

SESLIP: Quality Assurance of Non-school Alternative Provision Themes and Developing Practice

DfE – RIIA: Universal SENDAP Project 15: October 2025 to April 2026.



Contents

- Introduction and purpose
- Overview of QA arrangements in LAs
- Summary of practice shared by Change Partner Programme LAs
- Developing QA arrangements for children placed by LAs (case examples)
- Cross-border collaboration and the QA of non-school AP
- The learner's voice within QA arrangements
- Options and recommendations for 2026-27
- Annex



Introduction and purpose

THE PURPOSE AND OPERATION OF THE GROUP

SESLIP supports collaboration leading to improvements across all 19 local authorities (LAs) in the South-east. The initial proposal that has resulted in this pack was approved by the South-east Education Directors network <https://www.seslip.co.uk/education-directors-network/> was as follows:

To recruit and support a task-and-finish group for alternative provision (AP) lead officers in 4 or 5 LAs to explore and develop regional practice in oversight of non-school AP. The group would also provide the opportunity to test the feasibility for a regional community of practice focused on the commissioning and oversight of AP. The goal: to publish and disseminate local frameworks and case examples.

A secondary purpose of the Group was to trial sharing of learning from DfE Change Programme Partner (CPP) LAs in the South-east. To this end East Sussex and Portsmouth City were approached to both inform the scope of the project work and identify aspects of their oversight of non-school AP that they had been able to develop during the Change Programme. An assistant director from Portsmouth CC also agreed to chair the task-and-finish group meetings (the terms of reference can be found in the annex).

A total of 7 LAs participated in the group and contributed to this pack. In addition to the two CPP LAs:

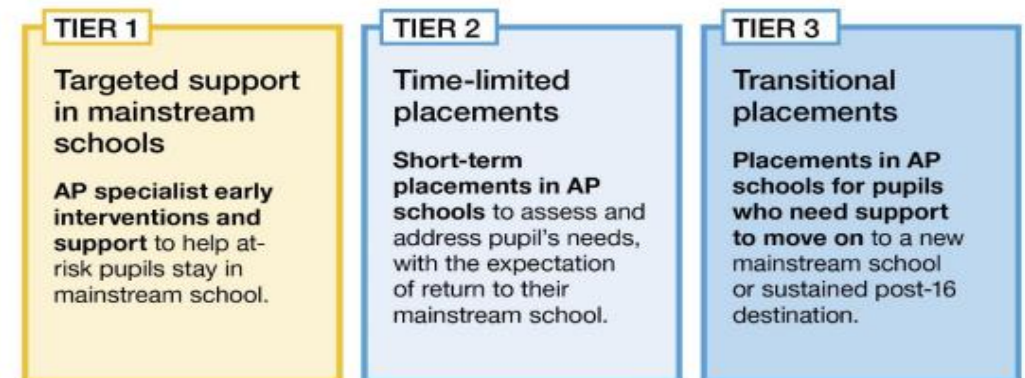
- Bracknell Forest
- Hampshire
- Kent
- Reading
- Wokingham

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE PROVISION?

The Dept for Education (DfE) describes alternative provision (AP) as: “education arranged by LAs for children of compulsory school age who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; AP can also be used by schools for children on a suspension; and for children being directed by schools to off-site provision to receive education intended to improve their behaviour.”

AP involves a tailored, flexible and more intensive approach to learning and the curriculum as a consequence of pupils having additional needs that have, often, been unrecognised, together with gaps in their previous learning at school. There are specialist AP schools that particularly teach pupils at tier 3 (see fig 1 below), and other AP providers, some of which are not registered as schools, which operate part-time, at tier 2 and address particular needs: such as for practical vocational learning or time-limited therapeutic learning and support.

Fig 1 A three-tier model for alternative provision



Introduction and purpose

INTRODUCTION TO ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Schools and LAs have a responsibility to ensure suitable full-time education for children and young people of compulsory school age. Some children and young people find great difficulties with the mainstream education at the school they are enrolled with (home school). For them, re-engaging with learning can involve part-time support from AP or even referral for full-time placement with a registered AP school. Often, in the past, LAs have focused largely on full-time, commissioned places at an AP school or a pupil referral unit (PRU). These places are usually at least part funded via High Needs Funding and, in the large majority of LAs, these pupils move onto the roll of the AP school or PRU.

More recently there has been an expansion in demand for part-time AP, mostly the responsibility of the home schools and as a component of a pupil's learning. However, more children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are now being placed with non-school AP, either due to parents' preference, or as an interim arrangement pending needs assessment or a more specialist school place. A recent report by the Children's Commissioner estimated, in 2024-25, 29,244 children and young people in non-school AP, compared with 27,700 in registered (mainly full-time) state-funded AP.¹

As part of the DfE's SEND reforms, there is a focus on AP: proposing the three-tier model for AP (see: fig 1), that promotes inclusion via earlier AP intervention either at the pupil's home school (tier 1) or via a time-limited and, often, part-time intervention (tier 2).

DfE guidance has promoted the role of the LA to oversee quality of provision with non-school providers and these expectations of LAs have stepped up with the publication by the DfE of "Non-school AP: Voluntary National Standards"². Although voluntary, these standards set out a minimum baseline for providers and for LAs in their local area role in overseeing the assurance of quality, whilst home schools have the assurance role for their own pupils they place.

NON-SCHOOL AP AND ITS QUALITY ASSURANCE

Non-school APs are education providers that cannot register with the DfE as a school because they are not a full-time education establishment (i.e children receive less than 18 hours a week of education with a non-school AP). As a rule, LAs operate a local quality assurance (QA) system for non-school APs, most of whom also support local schools with their own due diligence for individual pupils they place.

A home school would place one of their pupils with a suitable provider by directing them 'off-site', part-time to a non-school AP, for example to offer more specialist or holistic learning intervention over a limited time period. Another group of children and young people who are placed with non-school AP are those considered vulnerable and for whom the LA bears some or all the responsibility for their suitable education. These include those with SEND (often under-going needs assessment or awaiting a full-time school place), children looked after by the LA or subject to social care intervention.

It is important to note that DfE guidance states, for all placements into AP, that they should always be made with the child's reintegration back into mainstream or full-time education or move to a sustained, post-16 destination in mind.



¹ "Register, Regulate and Raise Standards"; Children's Commissioner on unregistered AP. (Sept 2025)

² "Non-school Alternative Provision: voluntary standards" (DfE Aug 2025)

Overview of QA arrangements across the seven LAs

The seven LAs who made up the task-and-finish group represented the range across the South-east, from unitaries to large two-tier LAs, including two of the Change Partnership Programme (CPP) LAs: E Sussex and Portsmouth that had developed aspects of their local quality assurance (QA) of AP as part of their CPP activities.

The overview both offers a picture of the state of current arrangements across the members of the group and tests a format for capturing such arrangements across a region. This can offer a baseline and pin-point similar practice and challenges. Elements of the overview are:

- Governance of AP across the local area: strategic positioning, the core partners and how QA processes are reported.
- The role of the LA, capacity and processes: the team that leads on QA and the expectations for monitoring and maintaining relationships with providers.
- Implementation of the QA framework within the LA: the rigour of practice for children and young people placed by children's services teams.
- Arrangements with local schools to support their practice when placing their pupils: across guidance for schools about their own QA and information about providers QA'd by the LA.
- Market development: non-school APs endeavour to meet education and support needs of vulnerable children and young people and this is enhanced by guidance from the LA; whilst what role does the LA fulfil in developing for future capacity and support needs.
- Oversight of children in N-S AP: although the duty of care lies with the placement school / team and the provider, what methods are adopted to meet the expectation of LAs to maintain an overview of children placed, especially the most vulnerable.
- Other: challenges and contextual information.
- Information about the scale of the role for the LA across its local area: number of providers QA'd and number of pupils recorded as in non-school AP.

Such a picture captures a snapshot and enables similar LAs to contact one another to problem-solve and share practice. We offer the format as a means for leaders to maintain a high-level picture of their local area and monitor progress where there are key developments.

The summary provided by the T&F LAs shows that local area governance and market development, for non-school AP, are key aspects for development within SEND Reform Plans.



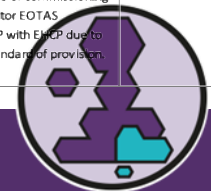
Is there a value in maintaining an overall profile such as this across all 19 LAs in the South-east?

It could be updated annually and would provide evidence of on-going improvement, together with intelligence when LAs are changing due to LGR and alerts if core arrangements are under pressure.



Overview of LA QA Arrangements for Non-school AP (spring 2026)

LA	Pupils in N-S AP*	QA'd APs*	Governance	QA processes (LA)	QA Framework (LA)	Schools - guide & QA	Market development & engagement	Oversight of CYP in N-S AP	Other	Challenges
BFC	157	23	Overseen by core governance board; providers of concern (red) flagged here.	Two-stage process that is a joint endeavour between commissioning team (due diligence & documentation) and operational teams (QA visits and meetings). The QA visits against DfE's voluntary standards have more recently been implemented. Providers risk assessed by RAG.	LA teams only place in N-S AP providers who have been through stage 1 of the QA process (due diligence & documentation). Reserve option to withdraw a child if AP provider becomes 'red flagged'.	Expect schools to place in N-S AP that been QA'd by LA; stress it is their risk if they choose another provider. Schools still responsible for their own QA & monitoring if place a pupil.	Started to develop a network for N-S APs. Also, LA system to include request for feedback from a school when their pupil's placement has finished. This feedback is to be passed to the provider.	Schools notify LA weekly of pupils placed in N-S AP (cross-check against 'b' codes). Working with StudyBugs to develop reporting of attendance of those placed at N-S AP.	Considerable change & development over past two years. _ At the planning stages of establishing AP framework that will follow formal procurement processes (planned from Sept 27)	_ consistency of oversight when providers outside of LA _ oversight of attendance for pupils whilst at N-S AP; mainstream schools notify LA of all pupils at N-S AP.
ESCC	N/A	27	County-wide oversight of providers and placements via AP sub-committee of SEND Board.	Two-stage process: i) review of documentation against checklist/standards (new post to chase complete submissions by N-S APs to speed process); ii) 1 day QA visit mixed programme of interviews & observation, incl with CYP & operational staff across 6 modules. Presented with written report and RAG	As a result of QA, N-S AP becomes an 'approved provider' and LA teams can only place at these. QA requirements / checklist updated promptly when statutory guidance changes.	ESCC has an AP directory of N-S APs, which is published and working so that schools wherever possible place pupils in these. However, standards are published so school can undertake their own QA as part of taking responsibility for placing pupils. Schools have confidence in LA standards due to regular updating.	Majority of N-S APs support secondary pupils. Increasing demand for primary places with support for SEMH. This is a challenge to develop. However, LA can shape the market: ESCC has a view there are plenty of 1:1 tuition providers who have been QA'd, so not accepting new providers at present.	Include views / feedback from pupils in QA visits.	_ with quality & capacity issues at specialist AP school over recent years, the AP directory and thorough QA of N-S APs has been essential to ensure sufficient AP capacity across tiers 1 to 3.	_ fairly diverse array of N-S APs, which demand flexibility in depth of QA _ invested in capacity: 2 fte maintain in the AP directory, plus support from 3 fte inclusion posts who are involved in QA visits.
Hants	N/A	66	Governance including: Internal education directorate and external Local Area Partnership Board	For LA approval, team runs documentation check against standards & QA visits.	Run a procurement platform, with documentation check against standards & QA visits, for N-S AP. Expect LA teams to place via the platform. Framework shared with schools as requested for information purposes only.	No formal framework offered by LA on behalf of schools. School's guide in place and shared with schools at regular intervals to ensure understanding of legislation and compliance. Schools informed by LA of N-S AP on the local platform.	Development of a school improvement package to support the quality of provision for non school AP.	Where reduced hours provision is used, this is also used to provide information to LA. Exploring MIS system to support monitoring of those in placements commissioned directly by LA. Any safeguarding concerns or complaints dealt with by school improvement team.	Developing information for P/C about N-S AP. Face challenges from some P/C when investigations due to lack of understanding or different values-base. Working with LAPB to strengthen understanding.	_ Large number of N-S APs in a large county; especially small rural N-S APs. Capacity to provide sufficient QA. _ building consistent understanding from schools & LA teams about N-S AP & QA & responsibilities.
Kent	3742	N/A		Put in place QA framework with 3 levels for N-S APs. Capacity to undertake QA: 1 fte post; major limitations on capacity to deliver.	Priority is more robust arrangements for LA placed CYP. To roll this out & establish across children's services.			Just started to request to schools to notify of their pupils placed in N-S AP.	Improvement journey' and N-S AP is an area developing more robust arrangements.	_ Fragmentation of QA responsibilities for N-S AP; by service & locality. _ Communications with P/C; when investigation or challenge of N-S AP by LA (e.g. safeguarding) some parents can be vocal; even legal challenge. _ Large number of N-S APs in a large county; especially small rural N-S APs.
Portsmouth	264 (2° only)	17	AP Board has been set up and its purpose includes oversight of N-S APs, incl where providers are 'red' therefore not to be used.	Two-stage process: i) review of documentation against checklist/standards (new post created to chase complete submissions by N-S APs to speed process); ii) 1 day QA visit: mixed programme of interviews & observation, incl with CYP & operational staff across 6 modules. Presented with written report and RAG rating. If 'red' not suitable to be assured & have to restart process.	As a result of QA, N-S AP becomes an 'assured provider' and LA teams only place at these.	Expect schools to only place at assured N-S APs.	LA runs a local N-S Provider Group that meets on a half termly basis to share best practice etc and hear updates from the LA. LA also undertakes targeted market engagement with specific providers based on the needs of the schools and commissioning teams. For example, recent demand for providers with a sport or music offer has been pro-actively supported by LA.	Schools inform LA of their pupils placed in N-S AP.	Considerable developments and have benefited from shared learning with other CPPs.	_ thorough QA has identified several that are illegal schools (ie offering > 15 hours per week). _ stretched capacity for QA processes (1 fte; plus some admin) means there is a significant backlog at present.
Reading	276	36		Series of steps of the QA: across documentation review, quality checks visit, incl placement agreements and due diligence. Set out in Toolkit document.	QA framework based on DfE quality standards. Now established in children's services.	Website-based guide and toolkit for schools; Web-based directory of QA providers published, with detailed info about their offer.	Providers can apply to be included in the LA directory. E.g. identification at time of AR.	SEND case officer has oversight of EOTAS CYP in N-S AP; Ed Access Team team have oversight of list of pupils in N-S AP from schools.	Early development (1 school) of internal AP. How well are CYP placed in N-S having their needs met or in the best placement? Opportunity to share intelligence between neighbouring IAs and also potential for shared workload of the QA processes.	_ capacity challenges to fulfill QA role _ suitability of placement(s) _ perception of risk (contrasting school / LA) and consistency
Wokingham	24 (LA placed)	18	QA Board has oversight of all children's services placements, including N-S APs.	QA processes involve review of documentation against standards, plus QA visit. Ideally annually, but for some is as little as 3-yearly. Involve DSL / SEND / IADO colleagues in some QA visits, especially if there are specific concerns.	QA framework based on DfE quality standards. Now established in children's services.	Toolkit for schools to use, as well as local standards. No 'approved N-S APs' but schools can access LA's list. Toolkit for schools to run own placement QA.	Twice a year AP Forum for schools & N-S APs; including practice development inputs. Working with schools to develop their offer of internal AP & how this can be increased to lessen their demand for N-S AP.	Starting to develop attendance reporting for those in N-S APs.	Considerable change & development over past two years. _ trial with local PRU of commissioning them to QA / monitor EOTAS placements for CYP with EHCP due to concerns about standards of provision.	_ considerable increase in number of N-S APs as demand from schools increased.



Practice shared by Change Partner Programme LAs

The Change Partners Programme (CPP) ran from 2023 to 2026. The DfE and its commissioned REACH consortium worked closely with three or four LAs in each region of England to test-and-learn proposed reforms to the SEND system. The reforms being tested were included in the DfE's 'SEND and AP Improvement Plan', a green paper published in March 2023. In the South-east region, Portsmouth City Council was the lead partner LA and worked with Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, West Sussex councils, with support from NHS Sussex. Alternative provision (AP) was one of the ten original elements for testing-and-learning. Following the change in Government, phase 2 of the CPP narrowed the focus to four priority elements, one of which was a continuation of the AP work. The LAs in the South-east to both embed existing work on QA of AP and post-16 pathways for young people previously placed with AP, and to tested local approaches to new initiatives such as 'alternative provision specialist taskforce / team'. The national SENDAP learning and support materials from the CPP are available at: <https://whatworks-send.org.uk/reach-change-programme-insights/>. Both Portsmouth and E Sussex were able to share some of their local developments with AP and some of learning from these at the three meetings of the QA of Non-school AP Group. A summary is set out below.

Practice development of relevance to quality assurance of AP

Portsmouth City

A unitary local authority with 62 state schools within the local area

Portsmouth have taken a system-wide approach with renewed governance and oversight of AP as part of its area-wide strategic SENDAP partnership together with a refreshed vision for inclusion across the local school system. An early phase of work was to take the local 4-tier model of AP provision (that includes internal AP as the earliest tier for pupils at risk) and checking how it aligned with the national 3-tier model and pathways. This locally owned model explicitly recognises the part played by non-school AP as part of more rigorous pathways for referral into, and reintegration from, each of the tiers of AP. Increasing local capacity at tier 4 was another priority focus, which was addressed by opening an AP base at a primary school and additional AP bases at a secondary and at an SEMH special school.

A start-to-finish review of quality assurance (QA) processes and capacity has been carried out and had a sharp focus on safeguarding expectations and practice among non-school providers and these are aligned across the 4 local tiers of intervention.

East Sussex

An upper-tier local authority with 185 state schools within the local area

In **East Sussex**, the contribution of non-school AP to the support and learning for vulnerable pupils was highlighted by a crisis in their main, specialist AP provider. A focus on quality assurance and capacity for AP became the local priority, with an immediate requirement to establish more robust placement and QA systems with local schools. This was key to rebuilding confidence among mainstream schools in the options and impact of the AP provision available, including non-school and internal AP. This focus was underpinned by refreshed strategic commitments to inclusion between the LA, schools and trusts supported by more localised decision-making in three localities.

Through the locality partnerships, the LA and schools established more robust arrangements to place pupils with non-school APs, and the LA overhauled its QA arrangements. Greater partnership non-school AP providers has enabled the LA to start to shape the local market: to influence the offer across the rural geography and ways to better align to the needs identified by schools (such as for short-term emotional and mental health support for primary-aged pupils).

Innovative work to take the learner experience of AP into account has been trialled and is described later in this pack.



Developing QA arrangements for children placed by LAs

The QA undertaken by the LA with non-school AP has two core groups of children and young people at its heart: pupils placed part-time by schools, and children placed by the LA, many of whom have SEND and/or their care is supported by the LA. The DfE has expectations that the LA quality assures standards for providers and supports good practice by schools, for example, by issuing guidance about approaches to take when they make decisions to place one of their pupils.

For those placed by children's services teams, robust expectations include that there is an assurance process to establish that sufficient standards are maintained by non-school providers and there is compliance by teams, following procurement and placement procedures and effectively monitoring the progress made by children at the non-school AP.

There follows case studies about two large county LAs at different stages of developing their internal compliance for LA placements.

Steps on a learning journey:

Hampshire

An upper-tier LA with over 540 state schools within the county.

In **Hampshire**, the oversight role is led by the commissioning and School Improvement team in the LA. A local guide is available for teams in children's services who might need to seek to place a child in non-school AP, such as the virtual school, children's social care and special education needs, as well as for schools. The LA's commissioning team complete initial onboarding processes to ensure a non-school AP could be included on the local framework. The school improvement team then conduct quality assurance of non-school APs using a framework of standards that are consistent with the DfE's voluntary standards.

Challenges:

- Staffing capacity for the volume of QA processes: in 2024-25 over 500 children and young people were placed by LA teams, whilst over 80 providers have registered for the QA process or are available via the LA's framework.
- Increase understanding across key LA teams about consistent commissioning and due diligence when placing with non-school AP.
- Improving the culture of inclusion, so AP is viewed an intervention rather than a destination.

Solutions:

- The 1 fte commissioning team role is now supplemented by colleagues from school improvement undertaking QA review of paperwork against standards and visits.
- A more streamline contracting process for LA teams has been introduced, together with documentation and templates for teams to use. There has been active dissemination of the expectations and updated process and documentation to LA teams. The commissioning team can be contacted for advice on individual placement decisions as well.
- Regular reinforcement of the message that placement with a non-school AP is a step towards access to full-time school education where possible in the longer term.

Impacts and further development:

- All LA placements to non-school AP have made use of providers on the current LA framework in 2025-26.
- The framework monitoring has withstood been tested as a result of standards not being maintained by a provider. This was escalated and partnership work undertaken with the provider to address the issue satisfactorily. Placements did not need to be changed due to effective intervention taking place.
- Future challenges include developing better information for parents and carers so they can be clearer about non-school AP, the role of the LA, why the QA standards are important and the quality assurance processes to support maintenance of these.



Developing QA arrangements for children placed by LAs

For those placed with non-school AP by children's services teams, robust expectations include that the LA quality assures standards for providers and there is compliance by teams with placement procedures plus effective monitoring of progress made by the child whilst with a non-school AP. These decisions involve formal contractual responsibilities as well as partnering with the provider to best support the child and their learning. Guidance and advice should be accessible, so these colleagues have a clear understanding of their compliance responsibilities and be supported with information about the nature of suitable providers.

Steps on a learning journey:

Kent

An upper-tier LA with 595 (approx) state schools within the county.

In **Kent** increasing numbers of children and young people have been placed for personalised education packages, including with non-school APs. As a result, the two posts were significantly overworked and focused largely on completing transactional tasks: maintaining QA paperwork with providers, ensuring contact data was held and finances transacted. A dynamic purchasing system (DPS) was in place that enabled providers to submit documentation for QA and for contracts to be let with them should a placement from a children's services team be made. A thematic review of the QA of non-school AP was the starting point for the change and improvement programme and undertook a thorough analysis of strengths in place and challenges.

Challenges:

- LA officer capacity and systems to undertake robust QA that includes visits and respond to requests and concerns;
- Weak tracking of placed children and little oversight of progress or effectiveness of placement;
- Limited information about non-school AP for parents / carers; some have been vocal about their preference for a provider, even when there were significant risks;
- Inconsistent understanding across children's services teams about good placement practice and monitoring of learning
- Lack of guidance and advice for mainstream schools when directing their own pupils off-site to be placed with a non-school AP provider .

Solutions:

- More robust QA for children placed by the LA or with an EHCP and EOTAS package was the priority. A more in-depth QA process involving SEND inclusion advisers, as well as establishing stronger practice in monitoring placements and the progress children are making.
- Data systems were overhauled so children's services teams have access to 'real time' information. A key component was the requirement, as part of the contract, for non-school providers to sign-up to DfE's attendance reporting systems, enabling the LA to then track attendance through these daily returns.
- Plain language information about non-school AP and its purpose and oversight has been developed for parents in partnership with the local Parent and Carer Forum. .

Impacts and further development:

- The in-depth QA processes and monitoring involve a wider group of LA officers, and this has helped to grow understanding of what good placement practice looks like.
- There is more robust data and evidence about individual providers which has resulted in earlier and more effective interventions, such as raising the need for improvement in a non-school AP's safeguarding practice.
- Routine reporting to the Kent SEND Strategic Partnership Board is being developed, having completed briefings to inform the Board of the baseline and the parameters.
- State schools directed over 3,742 pupils part-time to non-school AP, so a key next development is to adapt existing advice and to publish this as guidance for schools.



Cross-border collaboration and QA of non-school AP

DfE guidance¹ states that the core purposes of non-school AP are to meet the broad needs of the child placed and re-engage them with their education. The voluntary standards emphasise that it is important there is a robust standard of safeguarding practice in place and that the child's education, wherever possible, is of equivalent standard to a school education. The voluntary standards clarify a consistent baseline for LAs to quality assure against and a core set of expectations for providers, some of whom support children in more than one LA area. Two groups, the South coast, Change Partner, LAs and LAs in Berkshire, have been meeting and are developing ways to collaborate. The section below sets out key themes so far and they expect to progress these further in 2026-27.

1 Sharing up-to-date information: Formal QA processes provide a snapshot in time. Ongoing, robust safeguarding practice is essential, even more so with non-school APs whose children are often additionally vulnerable. Being alerted about concerns or inadequate practice has been an essential consideration for these LAs, so that mitigations can be addressed with the non-school provider, wherever possible, or, if necessary, actions taken such as pausing new placements or even changing current ones. Both groups of LAs meet periodically and can inform one another of the providers who work with children from adjoining LA areas and practical and QA issues. For the CPP LAs this has included sharing detailed QA standards and support materials, which results in more consistent expectations of non-school providers.

2 Opportunities to coordinate QA processes for providers serving more than one LA area: Rigorous, formal QA processes by LAs involve a desktop review of policies and procedures followed by site visits and interviews with leaders, staff and young people. Such processes are time-consuming for providers as well as the LA and where a small provider supports places for children from more than one LA area, this can be additionally demanding for them. The DfE's voluntary standards set out the core, QA expectations of non-school providers. Berkshire LAs are looking to trial arrangements where one of the group of LAs has a lead relationship with a non-school AP provider and would be responsible for formal QA on behalf of the group of LAs. Such an arrangement is expected to be accompanied by information-sharing to reduce the barriers to flagging concerns and to streamline administrative demands for the non-school AP provider.

3 Coordinate and collaborate market testing and development : Current estimates show in excess of 30,000 children and young people placed with non-school APs in England across an academic year.² This illustrates the scale of the contribution to the education system these providers make and the two groups of LAs recognise they have a role to support the development of the market among non-school APs. Two initiatives are:

- Termly 'market place' events for non-school AP providers run by one LA which offer chances to network including with school representatives and updates and briefings about important developments.
- Another LA has used its intelligence from schools and locality partnerships to identify areas of emerging need among pupils (e.g. primary-age children with social and emotional needs) and to also de-prioritise QA processes for some offers (e.g. there is a surplus of online, individual tuition).

¹ "Non-school Alternative Provision: voluntary standards" (DfE Aug 2025)

² "Register, Regulate and Raise Standards"; Children's Commissioner on unregistered AP. (Sept 2025)



Cross-border collaboration and QA of non-school AP (part 2)

4 Communication and consistent information with parents / carers and with schools:

Practice has been shared between the commissioning leads from the CPP LAs about communication with parents and carers and with local schools. Non-school AP is an important aspect of education for many vulnerable learners and these LAs have sought to support greater consistency across their local schools and to keep them informed as QA expectations are updated. Ideally they seek to support good practice so as many children as possible can return to full-time school education and two-way liaison with schools so the LA is updated about providers and providers experience reasonable consistency. More consistent communication with parents and carers is important, so they are on-board with the AP learning. Consistency is also important when a family have a close relationship with a provider, but there are concerns with quality or when there are limited alternative options for their child.

Themes and next steps for 2026-27:

- Drawing upon more expert advice for specific elements of QA of non-school AP. The CPP LAs are seeking legal team advice to inform formal agreements between LAs and non-school providers about information-sharing across LA borders. This could be followed by protocols for communication and consistent, transparent responses with providers when raising issues of concern.
- Ways to maintain consistency and systems during changes, as local government reorganisation starts to affect LAs in the South-east.
- Aligning with the DfE's policy direction for inclusive education. Sharing practice about how non-school AP fits with a tiered model of AP and with local inclusion and the role of a lead commissioner of AP.

Practice example:

As demand has increased for non-school AP and the technology has improved to support virtual learning, there has been an increase in providers offering online tuition as part of a non-school AP package and new non-school organisations as well. Whilst this can be a valuable learning arrangement for some children and young people, it has raised new issues for LAs and new practice challenges for non-school providers. Collaboration between a group of LAs led to the identification of an online provider that was employing tutors not based in the UK. This provider was therefore unable to comply with with LA safeguarding requirements for all staff in contact with children, with additional concerns about the lack of a data adequacy agreement between the UK and the overseas countries. Since the provider was supporting children from more than one LA area, consistency across the LAs was helpful in addressing such concerns. Further novel challenges, such as the use of personal IT equipment has led to Portsmouth City developing a checklist and guide for providers to support them embed robust safeguarding practice (for checklist, see Annex p14)



The learner's voice within QA arrangements

DfE guidance on non-school AP² expects commissioners (home school and LA) to ensure the placement meets the individual needs of the learner, including re-engaging them in their education. More details about this expectation is in DfE guidance for all AP¹ which states providers should:

- Offer good quality education equivalent to mainstream (or special) school
- Support the child to overcome their barriers to attainment and achievement
- Ensure the child is involved in decisions about their education ... and understands the reasons and intended outcomes for their placement.

The learner's voice is important to understanding to what extent providers and schools are achieving the above. The two LA spotlights below describe early stages of development of seeking learners' views and experiences of non-school AP and possible approaches to linking with local QA processes. This highlights some of the challenges, such as practical accessibility for learners through to the extent of reliance on providers.

Approaches being developed by two LAs:

East Sussex

East Sussex took the opportunity to work with Mind of My Own, who specialise in surveying children and young people, to trial a more systematic method to gather young people's views of their experience of non-school AP following being placed by their home school. Broad feedback was sought, including the extent they felt involved, the amount of contact they had with their home school when at placement, feedback on their learning and their knowledge of next steps. The online survey was introduced to providers in spring 2024 and achieved 80 completed responses from 12 providers, with half of the responses being young people at FE colleges. Over 90% reported that they rated their placement as good or excellent, however they also fed back that half of the learners could recall no contact with their home school whilst on placement and a third were unclear about what their next steps were. The report and summary were published and disseminated to schools, providers & LA teams.

The 2025-26 survey is currently open to students and is proving more challenging to generate responses with limited LA resource to remind and chase commissioning schools & providers. There is a sense that for some schools the learner voice is viewed as a 'bolt-on' rather than an integral element of directing a pupil offsite.

Bracknell Forest

In **Bracknell Forest** the learner's voice work has initially focused on children and young people placed with non-school AP who are the responsibility of the LA, particularly those with an EHC Plan which states 'education other than at school' (EOTAS). The LA has also established an automated notification system with schools who direct off-site, so the LA is informed when a student has been placed with a non-school provider and its duration, which also triggers an automated, online feedback request from the school on behalf of each student at the end of this period. For those placed by the LA, an online questionnaire with a mix of scaling questions and comments, has been designed and aims to be accessible to learners range from year 4 to year 11, and which providers are requested to assist with completion. The scope of the questions includes safety and comfort and the learning (support and challenge from the provider), plus the invitation to submit comments.

The current response size is small because those with an EHCP are a minority of children placed with non-school AP. It has highlighted providers with a good, responsive set up and others where this is not the case (largely 1:1 tuition providers). There has been learning for the LA already, for example about more pro-active reviewing and monitoring of progress by the child. The LA is being more systematic in monitoring attendance in non-school AP including monitoring cancellations of tuition sessions.

¹ "Arranging Alternative Provision" (DfE Feb 2025)

² "Non-school Alternative Provision: voluntary standards" (DfE Aug 2025)



Options and recommendations for 2026-27

Reminder of purpose:

SE local authorities hold the view that alternative provision (AP) is a key component of local approaches to inclusion. It is most effective as an integral aspect of the local SEND and AP system, built on strong, active partnerships between the LA, schools and trust, AP providers and parents and pupils. The purpose of the Alternative Provision Leads (task-and-finish) Group was to promote learning about practice for those leading oversight and monitoring of AP from a local authority perspective.

As a task-and-finish 'community of practice', the focus has been on the quality assurance (QA) of non-school AP and there has been sharing of learning from DfE Change Programme Partner LAs with others in the South-east. The Group was also tasked with advising SESLIP on future regional support for LAs for their role in the oversight and commissioning of AP.

Options proposed for consideration:

- a) For SESLIP to organise, with CPPs, specific webinars or workshops for all SE LAs where specific work and resources on AP developed by one or more CPP can be shared (from October 2026 onwards). A summer term task would be to assemble a list of contact details from all 19 LAs of those in role delivering the oversight and commissioning of AP
- b) SESLIP and one of the CPP LAs (subject to funding) to coordinate a series of small projects for groups of LAs to collaborate for the development of practice in AP from participating LAs. This could join with the 'sub-regional collaborations' below.
- c) SESLIP and one of the CPP LAs (subject to funding) should scope the planning of developing a series of peer reviews on AP using materials from the CPP. A quantity of project support could also be available to participating LAs to support improvement action following review.
- d) Is there value in setting up and facilitating sub-regional collaboratives between leads for commissioning of non-school AP for all South-east LAs to be part of? These would offer adjacent LAs opportunities to share practice, coordinate information and intelligence about providers and coordinate market development.



Annex Contents

- Task-and-finish group terms of reference
 - Examples of LA guidance: for school
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Acknowledgements:

- To colleagues from the following local authorities who participated in the task-and-finish group and contributed time and insights from the valuable work they are developing:
 - Bracknell Forest Council
 - East Sussex County Council
 - Hampshire County Council
 - Kent County Council
 - Portsmouth City Council
 - Reading Borough Council
 - Wokingham Borough Council
- Particular thanks to Hayden Ginns, Assistant Director for Children (Performance and Commissioning) at Portsmouth City Council who chaired the task-and-finish group.



Annex

- Task-and-finish group terms of reference

1. Purpose

The Alternative Provision Leads (task-and-finish) Group is a time-limited group to promote learning about practice for those leading oversight and monitoring of alternative provision (AP) from a local authority perspective. It will work between November 2025 and April 2026.

Alternative provision (AP) is a key component of local approaches to inclusion and is most effective, when it is an integral aspect of the local SEND and AP system and is built on strong, active partnerships between the LA, schools and trust, AP providers and parents and pupils.

The task-and-finish Group's primary purpose is as a community of practice with a focus on the quality assurance (QA) of non-school AP.

Secondary purposes of the Group are:

- To trial sharing of learning from DfE Change Programme Partner LAs with others in the South-east
- To inform and advise SESLIP on future regional support for LAs and oversight and commissioning of AP.

The Group reports to and is accountable to the SESLIP Education Network and to the DfE via the RIIA SENDAP grants reporting. The Group will liaise with the established SESLIP Access to Education group on topics including shared topics of interest, agendas and to collate and learn from data.

2. Key priorities

The Group will:

- Share an overview of each LA's approach to QA of non-school AP and the opportunity to learn from and collaborate with others in the Group.
- Consider the DfE's Voluntary Standards for Non-school AP guidance, how it informs good practice in the South-east and consider preparations for future mandated standards from the DfE.
- Consider LA challenges and collaboration arising from cross-border non-school AP providers.

- Develop approaches to drawing upon the voice of children and young people as part of QA of non-school AP.
- Ensure a focus on safeguarding and compliance, including health & safety, in its discussions of QA.

3. Outputs and impacts

These will include:

- Sharing of local practice / case studies that offer examples of robust LA oversight of non-school AP and commissioning arrangements for children placed by the LA.
- Among the examples will be local frameworks for QA and guides that support best practice by schools when commissioning placement in non-school AP.
- Test approaches to sharing information about non-school AP providers between LAs: themes such as ensuring robust safeguarding and health and safety, and the development of local markets for non-school AP.
- Case study or QA framework of approaches to involving young people's voice in the QA process for non-school AP.
- Advise SESLIP and its Education Directors Network about priorities for future support of practice and learning for LA oversight of AP and options for SESLIP in the support of these.
- Trial approaches to dissemination of learning about LA oversight of AP from the DfE's Change Partners Programme by SE LAs to others in the South-east.


4. Membership and administration

- Membership of the Group: will be drawn from six or seven LAs in the South-East LAs who are nominated by their Education Directors Network representative.
- The Group will meet at least three times between Nov 2025 and April 2026.
- Portsmouth CC will provide the chair for the duration of the task-and-finish Group and progress reports will be provided to the SESLIP Education Directors Network.
- SESLIP will be responsible for co-ordinating and minuting the meetings in and arranging dates and venues for meetings.



Annex

- Examples of LA guidance: for school

- **Bracknell Forest.** Advice and model policy for non-school AP: <https://can-do.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/Services/5327> and the non-school AP providers list: <https://can-do.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/Page/20898>
- **East Sussex.** Directory of non-school AP providers: <https://1space.eastsussex.gov.uk/Search?CategoryId=361&SM=ServiceSearch&SME=True>
Local offer about alternative provision, including non-school AP: <https://localoffer.eastsussex.gov.uk/send-information-and-services/school-age-5-16/alternative-provision#AlternativeProvisionAPinEastSussex>
- **Hampshire.** Alternative provision guidance for schools (including non-school AP): [Hants AP Guidance_schools June25.pdf](#)
- **Portsmouth.** Alternative education provider directory: <https://www.portsmoutheducationpartnership.co.uk/alternative-provision-directory/>
- **Portsmouth:** checklist and guide for providers to support them embed robust safeguarding practice:  **Microsoft Word Document**
- **Reading.** Alternative education provider directory: <https://brighterfuturesforchildren.org/approved-alternative-providers/>
Quality assurance toolkit: [Reading AP-QA-Toolkit.pdf](#)
- **Wokingham.** AP Toolkit for schools: <https://wsh.wokingham.gov.uk/learning-and-teaching-support/senco-hub/alternative-provision>

