

Unpacking the new guidelines for alternative provision: Practical steps for education institutions and providers

13 May 2025  Trish D'Souza and Laura Murphy

The recent overhaul of the Arranging Alternative Provision (AP) guidance has given education leaders plenty to think about.

As we unpack the new guidelines, we reflect on what these changes may mean for those leading education institutions and providers.

Embracing the 3-tier model

The introduction of a 3-tier model is a step forward for alternative provision and ensuring consistency. The tiers move through targeted support with the mainstream school, then moves on to time-limited support from outreach such as alternative setting and the final tier is a transitional placement where pupils may not be able to return to original school or mainstream. It could include a permanent transition to another school or a suitable post-16 destination.

It's not just about providing a place for students who cannot fit into the traditional classroom setting anymore. This model extends AP's reach, offering layers of support that start right from within mainstream schools through outreach efforts and onto more permanent solutions. Education leaders need to think about how to integrate these tiers effectively within their policies and procedures, ensuring that support is fluid and accessible at all levels. This includes the use of remote education or in-school support units.

Flexibility is key

The key point to note in the new guidance is 'flexibility.' Whether it's through remote education options or the positive use of in-school units, the ability to tailor educational experiences to specific learner needs is key in the new guidance. Leaders should consider how their institutions can adopt more flexible learning models, not just as a response to significant events. This is about being proactive rather than reactive.

Funding

Navigating the financial practicalities of AP will require detailed understanding and clear lines of accountability as it is not always obvious from where the funding flows from for commissioned AP. Education leaders must stay informed about these changes, work closely with the local authority and understand how they can impact the provision of services. Strategic planning and budgeting will be essential to ensure that funds are used effectively to support the broad spectrum of student needs in the school community.

Outreach: Not an afterthought

The guidance encourages a proactive approach to support. Instead of waiting for students to require AP, outreach efforts can help address issues before they escalate (this is also the aim of early intervention). This proactive approach not only helps in managing student behaviour and learning challenges, but also plays a critical role in inclusion. Leaders should think about how to foster a culture of support that is evident throughout their schools.

Safeguarding and strategic planning for AP

AP providers, as with all education providers must stay up-to-date on how to handle sensitive issues like sexual violence and harassment and as ever safeguarding practices need to be robust. Education leaders must ensure that policies are not only compliant but are also practical and reflective of the real-world scenarios their staff and students may come across. Additionally, the call for multi-year strategic planning for AP underscores the need for long-term vision and sustained commitment to these programs, this highlights the need for collaborative working between institutions and the local authorities.

The role of in-school units

The specific inclusion/reference to/of in-school units within the guidance highlights their importance as a bridge between traditional schooling or placements and AP. These units can serve as a key intervention point. Leaders should consider how these units are integrated into the school environment, ensuring they are not isolated but are part of a cohesive strategy to support all students in an education setting, creating a whole school approach and a more positive path for reintegration.

Remote education: A permanent fixture?

Lastly, the inclusion of remote education in the guidance solidifies its place in current educational planning and that it was not just a post-Covid hangover. Leaders need to think about how remote learning can be utilised to support AP effectively, ensuring that it is engaging, fair, and educationally sound, i.e. would it appropriately support individual pupils and their specific needs?

The new guidance has really prompted a shift away from the old, fragmented approach to AP and is guiding education leaders towards a more pupil-focused strategy. This new direction and guidance is going to give the sector more clarity around pupils with SEND and those who find mainstream settings challenging. This will ensure they receive the appropriate support that they need in the most appropriate setting.

It's a positive move for remote and online education, recognising these platforms as potentially the first port of call for students unable to attend mainstream provision due to exclusion, illness, or waiting for a school placement, rather than a last resort if nothing else is working. The focus on attainment and achievement is no longer attributed to the requirements for pupils to have in-person attendance but that the provision they receive is right for them via whichever method fits their needs.

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