

Alternative Provision

Ward(s): ALL

Portfolios: Education and Skills Councillor Kaur

1. Aim

This report provides an update on Alternative Provision within Walsall LA.

2. Summary

This report provides an overview of what alternative provision (AP) is, current practice within AP, an overview of Walsall's quality assurance process and framework, and our future strategy with a focus on supporting our AP providers and young people within AP.

3. Report detail – Know

For the purposes of the Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities January 2013, the definition of Alternative Provision (AP) is 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.'

The Council has statutory duties to provide Alternative Education Provision for Walsall resident pupils of compulsory school age defined as the above.

Alternative Providers (AP's) deliver a range of alternative approaches to providing access to education for young people who are excluded or at risk of exclusion, at risk of disengaging from mainstream school provision or otherwise require alternative education provision to meet their educational entitlement. It is crucial to provide a safe and supportive environment for these vulnerable children and young people to ensure good outcomes for them.

The AP Team has worked closely with the SEND (Special Educational Needs) Team to develop and implement the SEND and AP strategy, ensuring a collaborative approach to supporting students with additional needs. This partnership involves joint efforts to complete the Self-Evaluation Framework (SEF), identifying strengths and areas for improvement within the provision. The teams also work together to deliver the SEND and AP 12-month plan, which outlines targeted actions and priorities aimed at enhancing the quality, accessibility, and outcomes of both SEND and alternative provision services.

By aligning resources and expertise, the AP and SEND Teams ensure a robust strategy that prioritises the needs of vulnerable students and drives continuous improvement across Walsall's education framework.

4. Walsall Context

The majority of pupils in Alternative Provision are male and have identified vulnerabilities; however, this academic year has seen an increase in exclusions among female pupils. A significant portion of the cohort has identified SEND, with or without an Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plan, or Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. Many pupils are eligible for free school meals, and a number are children in care. Some pupils are on child protection, child in need, or early help plans, though the majority are not open to social care services. Attendance upon entering AP is often low but typically improves for most Key Stage 4 pupils, who benefit from and enjoy the vocational studies available.

5. Pupil Referral Units, AP Framework and Quality Assurance

Walsall has two Pupil Referral Units (PRUs): one focused on behaviour, The New Leaf School and one on medical needs, The Shepwell Centre. Alongside these PRUs, the Local Authority commissions places at The Ladder School, an alternative provision free school, as well as at other good or outstanding registered independent settings on our approved framework. This ensures that students accessing alternative provision following a permanent exclusion receive high-quality education and are supported to achieve positive outcomes in AP.

Walsall operates an open AP procurement framework, which has recently reopened for new tenders. This framework allows AP providers from across the country to apply and join throughout the year, with new tenders reviewed and moderated each term. This flexible approach enables the continuous addition of new providers, enhancing the alternative provision available for Walsall's students. Since opening the framework in April 2024, we have completed 3 cycles of moderation, and 29 new providers have joined the framework. By having an open framework, Walsall will continue to attract a greater number of AP providers to the framework, ensuring a diverse and comprehensive AP offer that delivers a wide range of courses, qualifications, and high-quality education.

All new providers applying to join Walsall's AP framework undergo a rigorous evaluation process, including quality-focused questions and moderation during procurement. Once accepted onto the framework, they are incorporated into the ongoing quality assurance (QA) processes.

Walsall's extensive AP framework enables schools to utilise unregistered provision as a vocational or supportive option to their main curriculum. Currently, the framework includes 52 providers: 9 registered schools, 41 unregistered providers, and 2 DfE-accredited online schools. For example, Walsall Construction Training Ltd, an unregistered provider, offers vocational courses in gas, electrical, and plumbing trades.

Among the registered independent schools on the framework is Sandwell Valley School, which received an outstanding rating from Ofsted in 2022.

Before placing any students, the Local Authority carries out up to three types of quality assurance (QA) audits through onsite visits. These QA visits are commissioned to assess the quality of education provided at all settings and are conducted annually. For providers that are not registered schools, the Local Authority additionally commissions health and safety and safeguarding audits. Additionally, Walsall also undertakes quality assurance for 40 additional settings commissioned by SEND and the Virtual School, ensuring those provisions are of high quality and appropriate to meet the needs of our most vulnerable cohorts.

Alternative provision can be established by public, voluntary, or private sector organisations. Most alternative providers are not required to register with any official body, and there are no formal national systems for evaluating their quality. However, any provider offering education must register as an independent school if they meet the DfE criteria: providing full-time education to five or more pupils of compulsory school age, or one such pupil who is looked-after or has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Walsall Local Authority monitors this through the AP Register process to ensure that no AP providers on our framework operate as illegal schools. Additionally, Walsall LA provided feedback and facilitated a working group to gather input from AP providers on the 'Strengthening Protections in Unregistered Alternative Provision' consultation and Ofsted's thematic reviews. The feedback from these groups has enabled us to refine our monitoring and oversight processes, ensuring that all unregistered provisions are safe for students and deliver high-quality education and services.

Unregistered providers on Walsall's AP framework undergo three annual audits to assess their suitability and quality. Only providers that meet the Local Authority's QA criteria will be approved for student placements. Registered schools with a recent Ofsted inspection that satisfies our QA standards will receive annual visits to ensure the education offered remains appropriate for our students. If the QA process identifies concerns, the AP Manager or Quality Assurance Team Manager will work with the provider to address the issues. Should these concerns remain unresolved or be of a serious nature, the Local Authority will remove students from the setting and may suspend or remove the provider from the AP framework. The AP and SEND Team Managers work closely together to ensure QA's processes are robust and feedback is shared across both teams.

The AP Register is a key initiative introduced by Walsall Local Authority to monitor and oversee students in alternative provision settings, including those not directly commissioned by the Local Authority. It tracks all students attending providers on Walsall's AP framework, ensuring comprehensive oversight of Walsall children accessing alternative provision. The AP Register is cross-referenced with data from the School Attendance Service and SEND teams to ensure all students in AP are accounted for and visible.

This comprehensive approach to monitoring students in AP will allow the Local Authority to collaborate effectively with schools to define the expected outcomes of AP placements, establish appropriate timeframes, and monitor student engagement. The register will ensure that students do not remain in AP longer than necessary and that graduated responses are applied either before or alongside their time in alternative provision. It also ensures that AP placements are suitable and personalised to meet each student's specific needs. The success of this process relies on collaboration between Local Authority teams, the School Attendance Service, SEND teams, AP providers, schools, and multi-agency partners. This coordinated effort guarantees that all provisions are safe, high-quality, and aligned with Walsall Local Authority's commitment to delivering positive outcomes for students in alternative education. The data is collated into our Alternative Provision Score card, that will allow the LA to monitor trends of students accessing AP, why and for how long, to ensure AP is used appropriately in line with student needs.

We currently have Walsall students at 5 registered providers and 15 unregistered provisions. We have 56 permanently excluded children in Key Stage 4 (KS4) are placed in alternative providers for their education provision, on roll of the New Leaf School and The Ladder School. Quality assurance activities, including audits, site visits, and Ofsted inspections, ensure standards are met and highlight areas for improvement.

6. Walsall Alternative Provision Quality Assurance Framework:

6.1. Quality Assurance – Why?

There is an expectation that all providers within the directory AP providers sign up to the QA process as described in this document. All outcomes of QA visits undertaken by Walsall Council are shared on the Walsall Council Website.

There are three elements to Walsall's QA process:

Teaching and Learning:

Teaching and learning quality assurance (QA) for alternative provision is vital to ensure that educational standards are consistently met, promoting effective teaching practices and positive student outcomes. Through systematic evaluation and continuous improvement, QA processes enhance the learning experience, ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education tailored to their needs.

This commitment to excellence not only supports student achievement and well-being but also upholds the provider's reputation and accountability, building trust and confidence among students, parents, and commissioners.

Safeguarding:




Safeguarding quality assurance (QA) for alternative provision is vital to ensure that all safeguarding policies and practices are effectively implemented, protecting the welfare and safety of vulnerable students. This QA process helps identify and address potential risks, ensures compliance with legal and regulatory requirements, and fosters a safe, supportive environment. By maintaining rigorous safeguarding standards, providers build trust and confidence among students, parents, and commissioners.

Health and Safety:

Health and safety quality assurance (QA) for alternative provision is vital to ensure a safe and secure environment for students and staff. By systematically evaluating and improving health and safety practices, QA processes help prevent accidents and manage risks effectively. This commitment to maintaining high health and safety standards not only protects the well-being of everyone in the provision but also upholds the providers reputation and accountability, building trust and confidence among students, parents, and commissioners.

QA Ratings

All self-evaluation and QA visits will use a standard RAG rating:

	RED – Requirement not met or significant deficiencies; urgent improvement needed
	AMBER – Requirement partially met; processes to be enhanced or embedded
	GREEN – Requirement fully met

The expectation is each visit is carried out in partnership with the provider. Therefore, we would expect and welcome managers to join the audit visit. Each visit would take no longer than one day and can be undertaken online if the provider does not have physical premises.

QA Cycle

Walsall Council will complete a QA with each provider on the framework on an annual basis.

The Walsall Alternative Provision Quality Assurance Framework will:

Ensure High-Quality Education:

- Support alternative provision settings to deliver a curriculum that is broad, balanced, and tailored to meet the needs of individual students.
- Promote high standards of teaching and learning to ensure positive educational outcomes for all students.
- Ensure all learners receive consistently high- quality learning experiences and their statutory entitlement within the Alternative Provision (AP) sector.

Safeguarding:

- Safeguard and promote the wellbeing of all children accessing education in the Alternative Provision (AP) sector.
- Ensure robust safeguarding policies and practices to protect the welfare of all students.

- Foster a safe and supportive environment where students feel secure and valued.

Support Personal Development:

- Encourage the development of social, emotional, and behavioural skills to prepare students for reintegration into mainstream education or progression to further education, training, or employment.
- Provide tailored support to address individual needs, including mental health and well-being.

Promote Accountability and Improvement

- Establish clear accountability mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of alternative provision settings.
- Facilitate continuous improvement through regular review, feedback, and implementation of best practices.
- Establish robust collaboration between commissioners and Alternative Providers.

Key Components of Walsall's Alternative Provision Quality Assurance Framework:

Leadership and Management:

- Strong and effective leadership committed to continuous improvement and high standards.
- Clear vision and strategy for delivering high-quality alternative provision.
- Robust governance structures to provide oversight and accountability.

Curriculum and Teaching:

- Curriculum that is broad, balanced, and meets the needs and interests of students.
- High-quality teaching that engages and motivates students.
- Regular assessment and tracking of student progress to inform teaching and learning

Safeguarding and Welfare:

- Comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures compliant with KCSIE 2024.
- Trained and designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) and staff.
- Safe recruitment practices and ongoing safeguarding training for all staff.
- Systems to ensure student safety, including online safety measures and secure environments.

Personal Development and Support:

- Holistic support for students' social, emotional, and mental health needs.
- Access to additional services and support, such as counselling and mentoring when they need it.

- Programs to develop students' life skills and prepare them for future opportunities.

Engagement and Partnership:

- Active engagement with parents, carers, and families to support student outcomes.
- Effective collaboration with local authorities, schools, and external agencies.
- Strong links with the community and employers to enhance learning opportunities.
- Inspire confidence across Alternative Providers and support the culture of continual improvement within the Alternative Provision (AP) sector.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Regular self-evaluation and review of provision to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- Use of data and feedback to drive improvement and inform decision-making.
- External inspections and audits to provide independent assessment of quality and effectiveness.
- Enable recognition and sharing of good practice across schools, colleges and other providers.

Professional Development:

- Ongoing professional development opportunities for staff to enhance their skills and knowledge.
- Support for staff well-being and workload management.
- Encouragement of reflective practice and sharing of best practices.
- By achieving these aims, the framework will ensure that alternative provision settings deliver high-quality education and care, safeguard students and are held to high standards of accountability and continuous improvement. A directory of Alternative Provision providers on the framework will be available for all commissioners to access.

The impact of this robust process is shown through the outcomes of OFSTED unannounced inspections of our providers. Since 2022 all inspections have resulted in a positive inspection outcome with all providers deemed as suitable. In one inspection an inspector reported to us that the provider commented on the fantastic support and communication from the AP Team that they don't get from other LA's.

6.2. Processes and Procedures within Alternative Provision

Ofsted has also highlighted national concerns regarding the appropriateness of some alternative provisions (AP) and a lack of oversight by schools over their students attending these settings. In response, the Local Authority has published its new procurement framework on the council's Local Offer website. This allows schools to review the quality assurance outcomes of AP providers they may consider

commissioning places with directly. While further development is needed for the AP Framework Directory, this is a significant step forward in ensuring all commissioners have the knowledge and understanding required to support appropriate AP commissioning.

Each Alternative Provision has their own safeguarding policy and identifies safeguarding staff within their provision, in line with Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024 and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023. All Alternative Providers are encouraged to complete a Section 175 Audit to identify areas for development around safeguarding.

The AP Managers Meeting, held termly, has a safeguarding and pupil outcome focus and is a forum to share good practice across AP. There have been Continual Professional Development (CPD) sessions on Ofsted Inspections and Quality Assurance, ordinarily available offers, and Safeguarding. This year's sessions have been focused on monitoring of outcomes and responses to prospective AP framework changes.

The local authority employs a team of 4 AP Keyworkers and an AP Manager who are all Level 3 safeguarding trained and provide support to our PRU's, AP's, students and families. This team supports the safeguarding team at the New Leaf Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) or other Alternative Provision providers on our AP framework. The keyworkers' main role is to support the students in their AP setting(s) and monitor their progress and outcomes. They work with KS4 students and providers to improve attendance and help resolve any issues to avoid a breakdown of placements.

To respond to the need to strengthen the monitoring of student outcomes in Walsall LA-commissioned AP placements, the Local Authority has implemented new Individual Learning Plan (ILP) and Education, Outcomes, and Transition Plan (EOTP) processes. These processes now provide a structured approach to supporting students' educational journeys, particularly those with additional needs. The process begins with a comprehensive assessment of individual needs, aspirations, and current progress, along with barriers to progress and individualised targets. These are documented in the ILP and reviewed termly. This sets out clear, measurable goals tailored to the student and ensures they understand what they are working towards. Regular evaluation and adaptation of the ILP's ensures support meets the evolving needs of students. Key components include collecting data on academic performance, attendance, behaviour, and post-16 destinations to monitor progress and guide targeted interventions, ensuring the delivery of high-quality education and positive outcomes. In response to parental feedback, regular feedback is provided to parents and carers, in the form of daily contact, progress reports and ILP reviews.

The Expected Outcome and Transition Plans (EOTP's) for students in AP, complements the ILP by focusing on long-term outcomes, including educational, personal, and career transitions. It ensures a seamless transition between educational phases by involving relevant stakeholders, such as school staff, local authority representatives, and external agencies.

The AP Team conducts regular reviews of both plans in collaboration with providers, students, and parents/carers. These reviews monitor progress, adjust targets as needed, and provide students with evidence of their success when targets are being met.

Key to the success of this implementation has been the collaborative approach with AP's, ensuring that all professionals involved have contributed to the plans. This has maximised the effectiveness of decision-making and ensured that the plans remain focused on achieving the best possible outcomes for each student in AP. This structured and collaborative approach has provided students with tailored support, enabling them to overcome barriers and achieve their potential during their time in AP. Additionally, this collaborative approach ensures alternative provision remains, flexible, effective, and focused on achieving the best outcomes for students.

This year's renewed focus has been supporting students return to mainstream education or other appropriate pathways, with priority given to their academic, social, and emotional development. Regular reporting and reviews of transition processes ensure transparency and continuous improvement within the team. Feedback from parents, students, AP providers, and schools is essential for improving services and sharing good practices.

6.3. Gathering and using Feedback

We now hold termly reviews with parents, carers, and students in alternative provision to gather valuable feedback and ensure their experiences are reviewed and improved where possible. These reviews provide an opportunity to understand the needs and perspectives of students and their families, enabling a collaborative approach to education and support in AP. To enhance this process, we have implemented an online reporting system that delivers real-time data and generates feedback evaluation reports. This system allows us to track progress and experiences for students in AP and identify areas requiring improvement across the service.

By using this data-driven approach, we can make informed decisions about provision, tailor interventions, and drive meaningful improvements in the quality of education and support provided to students in AP. This initiative reflects our commitment to transparency, accountability, and the delivery of high-quality alternative provision.

6.4. Parent, Carer and Student Feedback:

- **Safety:** 83.3% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their child is happy at their alternative provision, with 88.9% of respondents stating that they strongly agreed or agreed that their child feels safe at their alternative provision. Just 5.6% disagreed with the statement that their child is happy at their alternative provision and a further 5.6% were unsure.
- **Wellbeing:** A significant proportion of respondents also strongly agreed or agreed that their child's well-being and behaviour has improved since accessing alternative provision, with 83.3% of respondents agreeing their child's well-being has improved and 72.2% agreeing their child's behaviour has improved. This is likely to be linked to the fact that 89.9% of children enjoy the qualifications at their alternative provision.
- **Personal Development:** 94.4% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their child's alternative provision provider supported their child's wider personal development.

These reviews have provided valuable insight into how students and parents feel about alternative provision and highlighted key areas of focus, including post-16 transitions, attendance, and ensuring parents and pupils have a clear understanding of progress and achievements in AP.

In response to feedback regarding low attendance and additional support around post-16 advice and guidance, we have developed and implemented a Key Stage 4 attendance plan for KS4 students on the roll of The New Leaf School, featuring personalised strategies to improve student attendance. We will be overseeing the impact of this plan into the spring and summer terms. Additionally, we have extended our AP Keyworker support for these pupils, into the autumn term of post-16 study to provide support to reduce the risk of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) and to support retention in post-16 placements.

- **Behaviour:** Majority (91.4%) of respondents feel their behaviour has improved since starting the provision. 5.7% of respondents reported that their behaviour has "Sometimes" improved. 2.9% of respondents do not feel their behaviour has improved.
- **Attendance:** Majority (85.7%) of respondents feel their attendance has improved, and 14.3% of respondents do not feel their attendance has improved. While most respondents report improvement in attendance, a notable 14.3% do not feel any progress, suggesting further focus may be needed in this area.
- **Attitude to Learning:** Majority (94.3%) of respondents feel their attitude to learning has improved, 2.9% of respondents reported "Sometimes" improvement in their attitude to learning, and 2.9% of respondents do not feel their attitude to learning has improved. Nearly all respondents feel a positive shift in their attitude toward learning, demonstrating the provision's success in enhancing academic engagement.
- **Attitude Towards Staff:** 97.1% of respondents feel their attitude towards staff has improved, while 2.9% of respondents do not feel their attitude towards staff has improved. This signifies a very high level of improvement in attitude towards staff and highlights the strong relationships and trust developed between students and staff.
- **Attitude Towards Peers:** 82.9% of respondents feel their attitude towards peers has improved, while 14.3% of respondents reported "Sometimes" improvement in their attitude towards peers and 2.9% of respondents do not feel their attitude towards peers has improved.

7. AP Thematic Review Working Group:

Summary of the Alternative Provision Thematic Review Meeting Evaluation Report (Dec 2024):

Purpose: The Alternative Provision Thematic Working Group was established to celebrate existing strengths within the system and identify areas for development to further enhance the quality of AP and strengthen the outcomes of students in AP in Walsall. The group aimed to address key challenges and develop strategic, evidence-based recommendations to ensure that AP effectively meets the diverse needs of students. By facilitating collaboration and building on current successes, the group sought to drive improvements that would strengthen the provision and support positive outcomes for all learners.

Membership: The AP Thematic Working Group brought together a diverse membership, including representatives from the AP Team, AP providers, Admissions and Sufficiency, the Inclusion Hub, Virtual School, PRUs, parents, carers, pupils, Education Psychology, the Quality Team, the SEND Team, the School Attendance Service, Health, and Social Care. Weekly or bi-weekly meetings were held over an eight-week review period, lasting 1-2 hours, with agendas shared in advance and minutes documented in a shared Teams area.

Objectives: Over an 8 week period, the group focused on key objectives: (1) developing a bespoke Walsall definition of AP, (2) creating a centralised AP Register, (3) establishing a robust model for reviewing AP providers, (4) designing effective student transition pathways, (5) enhancing multi-agency collaboration for commissioning and decision-making, (6) creating a preventative model led by the Local Authority, and (7) refining AP commissioning arrangements to meet local needs.

These activities culminated in the finalisation and implementation of frameworks and strategies to strengthen Walsall's AP, with a review mechanism to ensure ongoing progress.

The group emphasised the importance of multi-agency collaboration, involving key agencies and partners, and providing training to the social care workforce to improve their understanding of the AP process. They also focused on the importance of ensuring smooth transitions for students, involving parents and students in decision-making, and addressing challenges such as budget constraints and staffing capacity.

The working group has made significant strides by encouraging focused and clear planning, resulting in a precise set of actions moving forward. The group adopted a solution-focused approach, not merely discussing challenges but collaboratively identifying what needs to be implemented and how to achieve it. This child-centred and improvement-driven focus has united stakeholders across Local Authorities, ensuring alignment and prioritisation of the needs of children at the heart of decision-making and action planning.

Overall, the efforts of the Alternative Provision Thematic Review Working Group have laid a strong foundation for sustainable improvements in AP, for future development of a more efficient, accessible, and supportive system that meets the diverse needs of students in Walsall. The implementation plan seeks to drive forward the identified improvements with clear focus and actions.

8. Future Development

We will use our AP Register to support further collaboration with schools for students in AP, to monitor their outcomes and reduce their time in AP. We will work collaboratively with our schools, providing them with our audit checklists and commissioning guidance to support teachers in quality assuring alternative provision placements. Where required, this will help schools establish a robust process to ensure that the placements they commission are safe and appropriate for their students, and they are making good progress.

Ongoing work of the Thematic Review implementation plan will continue the work to improve access and further drive positive outcomes in AP. By driving action in these areas, the group aims to further improve the quality, accessibility, and outcomes for students of Walsall accessing of alternative provision ensuring it better meets their needs.

9. Conclusion:

In conclusion, Alternative Provision remains a focal area for our Local Authority. While we have made significant progress, there is more to drive forward to ensure an accessible supportive service for the use of AP, particularly in the areas of intervention and further collaboration with AP's and mainstream schools that commission AP. The next 12 months will see targeted efforts in line with the implementation plan to support all pupils within AP and ensure good outcomes across all AP settings in our region to ensure pupil's get the right support, in the right place and at the right time.

10. Decide

The committee may decide to request further information on Alternative Provision.

11. Respond

Any recommendations made by the committee will be responded to by the appropriate service area.

12. Review

The actions and outcomes within this report are monitored by Access & Inclusion SMT and by individual schools.

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