

**Title:                   Alternative Provision – Current  
Provision and Capital Programme**

**Meeting:               Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee**

**Meeting date:       Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2026**

**Report by:           Liz Farr, Service Director, Education, Learning and  
Skills**

**Classification**

Open

**Report purpose**

To provide the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee with an overview of current Alternative Provision in Herefordshire, including the Herefordshire Pupil Referral Service (HPRS), and the capital programme being developed to increase capacity, strengthen early intervention and improve the quality and sustainability of Alternative Provision.

**Background**

1. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee has included Alternative Provision within its work programme to review the Council's current provision and the associated capital programme. The review provides an opportunity for members to consider existing capacity and demand, the current role of the Herefordshire Pupil Referral Service, the development of Tier 2 Alternative Provision and the Council's planned capital investment.
2. Alternative provision is an important part of the Council's education system for children and young people who are unable to access suitable mainstream education because of exclusion, illness or other circumstances. The Council has a duty under section 19 of the Education Act 1996 to arrange suitable education for children of compulsory school age who would otherwise not receive it.

**Meeting objectives**

2. The objectives of the scrutiny item are to:

- review the capital programme relating to Alternative Provision;
- consider the current Alternative Provision available in Herefordshire, including Pupil Referral Unit provision;

- understand current capacity and demand pressures and the Council's response to those pressures; and
- consider the intended outcomes, financial implications and arrangements for monitoring delivery of the Alternative Provision programme.

## Report information

### Demand and Cohort Profile

3. Herefordshire's current alternative provision system is under increasing pressure. Demand for places has risen beyond the capacity that can be delivered from the existing estate, resulting in greater reliance on bespoke, online, unregistered and externally commissioned provision. In November 2025, 24 children were reported as having no school place because of insufficient alternative education capacity.
4. The AP cohort differs significantly from the wider school population, with a disproportionately high prevalence of SEND, social, emotional and mental health needs, disadvantage and involvement with wider support services. Understanding these characteristics is important when planning future capacity and intervention models.
5. Referring to the data pack included, the number of children and young people accessing alternative provision (AP) in Herefordshire has increased significantly over the last three years, rising from 126 pupils in 2024 to 217 in 2025 and 305 in 2026. This represents a 142% increase over the period and suggests growing demand for AP placements, reflecting increasing complexity of need, inclusion pressures within mainstream schools, and rising numbers of pupils requiring specialist support.
6. The profile of pupils accessing AP has remained relatively consistent. Secondary-aged pupils (11-15 years) account for the majority of placements each year, representing around 62% of the cohort in both 2024 and 2026. This indicates that difficulties leading to AP placement are most prevalent during the secondary phase, with AP continuing to play a significant role in supporting young people at greater risk of disengagement from education.
7. There has also been notable growth in primary-aged pupils accessing AP. Numbers increased from 21 pupils in 2024 to 68 in 2026, more than tripling over the three-year period. Whilst primary pupils still represent a minority of placements, this trend may indicate increasing behavioural, emotional, social or learning needs emerging at an earlier age and highlights the importance of early intervention and targeted support.
8. Children with identified special educational needs and disabilities account for almost all AP placements. In 2026, 97.9% of pupils accessing AP either had SEN Support (2.3%) or an EHCP (95.7%), with only 2.0% recorded as having no identified SEN. This demonstrates the close relationship between AP demand and SEND pressures and reinforces the importance of ensuring sufficient specialist provision and support pathways across the local system.
9. Pupils eligible for free school meals continue to be over-represented amongst those accessing AP. Although the proportion has fallen slightly from 66.7% in 2024 to 64.3% in 2026, almost two-thirds of pupils accessing AP are FSM eligible, highlighting the continued association between socio-economic disadvantage and the need for alternative educational arrangements.
10. The gender profile remains broadly consistent with national trends, with males accounting for approximately two-thirds of AP placements. However, the proportion of female pupils

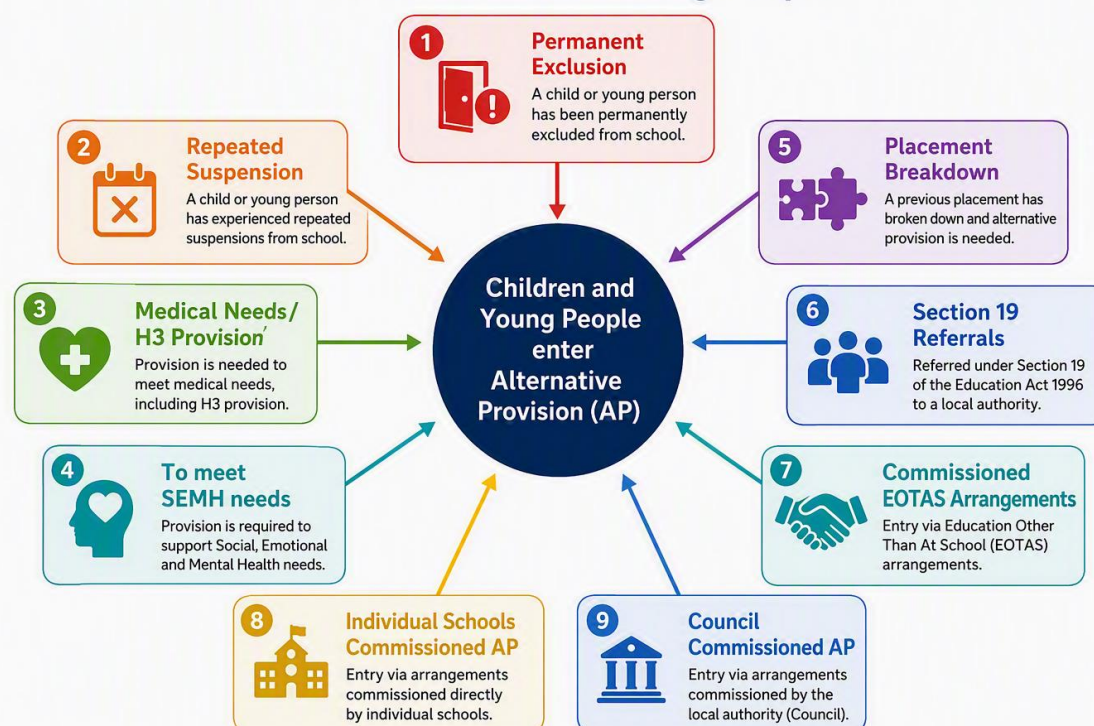
has gradually increased from 27.8% in 2024 to 37.4% in 2026, suggesting that the needs of girls requiring alternative provision may be becoming more visible and may warrant further analysis.

11. The number of children looked after (CLA) accessing AP has increased from none recorded in 2024 to 28 pupils in 2026. Similarly, the number of children subject to child protection plans increased from zero to five over the same period. Whilst these figures remain comparatively small, they indicate that a growing number of vulnerable children are requiring AP placements and underline the importance of strong links between education, social care and safeguarding services.
12. Compared with statistical neighbour authorities, Herefordshire has a notably higher proportion of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans accessing AP than many comparable areas. The local authority also has a comparatively lower proportion of pupils without identified SEN. This suggests AP in Herefordshire is being used predominantly to support pupils with the highest levels of identified need rather than as a broader response to behavioural or attendance concerns.
13. The average duration of completed AP placements has fluctuated over the period. Placements increased from an average of 9 months and 15 days in 2024 to 1 year, 2 months and 26 days in 2025 before reducing to just under 12 months in 2026. Whilst the recent reduction is positive, placements continue to be relatively long-term, indicating that many pupils accessing AP require sustained support rather than short-term intervention.

### **The Route into Alternative Provision**

14. Children and young people can enter alternative provision through a variety of routes and for different reasons. These may include permanent exclusion, repeated suspension, medical needs (H3 provision), SEMH needs, placement breakdown, Section 19 referrals, Education Otherwise Than at School (EOTAS) arrangements, school-commissioned AP or local authority commissioned provision.

## Routes into Alternative Provision (AP) for Children and Young People



### What is Driving Demand

15. Demand continues to grow as a result of several interrelated factors affecting both schools and local authority services. Children and young people are presenting with increasingly complex needs, often involving a combination of SEND, social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties, safeguarding concerns and attendance challenges. There has been a rise in emotionally based school avoidance, anxiety and behavioural needs, whilst schools continue to face increasing inclusion pressures within constrained resources.
16. Demand indicators demonstrate growing pressure within the system. During 2024/25, 1,615 suspensions were recorded across Herefordshire schools involving 688 individual pupils. Whilst the local suspension rate of 6.86 remains below the national rate of 10.88, repeated suspensions can indicate that existing interventions have not secured sustained improvement and that more intensive support may be required. In addition, increasing SEND demand, growth in EOTAS and Section 19 provision, and placement instability within mainstream and specialist settings continue to generate demand for alternative educational arrangements. In addition, continued growth in SEND demand is increasing requests for specialist support, statutory assessment and Education, Health and Care Plans.

### Existing provision

17. The Herefordshire Pupil Referral Service (HPRS) provides the Council's core registered alternative education provision. Key Stage 3 provision operates from Aconbury and Key Stage 4 provision from St David's. A separate hospital and outreach service, H3, also forms part of HPRS but is not included within the current relocation proposals.

18. HPRS currently has 64 commissioned Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 places. However, a recent capacity review identified practical building capacity of approximately 47 places because of limitations in the size, configuration and suitability of the existing buildings. Local demand analysis has identified a requirement for up to 100 HPRS places.
19. The existing Aconbury and St David's buildings also constrain curriculum delivery, therapeutic and pastoral support, physical education, vocational learning and multi-agency working. Previous feasibility work concluded that neither site can be expanded sufficiently to meet future demand.
20. Where suitable HPRS capacity is unavailable, the Council may need to commission alternative arrangements in order to meet its statutory responsibilities. These can include bespoke packages, online education, unregistered providers and other external provision. While such arrangements may remain appropriate for some individual pupils, wider reliance on them is generally more expensive and can result in fragmented or part-time education packages.
21. In addition to HPRS, schools and the Council currently use a range of school-based interventions and externally commissioned part-time Alternative Provision to support pupils who remain on a mainstream school roll but require additional support. There is currently no dedicated local Tier 2 facility providing a consistent time-limited intervention and reintegration pathway.

### **Measuring Success and Value for Money**

22. The Council's investment in Alternative Provision (AP) is based on a clear theory of change: by increasing the availability, quality and suitability of provision, more children and young people will receive the right support at the right time, reducing the risk of exclusion, disengagement from education and escalation of need.
23. Success is measured through a range of educational, social and financial indicators, including improved attendance, reduced suspensions and permanent exclusions, increased rates of successful reintegration to mainstream education where appropriate, better progress and attainment outcomes, and improved participation in education, employment or training.
24. The success of the capital investment will also be demonstrated through increased local capacity, reduced reliance on costly out-of-county or independent placements, and greater ability to meet need within Herefordshire.
25. From a value for money perspective, the Council expects that investment in early and effective intervention will reduce the significantly higher costs associated with unmet need, including persistent absence, exclusion, specialist placements and wider social care and health interventions. These costs are predominantly felt in the high needs deficit. Future scrutiny will therefore be able to assess both whether outcomes for children and young people have improved and whether the investment has contributed to a more sustainable and cost-effective system that delivers better outcomes with available resources.

### **Sufficiency of Provision and Capacity**

26. Members were keen to understand whether Herefordshire has sufficient AP capacity to meet current and future demand. Current provision is under significant pressure. Herefordshire has no dedicated Tier 2 capacity and HPRS operates within constrained accommodation that limits the number of pupils who can be supported. Consequently, the Council and schools are often required to utilise externally commissioned provision, bespoke packages or Section 19 arrangements.

27. The approved capital programme is intended to address these challenges through the development of a new Tier 2 service and the expansion of HPRS to provide up to 100 places. Together, these developments will strengthen local sufficiency, reduce reliance on external provision and improve access to appropriate interventions. Demand will continue to be monitored to ensure future capacity remains aligned to local need.

### **Capital Programme and Strategic Investment**

28. In February 2026, Full Council approved a £12 million capital investment programme designed to strengthen local Alternative Provision capacity and improve educational sufficiency. The programme comprises two complementary schemes: a £6 million investment to relocate and expand HPRS and a separate £6 million investment to establish Tier 2 Alternative Provision capacity.
29. The HPRS project is intended to relocate Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 provision into a single Alternative Education Centre, creating up to 100 places subject to site identification, detailed design and space validation. Delivery may be achieved through the adaptation of an existing council-owned building or, where no suitable asset exists, the acquisition and refurbishment of alternative premises.
30. Alongside this, Full Council approved a further £6 million capital allocation to develop a dedicated Tier 2 Alternative Provision model. This funding relates specifically to accommodation and supporting infrastructure. Detailed decisions regarding service delivery arrangements, staffing models, referral pathways, provider arrangements and recurring revenue requirements remain subject to further design and governance approvals.
31. The principal challenge to delivery remains the identification and acquisition of suitable premises capable of meeting operational requirements within approved budgets and timescales. As with all major capital schemes, delivery is also dependent upon property, procurement, planning and financial governance processes.
32. The investment has been prioritised because it addresses identified gaps within Herefordshire's AP system and supports the council's wider strategy to improve inclusion, educational sufficiency and SEND outcomes. By increasing local capacity and strengthening early intervention, the programme aims to reduce reliance on higher-cost provision whilst improving outcomes for children and young people.
33. Longer-term capacity requirements will continue to be reviewed through demand forecasting, sufficiency planning and High Needs Block monitoring to ensure provision remains aligned with future need.

### **Financial Pressures and High Needs Funding**

34. Alternative Provision continues to represent a significant area of expenditure within the High Needs Block, particularly where local capacity is insufficient and external placements are required.
35. The proposed capital programme seeks both to improve outcomes for children and young people and to moderate future financial pressures through increased local sufficiency. Current expenditure indicates that expanding HPRS capacity could avoid approximately £370,000 per annum of Section 19 expenditure currently incurred where pupils cannot access suitable HPRS placements because local capacity is unavailable.
36. In addition, approximately £425,000 was spent during 2025/26 on externally commissioned part-time Alternative Provision. The development of a local Tier 2 model

has the potential to reduce reliance on such arrangements where pupils can be appropriately supported through locally delivered interventions. This represents potential gross annual cost avoidance of up to £425,000, although this should not be interpreted as a net saving as operating costs, implementation costs and capital financing costs will also need to be considered.

37. Insufficient local provision can result in increased expenditure through external placements, transport costs and bespoke arrangements required to meet statutory duties. Where suitable local provision is unavailable, costs can increase significantly as children and young people may need to access provision outside the county or receive individually commissioned packages of support.
38. The Council's financial strategy is focused on increasing local capacity and reducing reliance on higher-cost arrangements through earlier intervention and improved local provision.
39. The financial impact of Alternative Provision (AP) continues to be an important consideration in the overall management of the High Needs Block. Based on the information available when setting the 2026/27 budget, the total budgeted cost of AP placements is £2.1m. While the duration and cost of individual placements can vary, with some packages being short term, this represents an indicative average annual cost of approximately £21,450 per child. By comparison, the average annual cost of an independent school placement is approximately £64,321. At the point of budget setting, 64% of independent school placements were outside the county, with the 10 highest-cost placements each exceeding £100,000 per annum. All independent school provision included within the current financial information relates to registered provision.
40. The financial pressures associated with AP and independent specialist placements need to be considered in the context of the wider High Needs Block position. The 2026/27 High Needs allocation is £24.9m after recoupment, against a total High Needs budget of £50.9m, resulting in a deficit budget set of approximately £26m, as agreed through Schools Forum. The £2.1m AP placement budget represents approximately 4.1% of the total High Needs budget, while independent specialist placements account for a further £19.1m, or approximately 37.5%.
41. Continued growth in demand, particularly where needs cannot be met within mainstream settings or through locally available specialist provision, is likely to place further pressure on an already constrained funding envelope. Ensuring sufficient and appropriate local provision is therefore important both in supporting better outcomes for children and young people and in managing the Council's financial exposure. Based on current average costs, an independent school placement costs approximately £42,871 more per annum than an average AP placement. Consequently, where it is appropriate to meet a child's needs through AP rather than an independent specialist placement, there is potential for significant cost avoidance.

## **Market Development and Commissioning**

42. There is a clear distinction between school and local authority responsibilities. Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions are short-term, targeted support commissioned and managed by schools. Tier 3 provision relates to children and young people for whom the Council has a statutory duty to secure alternative provision.
43. The AP market is overseen by the AP Lead Officer and Commissioning Manager through regular provider forums, site visits, quality assurance reviews, due diligence checks and contract monitoring. The introduction of the DC Pro system has strengthened oversight

through real-time attendance monitoring, referral management and performance reporting, improving safeguarding and visibility of outcomes.

44. Referral trends, placement requests and demand data are provided by the broker team to commissioning which is used to identify gaps in local provision. Where needs cannot be met through the Framework, spot-purchased placements may be used to meet statutory duties. Market intelligence is used to inform service development, provider engagement and preparation for the Framework re-opening in 2028.
45. The Council works collaboratively with schools and providers to shape local provision and improve outcomes for children and young people. Individual Placement Agreements (IPAs) set out agreed outcomes and support arrangements for each placement, with progress monitored through regular reviews. The Council also supports market development, promotes quality improvement, and works with providers to expand local opportunities.
46. Implemented under the Procurement Act, the Alternative Provision Framework includes 44 approved providers across three lots: Education and Engagement, Mentoring, and Tuition. The framework operates for an initial five years, with the option to extend for up to 24 months and can be re-opened to new providers in 2028. All referrals are managed through a central (commissioning) broker team, providing oversight of placements, expenditure, attendance, outcomes, quality assurance, and contract performance, creating a transparent and outcome-focused commissioning model.

### **Safeguarding and Quality Assurance**

47. The Local Authority has robust safeguarding arrangements in place for all children and young people accessing Alternative Provision. Prior to any placement being commissioned, a comprehensive Pupil Passport is completed. This document sets out the young person's educational, behavioural, medical and safeguarding needs, together with details of any agencies currently involved with the child or family.
48. The Pupil Passport forms part of the commissioning process and is shared with prospective providers to ensure they have sufficient information to determine whether they can safely meet the young person's needs and put appropriate support and risk management arrangements in place from the outset of the placement.
49. The Local Authority closely monitors attendance for all children placed in Alternative Provision. Until recently, attendance monitoring was undertaken through established manual processes managed by a dedicated member of staff. In response to increasing numbers of placements, the Local Authority has now commissioned DCPro, a specialist case management and attendance tracking system. This will provide enhanced oversight of attendance patterns and ensure that all pupils accessing Alternative Provision are tracked consistently and effectively.
50. Attendance information is reviewed regularly, and any absence is followed up promptly. Where concerns arise, officers will contact the provider, the home school (where applicable), and parents or carers to establish the reason for the absence. Where absence patterns indicate wider concerns, further enquiries are undertaken to determine whether:
  - the placement remains appropriate to the young person's needs;
  - additional support is required;
  - there are emerging safeguarding concerns; or

- there are unmet educational, social, emotional or health needs requiring intervention.

51. The Local Authority maintains particularly close oversight of children placed within unregistered Alternative Provision. For every young person placed in an unregistered setting, the responsible Local Authority officer maintains regular contact with the provider and receives weekly updates regarding attendance, engagement, welfare and progress. Providers are also required to notify and record instances of non-attendance to ensure concerns are identified and acted upon swiftly. No unregistered Alternative Provision provider may be used by the Local Authority unless it has successfully completed the Local Authority's quality assurance process.

This process includes:

- scrutiny of safeguarding policies and procedures;
- review of recruitment and vetting arrangements;
- assessment of health and safety compliance;
- review of operational policies and governance arrangements;
- visits to premises and learning environments; and
- evaluation of the provider's capacity to meet individual pupil need.

Providers that do not meet the required standards are not approved for use and cannot receive placements commissioned by the Local Authority.

52. Quality assurance is an ongoing process. Provider performance is reviewed through monitoring activity, placement reviews, attendance information and feedback from children, families and schools. All commissioned providers are required to have formal complaints procedures, and the Local Authority will investigate complaints or safeguarding concerns relating to any provision it commissions. When concerns are received, officers consider:

- the nature and seriousness of the concern;
- previous monitoring information;
- findings from quality assurance activities;
- historical use of the provider; and
- whether any immediate safeguarding action is required.

Where necessary, further placements may be suspended pending investigation or additional quality assurance activity.

53. Strong due diligence arrangements underpin all commissioning decisions. Only providers that satisfy the Local Authority's requirements for safeguarding, governance, health and safety, staffing and educational delivery are approved for use. Ongoing monitoring and review arrangements provide assurance that placements remain safe, appropriate and capable of meeting the needs of children and young people.

## **Relationship Between AP, SEND and NEET**

54. The relationship between Alternative Provision (AP), Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) is complex and should not be viewed as a simple cause-and-effect relationship. Whilst national evidence indicates that young people who access AP are more likely to become NEET, this is largely explained by the higher prevalence of factors such as SEND, social, emotional and mental health needs, attendance difficulties, exclusion, care experience, family challenges and wider vulnerabilities within the cohort, rather than AP itself being the cause of poorer outcomes.
55. AP should be viewed as an intervention rather than a destination. Its purpose is to re-engage children and young people with education, address barriers to learning and support progression into further education, employment or training. Outcomes for pupils accessing AP must therefore be considered in the context of their starting points and levels of need.
56. In Herefordshire, the proportion of young people progressing into education, employment or training from AP remains lower than the overall county average. However, this should be viewed in the context of the complexity and level of need within the cohort. The outcomes achieved often represent meaningful progress from a significantly disadvantaged starting point.
57. The Local Authority recognises the importance of intervening early, before disengagement becomes entrenched. This is one of the key reasons Cabinet has approved the development of a Tier 2 Alternative Provision offer. The model supports both local priorities and the direction of national SEND reform by providing:
- Earlier intervention when concerns first emerge.
  - Increased support before permanent exclusion or placement breakdown occurs.
  - Greater collaboration between schools, AP providers and SEND services.
  - Improved opportunities to maintain young people within their local education community.
  - Support focused on reintegration wherever appropriate.

This approach is intended to prevent escalation, strengthen inclusion and improve longer-term educational and employment outcomes.

58. Whilst GCSE outcomes remain important, they are only one indicator within a broader picture of vulnerability and risk. The Local Authority therefore continues to focus on both educational achievement and the wider factors that support successful transitions into adulthood.

### **Future Demand and System Change**

59. Alongside increasing demand, the Council is progressing significant investment in local AP capacity through the relocation and expansion of HPRS and the development of a new Tier 2 offer. These developments are intended to strengthen early intervention, increase capacity and improve outcomes for some of Herefordshire's most vulnerable children and young people.
60. Looking ahead, demand for alternative provision in Herefordshire is expected to remain high and may continue to increase as demographic growth, rising levels of identified SEND, increasing complexity of need and ongoing inclusion challenges place pressure on

both mainstream and specialist services. Demand for EOTAS and Section 19 provision is also likely to remain a feature of the system where pupils cannot readily access suitable educational placements.

61. Parental expectations and behaviours have also evolved, with families increasingly aware of their rights, more willing to seek bespoke provision, and more likely to challenge decisions relating to placement, support and attendance. Future demand modelling indicates that pressure on alternative provision, specialist placements and outreach support is likely to remain significant over the medium term as the number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans continues to rise.
62. In addition, the anticipated impact of national SEND reform, greater expectations around inclusion, and wider changes across the education system are likely to alter both the volume and nature of demand, requiring the council and its partners to maintain sufficient capacity, flexibility and early intervention services to meet the needs of children and young people effectively.

### **Consultees**

63. The proposals have been developed through engagement with relevant Council services, including Education, Property Services and Finance, together with HPRS leadership in relation to the HPRS scheme. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People has been consulted and is supportive of the overall approach.
64. Recognised trade unions and Schools Forum have been informed of the capital proposals and their intended purpose.
65. Political Group Leaders will also be consulted as part of the governance process, with any material feedback reflected in the relevant decision reports.
66. Further engagement will take place as the schemes develop. This will include pupils, parents and carers, mainstream schools, HPRS, relevant partner agencies, ward members and neighbouring communities once preferred property options and detailed service arrangements are identified.

### **Appendices**

Appendix 1 - Data Pack

### **Background papers and resources**

None