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## **National Autistic Society research into the alternative provision that is listed as part of the local offer of each local authority in England**

### **Introduction**

As part of the funding for the National Autistic Society (NAS) Exclusions Project (2015-16) from the Department for Education (DfE), the NAS carried out research into the alternative provision (AP) that is listed as part of the local offer in each of the 152 local authorities in England.

### **Definition of Alternative Provision**

For the research, the definition of alternative provision (AP) provided by the [‘DfE Alternative Provision Statutory guidance for local authorities’](#) was used:

*“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.”*

This includes pupil referral units (PRU).

### **Background to research**

Prior to the research, the NAS School Exclusions Service responded to over 500 enquiries from parents by email, phone or face to face appointments. A common issue emerged: for those autistic children and young people, who had been excluded from their mainstream school, what educational setting was available locally that was suitable for their needs?

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The most common form of alternative provision offered to these children and young people on the autism spectrum is the pupil referral unit (PRU). Although the staff at PRUs are often highly skilled at teaching and supporting pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, they do not necessarily have the knowledge or expertise to meet the needs of autistic children and young people. Parents frequently expressed concerns that a PRU was not a suitable setting for their child, in terms of their:

- age (many autistic children excluded from school are young (Key stage 1 or 2) and PRUs generally cater for older pupils);
- ability (some autistic children and young people can be of above average intelligence. As PRUs can offer a reduced curriculum, parents often feel that PRUs do not meet their child's academic needs: lower academic expectations can lead to slower progress); Indeed, this was also a finding of Ofsted's three-year survey of schools' use of off-site AP<sup>1</sup>
- special educational needs (autistic children and young people may be particularly vulnerable because of their disability. They may be bullied or pick up unhelpful behaviours from other children. They can experience increased levels of anxiety due to the unpredictable and disruptive behaviour of those around them).

In 2011, Ofsted published a survey about schools' use of off-site AP and found that there were too many weaknesses in the use and quality of provision and too many pupils were in unsuitable provision<sup>2</sup>. Ofsted recommended to the DfE that AP providers should be registered, and therefore inspected, if they provided more than one day's education a week to pupils<sup>3</sup>. Ofsted's subsequent three-year survey of schools' use of off-site alternative provision<sup>4</sup> showed that:

*'Some schools were still not taking enough responsibility for ensuring the suitability of the placements they set up. A few of the schools in the survey placed pupils at an off-site provider without having visited first to check its safety and suitability'*

To help parents find an educational setting locally that would be suitable for their child's needs, one would hope that their local authority's local offer would be a good starting point.

Indeed, The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014 require local authorities to publish, as part of their local offer, 'The special educational provision and training provision which the local authority expects to be available in its area for children and young people in its area who have special educational needs or a disability by ... pupil referral units' and must include information about 'the special educational provision and training provision secured by the local authority in ... pupil referral units and alternative provision Academies for children and young people with special educational needs or a disability'<sup>5</sup>

## **Aims of this research**

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The aims of the research were to:

- Compile a directory of all the local offers provided by the 152 local authorities in England.
- To find the listings of Alternative Provision, including PRUs, within each local authority's local offer
- To identify gaps

It had been envisaged that the suitability of the alternative provision for the needs of autistic children and young people would also be investigated. However, it became clear that this was unfeasible, as the listings do not necessarily specify the type of special educational needs that are catered for; nor was there any way of assessing the quality of the AP, other than through Ofsted reports, which was not only beyond the scope of this research, but also - as many AP providers are too small to be covered by the DfE registration requirement - beyond Ofsted's remit too<sup>6</sup>.

## Methodology

An internet search for each local authority's local offer was made, i.e. name of local authority and SEND local offer, e.g. 'Barking and Dagenham SEND Local Offer'. The URL of each Local Offer was recorded as a hyperlink on the spreadsheet.

To find the listings of AP available, within the Local Offer, the following methods were used:

- If the Local Offer had a search tool, a search was made for 'Alternative Provision' or 'Pupil referral unit'.
- If this did not provide any results, or the Local Offer did not have a search tool, a more circuitous route was taken, e.g. clicking on an 'Education' option and then 'Types of school places for pupils with SEND'.
- The URL of the page listing the AP and/or PRUs in the area was then recorded as a hyperlink on the spreadsheet.
- For those local offers that did not list any AP or PRUs, NONE was recorded on the spreadsheet.

## Limitations of the research

Some LAs are updating their local offers regularly, which means that new listings might become available and therefore hyperlinks provided by this research will no longer work.

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It is conceivable that some local offers that the research found to have no listing of AP, do in fact have such listings. However, if so, these listings must be fairly inaccessible to have escaped the various methods of searching described above: methods that parents and professionals alike could be reasonably expected to use. It is worth emphasising that only the AP listed as part of a LA's local offer was recorded. By searching elsewhere on a council's website it can sometimes be possible to locate AP. However, the local offer should capture this information.

Findings of the research

- Alternative provision was listed in 103 of the 152 (68%) local authorities nationwide
- It was rare for these listings to state whether they catered for the needs of autistic children and young people. The exceptions were local authorities, such as Hammersmith and Fulham, which provided a filter (Supporting people with, for example Visual impairments)
- Some local authorities list AP in their local area; others include nationally available virtual/online schools, such as Nisai Virtual Academy and Academy21
- If the listings of AP in the local authorities' local offers were a true reflection of the AP that is available, this would suggest that there is insufficient AP nationwide. However, simply because AP is not listed does not mean that it does not exist. Nevertheless, from the point of view of parents, who may be in desperate need of finding a suitable school for their permanently excluded autistic son/daughter, not listing AP might mean that they are unable to make informed choices about their child's education.
- The local offers vary dramatically nationwide, in terms of their ease of use and content. Navigating the local offers can be difficult and not intuitive. As mentioned above, local offers that provide a filter for search results can provide a time-saving way of finding appropriate provision. For example, allowing searches to be narrowed by only listing AP that caters for the needs of autistic children and young people.

## **Recommendations for the future**

- The 32% of local authorities that currently do not have any listing of alternative provision should update their local offers, not only to be compliant with the Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014, but also to provide parents with a quick and convenient way of finding AP in their local area.
- Local authorities to be comprehensive in their listings of AP
- All local authorities to adopt a filter to their search tools, to help parents find AP suitable for autistic children and young people – limiting searches to those that cater for the needs of autistic pupils.

## **References**

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1. 'In a quarter of the schools surveyed, the curriculum for pupils who attended alternative provision on a part-time basis was too narrow.' Alternative provision - The findings from Ofsted's three-year survey of schools' use of off-site alternative provision.
2. Alternative provision, Ofsted, June 2011;  
[w.gov.uk/government/publications/alternativeprovision-education-outside-school](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternativeprovision-education-outside-school).
3. The Taylor review of AP in 2012 (Improving alternative provision, Department for Education, March 2012) also noted: 'At the moment there is no system for sanctioning or closing down an inadequate provider if it is too small to be covered by the DfE registration requirement and thus Ofsted's inspection remit. This means that children can be placed in inadequate or dangerous provision without there being any external monitoring.'
4. Alternative provision - The findings from Ofsted's three-year survey of schools' use of off-site alternative provision: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternative-school-provision-findings-of-a-three-year-survey>
5. Statutory Instruments 2014 No. 1530, Education, The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014, Part 4 - Local Offer/ Information to be included in the local offer/Schedule 2 Regulation 53
6. A provider of alternative provision should be registered as an independent school if it caters full-time for five or more pupils of compulsory school age; or one such pupil who is looked after or has a statement of special educational needs.