes places for BCP resident children unable to attend school for medical reasons as well as educational support in NHS hospitals in the BCP area (Poole hospital and Pebble Lodge, a specialist psychiatric unit in Bournemouth). NHS units cater for pupils across council areas and the DfE fund NHS expansions through an application process.

40. The number of pupils catered for within state funded providers has changed little over this period with the growth in demand requiring use of high-cost independent providers.
41. The impact on the DSG budget will be assessed after the specific detail of the new 3-tier model has been determined.

## Summary of legal implications

42. The Local Authority has a statutory duty to ensure that all children and young people receive suitable education, particularly those who are unable to attend mainstream school due to exclusion, illness, or other circumstances. The model of provision must also comply with national guidance on safeguarding, commissioning, oversight, and reintegration. The core legal frameworks that inform and support the delivery of the proposed model are summarised below.

- **Education Act 1996 – Section 19:** Requires local authorities to arrange suitable full-time education for children of compulsory school age who, due to exclusion, illness, or other reasons, would not otherwise receive it. This forms the legal basis



for the LA's duty to provide AP. The three-tier model must ensure that all tiers (especially Tier 2 and Tier 3) meet the definition of "suitable education."

- **Children and Families Act 2014 – Section 61 (EOTAS):** This allows for education otherwise than at school for children with EHC Plans where mainstream or special school is unsuitable. This ensures that Tier 3 provision for complex needs is lawful and appropriately commissioned, especially where EOTAS may be considered.
- **DfE Statutory Guidance on Alternative Provision (2025)** Sets out what LAs, schools, and providers must do to comply with the law when arranging AP. Includes expectations around safeguarding, commissioning, reintegration, and quality assurance. Provides the operational framework for designing and implementing the three-tier model. Reinforces the need for strategic planning, oversight, and alignment with wider inclusion goals.
- **SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years (2015)** Statutory guidance outlining duties for education, health, and care services to work together to support children and young people with SEND. The model must integrate with SEND systems, ensure inclusive practice, and support reintegration and progression. Applies particularly to pupils with EHC Plans in AP.
- **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (2025)** Strengthens duties around pupil wellbeing, reintegration, and safeguarding in AP settings. Supports the rationale for early intervention (Tier 1), therapeutic support (Tier 2), and structured reintegration planning across all tiers.
- **Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)** Statutory safeguarding guidance for all education settings. AP settings must comply with safeguarding standards, particularly Tier 2 and Tier 3 placements. Oversight and monitoring must reflect these duties.

43. The Council's Legal Services will be engaged to ensure the proposed model aligns with these duties and does not create unintended risks and consequences. Key legal risks include ensuring appropriate oversight of placements, safeguarding responsibilities, and clarity around commissioning arrangements. These will be mitigated through robust service level agreements, clear referral pathways, and regular legal review of policy and practice. The Council will continue to ensure that all AP arrangements are lawful, transparent, and in the best interests of the child.

### **Summary of human resources implications**

44. The implementation of a three-tier model of AP will require changes in practice and increased collaboration across schools, the Local Authority, and wider education and health partners. The model places greater emphasis on early intervention and targeted support, which will require staff across the system to develop new skills and approaches, particularly in inclusive practice, therapeutic support, and multi-agency working.
45. A coordinated programme of professional development will be essential to build capacity and ensure consistency across settings.
46. A communication and engagement plan will be developed to support staff understanding and readiness across the partnership, ensuring that the workforce is informed, supported, and equipped to deliver the new model effectively.
47. The DfE's [Arranging Alternative Provision Guidance](#) (February 2025) states there should be 'regular review dates (at least half-termly) between the commissioner and the provider should be built in to monitor the child's progress against objectives and to consider any changes that may be necessary to ensure the placement is

successful'. This has a significant impact on resource, given that in May 2025 there were 1372 children and young people accessing AP placements.

### **Summary of sustainability impact**

48. The implementation of a three-tier model of AP supports the Council's climate emergency commitments by promoting more localised and inclusive education pathways. By strengthening early intervention and short-term support within mainstream settings (Tier 1 and Tier 2), the model reduces reliance on distant specialist placements, thereby lowering travel-related emissions, costs, and journey times for families. This approach also enables better use of existing school infrastructure, contributing to long-term sustainability in service delivery and resource allocation.

### **Summary of public health implications**

49. The proposed three-tier model of AP is expected to have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, mental health difficulties and those at risk of exclusion. By embedding early intervention (Tier 1) and targeted support (Tier 2) within mainstream settings, the model aims to reduce referrals to specialist mental health services by addressing needs earlier and offering holistic support. It also supports pupils with chronic conditions such as fatigue and anxiety by offering flexible, therapeutic environments that reduce stress and promote engagement. The model contributes to reducing health inequalities by ensuring that learners with vulnerabilities can access appropriate support locally, improving continuity of care and outcomes.

### **Summary of equality implications**

50. The new model will have a positive impact as children and young people with SEND will receive earlier support within their school setting. In circumstances, where this is not possible, we will develop higher quality provision based on need. We will also ensure that other information we hold about children and young people accessing AP being is reflected in the support available, for example that the majority are male.

### **Summary of risk assessment**

51. The implementation of a three-tier model of AP represents a significant strategic shift in how the Local Authority supports children and young people. While the model is designed to improve outcomes and deliver more inclusive education pathways, there are a number of risks that decision-makers should consider. These include operational, financial, and stakeholder-related risks. The table below outlines the key risks associated with the proposed model and the mitigation strategies that will be put in place to manage them effectively.

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Mitigation Strategy</b>
Insufficient capacity in Tier 1 and Tier 2	Schools may lack the resources or expertise to deliver early intervention and short-term support effectively.	Provide targeted support and access to outreach services; develop clear criteria and support frameworks for Tier 1 and Tier 2 delivery.

Inconsistent implementation across schools	Variation in practice may lead to unequal access and outcomes for pupils.	Develop a standardised model with clear expectations, supported by a robust SLA and monitoring framework.
Stakeholder resistance or lack of buy-in	Schools, parents, or providers may be unclear or concerned about changes.	Engage stakeholders early through consultation and co-production; communicate benefits clearly and provide ongoing support.
Funding pressures and sustainability	Risk of underfunding or misalignment with High Needs Block priorities.	Align funding with pupil need and outcomes; ensure commissioning decisions are data-driven and linked to wider SEND strategy.
Impact on existing AP providers	Changes may destabilise current provision or reduce referrals.	Involve providers in model design; offer transitional support and clarify roles within the new tiered structure.
Data and monitoring gaps	Lack of robust data may hinder evaluation and accountability.	Establish clear data requirements and reporting cycles; invest in systems to track pupil progress and provision impact.
Legal and statutory compliance	Risk of non-compliance with SEND Code of Practice or exclusion guidance.	Ensure model is co-developed with legal oversight and aligns with DfE guidance and statutory duties.

### Background papers

None

### Appendices

None