The familial circumstances of children in alternative provision

A literature review

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While its author is a civil servant in DfE, any views and analysis presented in this literature review are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect those of DfE, or of the current and previous governments.

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Abstract

This literature review considers the familial circumstances of children who attend alternative provision: a cohort widely recognised by policy makers, academics and others with an interest as being among the most vulnerable and marginalised in the English education system. It draws upon a blended range of recent qualitative and quantitative research on this subject which has been undertaken by academics, charities and third sector organisations, together with data and research commissioned and published by DfE, Ofsted and the government.

> "What is consistent in the [alternative provision] sector is extensive family engagement. The family is most frequently positioned as a paradox, as both the primary cause of children being excluded, a result of poor parenting or a lack of boundaries, but also a primary factor in the potential for their children being re-engaged in education through collaborating with alternative provision settings[2]".

When families engage positively with their children's education, and have good relationships with their children's schools, this can make a big difference to key educational outcomes like attainment, attendance and behaviour. Parental engagement has a positive incremental effect on marginalised families; the more resources are directed towards supporting children and families, the better the outcomes[3]. However, those with adverse socio-demographic familial circumstances and negative experiences of the education system are the most challenging families for education practitioners to work with: the "hardest-to-reach"[4]. Helping families to actively support their children's learning is important in all schools, but it is a fundamental part of alternative provision practice: it is crucial to improving disengaged children's outcomes, and to re-engaging these children and their families with the education system.

The causes of exclusion from mainstream education and/or moves into alternative provision are complex, and it is simplistic to solely ascribe this to "poor parenting or a lack of boundaries". As can be seen in some of the research considered in this paper, negative familial experiences of the education system, material poverty and adverse childhood experiences are common in children who attend alternative provision.

This literature review explores some of the challenges for the children and their marginalised families as they navigate the complexities of the education system. It highlights some of the techniques used by alternative provision practitioners to restore the broken trust between families and schools that often precedes children entering this sector. It also explores changes in relationships between families and alternative provision that have emerged in response to the growth of independent alternative provision, which now delivers education and support to a sizeable proportion of the alternative provision cohort.

[2] Page, 2021.
[3] Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.
[4] Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.

Executive summary

In the English education system, alternative provision educates and supports children of compulsory school age who, for varying reasons, are unable to attend mainstream primary and secondary schools. DfE collects data on alternative provision placements that have been commissioned by schools and local authorities, and publishes annual statistics, which includes information on the characteristics of the children who attend alternative provision[5]. This data highlights the complex, intersectional vulnerabilities that have come to typify many of these children; and as a consequence, this cohort is widely recognised as being among the most vulnerable and marginalised in the English education system. This literature review considers the familial circumstances of these children, and the differing roles of their families in localised decision-making on alternative provision placements.

Analysis part 1: Alternative provision and marginalised families

DfE's data shows that nearly two-thirds (63%) of those in state-funded alternative provision live in materially poor families who are eligible for free school meals[6], with many residing in areas of high deprivation[7]. For children experiencing poverty, there can be "significant differences in health, in family interactions, in the home learning environment, and in parenting styles and rules"[8]. In recent years the effects of underlying social deprivation have been "…exacerbated by societal changes, cuts to local services, and increases in the cost of living"[9], and many children now experience "an almost-Dickensian level of poverty" that affects all aspects of their life, including their education[10]. The families of many of those in alternative provision are therefore "…often keenly affected by structural economic inequalities and the additional impacts of austerity[11]."

A quarter (25%) of the children in state-funded alternative provision settings are classified by the government as being children in need, which means that they have been referred to social services in response to concerns about their domestic circumstances[12]. Many experience combinations of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)[13] like domestic violence[14], bereavement, abuse, household dysfunction, and neglect, which can profoundly affect their emotional development and well-being[15]. Their chaotic home lives might mean that they move frequently between mainstream or specialised schools, sometimes in multiple local authorities[16], resulting in a "fractured and disrupted education"[17]. Around a quarter of those in state-funded alternative provision have been permanently excluded from a primary

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[5] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025.
[6] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025 - 63% of children in state-funded alternative provision are eligible for free school meals, compared with 26% in all types of state-funded mainstream schools.
[7] According to Centre for Social Justice, 2020, there is a strong correlation between areas of high deprivation and areas where high proportions of school pupils are educated in alternative provision.
[8] Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010.
[9] Page, 2021.
[10] Office of the Children's commissioner, 2025.
[11] Page, 2021.
[12] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025. In comparison, 2% of those in all types of state-funded mainstream schools are children in need.
[13] Lloyd, 2018.
[14] In 2018 oral evidence to the Education Select Committee, an alternative provision leader said that around 90% of children referred to her school had experienced domestic abuse.
[15] Loizidou, 2009.
[16] ISOS, 2018.
[17] Ofsted, 2024.

or secondary school[18]. Understandably, many have fallen behind academically before entering the system. Alternative provision helps children to regain lost learning, from often very low starting points, so that they can be reintegrated back into mainstream education where possible. However, despite the best efforts of the practitioners, the educational attainment levels of those who finish their education in state-funded alternative provision settings are often extremely low[19].

Over 80% of the children in state-funded alternative provision have a recorded Special Educational Need (SEN)[20]. Complex needs, sometimes linked to children's negative familial circumstances, can be unidentified, misidentified and unmet in children who have moved frequently around educational settings, or who in some cases have dropped out of the education system completely. Alternative provision practitioners are experts responding to the multiple factors that may have led to the placements. They also deliver additional support, both within the settings themselves and with referrals to relevant partners like Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), medical provision, social services, or other localised educational providers. Alternative provision is therefore:

> "…well placed to be able to identify any unknown needs, gain an up-to-date understanding of known needs, plan supportive strategies and work to ensure that the stakeholders of pupils' progress and safety are made aware, as appropriate" [21].

Many children in the alternative provision system are caught in a continuing cycle of poverty, instability, low educational outcomes and poor mental health, with successive generations of the same families being exposed to similar traumatic and toxic combinations of disorder and deprivation[22]. These families, who may often have their own long-standing negative experiences and perceptions of the education system, do not have the required connections or the economic and social capital needed to negotiate systemic complexities, leaving them "fighting a system that they do not understand and that they feel is stacked against them"[23]. They lack the knowledge, confidence or resources to support their children's education[24]. Already poor educational outcomes are exacerbated when marginalised families cannot engage effectively with their children's learning[25]. They may find it more difficult to obtain the right support for their children's SEN[26], or be less likely to successfully appeal if their children are excluded from school, as they "do not have the knowledge, the understanding, the trust, or the experience to exert their rights, and they do not have access to advocacy"[27].

In many cases, referrals to alternative provision follow a breakdown in the critical relationship between children's families and the individuals or agencies that educate and support their children, including their schools. Families are left to feel "powerless and alienated from the processes that are used to manage referrals, transfers and monitor progress"[28]. Ineffective communication between schools and parents during the referral process leaves them

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[18] FFT datalab. 2019.
[19] taken from the Department for Education's ,key stage 4 performance official statistics , 2024: Less than 5% of state-funded alternative provision pupils achieve good passes in English and maths, compared with over 65% of their peers in state-funded mainstream schools.
[20] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025.
[21] IntegratED, 2022.
[22] Kew-Simpson, 2023.
[23] Education Select Committee, 2018.
[24] Buttle UK, 2019.
[25] Buttle UK, 2019.
[26] As noted by the Education Policy Institute, 2021,children living in local authorities with high levels of disadvantage are less likely to be identified with SEN than children of similar backgrounds in more affluent areas.
[27] Education Select Committee, 2018.
[28] DfE, 2017.

unclear about the aims of the placements and the pathways out of alternative provision[29]. Feelings of anxiety prior to starting placements[30] can intensify, with existing societal stigmas heightened during the complex and often adversarial alternative provision referral process[31].

Highly-skilled alternative provision practitioners recognise the problematic relationship between families and the education system, and the fundamental importance that intensive family engagement can play in re-establishing broken trust:

> "When parents and carers are positively involved, children are more likely to have improved self-confidence, are more likely to see the importance of school, be healthy and gain higher grades. Effective home and family engagement provides opportunities that enable parents and carers to be involved at all stages of their child's education in alternative provision"[32].

The practitioners, which often include dedicated family support workers, mediate between families and schools to help children successfully re-integrate into mainstream or specialised education[33]. They deliver advocacy, mentoring and support groups for families to help build mutual respect, trust and responsibility. Routine family interactions that children may not experience at home, like sitting around a table for meals, are replicated[34]. In return, the children appreciate their relationships with alternative provision staff and enjoy having trusted adults that they can communicate with[35].

"Micro work" undertaken during visits to family homes, further re-establishes trust and provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities of family lives. Alongside interventions to improve educational outcomes, there is practical support for children and families. Behaviour management techniques and reward schemes may result in parents' own behaviour being challenged. Family members are given help to access support for mental health or medical care, to source domestic appliances or food, or money to buy uniforms to ease their children's moves back into mainstream schools. This "micro-work" even extends to escorting parents confined to the home by anxiety to school meetings, registering children with the NHS, or helping to clean kitchens[36].

Alternative provision is increasingly delivering early intervention outreach support in mainstream schools for children at risk of suspension or permanent exclusion[37]. Outreach workers observe children in their classrooms, and in discussions with teachers, partner agencies and families. To build credibility and trust, this type of support is presented as being "neutral, one step removed from schools". Positive relationships are promoted, with families encouraged to be honest and open about their challenges. Outreach teams also signpost families towards appropriate local agencies for access to further support and provide behavioural and learning strategies that can be used with children at home[38].

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[29] Ofsted 2024.
[30] IntegratEd, 2022.
[31] For example, Wilson and McGuire, 2020 note that working-class mothers can feel "judged negatively by teachers and the school system, based on their marginalised (and sometimes multiple) social identities. Perceptions of stigma were recalled by parents, who felt this negatively impacted upon their engagement in their children's education".
[32] IntegratEd, 2022.
[33] Malcolm, 2021.
[34] DfE, 2017.
[35] Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2022.
[36] Page, 2021.
[37] DfE, 2022: Early intervention outreach support is the first tier of the new model for alternative provision outlined in the government's SEND and alternative provision green paper.
[38] What works in SEND, 2023.

Analysis part 2: The role of families in the growth of independent alternative provision

Much of the literature discussed in the first part of the analysis is based around the experiences of the marginalised and socially excluded families that are historically associated with state-funded alternative provision. This part of the sector has its basis in the segregated education policies of the mid-20th century, in which local authorities were given powers to establish schools for "disruptive children and those excluded from mainstream schooling". Children who were considered to be "educationally sub-normal" (ESN) were removed from the education system and placed in specialised ESN schools which operated separately from mainstream primary and secondary schools[39].

Towards the end of the century, there was a "global shift in education policy, with a world-wide movement towards the inclusion of populations of young people who would previously have been wholly excluded from the education system"[40]. The second part of the analysis considers the influence of families in the growth of a different type of alternative provision that has arguably emerged in response to the move towards greater inclusivity in the English education system.

This move towards inclusivity is apparent in many of the education policies of successive English governments in the 21st century. In particular, in 2014, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government announced a range of radical reforms to the SEN system, including statutory education, health and care (EHC) plans for those with the most complex needs, extending the age range for SEN support from birth to 25 years old, and a new requirement for local authorities to publish a "SEN local offer". Parents were given more involvement in local decision-making, statutory powers to work with local authorities and other partners in developing and reviewing EHC plans, and personalised budgets for SEN support, which can be delivered in mainstream schools, and in specialised settings like alternative provision[41].

These reforms were intended to create a more inclusive, straightforward and consistent system, reducing the complexity and fragmentation that families previously faced. But in practice, they have also increased demand for SEN support from schools, local authorities and from the families that were given a greater stake in the system. New pressures have been placed upon already stretched services; and for many of those with children with SEN, there is now "…a vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence from parents, carers and providers, and inefficient allocation of support[42]". In response, alternative provision has been repurposed by the government as "an intervention rather than a destination". It is expected to deliver more outreach support, which, as noted earlier, can include intensive work with families, with the aim of intervening earlier to keep children at risk of suspension or exclusion in mainstream schools instead of being moved into specialised settings[43].

The current Labour government has continued this "movement towards inclusion" as it seeks to "retain as many children as possible with SEN support in welcoming and inclusive spaces" in mainstream primary and secondary schools. It wants to move away from "a system that is skewed too far towards specialist provision, and which is consistently failing families on every measure[44]". In doing so, it has also pledged to "draw upon on the wisdom and lived experiences of parents, teachers and experts"[45].

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[39] Tomlinson and Johnson, 2024.
[40] Tomlinson, 2012.
[41] DfE, 2014.
[42] DfE 2022.
[43] DfE, 2022.
[44] Bridget Phillipson's Speech to the Confederation of School Trusts - GOV.UK.
[45] Education Secretary's speech at the ASCL conference, March 2025.

To service the demand for specialised support for children with SEN in this more inclusive mainstream system, a large and expanding independent alternative provision sub-sector has emerged. It consists of a relatively small number of independent alternative provision schools which are regulated in the same way as other types of schools; and an unknown but seemingly large number[46] of often very small, unregistered settings that deliver a wide range of bespoke education and support, including tutoring, vocational training and therapeutic interventions, often for children with EHC plans[47].

The increased demand for SEN support following the 2014 reforms, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have combined to produce unprecedented pressures on local education and support services, including alternative provision[48]. Numbers of EHC plans, which can be issued to children and young adults up to the age of 25, have increased each year since their introduction in 2014, including a 15.8% rise in the most recent reporting year[49]. Issues common in alternative provision pupils, such as disrupted learning and heightened family stress have contributed to this increased demand[50]; as have significantly more referrals for complex mental health needs[51] or neurodiverse conditions like autism spectrum disorder (ASD)[52]. Post-pandemic, alternative provision has also been called upon to respond to increasing numbers of children with emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) which has contributed to decreasing attendance in primary and secondary schools[53]. Greater numbers of younger children with unmet or undiagnosed complex needs who have entered the school system since the pandemic are also increasingly being supported by alternative provision[54].

As "the number of EHC plans has increased, so too has the number of young people educated outside the state-funded school system[55]". Strategic decisions on alternative provision by local authorities and schools are now being "driven by necessity: with the increased demand for specialised support forcing commissioners to look more widely for alternative provision[56]". Consequently, unregistered alternative provision is filling gaps in areas without sufficient specialised support for children with SEND, as well as for those with behavioural concerns that cannot be addressed in mainstream schools[57].

Tomlinson (2012) argues that in parallel with "policies and practices of inclusion", in which "many more children [previously] regarded as problematic [were being educated in] mainstream schools and classrooms", there was an "expansion of special education categories" for children with SEN. This in turn has "brought and exacerbated the need for an expanded army of special professionals working in an expanded and expensive SEN industry". According to Tomlinson, this market-led SEN industry, which includes independent

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[46] DfE does not collect any information on the numbers of unregistered settings, but in response to an FOI Act request in 2012 it estimated that there were "…several thousand [unregistered providers] in England".

[47] FFT datalab, 2022. FFT's analysis shows that over two thirds (65%) of children in unregistered alternative provision that has been commissioned by local authorities have EHC plans, compared with around a quarter of those in state-funded alternative provision.

[48] IFS, 2024.

[49] taken from DfE accredited official statistics on education, health and care plans, 2025 reporting year.

[50] Ofsted 2022.

[51] 76% of state-funded alternative provision pupils with identified SEND have social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) recorded as their primary type of need (taken from the school census: Special educational needs in England, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025).

[52] Data from NHS England, 2024 shows a 27% increase in new ASD referrals in 2023 compared with the previous year.

[53] BMJ, 2024.

[54] Ofsted, 2022.

[55] FFT datalab, 2022.

[56] ISOS, 2018.

[57] DfE: Strengthening protections in unregistered alternative provision - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk), 2024.

alternative provision, has expanded in response to the need for local authorities and schools to provide statutory specialised support for increasing numbers of children with SEN, but also in response to "demands for funding and resources coming from middle class and articulate parents"[58] who are seeking alternative educational arrangements outside of traditional school settings.

Increasing parental influence on alternative provision placements may account for recent changes in the socio-economic characteristics of some children in alternative provision. Since 2018/19, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of children living in more affluent areas who have been placed in unregistered alternative provision; and increases in demand for bespoke SEND services like one-to-one tuition, which are included in locally-published information on local authority SEND offers, and which can often be delivered in unregistered alternative provision settings[59]. The increased demand may therefore be a consequence of some "middle class and articulate parents" being more aware of the availability of this type of support, and of them having the required knowledge and social capital to access specialised services for their children by influencing localised alternative provision placement decisions.

Conclusions

Long-standing stigmas related to societal inequalities and adverse familial circumstances continue to be attached to alternative provision

Increasing demand in response to systemic pressures post-pandemic means that alternative provision continues to be a "burgeoning industry for disruptive pupils who are excluded from their schools on either a temporary or permanent basis[60]". Disproportionately high numbers of those in the system live in deprived communities, have ACEs, and have been excluded from mainstream schools. Long-standing stigmas derived from the education policies of the past in which the "educationally sub-normal" were placed in segregated ESN schools continue. Despite progress made by practitioners, often from very low starting points, the "low expectations of young people placed in alternative provision on the part of staff, parents and the young people themselves[61]" articulated by the government in 2008, still prevail. As the education system has shifted towards greater inclusivity, alternative provision remains adrift: a "dumping ground"[62] for disruptive children who do not display the normative behaviours expected in mainstream education.

Prior to starting alternative provision placements, parents and children understandably share feelings of anxiety and stigma which can intensify and compound the structural barriers they have already faced[63]. The unhelpful othering of the children attending alternative provision enables the deeply-embedded societal stereotypes and stigmas attached to this sector to prevail. The self-fulfilling prophecy of marginalised families and children being trapped in continuous cycles of poor educational outcomes and lower longer-term life chances continues. These stigmas can undermine the skilled work of alternative provision practitioners who aim to disrupt these cycles by improving marginalised children's educational outcomes.

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[58] Tomlinson, 2012.
[59] Office of the Children's Commissioner 2025. It is noted that "between 2018/19 and 2023/24, the proportion of placements for children with EHC plans in one-on-one tuition rose from 15% to 37%".
[60] Tomlinson, 2012.
[61] DCSF, 2008.
[62] Ofsted 2022.
[63] IntegratEd, 2022.

A growing divergence within alternative provision has been driven and shaped by differences in the familial circumstances of the children requiring support

As noted above, the negative and stereotypical connotations historically attached to alternative provision continue, as do perceptions that it is a last resort for challenging children who invariably experience poverty and difficult familial circumstances. However, over the last decade or so, there has been a growing divergence within the alternative provision sector, which has in part been shaped by differences in the familial circumstances of the children it supports.

In reality, while the quality of alternative provision is variable across England, outstanding state-funded alternative provision can be a system leader; a centre of excellence and an important resource for improving inclusivity. For example, in areas where there are risks of children becoming involved in serious violence, DfE's alternative provision taskforce programme includes multi-disciplinary teams of specialists providing integrated, child-centred support. Each taskforce includes a team of specialists based in an alternative provision school, including educational psychologists, therapists, post-16 transition coaches, youth workers and youth justice workers[64]. Many also include family support workers who work with children and families at their learning centres, in their homes, and in the community (for example in cafés, or when transporting children to their schools). The support is adapted and flexible to meet the children's and families' needs, and includes out of hours and holiday working schedules, so that responsive wraparound support, including holiday activities and food[65], is available at times when children are not required to attend school[66].

In other areas, there is little or no good quality alternative provision[67]; and localised systems of low quality, often unregistered settings, attempt to fulfil the needs of the most complex children and their families. Without the right support, these families can "feel as excluded as their children"[68] from processes that may help to break continuing cross-generational cycles of poor educational outcomes. The absence of economic and social capital means that they can exert little influence over their children's education. Their own negative perceptions of the education system are reinforced by their children's disengagement from their schools.

During the 21st century, the moves towards greater inclusivity in education policy, the 2014 reforms to the SEN system, and the after-effects of the pandemic, have all combined to contribute to the growth of the independent sub-sector, which continues to expand to fill gaps in local SEN provision, and which now co-exists alongside the state-funded sub-sector. This includes a "growing market of unregistered providers … which is often advertised directly to parents and carers[69]". In contrast to the disempowerment often felt by the families historically associated with alternative provision, families that possess the required confidence and knowledge of the education system can now engage with its complexities and influence local decision-makers. All parents want their children to succeed in life and will do all they can to achieve this. It is understandable that those with the required economic and social capital will use this to "leverage the system [and] exert their rights"[70], if this leads to additional support for their children that is not available elsewhere in the system.

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[64] Council for Disabled Children, 2024.
[65] This is often in conjunction with the government's holiday activities and food offer.
[66] DfE, 2024.
[67] Centre for Social Justice, 2020. In eight local authorities, every child in alternative provision was in settings that were considered to be inadequate or requiring improvement.
[68] Page, 2021.
[69] Ofsted, 2024.
[70] Education Select Committee, 2018.

There are now differing perceptions of the purpose of alternative provision

Alternative provision is the "'metaphorical expanding putty of the education sector' … filling the gaps left by other agencies whose work didn't fit together"[71]. However, the advent of parental influence in alternative provision placements represents a paradigm shift; a marked divergence from the accepted historical perceptions of the sector.

There are now differing perceptions of alternative provision and tensions between parents, commissioners and practitioners about its purpose. In particular, according to Ofsted, the increased availability of unregistered alternative provision has led to an "increase in parents advocating for placements with limited educational elements [which] professionals deem to be unsuitable". Some parents now believe that their children's academic learning in alternative provision is "being compromised by behavioural support", and that alternative provision should not be used as "a place to put children with behavioural challenges". In turn, practitioners have raised concerns about settings "focusing on behaviour… and not the real issue that needs to be addressed"[72]. The growth of independent alternative provision has raised legitimate questions about the purpose of the sector as a whole.

Comparatively little information is available on the familial circumstances of children in independent alternative provision, and on the organisations delivering it

The information that DfE collects on placements in the independent and unregistered sub-sector is not analysed and published in the same way as its annual data on state-funded alternative provision. Consequently, relatively little is known about the organisations that are commissioned by schools and local authorities to deliver alternative provision; or about the characteristics and familial circumstances of the thousands of children who attend placements in these settings every year.

In particular, it is unclear why some families seemingly advocate for their children's education and support to be delivered outside of mainstream schools, often in unregistered settings that do not have the same oversight as other parts of the education system. Little is also known about the finances, governance and ownership of the charities and private sector organisations that receive public funding to deliver the provision; about the progress made by the children in these settings; and about whether the diverse types of alternative provision that make up this sector are delivering value for money by improving children's educational outcomes and longer term life chances.

Mainstream schools can learn from the early intervention and parental engagement practices that are common in alternative provision, but resources must be targeted towards the most marginalised families

Most children have two main educators in their lives – their parents and their teachers. Children's families continue to be a major influence on their learning throughout school and beyond[73]. Effective home and family engagement is fundamental to alternative provision practice, with "opportunities for parents and carers to be involved at all stages of their child's education and journey[74]".

Parental engagement in children's education can have a positive incremental effect on the outcomes of children from marginalised families[75]. In the government's new model for alternative provision, the system is expected to tilt towards the delivery of early intervention outreach support in mainstream schools which often includes extensive work with families as

[71] Page, 2021.
[72] Ofsted, 2024.
[73] Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.
[74] IntegratEd, 2022.
[75] Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.

well as children[76]. However, this type of work is by no means widespread. Many primary and secondary schools do not currently commission outreach support for children who need it; often due to a lack of local availability or prohibitive costs[77].

In alternative provision, "the extent and depth of engagement strategies is heavily determined by their organisational size and [their] staffing resources"[78]. Mainstream schools are usually much larger than alternative provision settings, and lack the dedicated resources, or the capability amongst staff, to undertake extensive early intervention work with families. Preventative outreach support, delivered by practitioners with an understanding of the day-to-day challenges for marginalised families can build capacity within mainstream schools, giving school staff the skills and confidence to support parents who can find it difficult to engage with schools. To maximise the benefits, local resources for family engagement would therefore best be directed towards those working with the most marginalised families.

[76] SEND review: right support, right place, right time - GOV.UK.
[77] DfE 2023.
[78] IntegratEd, 2022.

Contents

Methodology

Overview of research aims

This paper is a review of the literature on the familial circumstances of children in alternative provision in England. It draws upon a blended range of qualitative and quantitative research on this subject which has been undertaken by academics, charities and third sector organisations, together with data and research commissioned and published by DfE, Ofsted and the government.

DfE collects data on alternative provision pupils in its school and alternative provision censuses and publishes annual statistics on placements in state-funded and independent alternative provision[79]. The published data is used by the government to measure the characteristics of alternative provision pupils, often relative to their peers in mainstream schools, and is also available to academics, practitioners, and others with an interest in this policy area.

The data shows that many children in alternative provision experience adverse familial circumstances. This paper examines published research on the familial circumstances and parental experiences of children placed in this sector. Additionally, where considered to be relevant, wider research on the familial circumstances of types of children who are over-represented in the alternative provision system (for example, children who have been excluded from school, children with SEN, working class boys, and children from some ethnic groups) was also considered.

Limitations

While other countries have their own systems for educating and supporting children not able to participate in mainstream education, the aim of this literature review is to consider the experiences of children and their families in the English education system. It therefore does not include research from other jurisdictions, including the other nations that form the United Kingdom.

Similarly, because alternative provision in England is legally only available for children of compulsory school age, this paper only considers research on the families of children who are of compulsory school age (that is, between the ages of 5 and 16).

While most alternative provision provides behavioural and SEND support, there is a small number of settings that educate and support children who cannot attend school for medical reasons. The initial online search did not find any relevant research relating to the families of children who attend medical alternative provision, and this type of provision is therefore outside of the scope of this paper.

This project commenced in late 2023, towards the end of the Sunak Conservative administration. To ensure that this paper reflected upon the policies of that government and its immediate predecessors, it primarily considered research undertaken after the election of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010. However, following the outcome of the 2024 election, when a Labour government came into power, additional contextual information was added on relevant alternative provision and family engagement policies of the previous Labour administration up to 2010, and on the new government's relevant policies.

[79] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025.

Criteria

An initial online search, using terms like "families", “parents” and “alternative provision” identified around 80 articles for initial consideration that were within scope, A sift of abstracts and executive summaries was undertaken, and each piece of research was assessed based on the following criteria, which were agreed with a DfE social researcher:

- whether the research considers links between families' outcomes or circumstances and those of their children;
- whether the research considers the impacts of alternative provision working with families;
- whether the research includes pupil and family voice (for example interviews with children and/or family members);
- whether the report considers alternative provision alongside contemporary policy context;
- whether the research demonstrated that it used validated methods or techniques; and
- whether the conclusions were evidence-based and substantiated by data.

Following the sift, around 60 pieces of research were assessed in full, with access to academic texts granted via York University’s Open Athens portal. Following the assessment, a full coding of each piece of research was undertaken using Excel. The key themes that emerged from the coding form the basis of this paper’s analysis. Not all of the articles that were assessed and coded have been included in this paper.

Review

Drafts of the paper were shared with a DfE social researcher and a data analyst, senior members of the DfE alternative provision team, relevant policy DfE policy officials and a small group of alternative provision leaders. All feedback was taken into consideration in the final draft, which was proofread by a DfE policy official. Further reviews were provided by the academic support from the University of York, as part of the Open Innovation Fellowship programme.

Introduction

What is alternative provision?

Alternative provision is a policy term used by the government and DfE to describe education for school-age children who are not able to receive full-time education in mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. DfE's statutory guidance outlines the circumstances, including permanent exclusion, suspension, and illness, in which alternative provision can be arranged[80].

Its legal basis derives from section 19 of the Education Act 1996, which gives local authorities the power to establish pupil referral units (PRUs) to provide education for excluded pupils and others outside of mainstream education. Legislative changes since then have led to the establishment of alternative provision academies and alternative provision free schools. Since 2013, mainstream schools have also had the power to direct pupils offsite to alternative provision for targeted behavioural support[81]. Local authorities and schools can also arrange alternative provision for children who cannot attend school due to physical or mental health conditions[82].

Around 4% of the school population is placed in alternative provision every year[83]. Over four fifths (83%) of state-funded alternative provision pupils have identified SEN, including just over a quarter (26%) with multiple, complex needs who have EHC plans[84]. Where a child has an EHC plan, local authorities usually name an educational institution for them to attend. An alternative provision setting can be specified in an EHC plan, but DfE's guidance states that "alternative provision should not be used as a substitute for special school provision simply because there is insufficient capacity in local SEND provision"[85].

The sector consists of both state-funded provision (where funding for placements is provided by the government directly) and independent provision (which is funded by local authority and school commissioners). State-funded alternative provision, which educates and supports around 27,700 pupils annually, includes 334 PRUs, alternative provision academies and alternative provision free schools[86]. DfE does not publish data on the numbers of school-age children in independent alternative provision; but during the 2024/25 academic year, 17,470 children of compulsory school age were placed by schools, and 15,800 were placed by local authorities, in a large and unknown number of independent unregistered alternative providers[87].

Alternative provision differs from area to area. In some local authorities there is predominantly state-funded provision, in a small number there is no state-funded provision at all, but in most there is a mix of state-funded and independent and unregistered alternative provision. In 111 local authorities surveyed in 2018, 28% of the providers commissioned were state-funded, 19% were registered as an independent school, and 24% were

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[80] DfE, 2025.
[81] As specified in section 29A of the Education Act 2002, introduced by the Education and Skills Act 2008.
[82] As outlined in DfE, 2023.
[83] Thomson, FFT Education Datalab 2021.
[84] taken from the school census: Special educational needs in England, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025.
[85] DfE, 2025.
[86] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025.
[87] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025. Children can have multiple placements over the course of a year and some may have been placed in both state-funded and independent unregistered settings during the reporting period. These figures are therefore not comparable.

unregistered. Smaller proportions of providers included further education colleges (13%), alternative provision units situated in mainstream schools (6%) and alternative provision places in special schools (6%)[88].

While this variance can be viewed as being beneficial, with differing types of provision offering a greater choice of provision and pathways, this trend is often "driven by necessity: [with] the pressure on provision forcing local authorities and schools to look more widely for alternative provision, including in the independent sector" [89].

The quality of alternative provision is also variable. In 2020, in 21 local authorities, over half of all alternative provision pupils were in settings that were considered by Ofsted to be inadequate or requiring improvement[90]. In contrast, in seven local authorities, over half of the alternative provision cohort was in provision that was considered by Ofsted to be outstanding[91].

Alternative provision is primarily intended to improve challenging behaviour, but its purpose differs, depending upon local strategic approaches to inclusion. In areas with an explicit focus on reducing permanent exclusions, alternative provision is more likely to be tilted towards preventative support and re-integrating children back into mainstream education. In other areas its use is more reactive, to "fulfil statutory duties and to find places within non-mainstream provision for pupils who for one reason or another were not in a mainstream or special school[92]".

The government's 2022 SEND and alternative provision green paper[93] sets out a new, three-tier model for alternative provision, in which the sector is positioned as "an intervention, not a destination." The sector is expected to pivot away from longer-term "downstream" placements, where children attend alternative provision reactively for indefinite and sometimes lengthy periods of time, towards delivering "upstream" outreach interventions in mainstream schools. This is intended to help the schools to identify children who are at risk of suspension and permanent exclusion early and to deliver interventions to keep them in mainstream education, thereby reducing numbers of preventable and expensive alternative provision placements.

The importance of parental engagement in children's education

In 2008, the Labour government published Back on Track[94], its strategy for modernising alternative provision. Its child- and family-centred approach reflected that government's strategy of placing families at the heart of the education system[95], with a renewed focus on improving collaboration between families, schools and local agencies; and government-funded projects to support partnership working with marginalised families in mainstream schools[96]. Reported benefits of these projects included:

- improved family functioning and relationships;
- increased understanding of the young person, and their behaviours within the family context, among education professionals;
- increased parent/carer capacity to provide continuity of support between school and home; and

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88 ISOS, 2018.
89 ISOS, 2018.
90 Centre for Social Justice. 2020: in eight local authorities, every child in alternative provision was in settings that were considered to be inadequate or requiring improvement.
91 Centre for Social Justice. 2020.
92 ISOS, 2018.
93 DfE, 2022.
94 DCSF, 2008.
95 HMT, 2005.
96 DCSF, 2007.

- greater trust and collaboration between parents and education staff[97].

These programmes were discontinued by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government soon after it took office in 2010. The same government commissioned a review of alternative provision, which, in terms of family engagement, focussed primarily on the importance of involving families in decisions on placements[98].

It is important to differentiate between family involvement "where families take part in structured activities within a school" like joining parent-teacher associations or attending planned parents' evenings; and familial or parental engagement, which is where there is a "culture of shared responsibility for children's educational success" between schools, families and other local partners[99].

Effective parental engagement, which includes building home/school relationships and helping families to improve the quality of home learning environments, is crucial to all children's educational progress. When families engage positively with their children's education (for example by reading with them, or by providing space and equipment for them to complete homework), and they have positive relationships with their children's schools, this can make a significant difference to key outcomes in attainment, attendance and behaviour. A 2010 review of evidence commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families found that:

- parental engagement in children's education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement, and continues to do so into adolescence and adulthood;
- the quality and content of fathers' involvement matters more for children's outcomes than the quantity of time fathers spend with their children;
- the attitudes and aspirations of parents and of children themselves predict later educational achievement. Parents with high aspirations tend to be more involved in their children's education; and
- the levels of parental involvement vary among parents. For example, mothers, parents of young children, parents from some ethnic groups and parents of children with SEND are all more likely than average to be very involved in their children's education[100].

Children have reported that parental support could influence theirs and their peers' attendance and performance at school[101]. When families are positively involved, children are more likely to have improved self-confidence, are more likely to see the importance of school, be healthy and gain higher grades[102]:

> "When parents and carers are treated as partners with valued expertise, they are more likely to support a school's efforts and decisions. Taking a welcoming, respectful and professional approach to initial interactions, and providing opportunities, often leads to parents and carers expectations being exceeded"[103].

In response to low standards in reading in primary schools, particularly amongst "children from white-working class backgrounds and those with special educational needs"; the

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97 DfE, 2010.
98 DfE, 2013.
99 Page, Leeds Beckett University, 2021.
100 Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.
101 Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2017.
102 DfE, 2017.
103 IntegratEd, 2022.

current Secretary of State for Education has recently re-affirmed the importance of parental engagement in children's education[104].

Barriers to effective parental engagement

Parental engagement has a positive incremental effect on disadvantaged families: the more resources are directed towards supporting children and families, the better the outcomes. However, those experiencing material disadvantage are less likely to have books at home to regularly read with their children[105]; to have sufficient space or IT equipment for their children to complete homework; or to be able to afford educational visits[106]. Those with adverse sociodemographic familial circumstances and negative experiences of the education system are the most challenging families for schools to work with: the "hardest-to-reach":

> "More sustained and intensive approaches to support parental engagement may be needed for some children—for example, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those with behavioural difficulties. More intensive approaches, which target particular families or outcomes, are associated with larger learning gains, but are also more difficult to implement[107]".

In recent years, increased pressures on the SEND and alternative provision systems have caused tensions between schools and families, and have led to "parents, carers and providers alike not knowing what is reasonable to expect and so losing confidence that mainstream settings will be able to meet the needs of their children and young people effectively[108]".

Problematic and adversarial relationships between schools and families may also inhibit effective parental engagement. A minority of parents are considered to be a "source of anxiety and increased workload" for school staff, with an imbalance of power as "social media gives parents the power to publicly express negative comments about a school or teacher"[109]. According to the National Union of Head Teachers, most school leaders now routinely experience verbal and sometimes physical abuse from parents[110].

[104] Parents urged to read more to boost children's life chances - GOV.UK, 2025.
[105] National literary trust, 2024.
[106] National Education Union, 2024.
[107] IntegratEd, 2022.
[108] DfE 2022.
[109] Ofsted, 2019.
[110] National Union of Head Teachers, 2025.

Analysis part 1: Alternative provision and marginalised families

Most of the data that DfE publishes on alternative provision derives from placements in PRUs, alternative provision academies and alternative provision free schools. State-funded provision has therefore become synonymous with the sector as a whole, and, perhaps as a consequence, much of the research considered in this paper focusses on the familial circumstances of the children in these types of settings.

While actual reasons for alternative provision placements are variable, children in state-funded alternative provision often have similar socio-economic characteristics. In particular, relatively high proportions experience material poverty and are eligible for free school meals[111]. There is also a strong correlation between areas of high deprivation and local authorities in which higher proportions of the school population is educated in alternative provision[112].

In recent years, the effects of underlying poverty have been "…exacerbated by societal changes, cuts to local services, and increases in the cost of living, with the families [of those in alternative provision] often keenly affected by structural economic inequalities and the additional impact of austerity."[113]. In 2025, many children experience "an almost-Dickensian level of poverty" that affects all aspects of their life, including their education[114]. Systemic poverty affects children's outcomes from birth. Compared with those from better-off families, for children born into poverty there are "significant differences in the children's and their mothers' health and well-being; in family interactions; in the home learning environment; and in parenting styles and rules"[115]. Experiencing poverty often leads to gaps in educational attainment which emerge early in children's lives and which continue to widen as they get older. By the end of secondary school only about one in five children from the poorest families gain five good GCSEs, compared with three quarters of those from the wealthiest[116].

Alongside poverty, many of those in alternative provision also experience adverse familial circumstances. In particular, an extremely high proportion of alternative provision pupils are likely to have experienced domestic violence[117]. Just over a quarter (26%)[118] of those in state-funded alternative provision are classified by the government as being children in need, having received support from social services in response to concerns about their domestic circumstances. Around one in twenty (6%) of the state-funded alternative provision cohort have been removed from their families and placed in the care of a local authority[119].

Children in alternative provision often experience multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)[120] such as bereavement, sexual, physical and emotional abuse, household dysfunction, and neglect which can lead to an increased risk of harm and complex trauma. Some are caught in a continuing cycle of poverty, instability and poor mental health, with successive generations of the same families being exposed to similar traumatic and toxic

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[111] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025 - 63% of children in state-funded alternative provision are eligible for free school meals, compared with 26% in all types of state-funded mainstream schools.
[112] Centre for Social Justice, 2020.
[113] Page, Leeds Beckett University, 2021.
[114] Office of the Children's commissioner, 2025.
[115] Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010.
[116] Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010.
[117] In 2018 oral evidence to the Education Select Committee, an alternative provision leader said that around 90% of children referred to her school had experienced domestic abuse.
[118] Who are 'children in need'? | Children's Commissioner for England (childrenscommissioner.gov.uk).
[119] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025.
[120] Lloyd, 2018.

combinations of disorder and deprivation[121]. ACEs can have a profound effect on children's emotional development and well-being:

> "…family risk factors such as early separation from the main carer (usually the mother), the loss of a close relative, divorce and family separation or the serious illness of a family member, can be described as situations that increase the likelihood of children developing emotional and or behavioural difficulties at some point in their lives"[122].

Numbers of placements in alternative provision per-child can vary, but those with chaotic home lives, family breakdown or involvement in the criminal justice system can experience multiple placements and may move frequently between different alternative provision settings and mainstream or specialised schools, sometimes in several local authorities[123]. As a result "…many children [in alternative provision] experience fractured and disrupted education. Some are frequently suspended and/or excluded, spending long periods of time in isolation and/or moving between providers, sometimes following behavioural incidents"[124].

Placements by local authorities and schools in alternative provision are usually in response to behavioural issues that require additional specialised support. Around a quarter of those in state-funded alternative provision have been permanently excluded from a primary or secondary school[125]. Familial breakdown is prevalent in this cohort and when it converges with ACEs like bereavement, involvement in criminality, domestic abuse or poor parental mental health, the risk of exclusion is heightened[126].

Complex needs, often linked to children's negative familial circumstances, can be unidentified, misidentified and unmet in children who have moved frequently around educational settings, or who in some cases have dropped out of the education system completely. This can "result in pupils finding it difficult to self-regulate, communicate with their peers and teachers or complete the work they have been set[127]". Alternative provision practitioners are experts in identifying, assessing and responding to the multiple and complex factors that may have led to the placements. They also deliver additional support, both within the settings themselves and with relevant partners like Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), medical provision, social services, or other localised educational providers. They are:

> "…well placed to be able to identify any unknown needs, gain an up-to-date understanding of known needs, plan supportive strategies and work to ensure that the stakeholders of pupils' progress and safety are made aware, as appropriate" [128].

Understandably, many children have fallen behind in school by the time they enter alternative provision. From often very low starting points, alternative provision helps children to regain lost learning so that they can be reintegrated back into mainstream education where possible. However, despite the best efforts of the practitioners, the academic outcomes of those who complete their education in state-funded settings are poor. Less than 5% achieve grades 9-4 in GCSE English and maths, compared with over 65% of their peers

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[121] Kew-Simpson, 2023.
[122] Loizidou, 2009.
[123] ISOS, 2018.
[124] Ofsted, 2024.
[125] FFT datalab. 2019.
[126] Graham et al, 2019.
[127] IntegratED, 2022.
[128] IntegratED, 2022.

in state-funded mainstream schools[129]. State-funded alternative provision pupils are also much less likely to be in sustained post-16 destinations than those who complete year 11 in state-funded mainstream schools[130].

Families who are relatively well educated, confident and informed, and who have the required economic resources, knowledge or connections, possess the "social capital" that is needed to negotiate the complex education in their children's favour. They are "better placed to exert their rights than others[131]". In contrast, the material and societal disadvantages experienced by many families of children in alternative provision are compounded by insufficient social capital, which causes them to struggle to navigate systemic complexities, leaving them:

> "…fighting a system that they do not understand and that they feel is stacked against them. They are in a very dependent position of trust for professionals, some of whom do a very good job and some of whom are not doing the right things. It is really important to recognise that some parents can leverage the system and some cannot"[132].

Already poor educational outcomes are exacerbated when marginalised families are unable to effectively engage with their children's learning[133]. They may find it more difficult to obtain the right support for their children's SEN[134], or be less likely to successfully appeal if their children are excluded from school, as they "do not have the knowledge, the understanding, the trust or the experience to exert their rights, and they do not have access to advocacy"[135].

Referrals to alternative provision usually follow on from a breakdown in the critical relationship between families and the individuals or agencies supporting their children, including their schools. Families are left to feel "powerless in and alienated from the processes that are used to manage referrals, transfers and monitoring progress"[136]. Where children had been permanently excluded from school, their parents can feel unsupported, unaware of exclusion policies and unhappy with the way that schools communicate information about the process[137].

Similarly, when children are referred to alternative provision, ineffective communication between schools and parents during the referral process can lead to disagreements on the types of placements that would be in children's best interests, and to children being placed in unsuitable settings. As a result, families can be unclear about the aims of placements and the pathways out of alternative provision when placements end[138]. They can feel angry, resentful, alienated and powerless, shut out from and uninvolved in important decisions that can affect their children's short-term educational outcomes and their longer-term life chances. Feelings of anxiety and stigma prior to the start of placements[139] can intensify, compounding existing societal stigmas that may be further heightened during the complex

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[129] taken from the Department for Education's key stage 4 performance official statistics, 2024.
[130] taken from the Department for Education's key stage 4 destination measures, Department for Education, 2023.
[131] Education Select Committee, 2018.
[132] Education Select Committee, 2018.
[133] Buttle UK, 2019.
[134] As noted by the Education Policy Institute, 2021,children living in local authorities with high levels of disadvantage are less likely to be identified with SEN than children of similar backgrounds in more affluent areas.
[135] Education Select Committee, 2018.
[136] DfE, 2017.
[137] Coram, 2019.
[138] Ofsted 2024.
[139] IntegratEd, 2022.

and sometimes adversarial referral process[140].

Alternative provision practitioners recognise the problematic relationship between families and the education system, and the fundamental importance that intensive family engagement can play in repairing the broken trust between families and schools:

> "When parents and carers are positively involved children are more likely to have improved self-confidence, are more likely to see the importance of school, be healthy and gain higher grades. Effective home and family engagement provides opportunities that enable parents and carers to be involved at all stages of their child's education and journey in alternative provision"[141].

In contrast to the sometimes negative interactions parents often have with mainstream schools, highly skilled alternative provision practitioners, including dedicated family support workers, mediate between families and schools, restoring trust and helping children to successfully re-integrate into mainstream or specialised education[142].

For many of those in alternative provision, the relationships with key adults in their lives can be chaotic. Alternative provision practitioners do not aim to replace or substitute for family members. Instead, they use approaches like advocacy, mentoring and support groups to build mutual respect, trust and responsibility. In some cases, they replicate routine family interactions within their settings that children may not experience at home; for example by "creating a homely atmosphere in which pupils and staff sit round the table together for meals"[143]. In return, children appreciate their relationships with alternative provision staff and enjoy having trusted adults that they can communicate with:

> "They felt that staff understood them for who they were, that staff were genuinely concerned about them and wanted to get to know them so that they could provide the right help. They [also] felt as though they could ask questions in class and felt less judged"[144].

The first part of the analysis concludes with examples of some of the extensive work undertaken by alternative practitioners to re-engage marginalised children and their families. This includes "micro work" undertaken during visits to family homes, which helps to establish trust and gives practitioners a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the families' lives. Alongside its key role in improving their pupils' educational outcomes, alternative provision can also provide more practical support, for children and their families. The types of support are variable and dependent upon children and their families' needs but it might often include behavioural support. For example, parents may be encouraged to establish boundaries, or to model behaviour management techniques and reward schemes. Sometimes practitioners may challenge parents' own behaviour and set out behavioural expectations for them as well as their children.

Because they tend to have active and well-established links with local services, practitioners can also help family members access non-educational support, including for mental health or medical care. In some instances, practitioners help to source domestic appliances or food or provide leisure activities or money to buy uniforms for children to ease their move back into mainstream schools. This "micro-work" can even extend to more practical types of support

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[140] For example, Wilson and McGuire, 2020 note that working-class mothers can feel "judged negatively by teachers and the school system, based on their marginalised (and sometimes multiple) social identities. Perceptions of stigma were recalled by parents, who felt this negatively impacted upon their engagement in their children's education".
[141] IntegratEd, 2022.
[142] Malcolm, 2021.
[143] DfE, 2017.
[144] Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2022.

like escorting parents confined to the home by anxiety to school meetings, registering children of recent immigrants with the NHS, or helping to clean kitchens[145].

As its name suggests, the Family School is an alternative provision free school in London with a family-centred approach to supporting children who have been excluded from mainstream education. Families are involved in all aspects of their children's learning. They are invited to regular parent-learning accredited training, which gives them the confidence to help to co-design lesson plans and join their child in classroom lessons. Parents are encouraged to form peer support networks, where they can share strategies that have helped their children to re-engage with education. Families can participate, alongside their children, in lessons and in co-designing lesson plans. The school's practitioners work with parents and carers to understand the traumas relating to exclusion; and the issues that cause challenging behaviour. Over 70% of the school's pupils are re-integrated back into mainstream or specialised provision, but equally importantly, the broken trust between families and the education system is re-established[146].

In some local authorities, flexible, relatable and culturally representative school-home support workers work alongside alternative provision practitioners to build stronger relationships with families and children. Practitioners with knowledge of local communities, customs and shared lived experiences provide consistent, sensitive, single points of contact, empowering families who can be inherently sceptical about teachers and other types of educational practitioners[147].

Early intervention outreach support, delivered by alternative provision in mainstream schools, is the first tier of the new model for alternative provision outlined in the government's SEND and alternative provision green paper[148]. When used effectively, this type of targeted early intervention work can also help to repair fractured relationships between schools and families:

> "Working with the child as part of a family was a vital strand of outreach provision, specifically with parent carers likely to be under considerable stress. Early engagement was regarded as key: instilling self-belief, ensuring parent-carers were respected and understood and recognising the demoralising experiences they may have had in mainstream settings"

Outreach support can include direct one-to-one and group work with children at risk of suspension and permanent exclusion, and a range of capacity-building work to help school leaders and staff intervene earlier and more effectively in response to emerging behavioural issues. Outreach workers observe children in their classrooms, and in discussions which also include teachers, partner agencies and families. Outreach is presented as being "neutral, one step removed from schools". Families are encouraged to be honest and open about their challenges. Positive relationships are promoted as an antidote to the negative, confrontational interactions that may previously have typified their relationships with schools. Outreach teams also signpost appropriate agencies when family members require support and provide behavioural and learning strategies that families can utilise at home with their children[149].

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[145] Page, 2021.
[146] Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2024.
[147] Broadbent, 2023.
[148] DfE, 2022.
[149] What works in SEND, 2023.

Analysis part 2: The role of families in the growth of independent alternative provision

Independent alternative provision is, arguably, part of a market-led "SEN industry" that, according to Tomlinson (2012), has emerged in the English education system in response to policy shifts towards inclusivity in mainstream schools by successive governments since the latter part of the 20th century[150]. The second part of the analysis considers the increasing influence of families in the SEN system and their role in the establishment and recent growth of independent alternative provision.

Tomlinson and Johnson (2024) argue that alternative provision in England derives from government education policies of the mid-20th century, in which local authorities were given powers to establish educational establishments "for disruptive children and those excluded from mainstream schooling". This was a political response to prevailing societal concerns around children who were considered to be "educationally subnormal (ESN) [with] learning and/or behaviour problems" who did not comply with the normative behaviours expected of those in mainstream schools. Consequently, children considered to be disruptive to other pupils were removed from mainstream education and placed in ESN schools[151]. By the 1960s and '70s, there were "…parental and educational anxieties about these placements, especially from Black parents whose children were over-represented in ESN schools". In this segregated education system:

> "…a majority of those regarded as having learning and/or behaviour problems were largely from the lower social classes. The descriptions attached to handicapping conditions have historically been attached to poverty and to the manual working classes and thus associated with exclusion and stigma" [152].

This viewpoint aligns with the dominant view expressed in much of the literature discussed in the first part of this paper: that children in alternative provision often come from marginalised groups and from socially excluded, deprived familial backgrounds. The 1996 Education Act, which continues to provide the legislative basis for alternative provision[153], enabled local authorities to establish pupil referral units (PRUs) to provide education for children who would "not receive suitable education without such provision being arranged". While children in PRUs continued to be educated separately, outside of mainstream schools, by the 1990s a global shift in education policy had already begun, with "a world-wide movement during the latter part of the 20th century towards the inclusion of populations of young people who would previously have been wholly excluded from the education system"[154].

In England, this move towards greater inclusivity in mainstream education is apparent in the policies of successive recent governments. The child- and family-centred approaches of the Labour administrations in the first decade of the 21st century placed families at the heart of the education system[155] and included a renewed focus on improving collaboration between families, schools and local agencies. The government funded projects to support partnerships to improve parental engagement with marginalised families in mainstream schools[156]. The reported benefits included "improved family functioning and relationships; increased parent/carer capacity to provide continuity of support between school and home; and greater trust and collaboration between parents and education staff"[157].

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150 Tomlinson, 2012.
151 Tomlinson and Johnson, 2024.
152 Tomlinson, 2012.
153 As outlined in DfE, 2025.
154 Tomlinson, 2012.
155 As outlined in HMT, 2005.
156 As outlined in DCSF, 2007.
157 DfE, 2010.

In 2014, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government announced a range of radical reforms to the SEN system. This included the introduction of statutory EHC plans for those with the most complex needs, extending the age range for SEN support from birth to 25 years old, and a new requirement for local authorities to publish a "local offer" detailing the support services available for children for and young people with SEN in their areas. Parents were given more involvement in local decision-making, and statutory powers to work with local authorities, schools and other partners in developing and reviewing their children's EHC plans. The introduction of personalised budgets means that parents also have greater control over how funding for their children's support is spent[158].

These reforms were intended to create a more straightforward and consistent system, reducing the complexity and fragmentation that families previously faced. But they also led to increased demand for SEN support from schools, local authorities and from the families that were given a greater stake in the system. In response the government continued to invest heavily in specialised support for children with SEN, and between 2010 and 2024, it had "created over 60,000 new specialist school places[159]". In the mainstream system, the increased demand added new pressures on already stretched services, and for many of those with children with SEN there was:

> "…a vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence from parents, carers and providers, and inefficient allocation of support. This begins in early years and mainstream schools where, despite the best endeavours of the workforce, settings are frequently ill-equipped to identify and effectively support children and young people's needs. Parents, carers and providers alike do not know what is reasonable to expect and so lose confidence that mainstream settings will be able to meet the needs of their children and young people effectively[160]".

The Conservative government's 2022 SEND and alternative provision green paper[161] and its 2023 improvement plan[162], aimed to improve inclusivity in mainstream schools through a greater use of early intervention. In keeping with the intentions of the 2014 SEND reforms, families were positioned as important partners in the delivery of localised SEND support. Alternative provision was repurposed as "an intervention rather than a destination". It is expected to deliver more outreach support, which as noted earlier, often includes intensive work with families, with the aim of keeping children at risk of suspension or permanent exclusion in mainstream schools, thereby avoiding placements in alternative provision[163].

The current Labour government continues this "movement towards inclusion" as it seeks to "retain as many children as possible with SEND support in welcoming and inclusive spaces" in mainstream primary and secondary schools. There is a clear move away from "a system that is skewed too far towards specialist provision, and which is consistently failing families on every measure[164]". As part of this journey, the government and DfE will "draw upon on the wisdom and lived experiences of parents, teachers and experts[165].

Over the same period, alongside state-funded alternative provision, a large and expanding independent sub-sector has emerged. It includes a relatively small number of independent alternative provision schools which are broadly regulated in the same way as state-funded alternative provision; they have to comply with standards that are set by the government[166],

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158 DfE, 2014.
159 DfE, 2024.
160 DfE, 2022.
161 DfE, 2022.
162 DfE, 2023.
163 DfE, 2022.
164 Bridget Phillipson's Speech to the Confederation of School Trusts - GOV.UK.
165 Education Secretary's speech at the ASCL conference, March 2025.
166 DfE, 2019.

and they are inspected by Ofsted. There is also an unknown but seemingly large number[167] of often very small, unregistered alternative provision settings delivering bespoke education and support.

Because these unregistered settings do not, by definition, have to register as schools, DfE does not know how many are operational in England. The department does collect data on placements in this sub-sector but it is not analysed and published in the same way as its data from state-funded alternative provision schools. Consequently, little is known about the finances, governance and ownership of the charities and private sector organisations that are commissioned by schools and local authorities, and which are given public funding to deliver alternative provision. Moreover, while the government states that the children attending this provision are some of "most vulnerable, disadvantaged and disengaged children in the education system"[168], there is no published evidence that the characteristics and familial circumstances of the thousands of children attending independent alternative provision actually mirror those of the children in state-funded alternative provision.

There is, however, evidence that as in state-funded provision, SEN is prevalent in children placed in independent alternative provision. A 2022 analysis by the Fischer Family Trust (FFT) of DfE's alternative provision census data[169] shows that a comparatively high proportion of children in unregistered settings have EHC plans[170]. Amongst these children, the two main types of SEN needs were autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs.

FFT also found that around 29% of those of compulsory school age in unregistered settings were enrolled at state schools at the same time as being in local authority-commissioned unregistered alternative provision and so continued to attend school while in part-time alternative provision. Around 16% of all those in FFT's analysis, and a quarter of the 15 year olds that were included, had previously been permanently excluded from mainstream schools. The government is concerned that excluded children are being "…placed in unregistered alternative provision settings indefinitely, with little or no oversight from local authorities or schools"[171]. In response to long-standing concerns about this sub-sector from Ofsted and others with an interest, it has consulted on the introduction of new national standards, local authority-led quality assurance frameworks, and limits on the time that children can spend in unregistered settings[172].

The numbers of EHC plans has increased each year since their introduction in 2014, including a 15.8% rise in the most recent reporting year [173]. As "the number of EHC plans has increased, so too has the number of young people educated outside the state-funded school system"[174]. Issues common in alternative provision pupils, such as disrupted learning

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[167] DfE does not collect any information on the numbers of unregistered settings, but in response to an FOI Act request in 2012 it estimated that there were "…several thousand [unregistered providers] in England".
[168] DfE, 2024.
[169] FFT datalab, 2022. It is important to note that FFT's analysis includes young people aged between 17 and 19, with EHC plans, in unregistered alternative provision, and that 62% of those in the analysis were of compulsory school age (5 to 16) when attending this provision. As illustrated, referrals to unregistered alternative provision gradually increase during secondary school and peak at age 16, but they continue to remain high for those aged between 17 and 19.
[170] FFT's analysis shows that over two thirds (65%) of children in unregistered alternative provision that has been commissioned by local authorities have EHC plans, compared with around a quarter of those in state-funded alternative provision.
[171] DfE, 2024.
[172] DfE, 2024.
[173] taken from DfE accredited official statistics on education, health and care plans, 2025 reporting year.
[174] FFT datalab, 2022.

and heightened family stress will undoubtedly have contributed to this increased demand[175]; as will the significant increases in referrals for complex mental health needs like SEMH[176] or for neurodiverse conditions like ASD[177].

Additionally, since the COVID-19 pandemic, alternative provision has increasingly supported children with emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), which has led to decreased attendance in primary and secondary schools[178]; and greater numbers of younger children with unmet or undiagnosed complex needs who have entered the school system post-pandemic[179]. Conditions like SEMH and ASD can result in challenging behaviour, and suspensions and exclusions are now at their highest recorded levels, following significant recent year-on-year increases, including large increases amongst primary-age children[180].

There are now unprecedented pressures on local education and support services, including alternative provision[181]. Between 2014 and 2018, pupil numbers in state-funded settings increased by 18%[182]. The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges and created new ones, leading to an even higher demand for alternative provision, with some alternative provision leaders reporting that their schools are full to capacity[183]. Strategic decisions on alternative provision by local authorities and schools are now being "driven by necessity: with the pressures on provision forcing commissioners to look more widely for alternative provision, including in the independent sector[184]". Unregistered alternative provision is therefore increasingly filling gaps in areas without sufficient specialised support for children with SEN, and for those with behavioural concerns that cannot be addressed in mainstream schools[185].

Tomlinson argues that in parallel with "policies and practices of inclusion", in which "many more children [previously] regarded as problematic [were being educated in] mainstream schools and classrooms", there has been an "expansion of special education categories" for children with SEN and disabilities. This in turn has "brought and exacerbated the need for an army of special professionals working in an expanded and expensive 'SEN industry'". This SEN industry, which includes independent alternative provision, has arguably emerged and expanded due to the need for local authorities and schools to provide statutory specialised support for increasing numbers of children with SEND, but also in response to "demands for funding and resources coming from middle class and articulate parents"[186].

In many areas across England, there is now a "growing market of unregistered providers [which] is often advertised directly to parents and carers[187]" who, in contrast to the disempowerment often felt by the marginalised families historically associated with alternative provision, do possess the economic resources, confidence and knowledge of the education system to obtain valuable additional support which they hope will improve their children's educational outcomes. This means that those with the required social capital to

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[175] Ofsted, 2022.
[176] 76% of state-funded alternative provision pupils with identified SEND have social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) recorded as their primary type of need (taken from the school census: Special educational needs in England, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025).
[177] Data from NHS England, 2024 shows a 27% increase in new ASD referrals in 2023 compared with the previous year.
[178] BMJ, 2024.
[179] Ofsted, 2022.
[180] taken from DfE official statistics on suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, Department for Education, 2023/24.
[181] IFS, 2024.
[182] UK Parliament, 2018.
[183] Schools Week, 2023.
[184] ISOS, 2018.
[185] DfE, 2024.
[186] Tomlinson, 2012.
[187] Ofsted, 2024.

"leverage the system [and] exert their rights"[188] can now, if they wish, influence local decisions on the commissioning and use of alternative provision to provide SEND support for their children that is not readily available in mainstream or state-funded specialised schools.

Increased parental influence on alternative provision placements may account for recent shifts in the socio-economic characteristics of children in alternative provision. In 2024/25, 63% of state-funded alternative provision pupils were eligible for free school meals, compared with 24% of those in local authority-funded alternative provision placements, which are often in independent and unregistered alternative provision[189]. It is important to note that compared with mainstream schools, children from income deprived backgrounds continue to remain overrepresented in unregistered alternative provision, and that those from more affluent backgrounds also remain underrepresented in this sub-sector. However, since 2018/19, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of children living in more affluent areas who have been placed in unregistered alternative provision[190].

This may be explained, partially at least, by families increasingly seeking alternative educational arrangements outside of traditional school settings. Since the pandemic, more children are being electively home educated (EHE), some of whom attend placements in unregistered alternative provision[191]. Local authorities can also arrange special educational provision in unregistered settings if they are satisfied that it would be inappropriate for the provision to be made in a school. This is known as "education otherwise than in school" and is often abbreviated to EOTAS[192]. EOTAS can include a range of bespoke support, which is tailored to children's specific needs, including home tuition, online learning, therapy sessions, or specialist tutors, and can be included by local authorities in information on their SEND offers that is made available to families[193].

DfE does not collect data specifically on EOTAS; these placements are included in the published aggregated information on all local authority arranged placements, which have risen in recent years. There is also very little information on EOTAS at local authority level, although one local authority reports a significant recent increase in numbers of children who are EOTAS[194]. While DfE's guidance states that EOTAS is not a form of alternative provision, the Office of the Children's Commissioner's analysis of DfE's data shows a significant overlap between these populations: at least 103 providers of unregistered alternative provision were being used for both EOTAS and alternative provision in 2023/24. This analysis also highlights substantial changes in the types of unregistered alternative provision that local authorities commissioned between 2018/19 and 2023/24. In particular:

> "one-on-one tuition has more than doubled, from 22% to 46% of the local authority commissioned unregistered AP sector [possibly due to a] bespoke approach to education and accessibility for children unable to access school. About half (53%) of children placed in EOTAS were receiving one-on-one tuition, compared to only 28%

[188] Education Select Committee, 2018.
[189] taken from the school census: Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Department for Education, Academic year 2024 to 2025.
[190] Office of the Children's Commissioner 2025.
[191] taken from DfE official statistics on elective home education, 2024/25.
[192] As outlined in DfE, 2024: "In certain circumstances, local authorities can arrange for any special educational provision necessary to meet a child's special educational needs (SEN) to be provided otherwise than in school. Section 61 of the Children and Families Act 2014 allows for a local authority to arrange for any special educational provision that it has decided is necessary for a child for whom it is responsible to be made otherwise than in a school, if it is satisfied that it would be inappropriate for the provision to be made in a school. This is known as 'education otherwise than in a school' and is often abbreviated to EOTAS".
[193] For example, see Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) which is included in Hertfordshire's local SEND offer.
[194] Oxfordshire reported a 64% increase in numbers of children who are EOTAS in 2024 compared with the previous year.

> for children placed in placements for any other reason, who were instead most frequently educated in “other” types of unregistered AP (49%)”[195].

Recent increases in demand for bespoke SEND services like one-to-one tuition, which are often provided by unregistered alternative providers, may therefore be a consequence of some parents both becoming more aware of the availability of this type of support, and being increasingly able to influence and shape localised placement decisions to secure bespoke support for their children that is not available in the school system.

[195] Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2025.

Conclusions

Long-standing stigmas related to societal inequalities and adverse familial circumstances continue to be attached to alternative provision

Despite the expansion of independent alternative provision, and the resultant means for some families to influence placement decisions, the sector continues to be perceived as a "burgeoning industry for disruptive pupils who are excluded from their schools on either a temporary or permanent basis[196]". Disproportionately high numbers of those in alternative provision live in deprived communities and have ACEs. Long-standing stigmas attached to the sector, derived from 20th century education policies in which the "educationally sub-normal" were moved out of mainstream schools and into segregated ESN schools, continue to prevail.

Over time, it has become an accepted part of the discourse on alternative provision that all those in this sector share similar marginalised familial circumstances which in turn contribute to the very low educational outcomes that are reported annually in the government's key stage 4 performance data on state-funded alternative provision. This data does not of course capture the progress that practitioners have made with these children, often from very low starting points, but it does lead to "low expectations of young people placed in alternative provision on the part of staff, parents and the young people themselves[197]". As the education system as a whole has shifted towards greater inclusivity, alternative provision schools remain adrift, perceived as a "dumping ground"[198]; a last resort for children who do not display the normative behaviours expected in mainstream education.

The cycle continues with expectations that these children will inevitably become marginalised adults. Earlier this year, following a debate in parliament on the injustices experienced by children in ESN schools, an MP who represents a disadvantaged area in northern England told a national newspaper that "Black children are still disproportionately pushed into pupil referral units and alternative provision, feeding into the school-to-prison pipeline"[199].

It is true that many of those in prison were excluded from school[200]. However, attaching a causal effect linking alternative provision with prison, unhelpfully ignores the multiple structural disadvantages like poverty, unstable family environments, and lack of access to resources experienced by many alternative provision pupils, which when combined contribute to limiting longer term life chances[201]. Exclusion from school further disrupts educational and social development. It increases the likelihood of criminal behaviour[202], and deepens the negative experiences of children and families who have been let down by the system that should be supporting them.

Prior to starting alternative provision placements, parents and children understandably share feelings of anxiety and stigma which can intensify and compound the structural barriers they face[203]. The "othering" of those attending alternative provision enables the long-embedded stereotypes and stigmas attached to this sector to flourish. This adds to the self-fulfilling prophecy of marginalised families and children being trapped in continuous cycles of poor educational outcomes and lower longer-term life chances. These stigmas can undermine the

196 Tomlinson, 2012.
197 DCSF, 2008.
198 Ofsted 2022.
199 The Guardian, 2025.
200 Catch-22, 2023.
201 Barrett, 2025.
202 Catch-22, 2023.
203 IntegratEd, 2022.

skilled work of alternative provision practitioners who aim to disrupt these cycles by improving children's educational outcomes.

A growing divergence within alternative provision has been driven and shaped by differences in the familial circumstances of the children who require support

It is important to recognise that not all children in alternative provision share the same familial circumstances. Even in state-funded alternative provision schools, there are children from relatively affluent areas who have experienced ACEs like family breakdown, parental addictions or bereavement which cut across socio-economic groups. Some have parents with well-paid jobs who simply have not had the time to engage with their children's education or to support their SEN needs[204]. As noted earlier, increasing numbers of children living in more affluent areas are now being placed in unregistered alternative provision[205].

Over the last decade or so, there has been a growing divergence within alternative provision, which, as argued in the second part of the analysis, has in part been shaped by differences in the familial circumstances of the children supported by the sector. Despite this, the sector as a whole continues to carry the historic negative, stereotypical perceptions and stigmas that have grown over a longer period.

In reality, while the quality of alternative provision is variable across England, outstanding quality alternative provision can be a system leader; a centre of excellence and an important resource for improving inclusivity via localised outreach support. For example, in areas where there are risks of children becoming involved in serious violence, DfE's alternative provision taskforce programme includes multi-disciplinary teams of specialists providing integrated, child-centred support. Each taskforce includes a team of specialists based in an alternative provision school, including educational psychologists, therapists, post-16 transition coaches, youth workers, youth justice workers[206].

Many also include family support workers who work with children and families at their learning centres, in their homes, and in the community (for example in cafés, or when transporting children to their schools). The support is adapted and flexible to meet the children's and families' needs, and includes out of hours and holiday working schedules, so that responsive wraparound support, including holiday activities and food[207], is available at times when children are not required to attend school[208].

In other areas, there is little or no good quality alternative provision[209]; and a market-led system of low quality and often unregistered settings attempts to fulfil the complex needs of the most vulnerable children and their families. Without the right support, these families can "feel as excluded as their children"[210] from processes that may help to break continuing cross-generational cycles of poor educational outcomes. The absence of economic and social capital continues to mean that many families still exert little influence over their children's education. Their own negative perceptions of the education system are in turn reinforced by their children's disengagement from their schools.

During this century, the moves towards greater inclusivity in education policy, the 2014 reforms to the SEN system, and the after-effects of the pandemic have all combined to

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[204] Page, 2021.
[205] Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2025.
[206] Council for Disabled Children, 2024.
[207] This is often in conjunction with the government's holiday activities and food offer.
[208] DfE, 2024.
[209] Centre for Social Justice, 2020. In eight local authorities, every child in alternative provision was in settings that were considered to be inadequate or requiring improvement.
[210] Page, 2021.

contribute to the growth of the independent sub-sector, which continues to expand to fill gaps in local SEN provision, and which now co-exists alongside the state-funded sub-sector. This includes a "growing market of unregistered providers [which] is often advertised directly to parents and carers[211]". In contrast to the disempowerment often felt by the families historically associated with alternative provision, families that possess the confidence and knowledge of the education system can now engage with its complexities and influence those making decisions on alternative provision placements. All parents want their children to succeed in life and will do all they can to achieve this. It is understandable therefore that those with the required economic and social capital will use this to "leverage the system [and] exert their rights"[212], if this results in additional support for their children that is not available elsewhere in the system.

There are now differing perceptions of the purpose of alternative provision

The advent of parental influence in alternative provision placements represents a paradigm shift; a marked divergence from the accepted historical perceptions of the sector. However, this has also led to tensions between parents, commissioners and practitioners. In recent years, according to Ofsted, there has been:

> "…an increase in parents advocating for placements with limited educational elements [which] professionals deemed to be unsuitable. Parents and carers often requested complex and expensive 'education other than at school' packages. They preferred, for example, equine and therapeutic care to educational settings. [Local authority] leaders suggested the issue was being worsened by a growing market of unregistered providers which are often advertised directly to parents and carers"[213].

There are now differing perceptions of the purpose of alternative provision. Some parents believe that their children's academic learning in alternative provision is being compromised by behavioural support, and some even suggest that alternative provision should not be used as "a place to put children with behavioural challenges". In turn, practitioners have also raised concerns about some settings "focusing on behaviour… and not the real issue that needs to be addressed"[214].

Alternative provision continues to be the "'metaphorical expanding putty of the education sector …filling the gaps left by other agencies whose work didn't fit together"[215]. However, the combined effects of recent shifts towards mainstream inclusivity, rises in demand for SEN support and the increasing influence of parents in placement decisions, raise legitimate questions about the purpose of this sector.

Comparatively little information is publicly available on the familial circumstances of children in independent alternative provision, and about the organisations that are delivering it

Independent alternative provision is being used in areas where there is insufficient specialised support. It is likely therefore, that many children from the marginalised families historically associated with the sector are in independent, often unregistered settings. However, compared with those in state-funded provision, relatively little is known about the familial circumstances and characteristics of these children. The government has proposed that in the future, those receiving time-limited interventions in unregistered alternative

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211 Ofsted, 2024.
212 Education Select Committee, 2018.
213 Ofsted, 2024.
214 Ofsted, 2024.
215 Page, 2021.

provision will be registered with schools[216]. If implemented, this may lead to improvements in the government's published data on those in unregistered alternative provision.

Independent providers that meet the government's independent schools criteria are required by law to register as schools and are subject to a national inspection regime[217] but unregistered alternative provision does not have to register in the same way. In response to concerns about the safety of, and the quality of education delivered to children who are placed by local authorities and schools in this type of provision, the government would like to improve local and national oversight and specify that unregistered providers will have to comply with new national standards[218].

However, the absence of national registration means that, unless the government's policy changes, the current uncertainty about the numbers of unregistered providers operating in this market will continue. The lack of publicly available information on providers limits the understanding of the governance and ownership of the numerous charities and private sector organisations that are given public funding to deliver the provision. As with the sector as a whole, data limitations mean that there will also continue to be challenges in understanding and tracking the progress that children are making in the settings, and therefore whether the provision is delivering value for money by improving children's educational outcomes.

In the future, both sub-sectors will contribute to the government's three tier model for alternative provision. In its consultation, the government signalled that it wants to encourage local areas to consider whether some services provided by independent alternative providers may be delivered in schools[219]. The parents of those in unregistered alternative provision were able to respond, but there is no real understanding as to why some seemingly prefer their children's education and support to be delivered in unregistered settings. It will be interesting to see whether the parent-led, market-driven demand continues if mainstream schools become more inclusive and less reliant on specialised support being delivered by external organisations.

Mainstream schools can learn from the early intervention and parental engagement practices that are common in alternative provision, but resources must be targeted towards the most marginalised families

> "Education should recognise the diverse and often complex needs of children and those of their families. Understanding these needs and not just assessing them, should be at the core of our work, from policymakers to those who work directly with children in schools and beyond. When we fully appreciate the diversity of challenges our children face, only then can we begin to build a truly inclusive system"[220].

Most children have two main educators in their lives – their parents and their teachers. Children's families continue to be a major influence on their learning throughout school and beyond[221]. Effective home and family engagement is fundamental to alternative provision practice, with "opportunities for parents and carers to be involved at all stages of their child's education and journey[222]".

Highly-skilled practitioners, drawing upon the extensive family engagement practices prevalent in alternative provision, routinely battle against the odds to repair broken

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216 DfE, 2024.
217 DfE, 2013.
218 DfE, 2024.
219 DfE, 2024.
220 Direct quote from an alternative provision leader: Special needs jungle, November 2024.
221 Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.
222 IntegratEd, 2022.

relationships between families and schools and to re-integrate marginalised and vulnerable children back into the education system. As outlined in the first part of the analysis, much-needed wider support is often extended to families as well as children. The government has said that it wants to "tackle the scar of child poverty, which limits opportunities and holds back life chances"[223]. It is hoped that if this ambition is successful, some types of whole-family support routinely delivered by alternative provision will be needed less frequently.

Parental engagement in children's education can have a positive incremental effect on the outcomes of children from marginalised families[224]. In the future, the system is expected to tilt towards the delivery of early intervention outreach support in mainstream schools which often includes extensive work with families as well as children[225]. However, this type of work is by no means widespread. Many primary and secondary schools do not currently commission outreach support for children who need it; often due to a lack of local availability or prohibitive costs[226].

Alternative provision practitioners are experts in inclusive practice, recognising and supporting individual needs and fostering:

> "…an inclusive culture, with staff who are skilled at meeting the needs of all pupils, [which] is essential for successful, long-term transitions from alternative provision back into mainstream or specialised education. The focus should be on the adjustments schools make to accommodate pupils' needs, rather than a need for a 'maladapted pupil' to change to fit the system"[227].

However, the support is often delivered reactively, after the critical relationships between schools, children and their families has broken down. The government's ambitious plans to reform the SEND system are an acknowledgment that at present, "learners are being marginalised from mainstream education". Instead "…policy could be directed at building capacity, removing barriers to participation and shifting funding and resources towards prevention, thus reducing the need for individualised compensatory approaches"[228].

In alternative provision, "the extent and depth of engagement strategies is heavily determined by their organisational size and [their] staffing resources"[229]. Mainstream schools are usually much larger than alternative provision settings, and lack the dedicated resources, or the capability amongst staff, to undertake extensive early intervention work with families. Preventative outreach support, delivered by practitioners with an understanding of the day-to-day challenges for marginalised families can build capacity within mainstream schools, giving school staff the skills and confidence to support parents who can find it difficult to engage with schools. To maximise the benefits, local resources for family engagement would therefore best be directed towards those working with the most marginalised children and their families.

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[223] Break Down Barriers to Opportunity - GOV.UK.
[224] Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.
[225] DfE, 2022.
[226] DfE 2023.
[227] IntegratEd, 2022.
[228] Squires, 2025.
[229] IntegratEd, 2022.

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