

Electoral Division affected:  
(All Divisions);

**Corporate Priorities:**  
Caring for the vulnerable;  
Delivering better services;

## **Alternative Provision Strategy** (Appendix 'A' refers)

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### **Brief Summary**

This report provides an overview of the work that has been completed to date and the action planned to support the implementation of the Alternative Provision Strategy 2023 - 2026. It provides an overview of the current situation and the actions that are underway and will be taken in the future to strengthen the oversight, quality and range of alternative provision in Lancashire.

### **Recommendation**

The Children, Families and Skills Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

- i) Reflect on the information provided and;
- ii) Provide comment on the action taken to date and planned for the future and consider further ways to support this area of work.

### **Background**

Alternative provision is defined as follows: education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness, or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour.

Provision for children who have been excluded must begin by the sixth day of the exclusion. While there is no statutory requirement as to when suitable full-time education should begin for pupils placed in alternative provision for reasons other than exclusion, local authorities are required to ensure that such pupils are placed as quickly as possible. Statutory guidance published by the Department for Education gives an expectation that local authorities should be ready to take responsibility for

any child whose illness will prevent them from attending school for 15 or more school days.

In March 2023, the Department for Education published the SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan in which it set out its ambition for the delivery of alternative provision that is fully integrated with the wider SEND system. This document outlined the government's vision for a three-tier system comprising targeted outreach support within pupils' mainstream school; time-limited intensive placements in an alternative provision setting and longer-term placements to support return to mainstream or a sustainable post-16 destination. The Department for Education has made a commitment to support local authorities' delivery of a single SEND and alternative provision system through the development of new National Standards. The National Standards are currently under development, and it is anticipated these will be published by the end of 2025.

## **Current Position**

Alternative provision in Lancashire is commissioned in diverse ways depending on the individual needs of the child or young person concerned, and includes the use of pupil referral units, colleges, independent training providers and individual tuition. Most alternative provision is provided via pupil referral units in Lancashire.

Nine pupil referral units, two primaries and seven secondaries, have been established in Lancashire to enable the local authority to discharge the above duties in relation to children who have been excluded or who cannot attend for other reasons. The number of permanent exclusions increases between September and July each academic year and increasing numbers of children are presenting with anxiety and other mental health related difficulties that prevent them from attending school since the Covid pandemic. This trend in Lancashire reflects that presented nationally and has resulted in an increasing demand for alternative provision in recent years.

In autumn 2022 there were 420 pupils taking up the 812 places commissioned that year. This meant that at that time 51.7% of the total commissioned capacity had been taken up. In April 2023, there were 862 pupils on roll at secondary pupil referral units which at the time was 132 over commissioned numbers for 2022/23. A decision was taken to increase the number of commissioned places from 812 to 851 in 2023/24. 82 of these places will be for primary aged pupils and the remaining 769 for secondary aged pupils as has been the situation this year. The 2023/24 number of places is consistent with the number commissioned in 2018/19, which was the last year schools were fully operational prior to the pandemic. This increase in demand for pupil referral units relates primarily to the increase in the number of pupils who have been excluded from mainstream schools in 2022/23.

291 pupils in year 11 left in July 2023 to move on to other education, employment, or training opportunities, which meant these places were then available at the start of the current academic year.

The number of pupils on roll in maintained pupil referral units in November 2023 rose to 798, which equates to a take up of 94% of the commissioned capacity in 2023/24



and significantly higher than in the 2022/23 academic year at about the same time. Two of the secondary pupil referral units are already over their commissioned numbers, and all others are above 80% capacity. A further 25 places have been commissioned at The Alternative School, a non-maintained provider, to provide pupil referral unit places in locations where there is insufficient commissioned capacity. It is planned that 851 pupil referral unit places will be commissioned for the 2024/25 academic year.

Information about individual pupils' placements provided as part of the census data last year indicated that on average a pupil in Lancashire will spend at least a year in a pupil referral unit following admission. The same data revealed that pupils on intervention places could remain in a pupil referral unit for two years or more. It should be noted however this data is a little misleading because it does not account for pupils provided with very short-term placements who do not appear within the census data. In addition, there was evidence to show that pupils with medical placements have placements that exceed the period of two terms, which is the agreed length of time for these placements. The intention for these placements is that, where possible, they are short term and allow the young person to reintegrate back into mainstream school.

There have been difficulties in ensuring an appropriate and welcoming environment for pupils' return for both groups identified above. Officers are currently working with each of the pupil referral units to identify children who would most benefit from a mainstream place. The intention is to ensure greater clarity at the start of placements about the expectations around reintegration and the ambitions of these pupils.

Most pupil referral units have pupils who have been on roll for more than four years. Last year there were 60 pupils who were not receiving their full-time entitlement to education in a school following their exclusion.

Reintegration rates data is limited although it seems likely that these are below 5%, particularly for older pupils and those who have been subject to permanent exclusion.

It is anticipated that the Education Management System, which will become available in the future, will enable the local authority to have better oversight of pupils' attendance and the use of part-time timetables within mainstream and special schools across the county. There is a commitment by the Attendance Support Team to review attendance with every school annually. These measures will enable the local authority to ensure it is meeting its duties in terms of ensuring all pupils who are unable to attend school for whatever reason receive a suitable education.

## **Funding**

The increase in the number of additional places over commissioned numbers outlined in the preceding section of this report equates to £804k additional funding for the summer term 2022/23. The continued take up of these additional places when considered in the context of the increase in commissioned numbers is likely to present a £1.3m additional pressure to the high needs block funding overall. The budget forecast for 2022/23 was £11.8m. The current forecast for 2023/24 is £15.2m.



## Pupil Voice

The Children's Champions produced a report presenting the outcomes of a survey of pupils attending the seven secondary pupil referral units at the beginning of the 2022/23 academic year. The team interviewed 32 pupils with the same questionnaire. Most pupils had been subject to a permanent exclusion, although some were attending a pupil referral unit as part of an intervention or because they had taken up the offer of a medical placement. The purpose of this review was to understand the views of the pupils currently accessing alternative provision so that the information could be used to inform service development and delivery.

The report concluded with some recommendations identifying changes that could be put in place to improve the processes and support available to pupils attending and/or transferring into a pupil referral unit. Pupils reported they would like to be more informed about the reasons behind the decisions that had been made around permanent exclusion, any future placements, and to be more involved in planning for their future. Other findings included a perception that it would be helpful for mainstream schools to be supported to have a better understanding of pupils' needs. It was felt this would support better planning and decision making by the local authority and/or pupil referral units in relation to pupils' integration back into mainstream.

## Outcomes for Children

Whilst we have confidence in the work of our pupil referral units it is notable that outcomes for pupils in alternative provision are poor this is a national picture, but we are aware that outcomes for Lancashire do not compare favourably with national measures. The Department for Education research reported that:

- 7% pupils that have been permanently excluded and 18% pupils with multiple suspensions achieve good passes in English and maths GCSEs
- Only 4.5% pupils educated in alternative education achieve a good pass in English and maths GCSE
- >1/3 pupils who completed compulsory school-age education in alternative provision do not go on to employment, education, or training (EET)
- 23% of offenders have been permanently excluded whilst at school
- 58% of young adults in prison were permanently excluded in school.

Attendance rates for pupils attending pupil referral units in Lancashire at the end of the last academic year ranged from 0% to 100%.

## Implementation of the Alternative Provision Strategy

An overall approach to alternative provision in Lancashire was agreed in the Alternative Provision Strategy 2023 – 2026 that was refreshed last year, as set out in **Appendix 'A'**. A range of short- and medium-term activity has been agreed to address the ambition of the strategy and the issues identified above, particularly with respect to supporting improved outcomes for children and young people and their reintegration wherever possible back into mainstream school. It is also important to



ensure that children and young people who need additional support and reasonable adjustments to engage in mainstream school have the opportunities they need to achieve success. To do this effectively it is likely that, there needs to be recognition across the system of a need to increase the range of alternative provision where this is appropriate and would better serve pupils' needs, interests, and aspirations.

### **Short-term Action**

Activity is underway to ensure the following is completed within the next six months. This includes/has included:

- 1) Monitoring the impact of action taken because of feedback from pupils attending pupil referral units and gaining further insight into their lived experience to inform the development of services.
- 2) The collation and review of information relating to individual pupils that is captured on the form that is completed to notify the local authority of a pupil's permanent exclusion.
- 3) Ensuring that pupils are well informed about the decisions being made and any resulting actions, this includes much greater clarity about the expected length of stay within a pupil referral unit.
- 4) Developing an agreed approach to support the reintegration of pupils from the pupil referral units and an implementation schedule.
- 5) Strengthening the monitoring arrangements for the pupil referral units, so that for example the use of part-time timetables and attendance data is routinely reported.
- 6) Reviewing the arrangements for all children and young people currently accessing alternative provision for whom the local authority is responsible directly.
- 7) The development of an alternative provision quality framework that can be used to complete quality assurance and safeguarding visits with alternative provision providers.
- 8) Developing a commissioning route for new and potential providers for registered and unregistered providers of alternative provision.
- 9) The development of a short-term alternative provision dashboard that brings together existing data sets, including those relating to pupil referral units.
- 10) Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of officers and all partners that provide or commission alternative provision.
- 11) Developing a communication strategy to support engagement and co-production of the approach to alternative provision.
- 12) Developing a training/communication plan to support engagement, co-production and a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities with respect to alternative provision with partners.
- 13) Using the existing Lancashire inclusion strategic governance structure and education structure to create a clear reporting structure to gain greater assurance around alternative provision. This will require the creation of a



group comprising officers from Inclusion, Commissioning, Education Improvement, Finance, Project Management and Performance Monitoring Teams that can influence change and drive the improvement required. As this is a new group it should be expected that an initial, intense, period of work will be needed to establish reporting and systems, terms of reference, reporting structures, and reporting formats.

### Longer-term Actions

- 1) Develop a quality assurance process and team to ensure ongoing checks on alternative provision currently commissioned by the local authority, this could include consideration of a service to schools to act as quality assurance for provision they commission. This work is underway and pilot quality assurance visits have begun. It is hoped that the initial round of visits will be completed in this fiscal year. The process will be reviewed and developed as needed following the pilot period up to the end of this calendar year.
- 2) Develop an alternative provision directory and undertake a review of current offer to map availability and gaps.
- 3) Review all non-registered provisions used by local authority services to create Lancashire database/directory of providers and then consider the additional providers commissioned directly through schools. Whilst the commissioning and review of these service are schools' responsibility there may be an opportunity for an income generating service level agreement around the quality assurance of alternative provision in Lancashire.
- 4) Ensure Education Management Systems development is in line with expectations and will support accurate and up to date recording of information so that the information provided can be used to track impact and to assure leaders of progress and highlight pressures or progress.
- 5) Develop an approach to communication that makes clear what is available in the system currently and the plans to address the gaps that have been identified. The shortfall in provision that has been identified by schools would seem to relate primarily to the following: the availability of alternative provision for behaviour support, with pressures across the SEND system, pressures in schools more generally, a lack of outreach support, perceived and real differences in offer in different areas, and exclusions. Whilst all the areas highlighted by schools are relevant in terms of the local authorities' need to support the provision of quality and timely intervention, the increasing numbers of children being excluded permanently from schools needs to reduce to allow this resource to be reprioritised.

### Appendices

Appendix 'A' is attached to this report. For clarification they are summarised below and referenced at relevant points within this report.

Appendix	Title
Appendix 'A'	Alternative Provision Strategy 2023 - 2026



## Consultations

N/A

## Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

## Risk management

Risks are identified in the report in terms of the additional pressures to the high needs block funding. There is also a need to improve our attainment levels for young people and consider the risks of them going on to become NEET.

## Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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N/A

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A

