



Department
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Effective multi- agency working with assistive technology

Research report

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Executive summary

This research sought to identify examples of effective practices and to explore both the facilitators and challenges of multi-agency partnerships between mainstream education settings and external organisations, specifically in the context of assistive technology. The study comprised 11 online focus groups, and 12 online in-depth interviews. The fieldwork was conducted over three months, from February to April 2025, using a purposive sampling approach to engage a range of participants with knowledge of multi-agency working when trying to implement assistive technology (AT) in education settings.

For the purposes of this research, by assistive technology (AT) we are describing a wide variety of devices, software, or equipment that are used by pupils to facilitate communication and access to the curriculum. A wide variety of it is used by pupils in schools, which can range from software on laptops, to hardware devices (e.g. a scanning pen).

The implementation journey of AT, by which we mean the process of getting a pupil access to a specific piece of AT, has several potential steps. This can start with the identification of needs, and then can move through referral, assessment, procurement, before the AT is put in place and then training and ongoing support is offered. The use of AT in mainstream education is characterised by a diverse range of tools and approaches, tailored to meet the needs of pupils. This means the journey rarely follows a specific route, and a variety of different agencies can get involved in the journey at different points. These agencies include the education setting itself, the local authority (LA), charities, suppliers of AT and parents. The type of need also determined which agencies or professionals were involved. For example, almost all deaf and hard of hearing pupils worked with Qualified Teachers of the Deaf (QTOD).

The approach to AT implementation is child-centred, and often necessarily ad-hoc, meaning that implementation journeys are flexible and can vary greatly from each other. This includes the extent of collaboration amongst agencies, which is influenced by factors such as LA policies, the specific needs of the pupils, and the cost, type, and availability of AT. Where expensive AT was required to meet need, this often led to greater multi-agency collaboration with education settings reaching out to other agencies (e.g., the LA, charities) for support with costs. When the AT was less costly, some education settings chose to purchase it themselves, exemplifying limited multi-agency working. In certain cases, education settings implemented AT without involving any other agencies, for example by using pieces of AT already owned by the setting.

To identify effective practice, we first asked respondents during the focus groups and interviews to reflect on what they considered to be the features of effective multi-agency working when implementing AT for pupils. We then conducted thematic analysis to identify the commonly emerging themes from those features. We identified the following factors that lead to effective multi-agency working when implementing AT.

Firstly, for education settings to be in the best position to work effectively with other agencies, it is crucial for them to be prepared to **involve key stakeholders early in the process**. This includes IT staff, school business professionals, and other professionals within the setting who work directly with the child accessing AT (e.g. the SENCO and class teachers). Additionally, it is key that there is **senior leadership team buy-in** for AT. Another hugely helpful facilitator for settings is for them to **designate an AT champion** (ideally someone whose formal responsibilities include AT).

Effective multi-agency working practices involving AT involves **high-quality information and knowledge sharing** on pupils AT needs and requirements, and **flexibility** from all agencies involved, including openness in adopting alternative working practices, in the best interest of the pupil. **Responsiveness to communication** from other agencies is also key to ensure pace in implementation. Relatedly, **clear definition of the roles of each of the agencies** involved is important, to avoid duplication of work, and to make clear which agency is responsible for different elements. Finally, the existence and building of **strong professional relationships and networks** between all agencies involved in AT implementation is important, to ensure effective and timely implementation.

Further factors for effective implementation include the involvement of parents, comprehensive training for education setting staff, and incorporating the voices of pupils. The broader SEND system context can present challenges to AT implementation, which subsequently lead to barriers to effective multi-agency collaboration. The limited capacity of staff that could support AT within LAs (e.g. SEN professionals, health professionals) presents a challenge. There was often a small number of staff working in this area, with a large caseload of work. Relatedly, systemwide issues related to Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) waiting lists are notable obstacles.

1. Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned IFF Research to investigate how multi-agency collaboration aids effective practice of assistive technology (AT) in mainstream education settings (Early Years (EY) through to Further Education). Through this research, we aimed to identify both examples of effective practice as well as the facilitators and challenges of multi-agency working between education settings and external organisations.

The central research question was: *How do educators share expertise and collaborate with external partners to ensure effective implementation of AT?*

This research will allow the DfE to draw out high level principles for effective multi-agency working practice to feed into their policy plans, to make improvements to AT access and implementation across mainstream settings. This is part of the department's commitment to improving mainstream inclusivity and SEND expertise.

Assistive technology (AT) is an umbrella term that includes any device, software or system used to support a pupil with their communication and/or to access the curriculum, typically used with SEND pupils. AT includes specialist equipment like Braille devices, as well as accessibility software within laptops and tablets such as dictation tools. When used effectively, AT can be a key component of high-quality teaching, helping pupils to realise their potential and breaking down barriers to opportunity.

The process of implementing Assistive Technology (AT) for pupils involves several steps, starting with identifying the pupil's needs. In this report, we refer to this as a 'journey'. By an implementation journey, we mean the process of getting a pupil access to a specific piece of AT. After identifying needs, this can be followed by a referral, an assessment, a procurement phase, and then training and ongoing support once the AT is in place. Due to the highly individualised nature of AT implementation, there isn't a single, standardised process. Instead, various tools and methods are employed based on the specific requirements of each pupil. Consequently, the implementation journey can vary significantly, with different agencies potentially participating at various stages.

During focus groups and interviews, we spoke to staff members in mainstream education settings as well as professionals from a range of external organisations including LAs, charities and suppliers. Within mainstream education settings, we spoke to SENCOs, school leaders and classroom teachers from schools, colleges and EY settings. It was hoped they would be able to bring the perspective of working with pupils who used AT day to day and could reflect on their experiences of working with other agencies to implement AT in their settings. Input from professionals from AT suppliers, charities and LAs provided insights into AT implementation for the perspective of organisations based outside of education settings. They were able to give a perspective of what it was like working with other agencies, primarily education settings. Including both education

setting staff and those based in external organisations, was important to ensure the findings of the research were holistic, reflecting all sides of multi-agency working.

The findings in this report are intended to provide in-depth insights rather than comprehensive coverage of all perspectives. The sampling approach taken was purposive, to speak to individuals who were both knowledgeable and experienced with AT, rather than representative of all those working in mainstream education. It is important to acknowledge that small-scale qualitative studies such as this one have limited generalisability and potential biases in participant selection. The interpretation of qualitative data should be approached with an understanding of these limitations.

Through the report, the following terms are used:

- **Education setting** refers to EY settings, primary schools, secondary schools, and colleges. Unless otherwise stated, this refers to mainstream settings only.
- **External organisation** is used as a broad term for key non-educator actors in AT distribution, such as LAs, charities and suppliers.
- **Agency/agencies** is a catch-all phrase for both education settings and external organisations, as some of our findings apply across both groups.

Quotes from the focus groups and in-depth interviews are included throughout the report, alongside narrative findings. All quotes from participants refer to their job title and specific workplace, if necessary, e.g. “SENCO, Secondary”. Case study boxes are also included throughout the report, which include information on specific, relevant examples of multi-agency working from the focus groups and interviews.

Report structure

The report is set out as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction
- Chapter 2: Methodology
- Chapter 3: Landscape of AT and current multi-agency practice
- Chapter 4: Effective AT implementation: practices within education settings
- Chapter 5: Effective AT implementation: organisations / agencies and education settings working together
- Chapter 6: Other facilitators of effective multi-agency working practice and AT implementation
- Chapter 7: Wider system challenges to effective multi-agency working practice and AT implementation
- Chapter 8: Conclusions

Acronyms

AT: Assistive technology

LA: Local authority

QTOD: Qualified Teacher of Deaf Children and Young People

QTVI: Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

SaLT: Speech and Language Therapist

SENCo: Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator

SEND: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SLT: Senior Leadership Team

2. Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period from February to April 2025.

We used a purposive sampling approach to ensure we spoke to individuals who have experience of multi-agency AT implementation. This meant that we prioritised speaking to individuals with relevant experience, rather than aiming for the research to reflect the broader population of education settings and external organisations.

We obtained contact details for potential respondents through multiple routes:

- Warm contacts from DfE: Initial participants were recruited through warm leads (individuals known to DfE who had expressed interest or engagement with the research topic), leveraging existing networks to identify key individuals involved in the implementation of AT in mainstream education settings.
- Contacts from participants: Snowball sampling was utilised, where initial participants recommended additional contacts for us to contact.
- Screener distribution: A short questionnaire to determine suitability for the research was sent to wider DfE contacts and further potential participants identified through desk research.

In total, 11 focus groups were conducted, each lasting 90 minutes and comprising 2-8 participants working in mainstream education settings or external organisations involved with AT implementation. The focus groups were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. Following the focus groups, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents from the focus groups to explore specific examples of successful multi-agency working in further detail.

Profile of participants

The focus groups and interviews were conducted with staff from mainstream education settings including SENCOs, school leaders, teachers and IT leads. They were also conducted with individuals from external organisations involved in AT implementation, including SEN coordinators in LAs, occupational therapists (OTs), speech and language therapists (SaLTs) and representatives from AT suppliers and charities. These audiences were selected to ensure we spoke to individuals that were knowledgeable about AT and to capture the whole implementation process. The sample included participants from a spread of different regions across England. This includes participants based in both urban and rural areas, and across northern, midlands and southern England.

Table 1: Profile of participants in focus groups

Who	Where from	Groups completed	Attendees
Educators	Primary school	2	10
Educators	Secondary school	1	5
Educators	FE/Colleges	1	8
Educators	Early Years	1	2
External	Charities	1	7
External	Suppliers of AT	1	6
External	LA SEND teams	2	8
External	LA Health teams	1	7
External	Early Years	1	4
Total	All	11	57

Table 2: Profile of participants in interviews

Who	Where from	Interviews completed
Educator	Primary school	2
Educator	Secondary school	2
Educator	FE/ Colleges	2
Educator	Early Years	1
External	Charities	1
External	Suppliers of AT	1
External	LA SEND teams	1
External	LA Health teams	1
External	Early Years	1
Total	All	12

Approach to analysis

Analysis began during the data collection phase, through active listening and formulating follow up questions during the focus groups and interviews, to gain initial insights. Focus groups and interviews were recorded with permission, and the findings were written up into an analysis framework for interpretation. The analysis framework was developed by identifying key questions and themes from the discussion guides, which were then

organised into a structured table format, with key themes as the columns and responses as the rows. This format allowed for the systematic write up of focus groups and interviews, to facilitate thematic organisation and comparison of data across focus groups and interviews.

Once all interviews and focus groups were written up into the analysis framework, and interviewers undertook personal analysis of specific interviews, the research team came together in an analysis session to discuss interpretations and thematically analyse the data. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness with qualitative data, to help identify and understand patterns and themes in participants' responses, capturing both detailed experiences and broader trends across the data. Findings from all of the focus groups and interviews were triangulated by the research team through reviewing the framework and conducting an analysis session to discuss and agree key findings. Common themes, patterns and more detailed examples from the data are set out in this report.

3. Landscape of assistive technology and current multi-agency practice

In this chapter, and to set the context for subsequent sections, we discuss the range of AT referenced by those who took part in focus groups or in-depth interviews. We then discuss the steps taken in AT implementation journeys from AT initial identification to use by pupils. Finally, we highlight how different factors influence the extent of multi-agency working, including those that limit multi-agency working.

Examples of the range of AT currently used in education settings

Agencies reported distributing a variety of AT to pupils. By agencies, we mean both education settings and any external organisations that work on the implementation of AT. The table (Figure 1) shows a range of the AT that agencies were working with, including both hardware and software. This is not an exhaustive list of AT that is used in mainstream education settings, or even all the AT mentioned by participants in focus groups and in-depth interviews nor are they products advocated by the department. These are included to provide additional context for the reader.

Table 3: Examples of commonly used AT

Piece of AT	How this supports pupils
Text Reader	A reading support tool that reads text aloud, breaks words into syllables, and adjusts spacing for better readability. It helps pupils with dyslexia, visual impairments or attention difficulties access written content more easily.
Read&Write	A literacy support toolbar that provides features like text-to-speech, word prediction and screen masking. It supports pupils with reading, writing and comprehension challenges, including those with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.
Scanning Pen	A handheld device that reads printed text aloud when passed over. It supports pupils with reading difficulties or visual impairments by providing immediate audio feedback, improving comprehension and independence.
Hearing Loop	An assistive listening system that transmits sound directly to hearing aids or cochlear implants. It helps pupils with hearing loss hear the teacher more clearly by reducing background noise.

The type and complexity of need of the pupil were the main factors influencing which AT was implemented. Agencies reported using AT to support a range of needs, including those affecting a pupil's language, mobility and mental health. Regarding the complexity of the need, agencies utilised tablets and laptops with AT software more frequently when the pupil had a less complex need. If the pupil could access learning effectively using laptops and tablets with AT software, then agencies were more likely to consider, or implement, this option. If the pupil's need was more complex, then agencies procured and utilised more bespoke pieces of AT.

Within education settings, staff were more likely to utilise the AT functionality built into laptops and tablets they already owned to support pupils. This was more likely in settings that already owned a significant number of these devices. Participants in some education settings operate a 1:1 or 1:2 device policy. A 1:1 or 1:2 device policy is where one device, usually either a laptop or tablet, is available per every one or two pupils in a setting (regardless of any identified AT needs). Most education settings in this research that operated such policies were affiliate schools (i.e. Microsoft Showcase schools or Apple Distinguished schools) and were able to procure these devices at a slightly cheaper price.

In focus groups and interviews, education settings with a 1:1 or 1:2 device policy often repeated the mantra ‘necessary for some, [but] useful for all.’ Accessibility features such as dictation software and Immersive Readers, were already present on all of the devices within these settings. Pupils could use them as and when they wanted. In some cases, this meant that the education setting was less likely to explore other AT options, as they viewed the device as sufficient, unless the need was particularly complex. Some education settings reported a lack of knowledge of which pupils were using accessibility tools to access their learning on such devices:

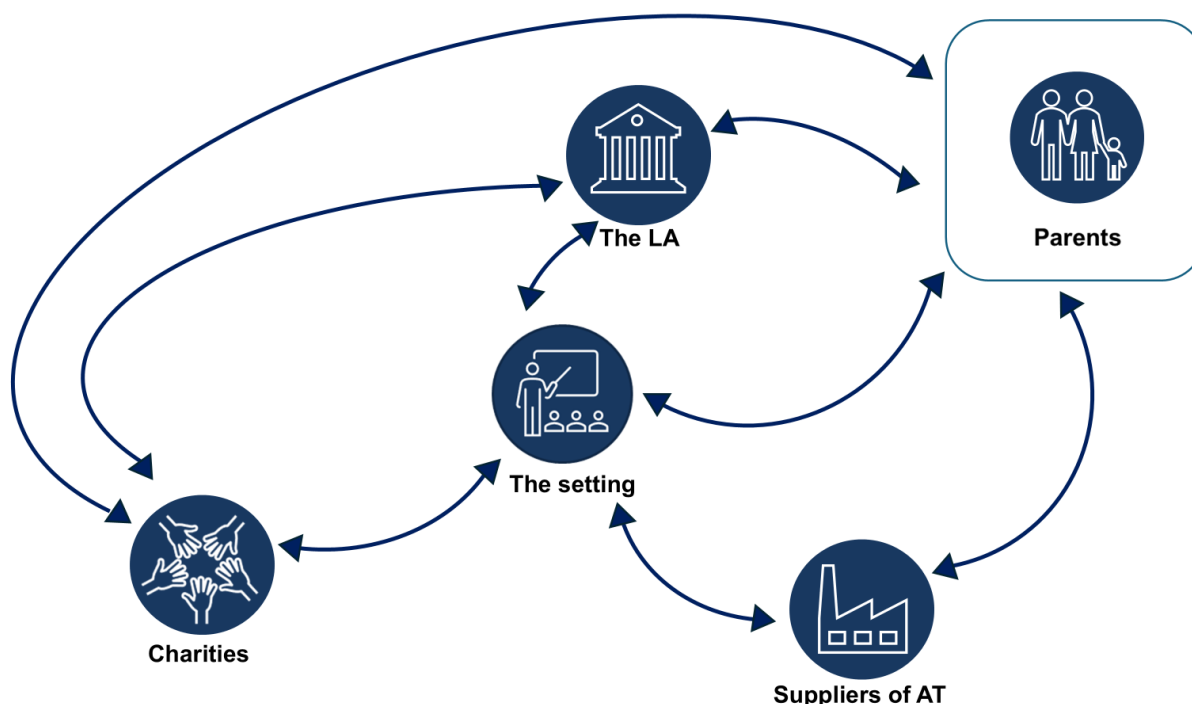
“I think, perhaps, sometimes that means that I can’t spot who’s using [the laptops] because they are assistive technology, and who is using the laptops because it’s part of technology for learning.” Director of Digital Learning and Teacher, Primary

Even if they did not operate a 1:1 device policy, or have an affiliation to a technology company, most education settings had access to laptops or tablets to some extent. It was both cheaper and easier for the education setting to utilise them as AT where possible, than invest time and resources in more specific solutions. Thus, most agencies, particularly education settings, cited laptops and tablets themselves as AT that they often used.

The ecosystem of assistive technology

A variety of agencies can be involved to implement or distribute AT. The visual below shows which agencies are part of the ecosystem of support to help a pupil get the AT they need and their relationships. It is important to note that, within our focus group and in-depth interviews, we found at least one case of bi-directional communication between each agency type.

Figure 1: Relationships between those within the AT ecosystem



In the text below, we go into further detail about the role that these agencies can play in implementing or distributing AT to pupils. It is important to emphasise that although these agencies often do play important roles in this process, each type of agency did not play the same part at the same point in each AT journey. This is because each journey is different, specific to the child and their needs, as well as other factors such as cost and knowledge of the professional that identifies needs. In the subheadings below, we explain the typical roles that agencies can play, not the roles they always do.

Furthermore, most agencies reported that their experiences distributing or implementing AT did not neatly follow a consistent sequence of events. In cases where the pupil had a more complex need, it was more likely that AT implementation featured agencies playing roles at the different junctures specified below. Most agencies highlighted practices that were ad-hoc, with a few education settings expressing that AT implementation did not follow a neat timeline:

“I think in a way it’s also more of a cycle than a timeline as well. It’s an iterative process.” Director of Specialist Provision, Primary Trust

Education settings

Education settings were typically at the centre of any AT implementation journey. Staff at settings often made initial identification of AT need and utilised previous experience and contacts to decide next steps. Members of staff such as special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), the class teacher, and members of the Senior Leadership Team

(SLT) were often involved at this stage, as well as throughout AT implementation, as the coordinator and intermediary between agencies.

Some education settings also reported collaborating with other local settings, including mainstream and special schools to help obtain the AT required by the pupil. This was both to share knowledge and utilise the competencies of specialist staff at those education settings.

“So, we have a local school, who specialise in autism. They have a full-time member of staff that we then pay for their time for them to come over and help with our writing up of [the child’s] provision and things like that. But it is very ad-hoc and dependent on [the child’s] needs. So, we have a person for this and a person for that.” Assistant Head, Secondary,

Suppliers

Suppliers of AT typically sold, loaned or demoed the AT chosen, and procured, by either the education setting or LA. Some suppliers also offered training on AT, ongoing support after purchase and, sometimes, used schools as a platform for increasing awareness of their product, e.g. for an exhibition event.

Local authorities

Professionals within LAs played a variety of roles at various junctures in the AT implementation journey. Most typically, LA professionals assessed pupils’ need for AT and recommended what AT be best for the pupil. These professionals included Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs), Qualified Teachers of the Deaf and Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (QTODs, QTVIs). In certain cases, LA staff also were responsible for procuring AT from suppliers, maintaining the equipment and liaising with the IT team to ensure smooth implementation in the education setting. LA staff took this role most often when education settings themselves did not have sufficient expertise. Finally, some LA professionals provided training to education setting staff on how to use AT equipment, particularly when the LA procured or loaned the device to the education setting.

Charities

Charities, both AT-specific and those with a broader focus, played a less standard role in the journey to secure the AT needed by a pupil. Within focus groups and in-depth interviews, we found that the most common way that charities would come into the picture was through being contacted by education settings or parents. This was for two key reasons. Firstly, staff or parents asked charities for advice about which pieces of AT would help a pupil best access the curriculum. Secondly, charities were consulted when the need for a specific piece of technology was more clearly identified, but typical funding

avenues (e.g. education setting SEN budgets, LA SEN budgets) were exhausted, to aid in providing or financing this AT.

Parents

Finally, although not agencies per se, parents often played an important role as advocates for their child and drivers of the AT implementation process. When participants mentioned that parents got involved in AT implementation, this was either to help the pupil get used to a piece of AT outside of the classroom or to provide financial assistance. In some cases, parents bought the AT for their child for use within the classroom. This was either because they, or the education setting, perceived that there was not any funding to provide the AT for their child, or to expedite the process of obtaining the AT, if they thought the lack of AT would be detrimental to their child's education.

2Extent and type of multi-agency working

Numerous factors affected the extent or type of multi-agency working that occurs. Participants reported that the need of the child, location and the cost of the AT all affected multi-agency working. Additionally, agencies reported that there were wider system challenges such as LA capacity that could sometimes hinder multi-agency working and AT implementation more generally.

The pupil's level of need was influenced by both the amount and type of multi-agency collaboration. Those with more complex needs typically received support from a wider range of agencies during AT implementation. In contrast, those with less complex needs usually required less involvement from multiple agencies. This was because education settings often felt confident obtaining certain types of AT, like AT software on laptops/tablets, or scanning pens, without additional support from outside organisations.

Location affected the number of external organisations and the type of support they could offer education settings. Some geographical areas have more access to comprehensive support than others. For example, London-based and LA-funded CENMAC (Centre for Micro-Assisted Communication) offers assessments, reviews and AT equipment loans. In other areas where this is not available, some participants reported getting help from private companies specifically for specialist teaching and support teams. One education setting reported that the Visual Impairment (VI) team in their LA had dissolved, meaning they hired a private organisation instead.

More expensive AT often led to greater multi-agency collaboration. Education settings were less likely to be able to afford costly AT on their own, so they reached out to other agencies for support (e.g. the LA, charities). When the AT was cheaper, some education settings chose to purchase it internally, since it was quicker and easier to buy the equipment themselves than to go through referral and procurement processes.

In certain cases, education settings implemented AT with only limited multi-agency working, or without it at all. Some education settings' examples of AT implementation via multiple agencies often only involved one other agency: the supplier. Some education settings were quite confident to 'give things a try', especially if they already owned the AT, or if it was simple/cost-effective to purchase themselves.

The following two case studies provide an idea of how securing AT can be different, both in terms of the extent multi-agency working and the order in which agencies are involved.

Case Study 1: Securing AT without multi-agency working

In a primary school setting, both teachers and parents identified a 7-year-old pupil with dyslexia who required AT to support their reading and writing. The pupil had already been using a laptop since the previous academic year, following early observations of literacy difficulties. This was made possible through the school's inclusion in a trust with a 1:1 device policy. After the pupil did not meet expected outcomes on the Phonics Assessment Battery (PHAB), they were referred for a dyslexia screening, via the school's SENCo, which led to a formal diagnosis. In response, the school promptly provided a scanning pen to further support their learning. As part of its broader technology strategy, the trust maintained a stock of assistive technology devices, allowing timely access to tools like the scanning pen for pupils who needed them.

Case Study 2: Securing AT with multi-agency working

The SENCo and Inclusion Manager at a primary school submitted a referral to the LA SEND team to support a Year 3 pupil with Muscular Atrophy in accessing the curriculum. Although the referral was made by the school, it was originally suggested by the child's physiotherapist and occupational therapist, who felt it would be most effective coming from the SENCo. Following the referral, the LA SEND team assessed the child and, in close collaboration with the parents, recommended a range of AT to support both school and home use. The recommended AT included a voice amplifier, a book reader, and an iPad. While most of the equipment was readily available, the iPad had to be specially procured through communication with Apple. Once all devices were ready, the LA SEND team visited the school to assist with set-up and provide training to the class teachers and teaching assistant. They continue to offer ongoing support through annual reviews and equipment maintenance.

Multiple education settings mentioned that time was a limiting factor for multi-agency working. A lack of time meant that these settings could not train their staff or explore AT options sufficiently. This meant solutions found could be limited to what agencies happened to find, rather than a comprehensive search. For example, one teacher explained they would come across ideas for AT on social media late at night because there was not sufficient time to do more thorough research within working hours.

Multi-agency working was sometimes prevented by participants perceiving a lack of agencies to work with. Particularly with education settings and LA teams, most individuals within agencies expressed a lack of belief in other agencies' capacity to support them in AT implementation. This led to agencies not even reaching out for support, as they had the expectation that they would not get it, or that it would be lacking. Furthermore, in terms of suppliers, participants, mostly within education settings, expressed that they did not possess much knowledge of AT suppliers beyond Big Tech firms. This led to less multi-agency working as education settings relied on technology provided by Big Tech firms to fulfil their AT needs. One teacher who was more knowledgeable about the range of suppliers pointed out the value of working with smaller companies, but highlighted that they were less well-known:

“Personally, my experience working with companies is that the UK sector around Ed Tech generally has a lot to be said for it, which sometimes gets overlooked. There are lots of brilliant, brilliant companies out there that don't have the budget to shout so loudly about it, but they're producing some really fantastic products, and they tend to be pretty responsive.” Digital Strategy and Computing Lead, Primary

Wider system challenges that can impact the extent of multi-agency working

Some agencies reported that multi-agency working and AT implementation was sometimes hindered by wider system challenges, including SEND budgets in education settings and capacity of teams in LAs where their responsibility covers AT.

A few agencies reported that some education settings were unsure what SEND budgets should be used for. This included both internal setting level SEND budgets and external SEND funding provided by the LA. Agencies reported that education settings may prefer using SEND funding for one-to-one staff as opposed to AT, as this is typically how such budgets are used to support children. This hesitancy could stem from unfamiliarity with AT, or a lack of experience/trust in its effectiveness. Agencies reported that another wider-system challenge that was sometimes preventing multi-agency working and AT implementation more generally was LA capacity. Insufficient funding, long SEND service wait times, shortages of SaLTs, and limited capacity for AT related work delay pupil access to necessary support. Consequently, some educational settings perceive LAs as disconnected from the AT process. A few settings noted needing to go through too many processes (e.g. proving multiple times why support is needed), hence why they decided not to interact with the LA regarding AT. For example:

“I think the issue that all schools face in terms of identification, if you do want external support... has to be this issue with repeated evidence of failure before you might get the support and input you need for the child.” Director of Specialist Provision, Primary School Trust

A few education settings reported that they had better technology in stock themselves than was offered by their LA, or already had stocks of AT to loan out to a pupil when needs arose. Some education settings reported learning from previous experiences with AT and trialling AT already available to them to navigate challenges while awaiting formal assessments or diagnoses.

“What they [the LA] kind of offer is very old and out of date, and doesn’t actually keep up with what’s actually possible... we’re now in the position where I think we don’t really look to them for Assistive Technology at all.” Director of Digital Learning and Computing, Primary School

4. Effective AT implementation: practices within education settings

In this chapter we explore how mainstream education settings could consider setting up internally to best facilitate working with other agencies.

The three themes we cover in this chapter are:

- Highly knowledgeable professionals
- Buy-in to the value of AT
- Early involvement of key professionals

The key principles that participants tended to identify as being associated with effective practice are identified throughout this chapter. They are applicable to all phases of mainstream education, and where there are points of difference, these are noted.

Highly knowledgeable professionals

It is important for education settings to have member(s) of staff that are highly knowledgeable about AT to work to get it into place where needed and drive forward the use of AT within their setting. In turn, this puts education settings in a good position to work with other agencies. Most that participated in this research were the respective 'go to person' in their setting related to AT, and felt it was key to have someone that held this knowledge within individual agencies. It was assumed that a person 'like them' did not exist in all mainstream education settings. External organisations also felt there was not a dedicated staff with knowledge about AT in all mainstream education settings.

In some cases, the participants in the research were the 'AT champion' where they worked and took it on naturally as part of their role (e.g. they were the SENCo, or a class teacher with an interest in supporting a pupil in their class). Often, responsibility for AT was taken on as the individual had a passion for technology or inclusion. On the other hand, in some cases, it was a formalised part of a participant's job role.

The benefits of having a nominated member of staff with responsibility for AT include:

- Coordination: This individual can lead the process for integrating AT within the setting and act as a primary point of contact for queries and guidance.
- Relationship management: They can manage relationships with AT suppliers, LA professionals, and other external organisations, ensuring smooth collaboration and communication.
- Staying current: They can keep up-to-date with developments in the AT sector, helping the education setting adapt to innovations and best practices.

- **Networking:** They can build relationships with other local professionals, fostering a supportive network for sharing knowledge and resources.

Suppliers and charities particularly emphasised the importance of this role in education settings to ensure effective practice:

“It is, I believe, a really essential role in schools that there is someone who has an overview and an understanding of the assistive technologies that are available in that school.” – Supplier of AT

Case Study 1: Having a single point of contact for AT across a trust

In one MAT trust, there is a digital lead who oversees the provisioning and implementation of AT across all schools. AT oversight is a part of their job description, and as such, they are both highly knowledgeable, and responsible, for AT. They felt that implementation of AT in the schools in the trust runs smoothly, as there is a clear point of contact for teachers across the trust.

Case Study 2: Knowledgeable staff members

Having a highly knowledgeable and informed member of staff in an education setting can lead to quick and efficient AT implementation. A supplier shared an example of working with a school to implement a piece of supportive word software on a laptop, to support a pupil with literacy. The school SENCo led the purchase and was involved in supporting with integration, based on their previous good level of experience. This made the experience easier for the supplier, and got things moving quickly.

Respondents believed it was crucial for at least one individual in the setting to be responsible and knowledgeable about AT. That being said, they still felt all staff should have basic AT knowledge, especially class teachers with pupils who use or could use AT, IT leads and the SENCo. Key knowledge includes recognising when AT is beneficial and how to use it to support pupil development. Some respondents noted a lack of AT knowledge within their mainstream setting. A challenge to implementing the champion model across more settings is the lack of time for staff to attend training to upskill in AT, to step into the ‘champion’ role.

Aside from lack of a perceived lack of general knowledge at a ‘whole school level’ about what AT is and how to use it, a few felt that there was hesitancy and nervousness around using any technology in the classroom for some teachers:

“There is a lot of sort of hesitancy around using technology... I think if the adults are apprehensive, then they won't encourage it in the classroom, and it's almost like, they're kind of, you know, burying their head in the sand about it. So, if we can get them on board and get them feeling comfortable and confident even in just doing the steps, then it starts to get embedded.” QTVI, LA based

An unintended consequence of the ‘champion’ model, or adding a responsibility for AT to job descriptions, could be that AT is seen as only one person’s role. Many felt that an understanding of AT should be part of everyone’s role and consideration, and this model could prevent more widespread responsibility within a setting. For example, if an education setting buys a piece of AT, but the professional who purchased it and knows how it works leaves the setting, it could stop the AT being used. A solution to this is for the champion in an education setting to attend relevant training, and then return to the education setting and share this knowledge (by training their own staff). This is known as cascade learning or ‘train the trainer’. This ensures the knowledge in the setting is diffused and shared. This model was used in the DfE-funded AT Test and Learn training pilot,¹ which aimed to support a ‘whole school’ approach to AT through training one individual in a school.² Our evaluation of the pilot found that 3-4 months after the training participants had started cascading their learning to other staff via meetings, presentations and 1:1 training.

Another challenge for champions within education settings is the fast of development in the AT available to mainstream education settings. There was a sense that the list of what is available is ever growing, meaning many find it hard to keep on top of what is available. This can further exacerbate the time and resource pressures they are under. A few working in education settings, as well as LAs and charities, suggested a central database of the current AT that is up to date and available, to help reduce this time burden. Education settings did not have time or capability to do this themselves, and felt this was the role for a national organisation.

Senior buy-in to the value of AT

A shared understanding and commitment to the value and need for AT in mainstream education settings increases the likelihood of AT being implemented well. Without the buy-in of senior leaders, it can be difficult for AT to be given the budget or the resources (e.g. staff time for training, staff time spent dedicated to specific pupil) required for it to meet pupil(s) needs. In turn, without the buy-in of senior leaders, those staff working to

¹ [Assistive Technology Test and Learn evaluation IFF Research](#)

² The individual from each school came from a variety of roles, including head teachers, other senior leaders such as deputy heads, SENCOs, IT leads and Teaching Assistants. Although not specifically explored in the research that is the focus of this report, the participants in the Test and Learn training suggest that the champion could be from any role in the school

get AT in place in mainstream education settings may choose to not work with agencies outside of the education setting, if they do not feel they have senior internal support.

Having a starting point of senior buy-in to AT can give setting staff the (real and perceived) permission to spend their time and other resources working with other agencies to find the best AT solution for pupils. One method of securing buy-in from senior leaders, as mentioned by a few respondents, is to make sure they are aware of the benefits of AT. This could be made in terms of the benefits for the individual pupils using the AT, but some also recommended informing senior staff of the benefits for other pupils too. These benefits can include: the idea that not only the individual pupil could use and therefore benefit from the AT (this depends on the specific AT however); and the knock-on benefits of an individual pupil's needs being better met, for example freeing up teaching assistant or teacher time or reduced classroom disruption. Where possible, linking potential benefits to existing school priorities can help achieve this buy-in, for example highlighting how AT can support wider behaviour, attendance and/attainment goals.

This buy-in would not only help setting staff justify to senior leaders to need to reach out to external agencies for support, but also justify training and knowledge building which we have also identified as key to effective practice.

“It is important to recognise that budgets are very tight, and it is very difficult in this day and age for teachers to be released to go on training, particularly if it is considered by the senior leadership team to be specifically for one child.” Deputy Nursery Manager, EY setting

Whilst selling the value of AT to senior staff is possible, a key challenge for champions in education settings achieving buy in from senior leaders, are the competing priorities, and limited funds within many mainstream education settings. Additionally, the lack of knowledge about AT more broadly in settings, including amongst senior leaders, means there is a lot of work to be done to achieve buy-in. For example, senior leaders might not be aware of what AT is and how it can be used to support needs. Without this buy in, it can be difficult to, for example, encourage senior leaders to send staff on training and release them from teaching, if they are not confident in what AT is themselves. A few AT participant champions identified the following approach to securing buy-in, leveraging the positives of free trials:

Several AT champions within schools built good relationships with suppliers over numerous years and were able to secure free trials for AT software or products. This in turn helped secure SLT buy-in, as there was less initial cost for the school, and settings can try before they buy. These gave SLT the chance to see AT in action and ensures money is not spent on unsuitable AT.

In summary, the value of AT for individual pupils (e.g. curriculum access, enhanced communication) and for the education setting more broadly, needs to be clearly put across by

champions. Additionally, making AT part of wider technology strategies was seen as another way of achieving buy in.

Early involvement of key professionals

Alongside securing the buy-in of the education setting's senior leadership team, participants highlighted it is important to engage other key members of staff within education settings. This is so they can be brought into the process of securing AT early, understand the value in what they are trying to achieve and feel motivated to find solutions. Both those working in education settings, and in external organisations, identified that IT staff within education settings (or if applicable connected to the wider trust) are key to AT implementation³. For example, AT implementation can encounter issues related to device compatibility with existing network settings and internal technology policies (such as network compatibility, e-safety and data security policies). Agencies described that in many instances, when faced with the issues IT teams would be inflexible and cite these issues as reasons why a piece of AT could not be used. In turn, lack of knowledge and confidence in these technological issues would often lead setting staff to accept 'no' as an answer. In some cases, previous 'bad experiences' with implementing a piece of AT could make IT teams resistant to support the process, as they can assume the same barriers would exist.

Despite such inflexibility being a common experience, agencies did see the potential for how IT teams could play a part in the solution for implementing the AT, rather than simply highlighting the barriers. Effective practice involved communication with IT teams in education settings early on in AT implementation, to get ahead of time-consuming processes (e.g. navigating device network compatibility) and troubleshooting issues early. External organisations reflected that those working in education settings, and in charge of AT, were often not empowered enough, or technically skilled enough, to be able to explain to the IT team why they were able to change policies for the case of AT. This was where, in some cases, suppliers, LA SEN teams, or charities, step in, and work with education setting IT teams to support them by explaining how things have worked in other education settings and provide reassurance.

Getting the IT team involved and on board early on are best illustrated by the following quotes:

"It is important to have comms between IT, and AT person at the school, and a supplier/charity, so the IT team can learn how to implement something in a way that still works for cyber security and e-safety."
Manager in an AT charity

³ Note that not all education settings have IT teams, therefore this is less of a barrier (e.g. nurseries).

“So it was just about engaging with the IT technician, inviting them along to a meeting and just explaining to them, you know, these are the reasons x y, z [why AT is needed], it's all about good communication”
Advisory Teacher, LA based

Case Study: Getting the IT team on board and ready for AT

Suppliers and charities are available to support education settings in implementing AT, and this includes having conversations with IT teams to answer questions about technical set up. This solution can negate breakdowns in implementation processes because of ‘clashes’ with IT teams. For example, a supplier of some AT software sent some software to a school laptop, and accompanied this with some PDF guidance and a call directly with the school technician.

Procurement processes can hamper getting the AT in place. Examples given by participants included even instances of very affordable AT (e.g. an app that costs only 99p) taking months to get installed, which is frustrating for staff involved. In other scenarios though, for example where the AT was more costly or difficult to procure, these processes meant that either the AT took a very long time to be implemented or was never implemented.

Effective practice thus involves ensuring everyone that will be involved in implementation are bought into the process with enough time for them to be able so they can consider any impact on different internal processes, and consider how they can prioritise accordingly to ensure they do not slow down the process of implementation. This requires setting staff such as the school business manager, and the IT lead, to understand why they may need to be flexible and adapt their usual working practices, when their work is related to AT.

Other key actors to include in early implementation discussions include the class teacher, and any learning support assistants if relevant. They need to be clear on why AT has been introduced, how to use it, and what their roles are.

5. Effective AT implementation: organisations / agencies and education settings working together

In this chapter we focus on effective working practices that applies to all agencies involved in multi-agency AT implementation. Professionals working each phase of education, and those working in external organisation, identified similar features of effective multi-agency working practices, as well as features that further support practices within their own agencies that facilitate this work. The type of AT that was implemented was often dependent on the phase of education and therefore the suitability for pupils of specific ages. For example, it was not common for laptops with AT software to be used by children in the early years, this was far more common in primary schools and above. However, all examples shared related specifically to being child and need centred, rather than thinking generically about what was suited to a child at a specific age/in a specific year group.

The chapter explores facilitators, challenges and solutions for ensuring effective, productive relationships between all involved. It also considers the conditions for and drivers to help ensure when a pupil with AT needs transitions between phases that the new setting (and other organisations who may be supporting them, e.g., the LA SEN teams) is prepared as well as possible for their requirements.

There are two common threads underpinning these effective practices: communication and productive relationships, which will be covered in this chapter.

High-quality information and knowledge sharing

Regular, up-to-date information sharing at all stages was seen as a key component of effective multi-agency working. This ensures that the necessary data and information about a pupil is readily available to all involved parties in settings, and across external agencies. Detailed information derived from assessments, diagnoses, and recommendations is key to reducing ambiguity, duplication of efforts, and delays.

However, a lack of suitable platforms and standardised formats can create barriers to sharing information effectively across different organisations. For example, some primary setting staff expressed frustration that health practitioners' case notes are uploaded to platforms accessible only to other health practitioners, preventing them from accessing them. Having common platforms accessible to both educational settings and external organisations was seen by some as a way to prevent case notes being lost when case workers change. This would reduce the need for repeated work, thereby minimising inefficiencies and delays.

Establishing a shared database of reports and information outlining how AT has been implemented within different contexts and any barriers and solutions established in those cases would also enable organisations to learn from other ways of working, as well as

learning from the experience of similar organisations or local education settings. However, one secondary educator highlighted how necessary safeguarding and GDPR concerns created limitations in how freely certain information could be shared. Identifying or sensitive information requires strict controls however, examples of how agencies have worked together to implement particular types of AT could help identifying more generalisable insights and learnings. Setting clear limitations on the types of information that are shared need to be thoroughly considered when developing solutions to support effective information sharing.

In addition to tools for knowledge sharing, regular meetings involving all organisations and stakeholders in the implementation process provide opportunities to discuss progress, identify potential issues or delays, and set realistic expectations.

Some EY leaders described conducting regular 'team-around-the-family' meetings. These meetings, which include the child's family, nursery staff, and health practitioners, ensure that all parties remain informed and up-to-date. They also offer frequent opportunities to discuss the child's needs and support options and create opportunities to access support and consider adaptations, where necessary. Similar types of meetings were also used by some school and FE settings and were seen as important in aligning expectations.

One EY leader highlighted that having opportunities to engage directly with health practitioners with more specialised knowledge and skills was reassuring to parents, who were sometimes reluctant to accept a child's need for support.

"Parents engage with different people differently. So that's why it's really useful to have the joint meetings where everyone is there so that the information can be shared across the whole team." Manager, Early years setting

Opportunities for in-person meetings were seen as particularly valuable in how they allowed setting staff to observe and ask question of health practitioners and external SEND specialists on how to use AT, which was helpful in acclimatising and upskilling staff on AT. Additionally, some health practitioners would share direct contact details during these meetings, which was seen to foster strong relationships by establishing more direct communication channels between the parties involved.

Difficulty scheduling meetings when all relevant professionals were available was a common frustration. Issues working around different timetables and non-working days were exacerbated by the fact that individuals within education settings, as well as LA staff and health practitioners, felt overstretched and were already juggling competing demands.

Accommodating different ways of working could also present a challenge. Regional and agency-based differences in levels of resources, expectations, and a lack of standardised roles and processes could create complications when attempting to coordinate efforts.

Shared platforms may help account for this, by supporting access to relevant information for the appropriate individuals. When used in conjunction with meetings, where possible, this can help maintain continuous communication, so progress is not delayed by scheduling difficulties nor access to information.

Responsiveness of all agencies

Timely communication within and between agencies was seen as key to progressing between stages of implementation. Long gaps between stages (for example, between initial referrals and assessments actually taking place) could undermine momentum and buy in and exacerbate delays.

Delays in communication could sometimes be attributed to unclear responsibilities. Lack of clarity around who is responsible for carrying forward the process at different stages could lead other parties to incorrectly assume progress is being made. This can also create tensions where some agencies or settings feel a disproportionate amount of work has fallen to them and negatively impact buy-in, due to concerns around managing workloads.

Some agencies noted that staff turnover also creates inconsistencies that slow down communication, for example, where the loss of responsible individuals with in-depth case knowledge create gaps in understanding, meaning momentum and progress can be lost.

Clear delineation of roles and detailed handovers where parties involved change were seen as key ways to address these issues. Openness about organisational barriers and time constraints was described by some as a way to help agencies and settings to plan around issues with capacity and develop suitable arrangements, without responsibilities having to be renegotiated at each stage. This also creates clarity for all parties, including families and young people in terms of what timeframes are realistic and avoids tensions that could undermine positive, productive relationships between agencies.

Willingness to be flexible to other organisations' working practices

Education settings: willingness to be flexible

External agencies often cited the need for education settings to be flexible when implementing AT. Some found that standardised policies within education settings could work against this, where a one-size-fits-all approach was seen as a barrier to providing targeted support to best meet pupils specific needs.

LA SEND specialists felt that curriculum-based policies could create tensions where settings could be wary of how to best adapt approaches around AT. They noted that some schools were more prescriptive in their approach to curriculum, in particular noting a focus on developing handwriting in primary schools, which could make teachers feel they had less autonomy to pursue pursuing more practical alternatives for their pupils that were counter to school policies, for example, touch typing using a laptop. A few participants mentioned that having a member of staff, such as a SENCO, at the setting who was prepared to advocate for an approach that went against standard policy was beneficial (i.e. the champion model).

Case Study: Flexibility in considering alternative progression pathways

One lead for a team of specialist teachers at a local authority described facing initial resistance from parents and school staff when suggesting a pupil focus on touch-typing rather than cursive writing. Joined-up handwriting was the school's preference in this case. However, the LA SEND team judged that due to the nature of the child's needs, they were highly unlikely to utilise cursive writing later on in life and they were concerned that focusing on this was preventing the child from making progress with their studies, more broadly. Commitment from themselves and a "brave" SENCo encouraged the school to flex the standard requirement for children to write. In turn, this had a positive outcome on the pupil's academic progression.

"The thing that [they, the pupil] said changed for [them] the most was when... [we] said no more writing. But that was only because the school took it on." Lead for specialist teacher team, Local Authority

Instilling confidence and willingness in setting staff to consider AT was seen as a key facilitator of successful AT implementation. Raising knowledge and understanding of AT, for instance by providing opportunities for consultation with external experts on how best to adapt their teaching, was seen as a way of reassuring teachers and supporting practical and effective AT solutions are implemented.

As discussed in the previous chapter, having individuals prepared to champion AT was identified as a way to improve overall confidence in using AT within the setting. These individuals were seen as a way to push through solutions in cases where there has been resistance and, more broadly, prompt greater openness towards AT within settings and advocate for change. Where these champions can share experience of AT having been successfully implemented, this also helped reassure staff that their approach is grounded in evidence.

Personal attitudes to AT linked to individual scepticism of technology among some education setting staff was also seen as a barrier. In certain cases where setting staff feel less willing or able to incorporate technology, this could undermine the scope of AT considered.

“There is a lot of sort of hesitancy around using technology... I think if the adults are apprehensive, then they won't encourage it in the classroom, and it's almost like... burying their head in the sand about it. So, if we can get them on board and get them feeling comfortable and confident even in just doing the steps, then it starts to get embedded.” Inclusion services team member, Local Authority

Providing more training for teachers on AT and how it can be used within lessons was seen as a key means for raising confidence and competency, so teachers feel more informed and equipped to incorporate AT.

'Where it works well is when [the] school has put aside the time and resources to train everybody and give everyone time to explore and play and engage with the experts.' Manager, AT Supplier

Widening access to technology within education was seen as a way to help to address this discomfort. One way of doing this could be to utilise the common sentiment spoken about in the focus groups and interviews that technology to support learning was 'essential for some, useful for all'. Some agencies felt that an approach of providing supportive technology more broadly, as some education settings did by making laptops available to all pupils, regardless of specific needs, may help normalise and improve confidence with technology in classrooms and make AT feel easier to integrate and use.

All agencies working together: willingness to be flexible

A strong understanding of other agencies' ways of working, including the limitations and barriers for different agencies' and individuals' ability to engage with AT implementation, was also key to finding workable solutions. Transparency around different budgets, levels of resourcing, and standard ways of working, can avoid a lack of involvement being perceived as a lack of willingness to contribute, which undermines positive collaboration.

Sharing previous experiences with AT was seen as a way to build both knowledge and trust between agencies. Understanding and learning from the experience of other settings who have successfully implemented AT, and the impacts this had on the pupil, were also seen as key ways to make AT implementation for less experienced settings feel more achievable. Openness to learning from the expertise of other agencies could also increase understanding of AT within education settings. Building confidence between parties encouraged the establishment of positive, productive relationships, as well as providing encouragement to proceed on a basis of 'what works' rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

“All you can do is share a good practice of where it has worked well in other schools.” Teaching and learning specialist, Supplier

Case Study: Flexibility between agencies creating realistic expectations

One secondary school assistant head described the process of implementing an AV1 robot, that would allow the pupil to join lessons remotely. They described the benefit of open and honest communication between the school, LA and the family in setting realistic expectations around timelines for implementation. These discussions allowed for a phased approach that was both achievable for the school and acceptable to the pupil and their family, and created clarity around funding, given the school's limited budget.

"I think what worked well was the communication of what was possible and what wasn't possible... the shared understanding that it was a trial and that we were working together to try and make it work." Assistant head teacher, Secondary education setting

Strong professional relationships and wider networks

Named contacts and the allocation of a 'responsible' individual leading the process helped ensure all agencies were aligned in their understanding and were clear on who to contact to pass on information to check in on progress. Education settings also appreciated having clear lines of communication with professionals at external organisations, with whom they could develop a relationship. To support with this, consistency of individuals and agencies involved in AT implementation was seen as key to maintaining progress, as well as building relationships between organisations over time. Where staff turnover prompted changes, clear and detailed handovers helped maintain continuity, so valuable case-knowledge is not lost.

Case Study: Named contacts improving clarity of communication

One charity representative described having a particularly productive relationship with a school SENCo. This was seen to create a clear, streamlined communication, by avoiding ambiguities around who to contact. It also helped to avoid communications falling between the cracks, as well as avoiding the need for information to be repeated, creating delays. This also utilised the SENCos knowledge of the setting to inform which other staff need to be brought in at different stages of the process.

"[What makes a good relationship is] somebody who's available to liaise around any barriers that might come into play." Senior consultant, Charity

Support for education settings attempting to implement AT was sometimes seen to be held back by a lack of awareness of what support is actually available to them locally. Especially for education settings that have limited prior experience with AT, many were unfamiliar with the external agencies, charities or more experienced local settings they

could consult for guidance or support. Understanding similar implementation journeys, particularly with similar local contexts, could aid understanding of how best to engage with and make use of local authorities, health providers and suppliers when attempting to implement AT. One LA health professional suggested a buddy system.

“Find a buddy school where they can have that empowerment relationship... there is bound to be some well-established AT settings that will be willing to work with others.”
Qualified teacher, LA Health practitioner

This could be particularly valuable given regional variations in available support based on different levels of resource and localised specialism. In some cases, LAs may already have access to specialised technology due to a previous purchase, simplifying multi-agency negotiations around how AT will be procured and funded, as was described by one secondary school educator as being valuable. This assistant head teacher described how their LA had access to a piece of AT that was previously used by a child in a different school but was no longer in use. This meant that an access agreement could be reached between the school and the LA, rather than the AT having to be re-purchased.

However, some education settings highlighted the difficulties of establishing relationships with relevant professionals in their area, often due to a lack of clarity or awareness around what type of support is available. Mainstream settings (who were the focus of this research) were much less likely to have dedicated contacts with health professionals in their area when compared to special schools, so pathways to securing support are often less direct.

Improving awareness of what support is available, including sharing lessons learned from similar education setting locally, could help provide greater clarity for education settings seeking AT for their pupils. Creating opportunities for contact between mainstream settings and external professionals would also aid in breaking down initial barriers to establishing contact with external organisations.

Case Study: Utilising local contacts to find AT solutions

One assistant principal at an FE college described the process of working with their LA, alongside contacts at a local special college, when coordinating funding for an AT equipped 'mock flat' to support pupils with a range of needs. This 'mock flat' was a simulated domestic space which allowed students to interact with a range of AT that they may use when living independently. Conversations between agencies ensured there was a joined-up approach to ensuring sufficiency of SEN provision in the local area and appropriate funding was allocated to equip the college to support SEN pupils.

"It's about taking the strength of both provider types and coming together to develop something." Assistant principal, FE College setting

Management of transitions between settings

Pupils move between education settings as they progress through early years, primary, secondary and further education phases. Transitions between settings present risks to continuity of AT. If transitions are poorly managed, this can have a negative impact on a pupil's support. This could in turn impact their wellbeing, attainment and level of confidence with AT. Ensuring smooth transitions was therefore seen as crucial. Successful transitions were facilitated by the following factors:

- The previous education settings providing detailed information on pupil's AT needs and usage to the setting the pupil was going to
- Consideration of differences in resourcing, skill and knowledge between settings
- Forward planning and long lead-in times to allow adequate preparation

Access to comprehensive information from a pupil's previous educational settings is essential for ensuring the new setting has a clear understanding of their needs, including any prior support or use of AT. Incomplete or inadequate information can lead to gaps in understanding, requiring additional efforts by new settings to reassess the pupil's needs. This can be disruptive for a pupil, creating delays or breaks in AT related support.

Detailed handovers between education settings would help to address this. However, the value of handovers is reliant on staff at the new setting having the capacity, awareness and knowledge of AT and understanding to make use of the information. In some cases, the new education setting may not be equipped to provide the same kind of support which the pupil has been used to. It was noted that at points of transition in education, there could also be a change in LA teams that are allocated to a child (e.g. if an LA is organised by the age of the pupil), and this can slow down processes in the new education setting. Therefore, a clear picture of previous support provides greater clarity around the pupil's needs and what elements of new AT they may need more support adapting to.

In person visits by staff from the new setting, ahead of transition, can provide useful context, opportunities to ask questions and hear advice on how AT has been incorporated previously. This helps to build capacity at the new setting, by improving understanding and preparedness.

Availability of AT, budgets and expertise on AT can also vary greatly between settings. When a pupil is due to move to a new setting, there needs to be a consideration of the different resources and capabilities of different settings they are moving to. This could be based on the size of the setting, the level of AT need it caters to and the level of funding available to them to prevent assumptions being made about the AT pupils have, and will continue having, access to.

Ownership agreements around AT can be a source of this disruption to continued AT access when moving between phases, especially where this prevents pupils maintaining

the use of the same AT that they have built up their confidence and experience with. Organisations like CENMAC (a London-based team of AT specialists offering a range of services) are able to set up loan agreements with settings, where schools are unable to purchase AT themselves, but some regions do not have these services to help ensure consistent access between settings. In these scenarios, frank discussions between settings and LAs and transparency around what is financially possible for settings helps aid negotiations, to find reasonable solutions to providing continued access to AT.

Where changes to AT need to be made, openness to new AT options and consulting pupils about their needs and preferred AT support options should be considered. For example, one college uses transition into their setting as a chance to introduce AT to a pupil that could need more extra support.

Case Study: Transitions as opportunities to identify new AT solutions

One college educator described enrolling pupils on regular learning support sessions if they declared a need during enrolment. Pupils could also opt-in and teachers could refer them to take part in these sessions, even if a need was not disclosed at enrolment. These sessions provided pupils the chance to share prior experience with AT and try out other AT available at the college. During these sessions, the college educator described one pupil sharing a desire for more independence which led them to consider new AT options that were not available in their previous setting.

This demonstrates how transitions, as well as creating challenges, provide opportunities for experimentation and considerations of new solutions that might better serve the pupil. This also acknowledged how the nature of a pupil's support needs may change, highlighting the importance of empowering pupils to advocate for themselves to find solutions that work best for them.

“Part and parcel of the [learning support] lessons is the experimentation with different AT.” College, Education setting.

Planning ahead for AT continuity can prevent these issues at transition points occurring. Long-term thinking around AT usage can support effective practice and help minimise disruption for the pupil by finding solutions that are more likely to be sustainable.

Where possible, utilising AT that pupils can use to study more independently can help ensure solutions are sustainable, so CYP can continue to use them as they move through and leave education. Using universal forms of AT, like accessible laptop software, makes it more likely for pupils to maintain consistent access – however, this is not always the best solution for pupils who require more specialised AT.

Finally, there should be long lead in periods when pupils are transitioning between settings to develop knowledge and expertise in new settings. This can help to prevent

challenges relating to staff being uninformed about AT, by raising capacity of new setting staff to support them, minimising disruption to support within early transition periods. Pre-empting these challenges will help facilitate effective multi-agency practice.

6. Other facilitators of effective multi-agency working practice and AT implementation

This chapter focuses on other facilitators of effective multi-agency working practice and AT implementation including the involvement of parents, effective training on AT, and the pupil's voice.

Involvement of parents

Some agencies highlighted the critical role of parental involvement in the success of multi-agency collaboration and the implementation of AT. When parents actively engage in and support the AT implementation process for their child, it can significantly enhance the success of the implementation.

One education setting mentioned that the involvement of parents can greatly ease transitions for pupils, as parents are invested and can champion the AT for their child. Parents can also help ensure that AT is integrated smoothly at home, which could in turn enhance its impact. Conversely, agencies reported that a lack of parental involvement can create barriers, potentially leading to miscommunication or misalignment between agencies and the child's actual needs, or a lack of progression with implementation due to more reliance on education setting staff who may have limited capacity. Therefore, agencies fostering strong relationships with parents, educating them on the benefits of AT and encouraging their active participation is important.

“If the parent does not feel confident and the parent is not backing it [the implementation of AT for their child], I think that's a really big determinant to how well something [implementing the piece of AT] is going to go.”

Early Years Autism Officer, Local Authority

“I have seen a few examples where I've transitioned a child into primary school and the primary school, they're really on it, they're really motivated, they want to put things in place, but maybe the parent feels a bit disconnected. They don't feel like they were part of that decision. And then there's kind of the breakdown in where it's going to go. So, parent efficacy is a big one. When they feel empowered, when they feel like, “Yeah, this is something we can do”, we always see better results.”

Early Years Autism Officer, Local Authority

It was noted that in some cases, parents purchased the AT themselves to maintain a sense of continuity with the device, as this would mean the pupil could keep the device with them throughout their education, rather than switching to a different piece of AT when moving between education settings. While this can be a straightforward solution to the challenges of transitioning between settings, it was noted by agencies that this was not an ideal solution seeing as not all parents would be in a position to afford to do this.

In these situations, it is agreed that it would be better to find another solution that allowed this continuity, for example use of funding that allowed for the AT to be bought for the pupil (as opposed to the setting).

Case Study: Involvement of parents

In an early years education setting, a child was identified as needing support with communication. At a 24-month check, a health visitor referred the child to a SaLT, occupational therapist (OT) and a pediatrician. The SaLT recommended a specific app to the parents, to support with the child's communication. The parents then passed this information on to the early years leader.

"The parent shared that they'd had a Speech and Language appointment, and this app was mentioned, and I think the parent leapt on this because they knew their child was very proficient with technology." Headteacher and SENCO, Nursery School

The parents purchased a tablet and the app, and the SaLT delivered a short training session to the parents, the child, and those in the setting. The app was used to help the child communicate throughout the day.

Effective training

Most agencies felt that another facilitator of effective multi-agency working and AT implementation was the delivery of training to education settings, including targeted, specific training on a piece of AT that is used by a pupil at the education setting, as well as more general training on the benefits of AT to increase awareness, knowledge and buy in of AT in education settings.

For targeted, specific AT training, the consensus was that this should be provided to all education setting staff involved with the pupil, to ensure a thorough understanding of how specific AT devices and software work. This enables staff to effectively integrate these tools into the classroom and tailor their use to support individual pupils' needs. This specific training was mentioned as being provided by the external organisation involved in providing the AT to the education setting, be that the AT supplier, LA, or a charity.

Additionally, some agencies mentioned that providing more general, wide-ranging training on AT was important, not just in specific cases. This broader training can help education setting staff become aware of the benefits of AT, as well as the various ways it can be implemented to enhance pupils' learning and development. It could also increase awareness of what AT is available to education settings in the first place, so they can make informed decisions about which tools can be used to best support pupils. One external organisation said that currently, a lack of this training and awareness is leading to pupils receiving the correct support too late.

Agencies highlighted that effective training, both specific and general, not only equips staff with the necessary knowledge and skills but also improves their confidence in using AT, fostering greater buy-in and enthusiasm. Another important facilitator of AT implementation in relation to training discussed was having multiple people from an education setting attend training sessions. This means that the knowledge and understanding of AT is spread throughout the setting and ensures expertise is not lost if a staff member leaves.

“When [AT implementation] works, it is a combination of leadership buy in, specialist knowledge and training to increase confidence in the setting.” Manager, Charity

“Where it works well is when school has put aside the time and resources to train everybody and give everyone time to explore and play and engage with the experts.” Manager, Supplier

Pupil's voice

Listening to the voice of pupils throughout the AT implementation process was also noted by several agencies as an important facilitator. By involving the pupil throughout the process agencies can gain a deeper understanding of what will work best for them, fostering a sense of autonomy and equipping them with the skills to articulate and advocate for their needs. This empowerment is especially important as pupils transition between different educational settings and eventually move beyond the education system. Additionally, listening to the pupil's voice can help inspire agencies to engage further with AT.

“I've also tried to find creative ways of just communicating the child's voice and like just writing down a little sentence that they say, like, *‘this is amazing, I can do this now’*. Or just giving them feedback of how that made them feel and the impact that it had, I find has been a real selling factor in getting adults and families and schools to buy into what we're trying to implement.” Occupational Therapist, LA

7. Wider system challenges to effective multi-agency working practice and AT implementation

In this chapter we focus on the wider system challenges that impact multi-agency working practice and AT implementation. Challenges that we identified include: AT specifications on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and regional differences. The purpose of highlighting these challenges is to be transparent about issues that agencies come across, to help less experienced settings be better prepared.

AT specifications on EHCPs

Agencies across focus groups and interviews reported that a challenge to multi-agency working and AT implementation can be the way that AT is specified on EHCPs. Agencies reported examples of EHCPs being too specific in the piece of AT needed, or too vague – both of which cause difficulties for education settings.

When AT specifications are too specific, they lack flexibility for the child to try something else or use new AT as it becomes available. Education settings without much experience with AT may feel that a pupil can only use the piece of AT listed in the EHCP, but this doesn't prevent additional AT being tried. Conversely, when AT specifications in EHCPs are too vague, this can leave education settings unsure about what AT to provide. Additionally, when a piece of AT is not directly specified on EHCPs, this can create a barrier to accessing funding for that AT, resulting in pupils not receiving the support they need. Particularly for pupils at transition points, the clarity of AT specifications on EHCPs, combined with flexibility to try other AT interventions can greatly impact the ease of transitions and effectiveness of the AT in place.

“They [education settings] come to us for advice, we get a lot of enquires after an EHCP where there might be some conflict, a school might not have the knowledge to know where to begin or knowing what the most appropriate technology might be.” Manager, Charity

Regional differences

Across groups and interviews, it was clear that there were significant geographical differences in multi-agency working and how AT is implemented in mainstream education settings. The availability and quality of AT-related services varied widely by geography and LA. For instance, depending on the region, some agencies reported benefitting from well-established specialist organisations like the Ace Centre and CENMAC, which provide comprehensive AT support and training to education settings. In contrast, agencies in other regions reported experiencing significant LA cuts to SEN related roles, resulting in very small teams to support education settings, with AT just a part of their

role. This disparity creates a patchwork of service levels, where some regions are well-resourced while others struggle to meet the needs of their pupils.

The lack of a centralised, nationwide process for AT provision exacerbates these regional differences. This explains why there is not a common AT journey from initial identification, to referral, assessment and eventually using the tech and ongoing support. Agencies noted that some LAs provide training on AT, while in others, such support is absent. This inconsistency can lead to a lack of awareness among educational settings about the help and networks available to them. The presence of large specialist organisations in some regions appears to work well, delivering all AT provision on behalf of one or multiple LAs. However, in regions where such support is lacking, education settings may find themselves without the necessary knowledge or resources to effectively implement AT solutions. Across focus groups and interviews agencies highlighted that addressing these regional disparities is important to ensuring equitable access to AT services for all.

8. Conclusions

This research highlights the diverse range of assistive technology (AT) being used in mainstream education settings, alongside varied approaches to multi-agency collaboration. Some mainstream education settings work with a variety of external organisations including the LA, charities and suppliers, to bring AT into their setting. Others work in a smaller network, for example only working with suppliers to purchase AT. External agencies can play a role in assessment, procurement, training, and ongoing support, and therefore effective collaboration with these partners can support timely and appropriate AT provision implementation.

The complexity of need is often the driver for the extent of multi-agency working – i.e. when a child has more complex needs and requirements, the more likely it is for multiple agencies to be involved. This highlights the importance of effective multi-agency working in the AT space. As there is no ‘one size fits all’ implementation journey, staff in education settings with less AT related experience may not know what the first step is, regarding implementation of AT, and when other agencies could get involved to support. **Despite the diversity in current models of multi-agency working, consistent facilitators of effective multi-agency working have been identified.**

Firstly, there were several examples of effective practice that education setting staff could follow, that would put them in the best place to be ready to work with other agencies. Settings are the central agency in the implementation journey, which is why we chose to highlight these effective practices through their lens. This included nominating an **AT champion** within the setting, who is highly knowledgeable and co-ordinates AT implementation. Ideally, this would be someone who has AT formally recognised as part of their role, giving them the time and autonomy to build and maintain their knowledge. There are however pitfalls to the ‘champion approach’, including the risk of leaving all responsibility to one person, therefore effective practice involves ensuring buy-in and upskilling of a wide variety of relevant education setting staff (e.g. via training). The existence of a champion can also increase the likelihood of realising the other effective practices.

Achieving buy-in from senior leaders in the setting can aid effective multi-agency working by making it more likely for senior staff to sign off the spending of time, money and other resources to implement the best AT for pupils. This can be done by selling the value of AT, and the impacts it can have on specific pupils as well as other benefits to the setting. Alongside this, **building support from other key gatekeepers** within education settings, such as IT teams, can help make the implementation process smoother. IT teams can often face barriers in implementing AT, and other education setting staff may not feel empowered or knowledgeable enough to push for solutions to these barriers. Therefore, effective practice here involves education settings looking beyond their own setting for support, which is often offered by charities and suppliers, regarding successful implementation that fits with established IT systems. **Once an education setting has**

several members of staff who are knowledgeable, bought-in, and ready to implement AT, they are in a positive position to work effectively with other agencies. The question of building genuine interest and passion for AT, amongst those with little previous experience and time, remains.

Beyond settings, when looking at effective multi-agency working practices that relate to all agencies that can be involved in implementation journeys, effective practice can ultimately be boiled down to high-quality communication between all agencies involved. This includes **high-quality information and knowledge sharing** between agencies, in the forms of shared platforms/databases, and meetings involving all relevant professionals, to keep implementation processes moving along. Whilst GDPR will present some issues here, the efficiency gains if a working shared platform is realised would be great. Good communication also involves the **responsiveness** of all agencies involved in a pupil's AT, at each stage of the implementation journey. Delays caused by slow response times can inadvertently lead to lack of momentum and buy in. However, delays in response are often out of the control of the individual staff members, and openness related to organisation pressures should be clearly communicated.

When agencies work well together to implement AT, this is because they have strong and productive relationships. This involves working together with a sense of **flexibility**, understanding the ways of working of other agencies, and **openness** in adopting alternative working practices, if it best fits the needs of individual pupils. To avoid duplication of work, and to ensure momentum, it needs to be really **clear which professionals own different parts** of the AT journey. Both flexibility, and clarity of roles, are underpinned by **strong professional working relationships**, and an understanding of the **wider network** of support available within local areas. Each of these pieces of effective practice should be considered when a pupil has an upcoming setting transition, to ensure continuity of AT access. There appeared to be a very broad variety in experiences of AT upon transition at the moment, with poor transition experiences negatively affecting a pupil's ability to access the curriculum and communicate.

Appreciating the speed at which new developments in AT are unfolding is key to understanding both the need for multi-agency working, but also why high-quality communication is so important to it. The AT available to mainstream settings is extremely wide-ranging, and new options are emerging constantly, so truly effective implementation is not possible if relying on one individual (or even a handful of individuals') to update their knowledge of what is possible. As such, being willing to reach out to others and be flexible about what solutions can be found will lead to the best chance of maximising outcomes for pupils.

Agencies universally agreed that the primary focus for those working in the AT space should be improving outcomes for pupils, through AT. The involvement of **parents and carers** and **pupil voice** were both seen as further potential facilitators to AT implementation. When parents supported and engaged in the AT implementation process

for their child, it was seen as able to enhance its success as they can support during transitions and help integrate AT at home where appropriate. Utilising pupil voice and involving them in decisions about their AT can help develop autonomy, ensure solutions are tailored to their preferences and supports long-term engagement. **Good quality AT training** was also seen as key, both in terms of training staff in education setting in specific pieces of AT that the children they work with use, but also more general training to the whole staff body to spread awareness of what AT is, and to build confidence. Having general training in addition to the specific is particularly helpful in the context of new AT developments, so that training can be applied to new situations and pieces of technology.

Encouraging broader adoption of AT throughout mainstream education requires not only highlighting the benefits of AT, but also how multi-agency working can support this. On the other hand, **there should be an acknowledgement of the barriers in place** that can make multi-agency working more difficult, and therefore less likely. This includes some misunderstanding around the use of SEND budgets and funding and the clarity of AT on EHCPs. More broadly, there are vast differences in the support services available to education settings regionally, and there was a sense that SEND services were currently highly strained, which could make multi-agency working more difficult. This research does not intend to suggest how this barriers should be solved, but rather to provide transparent information about them so that settings can be informed on, and prepared for the challenges they could face.



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