

# Alternative Provision: exploring the effectiveness of outreach services

## Key messages

July 2024



## Overview

This resource sets out some of the headline messages from research carried out by the What Works in SEND researchers at the University of Warwick.

The aim of the research was to explore effective practices for local area commissioning and delivery of outreach support as part of an Alternative Provision (AP) offer. We focused on five case studies, all demonstrating high quality outreach provision. Four case studies were of local area outreach services and one on a primary school Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) outreach service. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders in Local Authorities (LAs), AP teams and mainstream schools. We interviewed 35 participants in total.

The findings identified what needs to be in place locally for a strong outreach offer, what needs to be in place strategically to allow these services to function effectively, and the barriers to effective provision.

## The Outreach Offer: what needs to be in place locally?

- ✦ Signposting and informal advice: helpline for schools; informal partner agency support.
- ✦ Specialist support: outreach teams with skills to support and build relationships with children, schools and families.
  - For children, a designated outreach worker with space and time to listen.
  - For parents & carers, teams could signpost to appropriate agencies for support. Restoring trust and understanding a child's context were important.
  - For school staff, developing strategies to tackle the 'negative cycle' of pupil/school relationships, for example encouraging teachers to 'see' and develop empathy for the child.
- ✦ Support for reintegration: re-engaging children with learning in mainstream school.
- ✦ Support for transition: supporting children at 'trigger points', for example transition from primary to secondary school.
- ✦ Flexible and bespoke services: responding flexibly to suit the specific needs of the child.
- ✦ Innovative service developments: developing new partnerships/joint commissioning:
  - Prioritising outreach in schools with elevated suspension/permanent exclusion rates as a 'way in' to challenge school cultures.
  - Outreach teams worked to bridge gaps in service provision in health and social care. Outreach teams also worked with agencies to provide alternative forms of psychological support, responding to rising need and waiting times. Partnerships with Children's & Adolescent Mental Health Services supported children on waiting lists and joint work with Educational Psychologists to develop support for parent carers.

## Values driving outreach provision

- ✦ Behaviour as communication: recognising complexities of behaviour as 'communication of unmet need' as opposed to a problem to be 'fixed'.
- ✦ Holistic: understanding that all aspects of a child's life impact behaviour.
- ✦ Whole-school: in addition to working with individual pupils and teachers, offering broader support on aspects of school practice and culture.
- ✦ Trauma-informed: acknowledging that trauma can impact on behaviour and act as a barrier to learning.
- ✦ Non-judgemental: supporting from a neutral position. Outreach teams are viewed as one step removed from schools, a 'fresh pair of eyes' on complex situations.
- ✦ Prevention-focused: preventing disengagement with learning and negative outcomes.

## Strategic Approach: what needs to be in place locally?

### Commissioning and funding

- ✦ There were complex arrangements of commissioning and funding which varied across the case studies. Despite complex arrangements, providers tended to have flexibility to manage budgets as they deemed most appropriate. This was particularly valued as numbers of children requiring support fluctuated. When there were less than expected AP placements in settings, funding could be redirected to support additional outreach work.

### Partnerships

There were variable arrangements of strategic partnership working. In some areas, arrangements were prompted by poor outcomes of joint SEND/AP inspection.

- ✦ **Partnerships with children, young people and families:** parent carer forums where members of SEND/AP participate in strategic panels to ensure ongoing connections between strategy and impact.
- ✦ **Partnerships between mainstream and AP settings/outreach:** at strategic level, partnerships between AP and mainstream leaders were important, not least for encouraging inclusive approaches. Striking a balance between support and challenge was however important: effective partnership between outreach and schools was key for maximising impact.
- ✦ **Partnerships between outreach and other agencies:** local area SEND partnerships were key for multi-agency relationship-building between partners: such forums were vital for a collective problem-solving approach.

Effective engagement with partners from health, safeguarding, social care and youth justice teams were also common across case studies.

### Fair Access Panels (FAPs)

- ✦ FAPs are formal structures bringing together school and Local Authority leaders for the purpose of allocating school places for pupils. Referrals from schools are discussed with decisions made regarding next steps for pupils requiring additional support.
- ✦ FAPs were pivotal for partnership working between schools, APs and Local Authorities. AP leaders' specialist knowledge was highly valued, with FAPs facilitating collective responsibility for pupils across the local education system.
- ✦ Decision-making in FAPs were predicated on an understanding that referrals to AP support should be based on the demonstration that in-school strategies had been exhausted.

### Experienced leadership

- ✦ Endorsement from senior leaders was important for driving a collective agenda around AP.
- ✦ Stable leadership was also conducive to positive relationships with schools, children and parent carers, as was respect across stakeholders at strategic level.

### Credible, expert workforce

- ✦ The elevated position of AP in case study local area partnerships was a key characteristic: a Local Authority strategic leader describes this as 'refreshing' yet vital for effective outreach. Skilled outreach teams also characterised case study areas as work with schools was complex. A broad skillset to build mutual respect and credibility was required.
- ✦ In some AP settings, education and SEND experience was prioritised when recruiting outreach personnel, particularly at leadership level. In other case study areas recruitment focused on key personal characteristics conducive to building positive relationships, skills noted by one AP leader as 'empathy, humility and hard work'.

## Measuring effectiveness of outreach

- ✦ It was broadly acknowledged that whilst desirable, measuring outcomes of outreach provision could be challenging. Whilst 'hard' data on (multiple) suspension/permanent exclusion rates were regularly measured, making the link between outreach support and outcomes was more complex.

## Barriers to effective outreach provision

### Variable inclusivity in mainstream schools:

- ✦ Weak accountability measures contributed to poor motivation around inclusion in mainstream schools.
- ✦ Whilst strength of leadership could push an inclusion agenda, focusing on financial benefits could prove useful: *"...the more we shift the system to saying, if kids keep coming out and we're not working together, we'll then have to take more money off you as schools. We want that money to stay in schools."*
- ✦ Participants described variability in the inclusivity of mainstream schools. Experiences of participants in the case studies suggested that inclusion in schools was broadly mediated by factors relating to level of school (whether primary or secondary) and management and governance arrangements (maintained, academy, grammar etc). School leadership was however a key driver and could override differences in school character.
- ✦ The persistence of 'traditional' responses to pupils' challenging behaviour risked exacerbating underlying needs. Exclusion could be counterproductive and detrimental, especially for primary school children.

## Capacity and funding

- ✦ There were frustrations around lack of sufficient funding for outreach provision. Participants were critical of national and local AP planning: the mismatch between growth in school places and AP provision, particularly in the context of growing pupil need and number of permanent exclusions.
- ✦ AP settings: limited capacity for preventative work was frustrating, which was exacerbated by limited capital funding, particularly given rising demands on AP placements. Further challenges were inappropriate placement of pupils.
- ✦ Partner agencies: shortfalls in partner agency provision could be a significant barrier. A key challenge was health partners with systemic issues, such as long waiting lists, high thresholds, inadequate funding and staff. Participants highlighted the poor strategic commitment to education outcomes amongst health and social care partners.

- ✦ Mainstream settings: there was frustration at the lack of funding for preventative work in schools and concerns around the sustainability of AP services.

### Poorly paid, undervalued workforce

- ✦ Despite considerable skills, the AP workforce was undervalued. Poor pay impacted recruitment and was a concern at leadership level. This seemed unjust given the challenging working conditions.
- ✦ Recruitment relied on motivations beyond financial compensation, such as individuals who are morally driven.

### Recommendations

- ✦ **Increased capacity:** funding for outreach services should be reviewed as local areas struggle to cope with rising demand. There is mismatch between the demand and funding available for AP. Outreach teams promote preventative interventions to alleviate pressures on AP placements (tier 3), however there is high demand for tier 3 which puts outreach teams at risk. To relieve pressure on higher tiers more capacity for outreach is needed.
- ✦ **Appropriately recognised and remunerated workforce:** stronger financial incentives to attract and retain outreach workers are needed, recognising the professional skills needed to support children with complex needs.
- ✦ **Joint Commissioning supporting outreach:** joint commissioning of outreach services aligned with a values-led approach is needed.
- ✦ **Multi-agency working:** embedding of multi-agency teams in schools, mainstream as well as AP, could address the challenge of engaging agencies.
- ✦ **Stronger strategic oversight and understanding of Alternative Provision:** whilst national standards are promised in the SEND and AP Improvement Plan (DfE 2023), there is an urgent need to focus on AP nationally to develop understanding of this sector.
- ✦ **Remove disincentives for inclusive practices in mainstream schools:** whilst the latest Ofsted framework (DfE, October 2023) obliges schools to 'have an inclusive culture', accountability measures are dominated by academic outcomes. A review of this, including broader discussions on 'inclusion' would support mainstream settings to work towards achieving this.