



Forgotten Children – Creating Policy with Heart

Student exclusions are predominantly affecting children in poverty and with special needs. The Alternative Provision options are not sufficient and are creating a new generation of young people who are not in schooling or employment. Labour MP **Thelma Walker** discusses the implications of a new report on these forgotten children.

As a member of the Education Select Committee, it has been my privilege to be involved in the *Forgotten Children: Alternative Provision and the Scandal of Ever Increasing Exclusions* report over the last year.

I came to politics after a career in education, most recently as the headteacher of a primary school. My experience included primary and secondary settings, supporting teacher training courses and managing one of the first Stage One children's centres in my local authority. Every day working in education drove home to me the importance of politics and policy making. It was a natural step – after a lifetime in the Labour party – to step up to be a representative for my home constituency in 2017. For me, it was the

At its core, how we tackle the needs and wishes of our most vulnerable children informs and decides what kind of society we want to be. It is a question of how we include the excluded, how we pull families back from the brink, and how we see children with disabilities, mental health problems, and additional needs as an important part of our world rather than seeing them as a threat to Progress 8 results. The foundations of inclusion, equality and having a truly diverse society which enriches us all, can be laid at this early stage if we as policymakers are brave and compassionate enough to do so.

The statistics around who ends up in alternative provision – and why – are telling, and reflect deeper structural inequalities. Children in care, in need, in poverty, and with SEND are all more likely to be excluded than children not in these categories.² For every girl permanently excluded last year, over three boys were.³ Black Caribbean, Irish travellers and Gypsy Roma heritage pupils are disproportionately represented in Alternative Provision (AP).⁴ Almost half of children in AP are 15 and 16 years old.⁵

All these groups are subject to pre-existing vulnerabilities and are hugely over-represented in negative statistics as adults, significantly in the prison and justice systems. Parents of these children 'can be left fighting a system that they do not understand and that they feel is stacked against them ... parents often do not have the time or social capital to challenge schools.'⁶ The evidence we heard on this rang true with my professional and personal experience: the children most in need of articulate, consistent advocates are those least likely to have them, and the parents who need to defend their children most frequently may lack the confidence, skill, language and knowledge to do so. And once we start to unpick the types of inequality prevalent here, it is frankly difficult to know where to stop.

It is my belief that alternative provision should be used to address and tackle the inequalities which affect particular sections of the population – not to embed and worsen it. Of course, the elephant in the room when talking about alternative provision is the fact that:

...schools and school representatives told us that schools no longer have the financial resources to fund pastoral support, including teaching assistants, that would often help keep pupils in mainstream schools... financial pressures are affecting schools' capacity and ability to identify and support problems and provide the early intervention that is necessary.⁷

next stage in standing up for those who could not defend themselves. When I was asked to serve on the Education Select Committee, I was delighted to be able to bring thirty years of experience to the role, and to be part of the inquiry into such an important issue.

Alternative provision – defined by the DFE as 'education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour' – is not simply an issue of the individuals concerned and their families.¹

My own local authority, Kirklees, is the seventh largest metropolitan council in the country and is home to some of the 10 per cent most deprived families in the UK. Yet, when need is taken into account, it is the worst funded local authority in the country, having lost roughly half of its budget since 2010. There is no school in my constituency – even those serving areas of incredibly high need – which has not suffered a cut to its budget. Nationally the number of staff vacancies in the maintained AP and special sector has nearly trebled since 2011. Vacancies are 100–150 per cent higher than in mainstream secondary schools.⁸

It is simply not feasible to commit to resolving some of the issues highlighted by the Committee without also devoting adequate funding and resources. And it is my personal view that the near-decade of austerity has already done unforgivable harm to the teaching profession, to our education system and to the lives of children and families. Labour's radical vision for the future of education is what I spent a career waiting for and fighting for. But we should be under no illusions about how long it will take to undo the last eight years. The IPPR report *Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion* describes starkly how:

the number of children experiencing intersecting vulnerabilities ... is increasing. Put simply: rising exclusions could be partially explained by rising numbers of children with complex needs. Child poverty is rising. Between 2010 and 2015, half a million more children fell into absolute poverty. This has been driven by stagnant incomes due to the slow economic recovery – with median real wages falling between 8 and 9 per cent from 2008 to 2014 – and accentuated by welfare policy.⁹

It is with this in mind that I will discuss some of the Committee's specific findings which warrant further attention, and what they could mean for education and society more generally. I will consider what could be done about the glaring issues this report highlights. And I will make no apologies for being political, because there is no more political issue than how and what we teach our children.

Alternative provision and NEET young people

Anyone who has spent any time working in education or related fields is familiar with the struggle to tackle the issue of young people who are NEET (not in employment, education and training.) Even pre-austerity, when local authorities and government agencies were adequately funded, an inelastic group of NEET young people remained. With a concerted multi-agency effort, a lot of emotional investment from everyone, and a good dose of luck, it was sometimes possible to turn the corner for particular individuals.

But in my own region of West Yorkshire, the geographical areas of high deprivation and high levels of NEET are virtually the same now as they were twenty years ago. The actions of successive governments – whether driven by social justice or ideological austerity – have failed to deliver lasting and deep-rooted change on the scale required.

The link between alternative provision and NEET young people is twofold: firstly, there is an incredible lack of AP at further education and sixth-form level. As the report lays out:

“the Minister told us: It is a power local authorities have. It is not a duty. The duty is to provide alternative provision for those of compulsory school age to 16”.¹⁰ This can mean that a young person who is doing well and flourishing in AP reaches 16 and either falls off a cliff-edge of provision or moves on to provision where their situation is not understood, they are not comfortable, they do not have strong relationships with staff, the jump in what is expected of them is often immense, and they are effectively set up to fail and fall into the trap of becoming NEET.



Our report recommends that “the Government must allocate resources to ensure that local authorities and providers can provide post-16 support to pupils, either in the form of outreach and support to colleges or by providing their own post-16 alternative provision”.¹¹

Secondly there is a clear link between school exclusion and young people becoming NEET – “Exclusion blights educational opportunities and can stall or halt altogether the transition from school to further study and the world of work.”¹²

The scale of school exclusions is likely to be much higher than it would seem when looking at government data. Research carried out by the Institute for Public Policy Research reveals that despite only 6,685 reported permanent exclusions last year, 48,000 pupils were educated in AP, and still more pupils were in one way or another ‘functionally excluded’ from school. Evidence heard by the Select Committee would indicate that some of these ‘functional exclusions’ are as a result of technically unlawful practice, for example ‘off-rolling’.¹³

There is no shortage of shocking statistics about the future destinations and prospects of children leaving AP. 27 percent of excluded young people were NEET for between one and two years by the time they were 19, compared to one in 10 young people who had never been excluded. Fifteen per cent were NEET for more than two years. 45 percent of young people leaving PRUs (Pupil Referral Units) were not in a ‘sustained’ employment, education or training destination six months after their GCSEs.¹⁴

Overwhelmingly these children are already disadvantaged in some way – poor children are four times more likely to be excluded from school and 55 percent of 5–10 year olds in schools for excluded pupils are eligible for free school meals.¹⁵

But most saddening is the evidence we heard repeatedly, that one main factor holding children back is a sheer lack of ambition – from themselves, their families and even the staff who teach them.

As a teacher, I knew that what we taught children about themselves, their self-worth, their place in the world, and their innate importance as human beings was as important as what we taught them about English and Maths. “What good is it to teach a child to count, if you don’t show him that he counts for something?”¹⁶

Too often, ambitions for children and young people in AP are conspicuously and openly lowered – when it has never been more important that a sense of worth is instilled. As Peterborough Pupil Referral Service told us: “A good PRU delivers a lot of love and a little magic into the lives of those who have very frequently, and sadly, experienced too little of either.”¹⁷ The importance of this in the lives of those at risk of becoming NEET cannot be overestimated, and should be a cornerstone of all AP settings.

Prevalence of children with SEND

*The National Education Union told us that excluding pupils can save schools thousands of pounds...We also heard that schools are justifying permanent exclusions of pupils with SEND, by claiming that they will get the support that they need in alternative provision, and exclusion will speed up the assessment process. This then leads to pupils with SEND being left for long periods of time in alternative provision while the assessment takes place.*¹⁸(Forgotten children, as above. p. 11).

There is a clear correlation between exclusions and SEND. Nearly 8/10 children in schools for excluded children have SEND and those with a recognised need are up to seven times more likely to be excluded than those without.¹⁹ The narrowing of the curriculum (which I discuss in more detail below) disproportionately affects this group:

*48 percent [of schools] said curriculum changes were having a negative effect on the progress of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in their schools...secondary school pupils with SEND have much higher levels of unhappiness... [they]were also much more likely to have conduct problems, hyperactivity problems, to struggle with peer relationships and be at risk of mental health problems.*²⁰

As with NEET young people, the scale of the system’s failure to serve those most in need of it is stark. In 11 local authorities, there are no ‘good’ places in alternative provision. In some local authorities, all PRUs are ‘inadequate’. It is therefore the case ‘that there are areas of the country, and therefore large numbers of pupils, that have no access to high quality alternative provision and therefore high quality educational opportunities for those who may be set up to fail in mainstream school.’²¹ Our report recommends that “there should be a senior person in each local authority who is responsible for protecting the interests and promoting the educational achievement of pupils in alternative provision, which is adequately resourced.”²² For both SEND and NEET groups, this could be invaluable.

Truly ‘alternative’ provision

Since being elected in June 2017, I have prioritised visiting local schools – partly as a natural consequence of a lifelong passion for education, and partly because as the welfare state and service provision is systematically dismantled and destroyed, our schools are often the last remaining shield for our most vulnerable families. Much is often made of the public sector’s inherent inefficiency, but nobody who has witnessed the dedication of those working with our most deprived, most vulnerable, most complex families would think it anything other than a miracle that they have kept going for so long.

In the face of impossible budgets, skyrocketing poverty, increased demand and appallingly decreased resources, some shining lights of innovation and passion come through. I have seen a sheer determination to reach out to hard-to-reach children by whatever means necessary: something I would call ‘truly alternative provision’.

I am convinced that by making such deviations a standard part of the curriculum



– and something that every parent should be able to expect – we can create a truly world-class education system. The policy landscape at the moment, however, does not provide fertile ground for such provision to flourish, with what the Local Government Information Unit refers to as ‘tension between a personalised approach with a wider focus on the varying needs of individual young people and the policy imperative from schools that provision needs to meet narrower academic performance targets.’²³

As the report outlines:

We were told that a narrow curriculum can affect the engagement of some pupils with their education, and Progress 8 in particular can narrow the curriculum for some pupils.... It is progress in a far narrower set of subjects than would have been considered before. Creative and technical subjects, which a lower-ability child would find more accessible, have lost their validity and are disappearing from many schools. If pupils are experiencing a narrow curriculum, they are missing out on the wider subjects and opportunities that enable them to develop social and economic capital, which is vital for their future education and adult life.

A...consequence of the Government’s strong focus on school standards has led to school environments and practices that have resulted in disadvantaged children being disproportionately excluded, which includes a curriculum with a lack of focus on developing pupils’ social and economic capital.’²⁴

It was a cornerstone of my teaching ethos to include space in the curriculum for such individualised attention. ‘Every Child Matters’ was more than just a slogan – it was a promise which has now been broken. The narrowing of the curriculum has resulted not only in misery for the children who feel like the proverbial square pegs in round holes five days a week, but in social exclusion at an appallingly early age for those who do not or cannot conform. The use of more tailored provision, such as nurture groups, is a positive step, but one which is under constant threat from staff shortages, increasing class sizes and budget cuts:

Many schools are responding to the squeeze in funding by reducing the number of support staff, who work with vulnerable pupils and often staff pastoral elements of the school ... 69 per cent of primary school leaders and 68 per cent of secondary school leaders expected to reduce numbers of support staff to make savings in the academic year 2017/18. This is of particular concern if such support staff are responsible for identifying and supporting pupils with mental ill health and other vulnerabilities.’²⁵

Provision like outdoor education, art, music, sport and physical activity can sometimes literally be lifesavers for children, and provide them with a level of tailored nurturing that may be sadly lacking in other areas of life. Their disappearance from the curriculum – and from children’s lives – will come at an unquantifiable cost to society. One high school in my constituency runs a dry stone walling project for young people with behavioural issues. Not only is this a calming physical activity, it is helping to preserve a traditional community skill which is in danger of dying out. How much better and more enriching than an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ approach.



Conclusions

The scope of the *Forgotten Children* report was far wider than the issues I have discussed here. Every single data point, anecdote and piece of evidence we considered would be valuable to consider alone. The above issues are of particular interest because – if taken and funded seriously – they sketch out a policy roadmap to revolutionising the system of alternative provision. As our report concludes, ‘AP is diverse and it would not be appropriate to set a one-size-fits-all template for what good alternative provision looks like’.²⁶ By definition, those accessing AP are complex and difficult cases and centralised diktats about how they should be dealt with would be counter-productive.

However, it is very possible to look at broader policies which would create an environment in which good AP can flourish.

Provision like the creative, nurturing, outdoor, active sessions I have witnessed in my own constituency and heard about as part of this inquiry should not be considered as a tacked-on extra in areas where volunteers or a particularly dedicated teacher will provide it. It should be an essential part of the curriculum, as such activities enrich the lives and potential of every child, while providing a potential way to reach some of our most complex young people.

Children with SEND should be considered not as a difficulty, but as an opportunity. With the exception of mental health issues – which should be dealt with speedily and effectively – many conditions these children live with are lifelong. Children with SEND become adults who live in our communities. Designing provision to not only meet their needs, but which considers their uniqueness and skills as an asset, will benefit everyone in the short and long term.

The case of NEET young people demonstrates effectively why education is deeply political, but also why education policy cannot be considered in isolation. Tackling the issues which face young children who are NEET or at risk of becoming so is to tackle some of our most deep-rooted social problems – health, worklessness, the justice system, poor economic recovery and countless others. Alternative provision done well gives us the opportunity to break the cycles of abuse, poverty, imprisonment and poor education for those who need it most. It is early intervention not just for the individuals concerned, but for their families, their communities and our country.

The title of our report in full is *Forgotten Children: Alternative Provision and the Scandal of Ever Increasing Exclusions*. This narrative is one which shames us as a society and comes at a very real human cost.

I am proud and filled with hope to be part of a Labour party which is not afraid to think radically about how we change forever the direction of alternative provision, and the inequalities which plague and underpin it – ‘*not just to be a voice for the voiceless, but to give them a voice of their own*’.²⁷

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Notes

- 1 Department for Education (DfE). (2013). *Alternative provision: Statutory guidance for local authorities*. London, p. 3.
- 2 DfE (2013). *Alternative provision*.
- 3 DfE (2017). *Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2015–2016*. London, 2017.
- 4 Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2017). *Making the difference: Breaking the link between school exclusion and social exclusion*. London.
- 5 DfE (2013). *Alternative provision*.
- 6 House of Commons Education Select Committee (HCEC) (2018). *Forgotten children: Alternative provision and the scandal of ever-increasing exclusions*. London, House of Commons, p. 16.
- 7 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*.
- 8 IPPR (2017). *Making the difference*, p. 17.
- 9 IPPR (2017). *Making the difference*.
- 10 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, p. 38.
- 11 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, p. 43.
- 12 IPPR (2017). *Making the difference*, p. 21.
- 13 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, p. 16.
- 14 IPPR (2017). *Making the difference*, p. 22.
- 15 IPPR (2017). *Making the difference*, p. 16.
- 16 Cleave, C. (2016). *Everyone brave is forgiven*. London: Sceptre, p. 122.
- 17 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, p. 25.
- 18 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, p. 11.
- 19 IPPR (2017). *Making the difference*, p. 16.
- 20 IPPR (2017). *Making the difference*, p. 25.
- 21 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, p. 18.
- 22 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, p. 24.
- 23 Crompton, A. (2017). *Alternative provision: Effective practice and post-16 transition: DfE research*. Local Government Information Unit.
- 24 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, pp. 13, 40.
- 25 IPPR (2017). *Making the difference*, p. 25.
- 26 HCEC (2018). *Forgotten children*, p. 25.
- 27 Rayner, A. (2017). *Speech to party conference*.