

Schools need more specialist help for primary age children with additional needs

Primary-age children are referred to alternative provision when schools are unable to manage their physically or verbally violent behaviour, with negative effects on other children and staff. Around 7,000 primary-age children in England are currently known to be in AP. While this is a small proportion of all primary pupils, the number has risen by over a quarter in the last 5 years.

To understand this increase, Ofsted research explored the role that AP plays in the education system and the reasons primary-age children are referred there in the first place. It also looked at the challenges schools and APs face in supporting young children with additional needs, and how they work together to re-integrate them into mainstream education where possible.

[Ofsted's study, published today](#), found that most primary-age pupils only stayed in AP for a few weeks or months, and usually attended part time. However, some children with additional needs stay in AP for years while they wait for a special school place, and AP staff may be unable to meet their needs fully in the meantime. This absence of appropriate teaching and specialist support could have long-term consequences for these vulnerable children.

Primary school staff told Ofsted that the strain on specialist services nationally – exacerbated by the pandemic – has made it more difficult to support pupils with special educational needs. Limited access to professional help, such as speech and language therapists or educational psychology services, could be leading to more AP referrals and potentially more permanent exclusions.

Study participants also told Ofsted:

- Children were referred to an AP when their schools' support strategies had not worked – either because of a lack of training, funding or facilities. Support strategies also became ineffective when relationships between parents and school staff broke down. In these cases, an AP referral was sometimes used as a 'circuit breaker' to repair relationships, with the AP acting as a mediator between the school and parents, while supporting the child.
- School staff believed pupils' violent behaviour often stemmed from difficult home lives or undiagnosed SEND. A large majority of children in the study had social, emotional and /or health needs. This aligns with national statistics on pupils referred to AP.

- Staff had high expectations for pupils' progress and outcomes, and most were expected to return to school. For other children, schools and APs worked together to identify the right future setting, such as a special school.
- Schools saw outreach work by APs to be important for the early identification of children's needs, preventing an escalation in behaviour and helping retain pupils in mainstream education. However, AP staff said that funding arrangements affect the amount of outreach work they can do.
- Some APs had specialist teams on site, so that pupils' needs could be understood and addressed quickly. APs may also extend help to families, because some parents of children in AP have their own emotional, cognitive or learning needs.
- All parents involved in the research said their child's behaviour and academic work had improved since joining an AP, but some were unsure whether AP could substantially 'change' their child's behaviour or lead to them have a happy and full life after leaving AP.

His Majesty's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, said:

It seems shocking that primary age children, as young as five, could be taken out of school for violent behaviour. But, as our study shows, AP can be a positive choice for these children and play a transformative role in their young lives.

But limited access to external services, and lengthy waiting times for a special school place, mean some vulnerable children languish for years in APs that cannot provide the specialist support they need. And the consequences for these children may last well into their adult lives.

Today's report states that a high-quality curriculum and high-quality teaching are crucial in preventing pupils' needs from developing or worsening. Teachers would also benefit from improved access to appropriate external services, and opportunities to develop the right knowledge and skills. This could allow more mainstream schools to support pupils with additional needs, avoiding an AP referral or exclusion.

Notes to editors

1. AP can include state-funded pupil referral units and AP free schools or academies, or local authority commissioned AP provided by independent schools, further education colleges or tuition centres. It encompasses a

variety of services, including off-site full or part-time provision, specialist provision within mainstream schools, and outreach work – where AP staff observe a pupil in a mainstream school and help the school put new strategies in place to support them.

2. For the research, Ofsted visited 10 primary schools, 8 APs, 1 SEMH school and 5 local authorities between September and November 2021. Interviews were held with staff in all these settings, as well as 8 parents of pupils in AP. Due to the small sample size, the findings are not representative of the experiences of all pupils, schools or APs in England.

3. Ofsted inspections show that most registered APs keep pupils safe and provide a good standard of education. However, not all APs are required to register with the Department for Education, meaning they are not subject to any direct oversight. And some APs that should be registered are not. Inspectors have found low standards of education in unregistered settings, along with a range of safeguarding concerns, including failures to carry out the required checks on staff.