

# Catch them before they fall: What works in supporting vulnerable children to stay in education

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# Catch them before they fall: What works in supporting vulnerable children to stay in education

In post-lockdown Britain, the most vulnerable young people will be at greater risk of unemployment, and criminal and sexual exploitation. We may see a rise in school exclusions, and in young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

But rather than looking at what could go wrong, this situation can be used as an opportunity to find out what works. Here's how we propose that the government goes about doing that.

## Our recommendations

- 1.1 **Fast-track the evaluation of year 1 of the AP Innovation Fund programmes** so AP schools can make the best use of the £7m transition fund to support their students in the coming autumn.
- 1.2 **Commission an evaluation of the £7 million transition fund** so that successful interventions can be replicated in the future and persistently high NEET rates reduced in the longer-term.
- 1.3 **Commit to multi-year funding for post-16 transition from AP** based on the evidence about what works informed by a robust evaluation of the £7m transition funding.
- 2.1 **Provide place funding for 3,500 post-16 AP places** across England every year.
- 3.1 **Design a national fair funding formula for AP that includes an allocation for upstream work** with mainstream schools.
- 3.2 **Conduct and support research into effective upstream working** to reduce preventable exclusions, including outreach services run by AP schools and local authorities, in-school inclusion bases and third sector initiatives.
- 3.3 **Publish templates of good local systems of AP** and establish an AP system improvement fund to replicate successful models where AP schools are supporting mainstream schools with behaviour, and mainstream schools are supporting AP schools to provide an aspirational curriculum.

Youth unemployment could potentially rise to two million after the Covid-19 crisis, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies<sup>1</sup>.

In this context, the Youth Employment Group<sup>2</sup> - a cross-sector coalition formed in response to rising concerns about the economic and educational impact of Covid-19 on young people - have rightly highlighted the need to plan for the long-term.

As a country, we need to think strategically about how to provide training and job opportunities for young people over the coming decade, while the economy recovers.

One group who are disproportionately likely to become NEET are young people who have been excluded from school. Almost one in two children educated in alternative provision (AP) schools becomes NEET immediately after their GCSEs.<sup>3</sup> This compares to one in 20 from mainstream schools.<sup>4</sup> In the worst performing local authority, Bedford, only 34 per cent of excluded pupils sustain a positive post-16 destination.<sup>5</sup>

1. Institute for Fiscal Studies, April 2020. Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed? Accessed via: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14791>

2. The Youth Employment Group was formed by Impetus, Youth Futures Foundation, Youth Employment UK, the Institute for Employment Studies and The Prince's Trust to bring together key leaders and experts around the youth employment sector in the context of Covid-19.

3. Centre for Social Justice, May 2020. Warming the cold spots of alternative provision: A manifesto for system improvement (p.57)

4. Department for Education, 2019. Statistics: destinations of key stage 4 and 16 to 18 (KS5) students

5. Centre for Social Justice, May 2020. Warming the cold spots of alternative provision: A manifesto for system improvement (p.33)

These young people face a multiplicity of vulnerabilities. Children in AP are 13 times more likely to have a social worker than their peers in mainstream schools.<sup>6</sup> What's more, 81 per cent have an identified special educational need, compared to 14 per cent in mainstream.<sup>7</sup> And 43 per cent are eligible for free school meals: three times more than in mainstream.<sup>8</sup> There is also a strong correlation between areas of high deprivation and areas where a high proportion of the school population is educated full-time in AP.<sup>9</sup>

This cohort is also highly vulnerable to gang-related activity and childhood criminal exploitation. Compared to other children assessed by children's services, children associated with gangs are five times more likely to have experienced a permanent exclusion and six times more likely to have been in AP in the previous academic year.<sup>10</sup>

**This paper proposes that we act now to lessen the longer-term effects of Covid-19 on this group of children.**

Covid-19 has seen an encouraging upswing in partnership working and communication between AP schools, local authorities, local communities and central government.<sup>11</sup>

The government should seize the opportunity offered by this new era of collaboration to embed AP schools more fully into the continuum of education provision. There are two areas where this partnership working could be significantly strengthened: children leaving AP, and children at risk of entering AP.

## Supporting the transition to college

AP school leaders are legitimately worried that children will not transition easily into college next year. To address this concern, the government has announced a one-off £7 million fund to support children from AP to progress into post-16 education or training.<sup>12</sup>

This is a welcome support package but without robust evaluation and integration into a long-term plan, it risks being little more than a sticking plaster. This need is established in existing research, with AP schools feeling that support on a more "long-term basis" is important, but that there are often "funding/resource issues".<sup>13</sup>

Given the consistently high NEET rates for this group, we propose that this fund should be evaluated, and funding be allocated for successful interventions to be replicated in future years.

Post-16 transition support is patchy across England, with only some local authorities specifically funding AP schools to do NEET prevention work.<sup>14</sup> Centre for Social Justice research found that half of AP schools do not have any staff dedicated to post-16 transition support and of those that do, three in four are employed in this role part-time.<sup>15</sup> Yet government research has found this to be a crucial area for AP schools to focus on.<sup>16</sup>

The government has made a start in seeking evidence on what works. The 2018-20 AP Innovation Fund invested £1m into supporting successful transitions from AP to education, training and employment. Three pilot programmes in Salford, Nottingham and Sutton were run over two years, with the evaluations due in 2020.

The government could do three things to promote the effective use of the £7 million transition fund:

6. Department for Education, June 2020. Guidance: Alternative Provision: Year 11 transition funding

7. Centre for Social Justice, May 2020. Warming the cold spots of alternative provision: A manifesto for system improvement (p.65)

8. Department for Education, 2019. Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics 2019

9. CSJ analysis of Index of Multiple Deprivation data and pupil numbers from Department for Education Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics release 2019

10. National Youth Agency, May 2020. Gangs and exploitation: A youth work response to COVID-19 (p.17)

11. Education Select Committee virtual meeting, 22 April 2020. Oral evidence: The impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services. Accessed via: <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/299/pdf/>

12. Department for Education, June 2020. Guidance: Alternative provision: Year 11 transition funding

13. Department for Education, 2018. Investigative research into alternative provision. IFF Research Ltd. (p. 155)

14. Ibid (p.154)

15. Centre for Social Justice, 2020. Post-16 Support in Alternative Provision. Accessed via: <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/post-16-support-in-alternative-provision>

16. Department for Education, 2018. Investigative research into alternative provision. IFF Research Ltd. (p.154)

### **1. Fast-track the evaluation of year 1 of the AP Innovation Fund programmes.**

The information learned from the first year of the pilot programmes could be used to offer guidance to AP schools about how they might most effectively use this funding in autumn 2020.

### **2. Commission an evaluation of the £7 million transition fund.**

The government has responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by releasing large amounts of money as support packages. It would be a waste not to evaluate the effectiveness of this spend and use it to improve outcomes for this cohort in the long term.

Moreover, given the incomplete evidence that will surely arise from the AP Innovation Fund, for which only one year of reliable data is likely to be available rather than the planned two years, this is an opportunity to complement that data.

The findings of the interventions could have wider value. These are the children most likely to become NEET after their GCSEs. If we can find out what works for them, that knowledge could be applied year-on-year to dramatically reduce NEET figures across the country.

This could include an identification and replication of existing highly effective models.

In Blackpool - the local authority with the highest rate in England of children educated in AP - the Pathways for All programme has seen 90% of AP leavers remain in their post-16 destination after six months, and all others are still working with their coaches to achieve and sustain their next destination. No child has left the programme NEET.<sup>17</sup>

Another example is the MCR Pathways model, which has seen looked-after children in Scotland progressing to college, university or employment at 86 per cent relative to a national average of 50 per cent of a directly comparable group.<sup>18</sup> There is significant overlap between children in care and the alternative provision population.<sup>19</sup>

The Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) is prepared to evaluate this fund. What it would require from the government is a willingness to work alongside the YFF to facilitate this. The YFF is an independent, not for profit organisation set up to tackle youth unemployment by uncovering and sharing effective approaches to getting young people into meaningful work - particularly those facing the greatest barriers to their progression. A core part of their remit is to build the evidence base around "what works", to ensure future generations have access to fulfilling work, no matter what their background. By using the YFF's expertise in evaluating programmes designed for young people, the £7 million transition fund could become a powerful initiative to improve our collective understanding of how best to support this cohort.

### **3. Commit to multi-year funding for post-16 transition from AP.**

Based on the evidence about what works, the government could then guarantee that successful transition programmes would be funded into the future.

17. Blackpool Opportunity Area, Educational Diversity, and Right to Succeed, June 2020. Pathways for All - Programme Summary. (Document shared with CSJ.)

18. MCR Pathways, 2018. Impact report 2018. Accessed via <https://mcrpathways.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/GCC-Impact-Report-Final.pdf>

19. Department for Education, June 2020. Guidance: Alternative provision: Year 11 transition funding

## Specialist sixth forms for the most vulnerable

The increase in the education participation age in 2015 was not accompanied by statutory duties to provide post-16 AP.

Fifty-two AP schools (17 per cent of total state-maintained secondary AP) are currently registered to offer some kind of 16-19 education.<sup>20</sup> Not all receive additional funding to do so, and any that they do receive is provided at the local authority's discretion.<sup>21</sup>

These AP sixth forms are unevenly distributed around the country: the South East and Greater London each have 12, whereas the North East and the North West each have only three. This is despite the North West having the highest rate and number of children ending year 11 in AP.<sup>22</sup>

The Commons Education Committee, in their 2018 inquiry into AP, found "a clear will in the sector to provide post-16 education to pupils in alternative provision, and a clear need on the part of pupils".<sup>23</sup> It urged the government to fund not only transition support for FE colleges, but also AP sixth forms.

More recently, Centre for Social Justice research has found that nine in ten AP schools that don't currently provide post-16 AP recognise the demand and want to provide it.<sup>24</sup> They estimate that around half of their year 11 cohort would benefit from this provision - which is approximately equivalent to the percentage that becomes NEET every year.

Given the increased risk of this pupil population becoming NEET in a post-Covid-19 context, we recommend that the government conduct an analysis of need and provide place funding for approximately 3,500 post-16 AP places across England, at £10,000 per place.

## Stemming the flow into AP

At the other end of the AP pipeline, it is fair to assume that there may be an influx of new children into AP next year - potentially larger than normal - for two principal reasons. First, it is likely that schools will have low tolerance for transgression of new school rules around social distancing, due to health concerns. Second, with normal school routines disrupted for at least six months of this year, re-engaging some children with education will be a challenge. Disengaged learners are one of the categories of pupils that typically end up in alternative provision.<sup>25</sup>

The Centre for Social Justice polled almost 7000 teachers and school leaders in May 2020<sup>26</sup> to ask what they think would require the most work once schools re-open fully. Secondary school teachers consider student engagement as second only to catching up on lost learning time. Pastoral care and rebuilding relationships with learners were also high on the priority list.

There are several good reasons to aim to prevent an increase in children flowing into alternative provision. Here we will look at three: student outcomes, capacity, and cost.

### Student outcomes

Academic results for pupils who sit their maths and English GCSEs in AP are significantly worse than the results of their contemporaries in mainstream. Over the last three years, only 4 per cent of pupils educated in state-maintained AP achieved a grade 9-4 in maths and English.<sup>27</sup> This compares with 64 per cent of pupils across all state-funded schools (special and AP included).

20. Department for Education, 2019. Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics 2019

21. House of Commons Education Committee, 2018. Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions (p.38)

22. CSJ analysis of Department for Education data

23. House of Commons Education Committee, 2018. Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions (p.38)

24. The Guardian, June 2020. Thousands of excluded pupils in England have no place to go in September. Accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/26/thousands-excluded-pupils-england-september-teachers-covid-19-vulnerable-exploitation>

25. Department for Education, 2018. Alternative provision market analysis. ISOS Partnership (pp.27-28)

26. TeacherTapp survey of 6933 teachers and school leaders.

27. CSJ analysis of an FOI from the Department for Education

While good AP schools may be specialists in re-engaging children with education, they are unable to offer the full breadth of curriculum to which students will have access in mainstream.<sup>28</sup> AP schools also have fewer qualified teachers.<sup>29</sup>

Academic outcomes are not the only thing to suffer. Research has shown that exclusion leads to poorer mental health for students, compared to a control group.<sup>30</sup>

## Capacity

Research shows that an increased inflow of children into AP is likely to lead to more children being educated in unregistered provision of poor or unknown quality.

For example, the recent review of AP in Sheffield noted that the “excess of pupils” on roll at the Sheffield Inclusion Centre (219 pupils for 170 available places) made it “highly reliant” on independent providers.<sup>31</sup> “In addition to significant costs,” they remarked, “this adds complexity to mapping the curriculum, monitoring progress and securing attendance”.<sup>32</sup>

In Coventry, inspectors found that some students were being placed with external providers not due to the quality or suitability of courses but “because of capacity issues at the centres”.<sup>33</sup> As a result, they reported, “some pupils do not engage in these courses sufficiently well and do not sustain their placements”.<sup>34</sup>

In its response to the Timpson review, the government said it would announce capital funding for AP schools in the autumn 2019 spending review<sup>35</sup> and Conservative government’s 2019 manifesto pledged to “expand ‘alternative provision’ schools”.<sup>36</sup> In June 2020, the government announced £1bn for a new school building programme, although whether this will cover AP schools is yet to be seen at the time of publication. In any case, none of this is likely to materialise in time to mitigate the negative impact of an increase in formal or informal school exclusions in the 2020/21 academic year.

## Cost

The average cost of a place in alternative provision is £18,000 per year, which is drawn from each local authority’s High Needs Budget.<sup>37</sup> A report published by the National Audit Office in 2019 found that the system for funding alternative provision and specialist provision was “not, on current trends, financially sustainable”.<sup>38</sup>

The government has promised an additional £780m one-off funding package for 2020-21, but councils and SEND organisations have warned this is not sufficient to make up historic deficits.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the NAO found that pupils with SEND who do not have EHCPs are “particularly exposed”. This description disproportionately applies to pupils in AP (seven in ten pupils in AP, one in ten in mainstream and zero in special schools).<sup>40</sup>

From all the above, it seems clear that the government, local authorities and the school community need a co-created plan to prevent a flood of children into AP. A new approach is needed, which sees upstream work prioritised and good AP schools integrated into the continuum of education provision in each local area. A number of options exist as to how to approach this.

28. Department for Education, 2018. Investigative research into alternative provision. IFF Research Ltd. (p.99)

29. Centre for Social Justice, May 2020. Warming the cold spots of alternative provision: A manifesto for system improvement (p.12)

30. Cambridge University Press, August 2017. The relationship between exclusion from school and mental health: a secondary analysis of the British Child and Adolescent Mental Health Surveys 2004 and 2007. Tamsin Ford et al.

31. Learn Sheffield, 2019. Alternative Provision in Sheffield: A Research Study. (Internal report shared by the local authority)

32. Ibid

33. Ofsted inspection report, June 2018. Coventry Extended Learning Centre. Accessed via: <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/22/134269>

34. Ibid

35. Department for Education, May 2019. The Timpson review of school exclusion: Government response (p.20)

36. Conservative manifesto 2019. Accessed via: <https://www.conservatives.com/our-priorities/schools>

37. Department for Education, 2018. Alternative provision market analysis. ISOS Partnership (p.6)

38. National Audit Office, September 2019. Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England (p.11). Accessed via: <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/support-for-pupils-with-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities/>

39. Schools Week, January 2020. Government’s £780m SEND cash injection swallowed up by funding black holes. Accessed via: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/governments-780m-send-cash-injection-swallowed-up-by-funding-black-holes/>

40. Department for Education, 2019. Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics 2019

## Outreach and support

The Centre for Social Justice has already called for a national fair funding formula for AP, that is sufficiently generous to cover upstream work with mainstream schools.<sup>41</sup> Local AP schools and charities could bid for the outreach contract in each area, which would be allocated based on quality and outcomes.

Chessbrook Education Support Centre in Watford is an excellent example of an AP school that has flipped the traditional model to focus most of its resources on upstream work in mainstream schools, which reduces the need for full-time education of excluded pupils. Highly effective systems should be researched and replicated across the country, with templates of good practice published by government.

## In-school bases

In-school AP bases are another solution, especially in areas where good AP schools are lacking or are geographically dispersed. Research is sorely needed, however, into what effective practice looks like.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, high quality training must be made available for developing teachers and leaders who are expert in educating and supporting children with complex home circumstances and those who are struggling to engage with the mainstream curriculum.<sup>43</sup>

## Third sector programmes

Additionally, a number of charities are trialling models to provide better support for pupils upstream, in collaboration with local state sector bodies.

For example, Social Finance is working in partnership with two local authorities, Cheshire West and Chester County Council and Gloucestershire County Council, to transform how the local system identifies and supports children at risk of exclusion.<sup>44</sup>

Place-based change charity Right to Succeed is facilitating a town-wide literacy programme in Blackpool, testing the hypothesis that improving literacy will improve engagement with the curriculum and ultimately, reduce exclusions.<sup>45</sup>

Education charity The Difference is developing whole-school approaches to inclusion based on an understanding of trauma in children at risk of exclusion, and training mainstream school leaders specialised in educating the most vulnerable.<sup>46</sup>

In areas where the quality of local AP schools is poor and expertise is lacking, support could be provided by third sector initiatives such as these.

## Conclusion

The current crisis provides the government with an ideal opportunity to evaluate what works in stemming the inflow into AP, and in supporting vulnerable students as they transition out of AP.

41. Centre for Social Justice, May 2020. Warming the cold spots of alternative provision: A manifesto for system improvement (p. 71).

42. Ibid (p. 63).

43. IPPR, 2017. Making the Difference, Breaking the link between school exclusion and social exclusion (pp. 28-36)

44. Social Finance, June 2020. Co-producing locally, accelerating nationally: Lessons in Making Change Happen. Accessed via: <https://medium.com/social-finance-uk/coproducing-locally-accelerating-nationally-lessons-in-making-change-happen-93a6ef523997>

45. Right to Succeed, Reach Programme. Accessed via: <https://righttosucceed.org.uk/working-collectively/reach-programme/>

46. The Guardian, June 2019. Ending exclusion: specialist teachers trained to support most vulnerable. Accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jun/11/ending-exclusion-specialist-teachers-trained-support-vulnerable-schools>

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