What works in SEND

Alternative Provision: exploring the effectiveness of outreach services

Executive summary

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Introduction

The overall 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. By focusing on case studies demonstrating exemplary practice, we sought to discern the conditions for this and for delivering positive outcomes for children experiencing behavioural challenges, whose disengagement from learning placed them at risk of (multiple) suspension/permanent exclusion from mainstream schools.

We use the term 'outreach' to describe specialist services provided by teams from AP settings in mainstream schools to support children who are at risk of exclusion, alongside the adults in schools.

Rates of suspension have now exceeded pre-pandemic levels (DfE, 2023) with children with SEND over-represented in this cohort of pupils. There is however a dearth of data on outreach including models of commissioning and funding, the quality of provision and the impact of outreach on children's outcomes.

Methods

We focused on four case study local area outreach services and one primary school Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) outreach service, all demonstrating high quality outreach provision. These were identified and accessed through the DfE and consent established prior to commencing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders in Local Authorities (LA), AP teams and mainstream schools. We interviewed 35 participants in total.

Our main research question was: *What needs to be in place locally to ensure effective outreach support?* With sub-questions exploring: the outreach offer; models of partnership working; funding and commissioning; evidencing success; enablers and barriers.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Warwick Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

For the purposes of this report, we refer to 'outreach' on the assumption that this denotes outreach services delivered from workers and teams based within broader Alternative Provision settings.

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

Signposting and informal advice

Outreach support provided a 'first response' service to support pupils to remain in mainstream education and re-engage with learning. To this end, outreach teams could be contacted by schools informally as an initial step. In one area, a dedicated phone line allowed access to support for pupils identified at being at risk of exclusion.

Informal support such as this empowered schools to take action allowing efficient delivery of services for children. Informal conversations could also relate to individual pupils or whole school strategies. Schools reported that this support was invaluable, particularly for situations where schools had exhausted all strategies.

Support for children and young people

For children, a designated outreach worker with space and time to listen was invaluable. Relationship-building was important for school staff and families, but primarily the focus was on the voice of the child:

> "What's really great about the outreach is that they come into school, they go into lessons...there's someone new ...that can kind of go, 'look I'm not school. I'm here to help you. I'm solely for you."

Building relationships took time and skill. It helped that outreach teams were one step removed from the negative experiences of school, free of the hierarchical structures:

> "They [outreach worker] are still seen as an external member of the school... they [pupils and staff] can be a little bit more open and honest about their challenges in school."

Understanding children's needs required a multi-agency approach: AP leaders described robust relationships with senior leaders in partner agencies as important for securing appropriate support:

> "If we've got a safeguarding concern about a child ...we won't take no for an answer... because we know...who heads children's services, heads up social care...as long as we're championing the kids... we're not going to go quietly..."

Support for parent carers

As part of a holistic approach, family support was important. Teams could signpost to appropriate agencies where parent carers themselves required support. Restoring trust following negative experiences and understanding a child's context were important parts of outreach support:

> "We quite often experience a situation where the parental or the carer relationship with the school is quite broken... there are these issues happening with this child at home... For example, an apartment burning down or the reality of being born addicted to heroin."

Support for school staff

Developing strategies with school staff was important for tackling the 'negative cycle' of pupil/school relationships: outreach encouraged teachers to 'see' the child, developing empathy. Challenging adult behaviour was necessary if harmful labelling was to be challenged:

> "...we still hear adults labelling behaviours in a way that's really unhelpful ...We have to find our way to challenge adults when it's necessary while supporting them."

There was optimism about the power of outreach, once strong relationships had been established, driven by the principle of understanding behaviour as a form of communication:

> "Once you're...talking with...adults about what behaviour communicates...that's the... golden buzzer, ... they're looking at that behaviour as a piece of communication. The more schools we're in...the more there's trickledown effect."

Support for reintegration

Reintegrating pupils into mainstream was pivotal. Outreach teams recognised the quality of the AP they worked within but re-engagement with mainstream learning was the best outcome:

> "We are an outstanding organisation [but] the best place for them socially and academically is in a mainstream school..."

Outreach support would often include monitoring children as they returned to school if they had spent time outside the classroom with outreach workers, ensuring their successful reintegration.

Support for transition

Transition from primary to secondary was a particularly vulnerable time, especially for those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues or special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). In one area, advocacy support extended from year 6 to the first term at secondary, with outreach teams liaising with key individuals to ensure a smooth transition process:

> "I think going from 1 teacher to 12 is really difficult... I think it's tenfold...So that relationship becomes a bit of a triangle... the young person, the outreach worker, and the school..."

This required careful navigation and forward planning. Pivotal to this was partnership working:

> "It can be about building the trust with the secondary school that when we say 'you're going to need to put in for an autism assessment or an ADHD, so can you screen for this?'"

Flexible and bespoke services

Outreach teams had agency to respond flexibly, unhindered by layers of bureaucracy. Services could be designed to meet specific needs. This typically involved observations and discussions with children, teachers, family, and partner agencies, depending on the child:

> "...the outreach team hold their own case...They liaise with schools, they liaise with CAMHS, they liaise with external agencies, they work with a young person."

Innovative service development

At times outreach was prioritised in schools with elevated (multiple) suspension/permanent exclusion rates, this a 'way in' to challenge school cultures. Outreach teams also worked innovatively to counterbalance the shortfall in provision in health and social care, bridging gaps in service provision, as an LA strategic leader describes:

> "Some of our infant schools...would desperately love to have counselling ... but they literally cannot afford it... So, we try really hard on outreach to put other things in place, because it is a free service."

Outreach teams had also worked innovatively with agencies to provide psychological support, responding to rising need and waiting times. Partnerships with CAMHS supported children on waiting lists and joint work with Educational Psychologists (EPs) to develop support for parent carers.

Values and principles

Honesty and openness were cross-cutting values. In one area where there had been systemic failings, there had been some "really good self-reflection on what the system didn't get right..." Emphasis on the quality of provision was also a cross-cutting value, with high aspirations as one AP leader puts it, "a real sense of ambition for our young people".

Behaviour as communication

Recognising complexities of behaviour as 'communication of unmet need' as opposed to a problem to be 'fixed' was a driving principle of outreach support. Outreach promoted positive relationships, an antidote to negative, confrontational interactions. Understanding the dynamic of family relationships was part of contextualising behaviour. At the school level, a review of school policies and approaches to behaviour also helped to instil this principle.

Holistic

Initial classroom observations establishing triggers for 'dysregulation' encouraged staff to reframe behaviour in the context of family, home and community. As an AP describes with reference to work with schools:

> "Schools that will often say 'we are their education'...[but] the child is a package. It's not just a single thing."

Recognising that the school might be a problematic space, one outreach service provided therapy at the AP setting as 'neutral', away from the negative connotations of the school, this a child-led, holistic approach.

Whole-school

Outreach teams worked with individual pupils and teachers but also offered broader support on aspects of school practice and culture. In one area, outreach was commissioned to work specifically with schools with levels of (multiple) suspensions/ permanent exclusions that were a cause of concern, with the work focused on tackling systemic issues.

⭐ Trauma-informed

Recognising the impact of trauma on behaviour underpinned outreach. At times it was necessary to challenge behaviour policies that might not reflect this approach. A mainstream teacher describes how outreach teams had done this in his school: a focus on the child's voice serving to "professionalise the conversation around need".

⭐ Non-judgemental/neutral

Outreach support was 'neutral', teams one step removed from schools, a 'fresh pair of eyes' on complex situations. As an outreach leader explains in relation to family support, "the parent can be honest and open about...the challenges they're facing". Furthermore, as advocates "just there for that child", outreach support could focus solely on individual pupil needs.

⭐ Prevention focused

A preventative approach was at the heart of outreach, recognising particular pinch points for children, working as soon as possible to focus on reintegration into mainstream:

"If you can get it in, you're actually going be able to start unravelling those complex issues and actually re-regulate and actually get them ready to learn again."

This approach was mirrored in other areas: in one area outreach was described as the 'shop front door', signposting appropriately, providing support and averting crises.

Strategic Approach: what needs to be in place locally?

Commissioning and funding

There were complex arrangements of commissioning and funding in the case study areas.

In case studies 1 and 2, Education services, including outreach, were run by an LA-owned company. In case study 2 the Primary PRU was commissioned for outreach services in a region of the LA. In case study 3, outreach was commissioned by the LA through district areas. In case study 4 outreach was commissioned and managed by the LA through a behaviour team, this model promoting close relationships.

In case study 5 (similar to case studies 1 and 2) outreach was commissioned and provided by a separate organisation. This model risked weaker partnership working although relationships between commissioner and delivery partner remained strong.

In all 5 areas, a core outreach offer was freely available, although in one area AP settings raised funds through additional 'traded' arrangements: other areas had additional funding through government initiatives.

In some areas, AP placements were calculated to allow for outreach, this problematic however as it gave an impression of inflated placement costs. In the one area where AP was organised by district, funding was calculated by a model indicator, depending on demographic characteristics.

Despite complex arrangements, outreach was considerably flexible. This was particularly valued as numbers of children requiring support fluctuated.

Partnerships

There were variable arrangements of strategic partnership working. In some areas, arrangements were prompted by poor outcomes of joint SEND/AP inspection. For example, one case study area had strengthened strategic forums ensuring AP and special schools were fully involved, this the result of a WSOA which highlighted lack of clear joint strategies around SEND and AP.

Partnerships with children, young people and families

Parents Carer Forums were members of SEND/AP strategic panels to ensure ongoing connections between strategy and impact. In one area, parent carers sat on the safeguarding group with 'children's associates' also contributing to strategic forums.

In a further example, a local area inspired (but not funded by) the Family Hub initiative (DfE, 2023) were working directly with volunteers to champion parental voice.

Partnerships between mainstream and AP settings/outreach

At strategic level, partnerships between AP and mainstream leaders were important, not least for encouraging inclusive approaches. In one area a 'community of practice' of SENCos and AP leaders were focused on strengthening in-school provision. Similarly, district-managed budgets for AP encouraged school clusters to focus on 'ordinarily available' provision.

Ensuring pupils remained in mainstream was a focus: an AP leader explains how headteachers would be encouraged to buy into an inclusion ethos:

> "If a head… maybe new to the authority…said, 'this is the worst kid they've ever seen in thirty years teaching, they're going to permanently exclude', they get a challenge back from me…"

Striking a balance between support and challenge was however important: establishing boundaries in the partnership between outreach and schools was key for maximising impact:

> "It definitely isn't a 'doing to', it's a 'doing with'. And if we don't get that relationship with the schools right in the first instance, I don't think the rest of it will work to be honest."

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:

> "…it's a bit like Avengers Assemble isn't it? We are able to gather the superheros into the room and say, 'how are we here chaps? But more importantly, 'what are we going to bloody do about it?'"

Effective engagement with partners from health, safeguarding, social care and youth justice teams were also common across case studies. Local Safeguarding Partnership Boards were a further vehicle for multiple agency involvement, as were jointly commissioned positions. In one area, representatives from AP settings sat on triage panels in children's services, this acknowledging a joint focus on vulnerable children likely to be accessing, or needing access from multiple services.

Fair Access Panels

FAPs are formal structures of school and LA leaders for 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 LAs. AP leaders' specialist knowledge was highly valued, the forum 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. As a leader at strategic level notes:

> *"Commitment from everyone to make a difference…[is] huge really, because it definitely means that it's a much easier conversation to have when the LA is pushing the same agenda."*

Stable leadership was also conducive to positive relationships with schools, children and parent carers, as was respect at strategic level: as an AP leader describes, his leadership team were *'equals at the table'* in forums such as FAPs.

Leadership in mainstream settings was also key for impact, an inclusive approach a significant factor.

Credible, expert workforce

The elevated position of AP in case study local area partnerships was a key characteristic: an LA 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:

> *"Sometimes it might be about what the adults are doing, and we have to find a way to make that palatable and achievable for the adults to do something different."*

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

Evidencing outreach was particularly pertinent as exclusion rates were adding pressure to 'crisis' – tier 3 – provision in PRUs – this further distancing pupils from the mainstream and placing positive long-term outcomes at risk. Case study areas had various approaches to data collection. Whilst 'hard' data on (multiple) suspension/permanent exclusion rates were regularly measured, discerning the link between outreach support and outcomes was more complex.

Fair Access Panels were important for data-sharing. In one area data from 'behaviour plans' was shared at an FAP: this comparing re-engagement with learning of pupils accessing outreach with those who had had a managed move to an alternative mainstream school.

Data was important for targeting outreach to pupils vulnerable to (multiple) suspension/permanent exclusion and evidencing effective support for 'some of the most vulnerable in the system'. Examples included: a dashboard for schools with (multiple) suspension/permanent exclusion rates, this useful for effective targeting of outreach.

Participants referred to the importance of capturing the positive outcomes for children through one-to-one interactions, encouraged by positive relationships embedded in areas:

> *"You can't capture that [young person's voice] on a spreadsheet, really. It's what he said about …a new school making him feel inclusive and all of that kind of stuff."*

Barriers to effective outreach provision

Variable inclusivity in mainstream schools

Weak accountability measures were a factor to poor motivation around inclusion in mainstream schools. Complex school management arrangements could make a difference: case study areas were a mix of academy, LA maintained and grammar schools with differing behavioural management approaches and relationships with local partners. Larger secondary schools could be particularly challenging as this involved a "shift of [some] of the cultures in the whole school".

The persistence of 'traditional' responses to pupils' challenging behaviour risked the exacerbation of underlying needs. Exclusion could be counterproductive and detrimental, especially for primary school children who "return feeling rejected and bringing that resentment with them".

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."*

Capacity and funding

There were frustrations around funding shortfalls, particularly given the pressures on placements in AP settings, this limiting resources for outreach support. Participants were critical of the planning of AP: the mismatch between growth in school places and AP provision particularly pertinent in the context of growing pupil need and number of permanent exclusions.

AP settings

Limited capacity for outreach in AP settings was also frustrating, particularly given rising demands on AP placements, this exacerbated by limited capital funding. Further challenges were inappropriate placement of pupils. A medical PRU for example often found they "discovered quite quickly" when accepting a child that they couldn't meet their needs due to lack of appropriate and specialist support.

Striking a balance between quality outreach support and encouraging successful reintegration into mainstream could also be problematic: good quality AP the preferred option for some children.

Partner agencies

Shortfalls in partner agency provision could be a significant barrier. A common complaint amongst participants was the perception of poor strategic commitment to education outcomes amongst health and social care partners. Engagement with CAMHS was often problematic, this relating to thresholds and working practices. Engaging partners for Team Around the Child could be fruitful but was challenging if thresholds for support were not met:

> "Social care and health [partnerships] we've had really successful outcomes, it really does work, it's a really positive model but it's just, those children meeting threshold."

Mainstream settings

There was frustration at the paucity of funding for preventative work in schools. As a headteacher describes, increasingly complex issues were stretching capacity:

> "I think every school is in the same boat. It's just how they handle it … the [AP provision 1] are full, overfull and that is a problem... [AP provision 2] is full and therefore it's outreach, however good it is...is incredibly limited."

Concerns expressed below around sustainability of AP services reflect sentiments across case study schools more broadly:

> "As a Borough, we have increased our number of school places exponentially. We haven't increased numbers of AP placements. With the increase of emotional school avoidance...if our resourcing doesn't improve then, over the next couple of years then it most certainly has to go."

Poorly paid, undervalued workforce

Despite considerable skills, the AP workforce was undervalued. Recruitment into outreach teams was challenging, low pay a significant factor. Poor renumeration was also a concern at leadership level, particularly problematic as pay scales were based on school size. This seemed unjust given the challenging working conditions. Recruitment relied on motivations beyond financial compensation:

> "I suppose you're relying on morally driven individuals to take those roles and then fight for kind of recognition."

Discussion and Conclusion

This research focused on five case studies of outreach services in AP, demonstrating positive practice conducive to effective outreach. The organisation of outreach varied considerably in the case studies with differing arrangements for funding, commissioning and delivery. Key features of effective practice were however identifiable and are summarised below:

Values-led approach: Taking a holistic approach, outreach teams were advocates for pupils struggling with mainstream education. Driven by the principle 'behaviour is communication' support centred on practical strategies for schools but also for families, working in partnership with agencies to understand complexities of children's lives.

Effective multi-agency partnerships: Outreach services liaised with agencies such as health, social work and family support. Strategically and operationally, APs were a respected and valued partner: 'having the right people at the table' pivotal for planning and delivering successful outreach work.

Bespoke offer: outreach offers were flexible responding to specific needs, expertise within teams facilitating this. This agile approach allowed for innovative working to bridge gaps in service provision, driven by a child-centred approach.

Innovative and proactive preventative services: a 'problem-solving' approach was taken to supporting children and preventing (multiple) suspension/permanent exclusion. Partnership working was vital: LAs and APs had jointly produced strategies for addressing pressing issues such as the rise of EBSA and SEMH.

Inclusive Local Education System: outreach teams worked with schools to develop inclusive cultures. This included advice on classroom strategies to whole school approaches. Outreach provided support on how best to reintegrate pupils, focusing on inclusion rather than exclusion.

Strategic vision: effective outreach was embedded in local area partnerships with senior leaders endorsing it. AP leaders were equal partners both strategically and operationally. Funding and commissioning were complex, but with flexibility according to local needs.

Highly skilled workforce and leadership: outreach teams required credibility. Leaders were valued for their expertise and were well-networked.

Recommendations

Increased capacity: funding for outreach services should be reviewed. High demand for AP placements (tier 3) puts outreach teams at risk. To relieve pressure on higher tiers more capacity for outreach is needed.

Appropriately recognised and renumerated workforce: this recognising the professional skills needed to support children with complex needs.

Joint Commissioning supporting outreach: joint commissioning of outreach services aligned with the values-led approach is needed.

Multi-agency working: embedding of multi-agency teams in schools – mainstream as well as AP-would recognise the complex nature of behaviour issues.

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 Alternative Provision 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', 'felt' accountabilities are dominated by academic outcomes. A review of this, including broader discussions on 'inclusion' would support mainstream settings to work towards achieving this.

About What Works in SEND

The What Works in SEND programme is part of a programme of work led by the RISE Partnership bringing together thought leaders from the SEND system who have the necessary understanding of system change and specialist knowledge of SEND.

The RISE (Research and Improvement for SEND Excellence) Partnership is led by the Council for Disabled Children in partnership with ISOS Partnership, the National Development Team for inclusion (NDTi) and the University of Warwick. The What Works in SEND programme is led by the University of Warwick research team encompassing three departments relevant to service improvement in SEND: Warwick Business School; Warwick Medical School (Warwick Evidence); and Centre for Research in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (CIDD), and delivered in collaboration with colleagues in the RISE Partnership, specifically Isos Partnership and CDC.

Warwick Business School
Warwick Business School has considerable expertise and experience in applied research focused upon public services improvement, encompassing health care, social care and education.

Warwick Medical School
Warwick Medical School has considerable expertise in systematic reviews through Warwick Evidence, which constitutes the second institutional component of the University of Warwick research team. Warwick Evidence (2011–2022) is an established, successful, multidisciplinary, academic technology assessment review team.

Centre for Research in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (CIDD)
CIDD is a specialist research-only department in the University of Warwick. CIDD is focused on applied educational and psychological research in the field of special educational needs and disability (SEND) across the lifespan and has a 30+ year history of contribution in this field.

Council for Disabled Children
The Council for Disabled Children (CDC), hosted by the National Children's Bureau (NCB), are sector leaders with an expert senior management team, experienced in working across Government to support decision makers in Education, Health and Care. Our practice teams deliver wide reaching programmes of bespoke intervention in local areas enabling service improvements and system change.

Isos Partnership
Isos Partnership led widely-recognised national research that has explored the enablers of system-wide improvement in local **children's services, in the development of local early help offers, the development of effective support** for school inclusion, and the development of effective whole-system approaches to SEND.