Explorative research into In-school Support Units

Research report

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Department for Education

Contents

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

This research was conducted by the Department for Education (DfE) to explore the models, uses and perceived outcomes of in-school support units within mainstream schools in England. Ten mainstream secondary schools across England, including 12 members of school staff, were interviewed by DfE social researchers to understand the purpose, use and outcomes associated with using in-school support units. As a small-scale qualitative study, with a low sample size, the findings only represent the views and practices of those who agreed to take part in the research and cannot be generalised wider.

Why we conducted this research

In June 2023 the Department for Education ran a series of questions on the prevalence and use of in-school units in the School and College Panel Survey[1]. These questions focused on Pupil Support Units (PSUs) and Internal or In-school Alternative Provision (IAP). The survey found that 50% of secondary schools either have or are planning to open a PSU compared to 11% of primary schools. Secondary schools were also more likely to have an IAP or be planning to open one (20% vs 7%).

Whilst the survey used the terms PSUs and IAPs, this research acknowledges and explores the reality that in practice, mainstream schools have many names for in-school units that support pupils who may be struggling to thrive at their mainstream school, beyond the definitions of PSUs and IAPs. With a growing number of mainstream schools using in-school support units, this research was conducted to better understand the wide variety of models, uses and perceived outcomes of this type of provision.

A note on terminology of in-school support units

The term In-school Support Units (ISUs) is used in this research to capture the wide variety of provision used in mainstream schools under the description of a support unit, where the purpose is to provide additional support to pupils for whom the mainstream classroom may not be suitable. This includes where pupils require additional support for one or more of the following reasons: behaviour, attendance, academic performance, Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). The term In-school Support Units (ISUs) includes both Pupil Support Units (PSUs) and Internal / In-school Alternative Provision (IAP) as defined in the Behaviour in Schools guidance[2]. Our definition of ISUs does not include SEN Units or Resourced

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[1] Unweighted base of 420 school leaders, 238 primary and 182 secondary schools. School and College Panel June 2023 survey, DfE. SCP June 2023 wave report (publishing.service.gov.uk)
[2] Behaviour in Schools, 2024, DfE Behaviour in Schools - Advice for headteachers and school staff Feb 2024 (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Provision (RP) which are SEN provisions within mainstream schools, formally recognised by the local authority and receive high needs funding. The units that school staff were interviewed about in this research were not SEN Units or Resourced Provision and were set up and funded by the school.

Key Findings

Types of in-school units

- Almost all of the 10 secondary schools that were interviewed as part of this research operated more than one support unit. Three schools operated what they described as an 'Internal AP', though only one of these accepted pupils from other schools in the local area.

- Schools used a variety of models of support units, operating for a range of purposes which broadly fell into four main categories:
  - SEMH / EBSA support
  - Academic support
  - Proactive behaviour support
  - Reactive behaviour support
  - Removal rooms (not in scope).

Purpose and reasons for use

- Support model types often had a hybrid purpose, with overlap between SEMH / EBSA support units, academic support and proactive support units. School staff had a common view that this overlap was due to the belief that behaviour problems are a communication of unmet need. The most developed examples of in-school units found in this research were units that combined these categories and took a holistic approach to improving pupil outcomes, with a focus on addressing the underlying reasons for misbehaviour.

- A strong theme amongst schools who operated in-school units was that many of these types of support were viewed as being inclusion focused. In-school units were often needs-based and were viewed as a way of engaging 'harder to reach' pupils in their education.

- Schools varied in their rationale for using the provision, with some opting for a proactive approach to support which was viewed as a type of early intervention, whilst others operated reactively and utilised the unit after a build-up of misbehaviour.

- Although out of scope of our definition of ISUs, some schools operated removal rooms which were used as a sanction. Pupils who attended these types of units did so as a reaction to consistent misbehaviour and often stayed for short periods of time, with some examples including spaces where pupils were removed from the classroom and their peers and supervised by staff in a separate space.

Circumstances leading to placement

- Circumstances leading to placement were commonly a graduated response to behaviour, where behaviour data triggered a referral to in-school units. When units were used more proactively or for a wider range of support reasons, referral was often based on pupil need and, in some cases, came from safeguarding or pastoral staff members.

- Schools regularly used monitoring data to determine both referrals into in-school units and to monitor the progress of pupils and decide on their length of stay. For some schools, the length of stay was pre-determined with a set number of weeks as part of a structured programme of support.

Length of stay and numbers of pupils

- Length of stay within ISUs varied from short interventions (from as little as 15 minutes for academic support, or the duration of a class if a pupil had been sent out for misbehaviour) to longer term structured courses. Longer stays included set 6-week plans or in some cases, indefinite stays if the school felt that the unit better met the needs of the pupil.

- Units varied on the number of pupils they accepted, with 15 pupils stated as the maximum number across respondents. Pupil numbers were commonly stated as between 5 and 10 per unit, with isolation rooms taking one pupil per unit. Many schools in this research were at capacity with the number of pupils they could support in their ISUs.

Staffing and accountability

- Senior staff including Headteachers, Assistant headteachers and Inclusion directors were often accountable for how the unit operates, however day-to-day running was commonly managed by Teaching Assistants (TA).

- Classroom teachers often set the curriculum in units, but few examples staffed units with classroom teachers full time. Instead, TAs often taught the subjects set by classroom teachers. Where units had a holistic approach to behaviour, they often included the use of specialist staff members such as Special Educational

Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), Educational Psychologists (EPs), counsellors and mentors to support pupils.

- Senior leadership teams were commonly involved in the referral of pupils to ISUs in the form of a panel, with the family and pupils often involved as well.

Perceived pupil experience

- Initial reaction to pupil placement was perceived to change over time. School staff felt that pupils were often initially reluctant to attend the provision, but this point of view changed positively by the end of their placement. This was not believed to be the case where units were only viewed as a type of sanction.

- Communicating the purpose of the placement was seen as crucial in managing pupil reaction. This contributed to a clear understanding for the pupil of why they were placed in the provision. In some examples, schools rebranded their ISUs to improve pupil and parent perception of the provision, such as changing the name of the unit.

- Overall, staff perceived pupil experience of ISUs as positive. Where ISUs were not branded to be a sanction and had a holistic approach to pupil support, staff commonly felt that pupils had a positive experience during their placement.

Pupil outcomes

- Pupil outcomes were perceived to span behaviour, attendance and attainment improvements, as well as softer outcomes including happiness, ability to regulate emotions, reduced mental health problems, reengagement with education and improvements in feelings of belonging. This was particularly the case where ISUs had a holistic approach to their support and were not viewed as a sanction.

Parental involvement and reaction

- There was mixed reaction from parents, with initial concern over quality of learning. Parents were commonly stated as having been initially reluctant to have their child attend an ISU, however over time this often changed when positive outcomes were seen. In units that were used by the school as a sanction, parental concerns were perceived to be heightened.

- Parents and school staff working together contributed to successful outcomes for pupils. School staff frequently stated that when parents and the school were aligned, pupils were better able to engage with the ISU and this contributed to both successful outcomes and a positive experience for pupils.

Factors for success

- The importance of good quality staff was commonly stated across this research, with some schools sharing challenges in recruiting staff. School staff felt that staff who had expertise in SEND and behavioural support were critical in adequately supporting pupils. The importance of staff was perceived to be key in pupil-staff and parent-staff relationships, as well as strong ties between the school staff operating the units. In all cases, these relationships were commonly stated as contributing to successful outcomes for pupils in ISUs.

- The relationship between staff and pupils was commonly stated as a critical success factor. Where pupil-staff relationships were strong, this was viewed as contributing to both successful outcomes and positive experiences for pupils.

Limited links with Alternative Provision schools

- Schools had limited links to external Alternative Provision (AP) schools, despite wanting a more proactive relationship with them. Commonly, schools stated that they would benefit from AP outreach, where AP staff provide behaviour support to the mainstream school.

- Schools stated that external AP was used when mainstream schools could not meet pupil needs, though many schools described their ISU as an IAP, viewing their unit as a type of alternative provision that prevented the pupil from needing to leave the mainstream school.

- Some schools felt that an added benefit of using the ISU was that it was cost-saving for them, with external alternative provision places being costly and the ISU representing a cheaper alternative which benefited the pupil as well by keeping them in school.

Suspension and permanent exclusion

- Schools used ISUs to prevent suspension and permanent exclusion. Commonly, schools stated that using their ISU has resulted in a reduction in their use of suspension and permanent exclusion. Whilst suspension and permanent exclusion would still be used by schools in cases of violence and serious verbal aggression, there was a strong understanding amongst school staff of the impact on life outcomes that these mechanisms have on pupils.

- Out of the 10 schools who took part in this research, 7 had a lower than national average permanent exclusion rate (below 0.22) with 6 out of 10 schools having a lower rate of suspended pupils (7.12 nationally in 2022/23).

Background

Defining In-school Support Units

This research aimed to develop an understanding of the models and uses of In-school Support Units (ISU) by mainstream schools in England. When using the term In-school Support Units (ISU) in this research report, this includes two types of support units found in mainstream schools: Pupil Support Units (PSUs) and Internal or In-school Alternative Provision (IAP). In addition, this definition covers the full variety of models of in-school support units. This includes where pupils require additional support for one or more of the following reasons: behaviour, attendance, academic performance, Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Our definition of ISUs does not include SEN Units or Resourced Provision (RP) which are SEN provisions within mainstream schools, formally recognised by the local authority and receive high needs funding. The units that school staff were interviewed about in this research were not SEN Units or Resourced Provision.

The Behaviour in Schools guidance (DfE, 2024[3]) defines Pupil Support Units (PSUs) as:

> A pupil support unit is a planned intervention occurring in small groups and in place of mainstream lessons. The purpose of this unit can be two-fold:
>
> a) as a planned intervention for behavioural or pastoral reasons
>
> b) as a final preventative measure to support pupils at risk of exclusion.

Whilst IAPs are not an official definition, mainstream schools are using this term to describe in-school units which are used instead of, or before, external alternative provision. The Behaviour in Schools guidance notes this and has included the below definition of IAPs which has been used in this research project.

> Most pupil support units are established solely to accommodate pupils from the school in which they are located, whilst some units, often termed 'in-school Alternative Provision (AP) units', are established to accommodate pupils from other schools as well.

Whilst this report uses the terms ISUs, PSUs and IAPs, this research acknowledges and explores the reality that in practice, mainstream schools have many names for in-school units that support pupils who may be struggling to thrive at their mainstream school.

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[3] Behaviour in Schools, 2024, DfE Behaviour in Schools - Advice for headteachers and school staff Feb 2024 (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Research aims

The aim of this research project was to explore the use and models of ISUs in mainstream schools in England. The rationale for this was that the Department for Education holds limited information about the types and uses of ISUs, with an awareness that they are increasingly being used by mainstream schools.

Existing research on in-school units is scarce despite local practitioner intelligence indicating that units are increasingly used within mainstream schools. One of the most recent in-depth research studies on in-school units was published in 2003 by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) who evaluated the outcomes, effects, process and components of Learning Support Units (LSUs), which were an Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative launched in 1999 by the Labour Government at the time. LSUs provided a base in mainstream schools offering short-term teaching and support programmes geared to the individual needs of pupils experiencing difficulties in school and/or at risk of exclusion[4]. The evaluation of LSUs found them to be largely successful for improving pupil outcomes, but that they worked best as part of a network of support. The EiC programme was discontinued in 2006. Research published more recently than this is scarce, however there is growing interest in what mainstream schools' term Internal Alternative Provision (IAP), which is reflected in the current study that the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) are running, which seeks to understand the use of IAPs for pupils at risk of persistent absence or exclusion[5].

In June 2023, DfE ran a series of questions in the School and College Panel survey[6] which asked about the prevalence of PSUs and IAPs. Around one-in-ten schools (11%) reported to have a PSU, with a further 7% planning to establish one. Secondary schools were more likely to have a PSU, with 50% of secondary schools having or planning to open one (37% had one, 13% planned to open) compared to 11% of primary schools (6% had, 5% planned to open).

Prevalence of IAPs was found to be less common, with one-in-twenty (5%) schools reporting to have an IAP. Secondary schools were also more likely to have an IAP (12% vs 4%) or be planning to open one (9% vs 3%). In total, 20% of secondary schools reported that they had, or planned to open an IAP.

On length of pupil stay, survey responses varied with less than one day (20%), over three months (20%) and over one year (14%), the most common responses for PSUs[7]. Over

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[4] Learning Support Unit strand study, July 2003, NFER Learning Support Unit Strand study
[5] Education Endowment Foundation Understanding the use of internal alternative provision for… | EEF
[6] School and College Panel June 2023 survey, DfE. SCP June 2023 wave report (publishing.service.gov.uk)
[7] Unweighted base of 81 school leaders, 14 primary and 67 secondary. SCP June 2023 wave report (publishing.service.gov.uk)

one year (24%), over three months (23%) and more than a week but less than one month (16%) were the highest proportion of answers for IAPs[8].

As a result of these findings, DfE planned this explorative research to answer the following research questions:

- How PSUs and IAPs are being used in mainstream schools.
- Pupil pathways into in-school support units and onward movement.
- Decision-making and accountability for pupils in PSUs/IAP.
- The perceived impact of in-school support units on pupils' outcomes and how schools are measuring this.
- How PSUs/IAPs link to wider AP services and how (or whether) transition between the two is managed.

Methodology

This research project used qualitative explorative methods to obtain an in-depth understanding of the use and models of ISUs.

Our sample was drawn from the June 2023 School and College Panel survey where schools responded as currently operating either a PSU or an IAP. This gave us a sample of 69 schools who were invited to a 1-hour semi-structured interview with a Government Social Researcher. Of this sample, 10 secondary schools including 12 members of school staff across England agreed to take part and were interviewed as part of this research. Of these members of staff, 7 were assistant or deputy headteachers, 1 was a headteacher, 1 was a behaviour manager and 1 was a dedicated member of staff hired for the in-school unit.

Comparing the 10 schools who took part in the research with equivalent rates in secondary schools nationally, 7 schools had a higher proportion of pupils with SEN support (12.9% nationally in 2023/24), 5 schools had a higher proportion of pupils with EHCPs (2.7% nationally in 2023/24), 7 schools had a lower rate of permanent exclusion (0.22 nationally in 2022/23) and 6 schools had a lower rate of suspended pupils (7.12 nationally in 2022/23). Further information about the sample of schools who took part in this research can be found in the annex of this report.

Those who took part in this research did so anonymously and as such staff names, school names and identifying characteristics have not been included in this report.

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[8] Unweighted base of 31 school leaders, 9 primary and 22 secondary. SCP June 2023 wave report (publishing.service.gov.uk)

After conducting all 10 interviews, the qualitative data collected was thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2008)[9] method for thematic analysis, where key themes and patterns were drawn out of the information collected and is described in the findings section of this report. A team of four Government Social Researchers thematically coded interviews and discussed emerging findings. Joint analysis of this qualitative data provided quality assurance of the themes and subthemes created.

Methodological considerations

It is important to take into account the limitations of this study which should be considered alongside the findings in this report:

- The findings only represent the views and practices of the 10 secondary schools who agreed to take part in the research. Schools who did not take part may have different approaches and models of in-school units, and findings cannot be used to generalise how all in-school units currently operate.

- Schools who took part in this voluntary research self-selected and they may not be typical of school type or in-school unit type.

- This research has not been conducted to share best-practice. Instead, it is an objective exploratory piece of research into the models and types of in-school units operating in mainstream schools.

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[9] Braun and Clarke (2008) Using thematic analysis in psychology Using thematic analysis in psychology: Qualitative Research in Psychology: Vol 3, No 2 (tandfonline.com)

Findings

How support units were described by school staff

School staff who took part in this research were asked what their in-school units looked like, how long they had been running, details on the curriculum used and the physical set up of the space.

Most schools had multiple units for different purposes

Almost all schools that were interviewed as part of this research operated more than one support unit. Three schools operated what they described as an 'Internal AP', though only one of these accepted pupils from other schools in the local area. For schools that did have multiple units, each unit was defined as having a different purpose. This broadly fell into four categories, though overlap existed:

- **SEMH / EBSA support**: support for pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), with many focusing on mental health and wellbeing. Some of these units did have crossovers with wider Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), with SENCO support.

- **Academic support**: support for pupils who are struggling academically and require additional support to improve their grades. This included 1-1 tutor support for skills such as numeracy and literacy but also counselling support for pupils whose home life may be impacting on their ability to perform in school.

- **Proactive behaviour support**: early intervention support for students who are struggling with behaviour in mainstream classes. These units offered holistic support with a focus on understanding underlying pupil needs to improve behaviour, attendance and attainment. Holistic behaviour support was described as understanding and addressing the physical, emotional and social factors that may influence behaviour.

- **Reactive behaviour support**: reactive behaviour support used as a result of misbehaviour once it had reached a certain threshold as per the school's behaviour policy. In some cases, these types of units were viewed primarily as a sanction, though this was not always the case. Occasionally, reactive units also included removal rooms.

- **Removal rooms**: these units were out of scope for our research, though some schools did operate them. This type of unit was described as a space where pupils were removed from the classroom and their peers and supervised by staff in a separate space.

Support units varied on the number of pupils they accepted, with 15 pupils stated as the maximum number across respondents. Pupil numbers were commonly stated as between 5 and 10 per unit, with isolation rooms taking one pupil per unit. Many schools in this research were at capacity with the number of pupils they could support in their ISUs.

Facilities and curriculum

Support unit facilities varied between schools, though all units were attached to or on the same site as the mainstream school and were frequently a classroom style setting. The range of facilities within the units included computers, small libraries, quiet spaces and sensory rooms. Reactive behaviour units often used individual booths for pupils to be seated away from their peers, whilst supervised by school staff. Commonly, schools stated that they would like to make improvements to their in-school units including upgrading facilities, hiring more dedicated staff members and opening a second unit.

Curriculum delivered in the units varied. A common theme amongst the units was that the mainstream curriculum was followed, and subject teachers would join the units to set the work which would then be supported by staff members working in the units. Units often offered adaptive materials to meet pupil needs and reengage them in the curriculum where appropriate. In some units, deviation from the main curriculum was sometimes offered and viewed as a type of enrichment to engage with pupils. An example of this was a graffiti artist who came into the unit for a session which the pupils were perceived to respond extremely positively to.

For reactive units, where attendance was viewed as a sanction, pupils would not always follow the class curriculum if this was used as a short-term measure. An example of this is where pupils would be asked to write an essay on why they had been placed in the unit rather than carry out the work of the lesson they were sent out from.

Hybrid types of support models

It is important to note that there was often overlap between SEMH / EBSA support units, academic support and proactive behaviour support units, as a common view amongst schools was that undiagnosed SEMH or SEND and factors outside of school contributed to misbehaviour and academic performance. Once the needs of the pupil were better understood, they were sometimes moved from behaviour focused units to SEND / SEMH support when schools had two units, or specialist support was brought in for these pupils. Because of this overlap, units often had a hybrid purpose combining two or more of the above categories. The most developed examples of in-school units found in this research were units that combined these categories and took a holistic approach to improving pupil outcomes. Reactive behaviour support however, where the unit was viewed solely as a sanction, did not include any overlap with the above categories for the schools who operated this type of unit.

Schools had a range of names for their support units, including generic terms such as student support centres to more abstract names which were used to 'rebrand' the support units and make them more appealing to pupils. The term 'Internal AP' was mentioned by some schools, though only in one instance was this in relation to a unit which also supported pupils from other mainstream schools. Often, schools used the term 'Internal AP' as they viewed the unit as a type of support they could utilise in-school rather than using external Alternative Provision.

Inclusion Focus

A strong theme amongst schools who operated in-school units was that many of these types of support were viewed as being inclusion focused. Support units were often needs-based and were viewed as a way of engaging harder to reach pupils in their education. Staff often had a secondary role such as Head of Inclusion or Inclusion Manager, showing a commitment to inclusive practices within the school culture.

Staff setup

Senior Leadership Team (SLT) often accountable for units

A common theme amongst schools was that Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) were often accountable for the governance of the units. This included headteachers, assistant headteachers and directors of behaviour or inclusion. In cases where SLT were not responsible for governing the units, this fell to a single member of staff who was responsible for managing the unit as a full-time role. The staff setup in the daily running of the units varied from school to school, and included rotas of teaching staff, teaching assistants and more fluid approaches to staffing based on pupil need or availability of teachers. There was generally a mix of full-time and part-time members of staff in the units. Whilst senior members of staff were frequently responsible for the units, they were not always present in the day-to-day operation of them.

TA involvement in day-to-day running of units

Teaching Assistants (TAs) were commonly involved in the daily running of support units across all types. Staffing methods were often responsive and needs-based depending on the pupils they had in the unit at that time. Most units had involvement from classroom teachers who set work in the units to follow the mainstream curriculum, which TAs or Higher-Level Teaching Assistants (HLTA) would then support the pupils in completing.

> So, we have staff that come in, in terms of curriculum and deliver the curriculum. It's predominantly based at key stage three, we look at early intervention. […] So, we have staff coming into the provision, they deliver sessions within the provision, and they support. We have two HLTA (Higher Level Teaching Assistant) members of staff that are permanently based in the provision itself and they run and support in lessons as well. They access their full curriculum within the provision and then we look at a transition and phase back into mainstream.

– *School staff member*

Specialist staff

Units that focused on a holistic approach to behaviour often included the use of specialist members of staff such as SENCOs, Educational Psychologists, counsellors and mentors. This was frequently the case where there was overlap between proactive behaviour approaches with SEMH, EBSA, wellbeing and an understanding of the impact of life outside of school on pupils. In some cases, schools brought in external specialists such as therapists and mental health professionals to work in the unit.

> We've got therapists that are brought in from off site. As part of the team, they are very much based with us. And then we've got the mental health support team, which are actually based at our school.... we have a referral system. There's a concern about a student, and a referral comes in and then they sit down with the therapist, the mentor, my designated safeguarding lead, the mental health support team, one of the mentors. And they'll sit down and then triage, who is then gonna be best to support this young person. And that's kind of the makeup and the setup of that in [the unit].

– *School staff member*

Some units used a 'caseload' method of working with specific pupils, where members of specialist staff were assigned a small number of children to work with on a 1-1 or small group basis, to provide concentrated support for pupils who needed extra support.

Reasons for using the provision

School staff were asked what the main reason was for using ISUs. This included asking about the needs that the units were designed to meet both for the pupil and for the teaching staff.

Proactive versus reactive approach

A common theme across units was the position of the unit to respond either proactively or reactively to pupils. Often, where the purpose of the unit was to support behaviour, this was part of a graduated response to behaviour as part of the school's behaviour policy. This was commonly referred to as a reactive system where pupils collect 'behaviour points' for instances of poor behaviour such as disrupting class, not wearing the correct uniform, not handing in homework and skipping detention. Each instance of poor behaviour was given a numeric value in behaviour points which would trigger certain actions taken by the school at each threshold. Examples here included triggering a detention, a call home to parents, a short visit to one of the in-school units or a longer stay. This data-led approach for some schools combined behaviour points with data held on attainment and attendance to decide on referrals to one of the in-school units. A common theme across research participants was that using their units in this way helped the school avoid using suspensions and permanent exclusions more frequently, which led to some schools defining units as 'Internal Alternative Provision'. Some schools' behaviour policies were trust-wide and included a consistent approach to operating in-school units to support pupil behaviour.

> We're set up for the purpose that we've mentioned really, to try and modify pupils' behaviour where we were having issues with that behaviour. A space to work with the pupils away from mainstream lessons. To try and make sure that they stayed with us rather than ending up being suspended and excluded. – *School staff member*

Where units were used as a form of early intervention, pupils would be referred to the unit at the point of showing early signs that they required support, rather than this building up over time or through accrual of behaviour points. The schools we spoke to who operated earlier intervention units often included a more holistic approach with a focus on wellbeing and understanding the underlying reason for misbehaviour. These types of units often included specialist support staff to meet underlying needs and were commonly given abstract unit names to take the focus away from solely 'behaviour' support.

> Before it was, when I started…staff weren't going about it in the right way. We've done a lot of work with local virtual schools, with specialists in terms of attachment and kind of the neuro sequential model, understanding the adolescent brain in terms of trauma and the staff there receive a high level of training. [Now] they better understand the kind of needs of those pupils. – *School staff member*

Behaviour versus SEMH needs

Whilst unit purpose varied between schools, a common theme amongst unit types was a focus on either behaviour support, or SEMH / EBSA support, with many including a combination of the two. Support units were often used to meet pupil need where the classroom was perceived to not be able to. The most developed examples of units included in this research commonly combined a mixed focus of behaviour with wider underlying needs such as SEMH, SEND and external factors such as issues at home.

> A referral for a placement in there, we'd expect there to probably have been a suspension. We'd have expected behaviour data that we hold on the pupils to show a spike, to show an issue. If it is for behaviour, it may be for other reasons that they're going in there. Like we said, a mental health need, a safeguarding need, just a quiet space when there's chaos at home. It's not always behaviour that we access that facility [for]. – *School staff member*

Some units were primarily used as a sanction. Pupils who attended these types of units did so as a reaction to consistently poor behaviour and often stayed for a short period of time. In most cases, the mainstream curriculum was still followed in these types of units, though one example described pupils writing essays on why they had been sent to the unit instead of the mainstream curriculum. There were also examples in this research of removal rooms, which were spaces where pupils were removed from the classroom and their peers due to misbehaviour and were supervised by staff in a separate space.

Reintegration was another reason that units were used in mainstream schools. Schools spoke about reintegration as an intended outcome of using the unit for many pupils. This was spoken about in terms of reintegration from external AP schools back to mainstream schools, following school exclusion or for pupils who had Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and were phasing back into mainstream school with the support of the unit. In both instances, support units were a crucial step in reengaging the pupil with their mainstream education and providing holistic support to meet pupil needs.

> [Some pupils] just can't cope in a mainstream lesson. Just absolutely, unbelievably disruptive and so to a point where they had that many exclusions that they are spending more time at home than they are in school. So therefore, we've got to get them back into school. [The unit] is used as a bridge really to try and get them some education, get them used to learning and then with a view to eventually either EHCP and looking at alternative provision… or are they able now to cope upstairs [mainstream classroom] with support of the TA? – *School staff member*

Circumstances leading to placement

School staff were asked about the process of placing a pupil in ISUs, this included questions on the typical circumstances that lead to placement, any thresholds that triggered placement and whether data is used to decide on pupil referrals to the units.

Graduated response to behaviour

A strong theme that emerged across schools who participated in this research was the use of a 'behaviour points' system as part of the school's behaviour policy. This system entailed attributing a set number of behaviour points to incidents of poor behaviour. For example, 10 points for disrupting the class and 20 points for a detention. Commonly, schools who used this system had a threshold of a certain number of accrued points which would trigger referral to the in-school unit. After triggering the threshold, a member of staff would collect the pupil from their classroom immediately and escort them to the in-school unit.

> Students will go in there for a wide range of reasons. It could be that they've met the threshold in terms of warnings, verbal warnings, name on the board, so a graduated response. You know you're not just sent to [unit name] because you've not got your exercise book. It's, so you've done something that is graduated or there's been a serious incident in the class or around the school, and they've been sent to the unit. – *School staff member*

In addition to behaviour points, schools commonly assessed a variety of data on their pupils when deciding on unit referrals. Examples here included attainment and attendance data as well as considering information held on pupils about SEMH, SEND, Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) and information from staff or families.

Referral from staff based on need

Whilst behaviour point systems were common, schools also reported that staff regularly referred pupils to in-school units directly when staff felt they were unable to cope in mainstream classes. This included referrals from teaching staff and safeguarding or pastoral leads. Where units were behaviour-focused, more serious incidents of poor behaviour could lead to an instant referral to an in-school unit.

> At the moment I think it's just been a case of children really struggling, running out of lessons and not engaging with class, just really disruptive behaviour. Their head of year or that child's key worker has just come and said what do you think? Do you think you could help this child? So not been a proper formal process, which I think is quite difficult really, that's something that we're looking at. *– School staff member*

In units that had an SEMH / EBSA focus or were more proactive in their approach, referrals often came from school teachers directly based on pupil need, or in some cases, self-referral from pupils. Pastoral members of staff often referred into school units of this kind, including a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) panel. In one example, the school utilised Operation Encompass[10], a partnership with local police which alerts the school when an incident of domestic abuse has occurred in the family home. In this circumstance, the school was able to react proactively and place the pupil in their ISU to provide holistic support with specialist members of staff on hand.

> So we're in the process of applying for EHCPs and then looking at you know, we can't meet needs basically they need a more specialised provision. It's just plugging that gap really between mainstream and special education and trying to give them the basics of the education that they need. And I'm trying to meet their SEMH needs as well so that they do feel safe in school. *– School staff member*

Decision making process and length of stay

Schools were asked about the decision-making process of placing a pupil in an ISU, this included how decisions are made, who by, and who had overall accountability for pupils once placed in the unit. Questions on length of stay in the provision were also included in this section.

Referral process

Schools commonly had a referral panel or group of staff that made the decision to refer a pupil to their ISU. This panel was often made up of SLT staff members as well as pastoral leads, Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and sometimes specialist staff members such as counsellors and SENCOs. SLT members of staff, most commonly Headteachers or Assistant Headteachers took overall responsibility for in-school units.

Family and pupil involvement were often part of the referral process to some extent. In one example, parents helped the school in communicating the purpose of attending the unit to their child. Parental involvement at the point of referral was a common theme

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[10] Operation Encompass. Home : Operation Encompass

amongst schools, which the schools reciprocated by keeping families up to date with the progress of their child.

> We would never put someone in [the unit] without a conversation with the family. So that would be the first port of call, and it would very much be, you know, probably inviting them for a meeting. And it probably is a family that have been in school before and we've talked about concerns that we have, and we're going to try this, we're going to try that […] I can't think of any family where we've suddenly gone from very little communication with the family to [referring to ISU]. – *School staff member*

In the school who ran a unit which accepted pupils from other schools, it was stated that staff from both schools would meet to discuss potential referrals and to better understand the needs of the pupil being moved between schools to attend the unit.

Length of placement

Across schools, there was a mix in placement length, with some schools offering fixed short-term placements (under 12 weeks) and some offering longer-term. For some units, length of stay was predetermined with a structured course of a set number of weeks. Other times, it was needs-based and individual to the pupil. Length of stay in some cases was stated to be indefinite for pupils who staff felt would benefit from staying in the unit rather than reintegrating back to mainstream classes, one example of this stated that this was more common for pupils attending in key stage four.

> [The pastoral panel decide on length of stay] and it might just be [attending the unit] for a period of time just to give them an opportunity to change the way that they are or change the behaviours that they display that have led to that decision being made or… it could be that they're there for half a term or it could be that actually especially key stage four, this is going to be your education now..... for the remainder of your time, and then that's when we make sure that they're there with the core teachers and the other staff that we've been able to timetable. – *School staff member*

Some of the shortest lengths of stay mentioned by schools were in incidents where removal rooms were used, which tended to be used for the duration of the class they had been sent out of, or up to one full school day. Some short stays were also mentioned where support was provided as short-term academic support, such as reading or spelling support.

It all depends on the needs. If they're having intervention, they could be there on a kind of short-term, medium-term or long-term reading intervention, [it] can be 10 minutes, 15 minutes catch up, you know [a] spelling test will take 5 to 10 minutes.

– *School staff member*

A common theme across units was the practice of reviewing the length of stay during the pupil's time in the unit. In some cases, this included assessing how the pupil was performing in the unit in terms of both behaviour, wellbeing and the quality of their work. Success of reintegration to mainstream classrooms often determined the length of stay in the unit, where stays were increased if reintegration failed, or if behaviour issues persisted.

And then what we do with [unit name], we reintegrate in. So, we'll then phase or transition students back into mainstream lessons. And that's really bespoke and it's a methodical process. We actually spend a lot of time going with the student voice and actually saying, how can we be successful? We identify them early. We have the success, and we get them back into the [unit] lessons first and then we build upon that within the provision to hopefully transition into mainstream. – *School staff member*

Use of monitoring data

Commonly, schools used data to determine both referrals into in-school units as well as monitoring the progress of pupils whilst in the unit. Where schools had a focus on early intervention, trends were often identified in monitoring data held on instances of poor behaviour to devise opportunities for proactive support.

I mentioned to you the data that we have for the [unit name] of when they're sent there, why they're sent there, particular repeat offenders, what are we doing about those, their class, their ethnicity, gender, when have they been sent there? What lesson have they been sent from? Is this a recurring picture? And that is obviously tightly monitored. – *School staff member*

Pupil experience of being placed

School teachers and staff were asked what they believed the experience of pupils were who attended their in-school units. Questions covered pupil understanding of being referred to the unit and pupil reaction to placement.

Initial reaction of pupil changes over time

A strong theme across the interviews with teachers was that pupils were often initially resistant or reluctant to attend the unit however this was perceived to change over time. Some schools felt that pupils formed strong relationships with teaching staff in the units and in some cases were sad to leave the unit at the end of the provision. Pupil reaction varied by type of unit, with units that were primarily used as a sanction commonly receiving a negative reaction from pupils throughout their stay.

> They speak about it quite negatively a lot of the time and they say it's because "we're stupid", but then when you do talk to them more about it, I think they do understand that it is more nurturing and they do say that they prefer it in the [unit than mainstream] and that it does actually meet their needs a lot better. So I think initially they're quite critical of it. – *School staff member*

Pupils perceived to have a clear understanding of placement

Interviewees felt strongly that pupils had a clear understanding of why they had been placed in the unit, due to detailed explanations from school staff about the reasons behind the decision. To aid in pupil's understanding, some schools relied on family support to explain the rationale behind the placement.

Communication is a key factor in pupil reaction

Branding of in-school units varied across the schools who took part in this research. Commonly, schools had rebranded the name of in-school units to change the stigma attached to attending them, as well as changing how the purpose of in-school units was communicated to the rest of the school. This change was perceived to impact how pupils felt about attending, with an improved reaction on placement being associated with attending units that had more positive branding.

> So we used to call it [unit name] and then it got changed. When it moved locations, we [changed the name]. We wanted to separate any attachment of [previous unit name] students because we thought there was sometimes negative connotations around that and actually just being [a different name] has kind of separated that out. – *School staff member*

Some schools talked about the importance of the way in which the initial referral to the unit is communicated to pupils. In this context, some schools preferred to explain the benefits of attending the unit rather than focusing too heavily on poor behaviour or a drop

in attainment or attendance that had led to the referral. This initial communication was felt to be important in improving how pupils felt about attending in-school units.

> The children's response is generally positive. The staff are quite skilled in how they present that information, how they deliver that message. But it's not a case of right 'you're up in [unit name] because this has happened', It's more talking through what the process is, what it means because there are lots of positives about being [in the unit], but some drawbacks as well. – *School staff member*

Overall experience perceived to be positive

Where ISUs were not branded as a sanction, and had a holistic approach to pupil support, school staff commonly felt that pupils had an overall positive experience during their time in the unit. School staff often believed that pupils have their needs met in these types of in-school units in a way that the mainstream classroom cannot provide. Soft outcomes in these instances were listed as pupils being happier, better able to regulate emotions, reduced feeling of anxiety, improved feelings of belonging and being reengaged with their education.

> I think overall it's a place where young people will come… to just get that little bit of attention, that pick up, that that feeling of belief in themselves from the staff, where they'll come in and have a joke and a laugh and start the day and they walk out smiling. So I think overall, I think they really lean towards the staff that support them in there. – *School staff member*

Where pupil experience was perceived to be negative, this was commonly stated to be due to the unit being sanction-based with elements of time spent alone, in instances where units were viewed as a sanction and where the move had not been communicated or managed correctly.

> Sitting quietly and doing work...I don't think you would get a very positive answer [from pupils in the unit]. The good thing is that they get to sit down, and they get to do the work and they're doing their work and that's very important and get time to actually reflect and think. They've got teachers in there […] having a chit chat with them, having a conversation about their work and so forth. But would they want to be there? No. But hey, or would they have an overall 'Oh, OK I'm really happy that I've been [in] the [unit name].' No. – *School staff member*

Pupil-staff relationships crucial success factor

A strong theme from across this research project was the importance of pupil-staff relationships. The relationships that pupils built with staff members in the units were felt to be a crucial factor in both the positive experience and successful outcomes of pupils. Many schools felt that by the end of a pupil's stay in the unit, staff members who worked in the unit were seen 'as family' by the pupil, with some pupils visiting the provision after leaving the unit due to the close relationships formed.

> I was talking to one of the [pupils in the unit] and I just said to them, just write down for me why this is working for you. Because we tried everything, absolutely everything. Why is this different? And like, the stuff that she wrote down is so cute […] she said the staff. It's the right staff for her. She's been able to build, although she has probably tested every boundary they've all got going, she's been able to build great relationships with them. She said the fact that the lessons are chunked, so she's not having to sit somewhere for an hour, having to completely focus. It's broken up. She enjoys being part of the smaller group. […] Being able to talk to the staff and having a bit of a laugh, being able to get the resources that you need. – *School staff member*

Parent reaction

School staff were asked about the reaction that parents had on being informed that their child would be referred to the in-school unit. This section of the interview also included questions on how parents were kept informed.

Mixed reaction from parents

Commonly, school staff perceived that parents often felt relief that their child was getting support from in-school units and were pleased that their child was re-engaging with school. The type of unit that the school operated was thought to influence the reaction from parents, with units that had a more proactive focus having a more positive reaction. Often, parents would change their opinion of the ISU over time after observing positive changes and outcomes in their child.

I mean, I was looking at [pupil] attendance and the reduction of suspensions. It's incredible. Like, it's absolutely amazing. And we've got parents that were really fighting against us who are writing emails in and saying, thank you so much. It's just transformed everything. You know, I'm so pleased. They're doing so well, which is really lovely to see. […] We've just got to look at how, because we do need to access it for more students, how we can realistically make that work? – *School staff member*

Where units were solely behaviour focused and included removal rooms, school staff perceived parental reaction to be negative. One example included a campaign from a group of school parents to close the in-school unit due to concerns over the stigma of attending the units as a form of sanction to misbehaviour, and specific apprehensions around the use of individual booths. In this example, parents involved the local police in their attempt to close the in-school units.

We have got into a lot of issues with parents about isolation. They [had a] campaign. They don't see it as serving a purpose. 'He's not learning' and I just try and say well, yeah, but what, what other punishments do we do? Do you want me to send him home or do you want him to be in the class disrupting the learning and then no one's going to learn. We get quite a bit of pushback from parents. My point, and I should reiterate, is that we get less pushback from pupils. – *School staff member*

Concern over learning outside of mainstream

Some parents were perceived to feel concerned that their child was not learning during their time in the unit. This concern was felt to be worsened where units did not follow the curriculum, however apprehension remained even where units did follow the curriculum due to the learning taking place outside of the mainstream classroom.

Where removal rooms were used, the perception was that parents felt negatively about their child's learning outcomes.

School-parent relationship important

Interviewees commonly felt that parents' understanding of why their child had been placed in the unit was strong where the school had built a good relationship with them.

A strong theme that came across was the importance of school-parent relationships in supporting the success of pupils. Where ties were strong between the school and the family, it was perceived that this contributed to successful outcomes for pupils attending in-school units. Schools worked hard to keep parents informed on the progress of pupils

in the units, with regular communications with home and sharing monitoring data for their child.

> I think generally we [the school and parents] all respect each other. And so we work together well as a team and the children know that we work together. So they know that they can't play the system. And we are very consistent with how we deal with the children and how we speak to parents and what we promised parents. I think that the consistency is what's really worked well for the [unit]. – *School staff member*

Some schools said that staff supported not just the pupil, but also the family as part of their overarching support offering. For example, in some cases schools would conduct home visits to work through key issues.

> We've had parents [of pupils in units] walking into school just saying I need a chat with a member of staff. And they start talking to you about their life, not about their kid. They come in on the premise of that, and some of them just want… they just want to be heard. So, you know, we are sort of an open service. – *School staff member*

Pupil outcomes

Schools were asked what the outcomes for pupils receiving support from in-school units were, with questions including how success and progress is measured, the types of data recorded and who this is reported to.

Behaviour, attendance and attainment improvements

Improvements in behaviour were commonly stated by school staff as a key outcome for pupils who spent time within ISUs. This included less frequent visits to the in-school unit and a reduction in other behaviour measures such as detentions, after visiting the unit. For schools who operated a behaviour point system, a decrease in behaviour points was stated as an outcome which indicated an improvement in pupil behaviour. In addition, school staff stated that attending the unit prevented the use of suspensions and permanent exclusions.

Further improvements were commonly said to be seen in attainment, attendance and literacy skills. Some units supported pupils to gain qualifications that school staff felt would not have been achievable without the support of the in-school units. Overall, outcomes data on behaviour, attendance, attainment and suspensions / permanent exclusions was tracked by the school and was not published or shared with the local authority. This data was commonly shared with school governors.

> Someone will walk out [of the unit] and go 'what was all that about? I don't think I've done anything', but then they're successful in their English class when they used to be unsuccessful and kicked out every 15 minutes. So we see that kind of. …progress without there being…. there probably is data that we could pull from a certain period of time and behaviours and so on, but you see less of the children that you would see more of before. To me, that's a success. – *School staff member*

Soft outcomes

A strong theme amongst school staff was that soft outcomes were greatly improved in many instances of pupil placements within the ISUs. This was particularly the case where units were proactive support, academic support, SEMH / EBSA focused, or a combination of these purposes in addition to behaviour support. School staff listed soft outcomes as pupils being happier, with an increased ability to regulate their emotions, a reduction in anxiety, improvements in mental health and reengagement with their education

> I believe the pupils' experiences in there are positive when they go in there and they leave more confident, more happy, more content. More knowledgeable and better able to regulate themselves than when they went in. – *School staff member*

Where units focused on support for pupils who had SEMH and EBSA, a further outcome for some units was a referral on to specialist support services where an underlying need was identified that the school could not meet. This included bringing in external specialist staff to the unit.

> OK, so their attendance for the majority is improving and we have students that weren't attending school at all that now are daily. […] But where we have been able to see those students where it's still really bad, we've been able to access the external support which is through [referrals] for them to do something because we haven't got a member of staff as such working with them. We haven't got the resources for that, so it's more about what can we access from outside to try and look at the more holistic, especially for those students that are neurodiverse for them to get a bit of an understanding as to what's going on and what strategies they can put in place. – *School staff member*

Some units focused on celebrating what pupils can do, rather than focusing on correcting poor behaviour. In one example, the school stated that this increased feelings of belonging in their pupils which then improved their overall outcomes including behaviour, attendance and attainment.

> I think what we try to do is we try to reform that negative behaviour that they've had […] we try to celebrate them actually being successful [...] for them to recognise that they've done well and then to actually celebrate their success. What we say to the students is what makes you proud to be a student here. And it's always about that feeling of, wanting to be wanted in the school and that they're wanted. When you direct a student to [external] AP, there's always that feeling that they don't necessarily belong. So, we've done a lot [on] their belonging in schools and especially in our setting and actually how we want them to feel …my philosophy is that if they belong here, they'll want to be here. So that's what we've really focused on. – *School staff member*

Whilst many interviewees were able to state the positive outcomes of pupil placements at their in-school units, the success of some units resulted in capacity issues, with external schools requesting to refer pupils in.

Contributing factors for success

As part of this research, school staff were asked what they perceived to be the leading contributing factors to the success they had seen in pupil outcomes. This included questions on pupil engagement, parental support and staff support.

Importance of staff

Strong pupil-staff relationships were commonly stated as a key driver in achieving successful outcomes for pupils who attended in-school units. The quality of staff, including their skills, expertise and understanding of the unit's purpose was felt to be an important factor.

> The next thing is the quality of staffing and the people who are managing it. It's very, very difficult to find good quality staff nowadays. But you know that getting the recruitment right and getting the right staff in there, who understand how [units] actually work, that it's not a place where it's just to sanction. But it is to actually transform, and if they have that understanding in their mind they would… set the expectation in such a way that when students come in, [they would] ensure that the students come out, you know, transformed. – *School staff member*

Relationships between staff members who are responsible for running or being involved in the units was also identified by some schools as an enabler for success. This was particularly crucial where multiple staff members were running the day-to-day operation of the units. In addition, some schools had strong behavioural support from Team Around

The School (TATS), a wider group of schools offering support and advice on tackling behaviour and mental health issues. Schools who were involved in TATS stated that the support was invaluable.

> I think having the right staff with the right mindset in there, has been instrumental to the students doing well. I think it's been the relationships that people have been able to build with them, developing that sense of connection, they're not being repeatedly suspended or removed from circulation. – *School staff member*

Pupil and family factors

The importance of family support in enabling success was a strong theme that came across in this research. Schools mentioned the importance of family support in assisting the success of pupils. This included strong school-family relationships and parent/carers being informed and involved in the pupil's progress throughout their time in the units.

> And when we did see the initial kind of pushing of boundaries and the behaviour right at the very start, it was then we had parents in and we all spoke about it together. And it was because they [pupils] are spending so much time together, especially with the staff up there. It was kind of them not wanting to let them down, you know, they could see what they were doing. – *School staff member*

In one example, a school described the positive and negative impacts that parental involvement can have on pupils who are attending in-school units.

> We've had times where parents have come in and seen the work that they've been doing, and some can be quite positive and some can be quite negative. So we're a little bit anxious about that because … we've had in the past, […] parents coming in and going, 'what? That's all they've been doing for six weeks?' And then the child's literally beaming and smiling and attending school and going to lessons, and then they've come in and go, 'is that all they've done?' where they don't see the work that's been done internally. And then the child just went back into their little shell and lost all of that confidence or whatever that was built up. So it's a little bit of a difficult one with getting parents in, but I'd say probably a sixty forty split positive on that one. […] If we know we've got a parent that's really quite positive about it, we will absolutely get them in. But what we used to do is get everybody's parents in at the same time but that doesn't always work. – *School staff member*

Pupil's understanding of why they were placed and their attitudes towards attending the unit was also stated by some school staff to be a defining factor for success.

Links to Alternative Provision

Alternative provision schools are a type of educational provision that can be arranged by local authority or by schools. Typically, local authorities arrange alternative provision for pupils who cannot attend mainstream school due to exclusion, illness or for other reasons where they would not otherwise receive suitable education. Schools arrange alternative provision for pupils on a short-term basis due to a fixed-period exclusion (suspension) or for pupils to improve their behaviour off-site[11].

During this research, we asked school staff about any links their school had between local alternative provision schools and their in-school units.

Limited links with alternative provision schools

Commonly, mainstream schools had limited links with local alternative provision schools operating in their area, despite wanting to develop these links further. School staff stated that they would benefit from more proactive relationships with local alternative provision schools, with a desire for greater support from them in the form of alternative provision outreach support. Outreach support is where professionals from local alternative provision schools spend time working in mainstream schools to support the school with behaviour strategies, run small group sessions and one-to-one meetings with pupils who are struggling with their behaviour. Currently, very few of the schools who took part in this research received alternative provision outreach support.

> So, [AP outreach] has kind of disappeared away now. What we had was…. we had somebody that could be able to constantly provide some counselling from that AP. We've now got one term a year where they can come in and do a bit of that work. So, I think it's… It seems that it's all going away a little bit more now and it's a little bit more difficult to be able to get… that support, but again, I think staffing is a bit of a problem. – *School staff member*

Schools did commonly speak to local alternative provision schools when they needed to look for external provision in instances where the mainstream school could not meet pupil needs, but very few had proactive conversations with these schools.

Some schools who referred to their in-school unit as an IAP viewed the unit as an in-school way of delivering alternative provision, in a way that kept the pupil in the

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[11] Alternative provision - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

mainstream school instead of moving them to an external alternative provision provider. Aside from the benefit of keeping the pupil in school, some schools also stated that operating in this way was cost-saving, as it was cheaper to support the pupil with the in-school unit than paying for them to attend a 'costly' alternative provision provider.

Alternative provision used where school cannot meet pupil need

A strong theme across schools was that where schools had exhausted in-school unit placements and were not able to meet the needs of the pupil, they would occasionally use external alternative provision providers. In these instances, schools would quality assure the providers in advance of arranging placements, visiting the site to ensure the learning being offered would meet the pupil's needs. Some schools offered examples of alternative provision types previously used, such as a trust-wide alternative provision that all schools within the trust could refer in to, as well as more 'hands on' providers and small unregistered alternative provisions, such as bricklayers, where it was felt that a pupil would not be suited to classroom style learning.

> Well, previously beforehand it would have been, they would have gone to the Pupil Referral Unit. However, now where we can, we're trying, we're trying to keep them here [in the unit], but we're limited on numbers, really limited on numbers. – *School staff member*

Use of suspension and permanent exclusion

To better understand the journey of pupils through in-school units, we asked schools about their use of exclusion. This included questions on the circumstances that led to suspensions and permanent exclusions and how they made this decision.

Suspension and permanent exclusion used in serious incidents

Violence and verbal aggression were commonly stated reasons for suspension use, with violence and physical aggression often the main reasons for using permanent exclusions, as a mechanism to keep staff and pupils safe. Other incidents leading to permanent exclusion included racist or homophobic abuse, use and possession of drugs and knives and any other behaviour that risked the safety of students or staff.

Commonly, schools stated that a build-up of poor behaviour (persistent defiance, failed interventions including use of in-school units, disruptive behaviour) did sometimes result in the use of suspensions. In-school units were often used to avoid suspensions where they were focused on improving behaviour, which led to some schools referring to their units as 'Internal AP'.

Some schools felt there had been a change in the use of suspensions (increased suspending in younger year groups for example) since the COVID-19 pandemic. Some schools established their in-school units because of an increase in behaviour problems post-pandemic.

Schools had a strong understanding that permanent exclusion leads to poor outcomes

A strong theme across school staff was a clear perception that using permanent exclusion results in poorer life outcomes for pupils. Because of this understanding, schools stated that it was rarely used and that every avenue was exhausted before using this option, which the in-school units were an important part of.

Some schools felt that permanent exclusion use was reduced by using their in-school units, with some seeing a drop off in the use of permanent exclusion as a result of introducing the unit.

> Yeah, we use suspensions, and we very rarely permanently excluded before, we've had three. In two years, three or four…. It's not something that anyone takes lightly, it's a horrible decision to make and doesn't necessarily lead to the best outcomes for people. But yeah, our suspension figures have increased significantly. Which is why, we've made the decision to do what we have done with [operating the unit]. – *School staff member*

Reflections

Throughout this research, 10 schools including 12 members of school staff shared their experiences of running a diverse range of ISUs.

From reactive to proactive units, to those which focused on SEMH and EBSA, academic support and/or behaviour support, schools indicated they were working extremely hard to provide the best quality of education possible to their pupils. Crucially, it was clear that the schools were using ISUs where mainstream classes were unable to meet pupil needs, to both prevent pupils from being suspended or permanently excluded and to provide them with additional support to thrive at school.

Schools described a range of benefits for pupil outcomes varying from improvements in hard outcomes such as attainment, attendance and behaviour to equally important soft outcomes including mental health, confidence, happiness, feelings of belonging and engagement with education. Schools often stated that pupil outcomes were at their most successful when underlying needs could be met in a holistic manner, with expert teams of specialist teachers supporting teaching staff in running the units. A strong theme here was family involvement and engagement from the point of referral to ISUs, and the importance of relationships between both the family and the school. Across interviews, relationships between staff and pupils were commonly stated as a key enabler in successful pupil outcomes and this theme amplifies the importance of quality staff working within in-school units.

The perceived most effective examples of ISUs in this research included those where a combination of purpose was used, where behaviour support was proactive as a form of early intervention and specialist support staff trained in SEND, EBSA and SEMH were available to provide support and meet underlying needs. Staff mindset was thought to be key, with a high degree of value placed by schools on resourcing the units with staff who understood that the purpose of the unit was to support pupils rather than a sole focus on sanction.

Although many of the schools in this research were operating successful units, a strong theme that came across was the desire to improve their provision by upgrading the facilities and employing additional specialist staff members.

With a lack of evidence about existing practice on in-school units, this research sought to better understand the models and types of in-school units operating within mainstream schools. Whilst the sample for this project was small, interviews with schools have delivered detailed insights on the use of in-school units, where schools positioned them as an important part of the mainstream school system. In-school units would benefit from further research and data collection to better understand what best-practice approaches look like in mainstream schools.

Annex

Table 1 provides data on school characteristics for the sample of 10 secondary schools who took part in this research.

Table 1. Number of schools in our sample relative to national averages

	Below average	Above average
Headcount (Spring 23/24)	5	5
Proportion of pupils eligible for FSM (Spring 23/24)	5	5
Proportion White British (Spring 23/24)	4	6
Proportion of pupils whose first language is other than English (Spring 23/24)	6	4
Proportion of pupils with SEN support (Spring 23/24)	3	7
Proportion of pupils with an EHCP (Spring 23/24)	5	5
Suspension rate (full year 22/23)	5	5
Permanent exclusion rate (full year 22/23)	7	3
Proportion of pupils with one or more suspension (full year 22/23)	6	4
Overall absence rate (full year 22/23)	5	5

Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
DfE	Department for Education
NFER	National Federation for Education Research
LSU	Learning Support Unit This term was previously used by the 1999 Labour Government under the Excellence in Cities programme.
EiC	Excellence in Cities programme This was a previous policy which ran from 1999 to 2006 by the Labour Government at the time.
PSU	Pupil Support Unit A pupil support unit is a planned intervention occurring in small groups and in place of mainstream lessons. The unit can be used as a planned intervention for behaviour or pastoral reasons or as a final preventative measure to support pupils at risk of exclusion.
IAP	Internal or In-school Alternative Provision This is a term that many mainstream schools use to name in-school units which are used to support the behaviour needs of pupils.
ISU	The term In-school Support Units (ISUs) is used in this research to capture the wide variety of provision used in mainstream schools under the description of a support unit, where the purpose is to provide additional support to pupils for whom the mainstream classroom may not be suitable.

Term	Definition
SEMH	Social Emotional and Mental Health
EBSA	Emotionally Based School Avoidance
SEN Units and Resourced Provision	Special Educational Needs Units Formally recognised by the local authority and receive high needs place funding to support pupils with special educational needs.
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
TA	Teaching Assistant
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
EP	Educational Psychologist
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
DSL	Designated Safeguarding Lead
TATS	Team Around The School
Alternative provision (including pupil referral units and unregistered alternative provision)	Alternative provision settings provide education for pupils who do not attend a mainstream school or special school full time. Education in alternative provision often takes place at a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), alternative provision academy or alternative provision free school but placements can also be arranged in another mainstream or independent school that provides alternative provision, or in an educational setting that is not registered with DfE, which we call unregistered alternative provision.
Alternative provision outreach	Alternative provision outreach. In this research, when mainstream schools spoke about receiving alternative provision outreach, they referred to alternative provision schools rather than non-school settings.

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