Diarddel O Addysg | Excluded Lives

The Varied Landscape of Alternative Education Provision in the UK: a Home International Comparison

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Aims

This report provides an analysis of the varied landscape of alternative education provision (AEP) in the UK. The ESRC-funded *Excluded Lives* project attempts to illuminate some of the contextual factors that may contribute to the very different rates of school exclusion in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. AEP is likely to be an important factor in determining these rates as it offers a substitute for, or supplement to, 'mainstream' education for those students who have been excluded, or who are at risk of exclusion, from the mainstream classroom. The analysis seeks to answer two broad questions:

- *What do national-level variations in the nature and scale of AEP tells us about the political economies of education in each of the four jurisdictions?*
- *What are the implications of these variations for levels of school exclusions in the UK?*

Challenges

There are significant challenges in undertaking comparative research on AEP because of issues of definition. There are differences between the countries in terms of the kinds of data (on institutions and individuals) which are held centrally, which makes straightforward comparisons impossible. Each jurisdiction has not only different institutional arrangements for accommodating the needs of 'troubled' students, but uses different designations and terms for provision outwith 'mainstream' schools. In addition, there are issues with deciding which forms of alternative provision to include or exclude in the analysis. In order to provide some kind of framework in which to conduct the comparison, we used the following definition:

> *Alternative Education Provision (AEP) is planned provision where children at risk of exclusion, or who have been excluded from school, are removed from the mainstream classroom. This might be for a set period each week or full-time.*

Methods

Charting the similarities and differences in the landscape of AEP in the UK has entailed drawing data from multiple sources. At national level, the data have been largely derived from government reports and searchable databases, as well as reviews and research undertaken by government agencies and third sector organisations. However, these sources provide very little data on provision other than schools and designated units.

In order to map the landscape at local level, we compiled inventories from publicly available directories and then supplemented these with data from interviews with local authority (LA) officers, AEP providers, teachers, parents and pupils have been undertaken in ten LAs (four in England, three in Wales, two in Scotland, one in Northern Ireland). These inventories were then coded to classify AEP

providers in terms of sector, 'reach' and type. Profiles of AEP within each LA were then constructed, compared, and combined to give an indication of the landscape of AEP at the national level.

Key findings

This 'home international' comparison has revealed that *there is significant variation in AEP in the four nations of the UK* in terms of the sector of AEP provider, the 'reach' and type of provision.

Sector of provision*:* In terms of sector of provision, a simple division between 'public' and 'non-public' provider reveals that, in England, Scotland and Wales, *the majority of AEP providers are non-public*. Northern Ireland is distinctive in that nearly all its AEP is publicly provided. However, this simple binary distinction is not very illuminating. A more nuanced representation is provided by the tripartite distinction between 'public', 'third sector' and 'private'. This reveals that *there is a spectrum of privatisation*, with England having the most private AEP providers (accounting for over half of all providers), and Northern Ireland the least (having no private AEP providers). In all jurisdictions other than Northern Ireland, *there is a significant presence of third sector providers*. The third sector accounts for 80% of providers operating in the Scottish local authorities, half of those in the Welsh local authorities and one third of those in the English local authorities. Of course, the distribution of providers tells us little about the number of children and young people for which they make provision.

Reach of provision*:* In terms of 'reach', only a minority of AEP providers operate across national borders. Wales has the most UK-wide (though usually 'England and Wales') providers. Scotland has the most providers that operate at the national level. Overall, though, *the majority of AEP providers appear to operate at the local level.*

Diversity of provision: There is wide variation across the UK in terms of the extent and nature of the diversity of types of AEP provision. Aside from Northern Ireland, with its uniform, largely publicly provided, AEP, there are wide variations in the level of diversity. There is diversity in the type of provision available within individual LAs, particularly in England. In terms of the amount of diversity between the LAs at national level, *England and Wales have the most diversity of AEP providers* – with a wide range of provision. *Scotland has less diversity and Northern Ireland has no diversity of type of AEP*.

Type of provision*: There are variations not just in the level of diversity but in the kind of AEP available*. The English LAs have the largest proportion of providers offering tutoring. The Scottish LAs have by far the highest proportion of non-school-based providers offering various forms of 'therapeutic' AEP, especially mentoring and counselling services – a form of AEP which appears to be relatively under-represented in England. The Welsh LAs have the largest proportion of providers offering AEP based on forms of physical activity, such as rugby and military training. Nature-based provision is available in England, Scotland, and Wales. Vocational AEP is also well represented in these three countries.

Conclusions and implications

In addition to the findings listed above, undertaking this home international comparison of AEP has led us to the following broad-brush conclusions in relation to the two overarching research questions relating to the political economies of education and the implications for rates of school exclusion.

Political economies of education: This analysis has indicated that *there are significant differences in the landscape of AEP in the UK that relate to the wider political economies of education in the four nations of the UK.* England's landscape of AEP reflects the characteristics the country's education system as a whole and the ideological preference for quasi-market mechanisms driven by diversity and choice. It may be that Scotland's landscape of AEP reflects the Scottish Government's explicit commitment to inclusive education and high levels of third sector involvement. Wales' landscape of AEP appears to bear the legacy of its historic control by England, alongside the Welsh Government's commitment to retaining public provision. Wales also has the highest proportion of providers operating from outside its borders. Northern Ireland's landscape of AEP is the most distinctive of all, with no evidence of a 'market' in AEP. Provision is publicly provided with minimal third sector involvement and no diversity of institutional form or type.

Implications for levels of school exclusions: If we are to take official school exclusion rates at face value, it would appear that *the availability of diverse types of AEP does not reduce school exclusions*. England has the highest rates of school exclusion and, on the basis of this analysis, the highest number and greatest diversity of AEP providers. Scotland has the lowest rates of school exclusions, and relatively low numbers of AEP providers. It might also be speculated that not only does an extensive array of AEP *not* reduce exclusions, *AEP may even contribute to higher exclusion rates*. In short, it may be that, in the case of AEP, supply creates its own demand. This is not to say that individuals have not benefited from such provision, but without independent systematic evidence, we just do not know how representative these individual narratives of success are. This does not mean, though, that there may not be some benefits for the schools and classmates they leave behind.

The need for evidence: While this report has highlighted some significant differences in the nature of AEP in the four jurisdictions of the UK, *there are some startling omissions*. We do not know how many pupils are using these different providers, for how much of their school time, for what duration, and for what purpose.

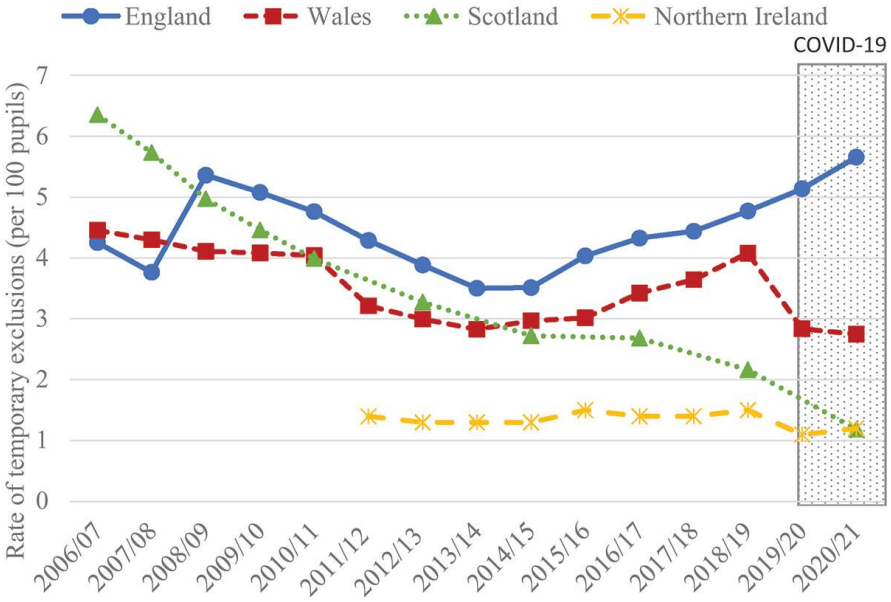
In terms of funding, much of the AEP is commissioned by schools, so *there is no data on how much funding is flowing from the public purse to AEP businesses, social enterprises and charities*. It is likely that school-level commissioning of AEP is placing significant financial burdens on schools, especially those serving disadvantaged communities. While these schools may receive some additional funding based on poverty indicators, it may well not cover these extra costs.

Perhaps most importantly, *we have no systemic evidence on how effective they are* – either at reducing exclusions or providing the young people with worthwhile educative experiences.

Introduction

This report provides an analysis of the key differences and similarities in the landscape of alternative education provision (AEP) in the UK. As part of the ESRC-funded Excluded Lives Project,[1] it attempts to illuminate some of the contextual factors that may contribute to the very different rates of school exclusion in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. As Figure 1 indicates, while levels of temporary (or fixed-term) exclusions are low and/or falling in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, they are rising in England.[2]

Figure 1: School exclusion rates (temporary/fixed term) across the UK[3]



Alternative education provision (AEP) is often portrayed as an important factor in reducing levels of school exclusion and/or providing an appropriate substitute for 'mainstream' education. Some forms of AEP provide long- or short-term placements for those pupils whose continued presence in the mainstream school is no longer possible or desirable. Pupil Referral Units in England and Wales, and EOTAS Centres in Northern Ireland, are examples of this kind of AEP. Other types of AEP offer 'outreach' services to schools. These can include a wide range of interventions that are designed to eliminate or reduce those behaviours which render the 'troubled' pupil at risk of exclusion, and therefore enable them to remain in the school – even if not in the mainstream classroom for all of the school day or week. This form of AEP may take the form of therapeutic interventions (such as counselling, mentoring or mindfulness), outdoor activities (bootcamps, working with animals, games) or vocational courses (often at FE colleges, but also with business and industry).

[1] https://excludedlives.education.ox.ac.uk/

[2] There is a similar pattern in relation to permanent exclusions, but numbers are too small in Northern Ireland to report.

[3] Tseliou, F., Taylor, C. & Power, S. (2023) Recent Trends in Formal School Exclusions in Wales, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2023.2276404

It is widely acknowledged that there is little data and evidence on the scale, nature and efficacy of AEP.[4] This applies to longer term placements, but even more so to the short 'outreach' activities. Even less is known about how far the landscape of AEP varies across the UK. If there are significant differences in the landscape, it is possible that they have a bearing on the very different rates of exclusion in the four countries.

The research is premised on a belief in the value of 'home internationals' in comparative research. As Raffe *et al*. (1999: 9)[5] argue, for many comparative researchers the differences between the four nations of the UK appear as something of a 'nuisance'. However, these differences are also an opportunity for research. 'Home international' comparisons can contribute not only to greater theorisation of the relationship between the state and the education system but can also provide important evidence of the consequences and efficacy (and otherwise) of divergent policy regimes and interventions. For this report, we are concerned to examine how these divergences are manifest in the range of education provision that exists outside the 'mainstream' school.

Given that the emotional, behavioural and wellbeing factors that contribute to pupil disaffection from school are unlikely to vary significantly across the four nations of the UK, we might usefully look at the context in which responses to such pupil disaffection are shaped. What alternatives are open to schools, to teachers and to parents when the continued presence of a pupil in the mainstream classroom no longer seems desirable or possible? This is the question that drives this attempt to map out AEP in each of the four nations.

Structure of the report

In the following pages we begin by discussing some of the challenges of undertaking comparative research on AEP before outlining how we approached the challenges. We then look at each country in turn, beginning with an overview of the national level of education provision (including diversity of school types, number of special schools, units and centres). We then look at the local landscape of AEP based on the identification of AEP providers in each local authority provided by collating providers of AP from local authority datasets, directories and our interviewees. In particular, we look at the number of AEP providers operating in each authority, the 'reach' of the provider, the sector (public, private or third sector) of the provider, and the type of provision offered.

We then draw comparisons from across the four nations and raise some questions about the implications for levels of school exclusions. The report concludes with a discussion what the national-level variations in the nature and scale of AEP tells us about the governance of education in each of the four jurisdictions and the implications of these for understanding different rates of school exclusion across the four nations of the UK.

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[4] See for instance:
Owen, C., Woods, K., & Stewart, A. (2021). A systematic literature review exploring the facilitators and barriers of reintegration to secondary mainstream schools through 'alternative provision'. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *26*(3), 322-338.
Malcolm, A. (2018). Exclusions and alternative provision: piecing together the picture. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *23*(1), 69-80.

[5] Raffe, D., Brannen, K., Croxford, L., & Martin, C. (1999). Comparing England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: the case for 'home internationals' in comparative research. *Comparative Education*, *35*(1), 9-25.

The challenges of mapping the landscape across the UK

While undertaking home international comparisons of this kind provides opportunities, it also creates huge challenges. These can be briefly summarised in terms of a) issues of definition; b) difficulties with data; and c) scope of the analysis.

a) Issues of definition

There are various terms used to describe provision for pupils who have been removed from the mainstream classroom. Wales and Northern Ireland, for example, employ the acronym 'EOTAS' (Education Otherwise Than at School) to refer to education provided by the local authority which does not encompass elective home education provided by parents. While the term EOTAS is also used in England, it refers to the legal mechanism whereby a child or young person with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan can receive special educational provision despite being unable to attend an educational setting.[6] In England, the term 'Alternative Provision' is used and refers to settings that provide education for children who cannot go to a mainstream school. In Scotland, the term 'Alternative Curriculum' appears to be more commonly used. In reality, these terms appear to be used interchangeably.

The challenge has been to find a definition that encompasses the diversity of provision that is offered to young people who have been removed from the classroom. We wanted to widen our definition beyond 'EOTAS' as there is a range of provision where young people are removed from the classroom for short periods of time, as well as provision that is offered in the school setting – albeit not in the mainstream classroom. However, we didn't want to include the kind of *ad hoc* intervention that a pupil receives if they have been required to leave the classroom because of single incident. We are therefore basing our analysis on the following working definition:

> *Alternative Education Provision (AEP) is planned provision where children at risk of exclusion, or who have been excluded from school, are removed from the mainstream classroom. This might be for a set period each week or full-time.*

Our definition therefore includes EOTAS, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), special units attached to schools, and the range of activities that schools and local authorities (LAs) commission for children who have been excluded, or are at risk of exclusion, from school. It includes full- and part-time provision, that may last for a few weeks or several years. It may take place in a variety of settings, such as Further Education (FE) colleges, AP Academies and Free Schools.

This provision may be public (funded and provided by the local authority), third sector (not-for-profit or charity) or private. These attributes matter because of their implications for funding and oversight. The provision may be commissioned by the school or the local authority. Some provision may be

[6] https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/eotas-education-otherwise-than-at-school-what-is-it-and-can-i-get-it/

'registered' in that it meets the criteria of an independent education provider and is therefore subject to inspection. But many, if not most, provision is not monitored in this way.[7]

b) Difficulties with data

Even with an agreed definition, it has been difficult to gain an accurate picture of the scale and nature of AEP. Given the broad definition we are using, it is perhaps not surprising that there is little comparable data on some forms of AEP, particularly those of short duration and offered by the third or private sector. However, there are anomalies even with the official data. For example, in Northern Ireland's EOTAS Centres are sometimes grouped together, at other times counted separately – so that the Department of Education (DENI) counts only 16 centres, the Education Authority counts 27.

In addition to being unclear about the comparability of particular kinds of provision in the different countries, there are also discontinuities in age range. While we are primarily interested in secondary phase of schooling, at times the data refer to all-age provision.

A further major gap in the data is any record of how many children and young people experience these different forms of provision.

c) The scope of the analysis

Another major challenge has been knowing how wide the scope of the comparison needs to be. Trying to understand how professionals, parents and pupils respond to the risk or the incidence of school exclusion in different contexts entails not only an awareness of the range of available alternatives, but an assessment of the overall nature of inclusivity within the system as a whole. To what extent are pupils with emotional, social and wellbeing issues generally accommodated within the 'mainstream' education provision? Are some kinds of school more exclusionary than others?

In attempting to map these differences it is important to locate alternative provision within the overall landscape of education provision, including the availability of special schools. The availability of this provision is likely to have a bearing on the proportion of children in mainstream maintained schools who have special needs and the range of options available to parents if their child appears to be at risk of exclusion.

Clearly special schools provide education for children with range of needs (e.g., sensory and physical, communication and cognition), not only those associated with emotional, social and wellbeing challenges. However, the boundaries between these different categories of need are blurred – especially with the increasing diagnoses of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). A recent report[8] on the exclusion of children with special needs in England claimed that special schools are under increasing pressure to take in pupils who are 'pushed

[7] Recent reports on the lack of regulation of AEP in England can be found at https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/CSJ-out-in-the-open.pdf and https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternative-provision-in-local-areas-in-england-a-thematic-review/alternative-provision-in-local-areas-in-england-a-thematic-review

[8] https://schoolsweek.co.uk/send-pupils-pushed-out-of-mainstream-schools-new-data-shows/

out' of mainstream schools. They also report that 40 new special schools are planned in England, of which 65% have autism as the primary focus.

It is also likely that the presence of private provision may have an impact on how parents respond to the risk or incidence of their child's exclusion from school. In addition to the private special schools, many private 'mainstream' schools also claim to offer enhanced opportunities for pupils with special needs, such as autism.

These complexities are further compounded by jurisdictional differences in regulations governing elective home education. Research has shown that parents may remove their children from school, sometimes at the suggestion of the school, in order to avoid them being officially excluded.[9] However, it is not possible to include this dimension because comparable data on the number of children being educated at home are not available. For example, in Wales there is no systematic data collection on elective home education at all.

Method

Data sources

Charting the similarities and differences in the landscape has been an iterative process that has entailed drawing data from multiple sources. At national level, the data have been largely derived from government reports and searchable databases (e.g., in England, *Get Information About Schools*, in Wales, *My Local School*), as well as reviews and research undertaken by government agencies (e.g., Estyn, Ofsted) and third sector organisations (e.g., Centre for Social Justice). However, these sources provide very little data on provision other than schools and units. In order to drill down in more detail, we have compiled inventories of provision in case study local authorities. One of the challenges in home international comparisons is trying to accommodate the different size of the four nations. Northern Ireland only has one 'local authority', so there was no sampling procedure. In Scotland and Wales, it was decided to sample two local authorities, selected because one had a higher and one a lower rate of school exclusion than might be expected given the demographic profile. In the event, three local authorities in Wales were included. Because of its larger size, four English local authorities were included. In these ten local authorities, interviews with LA officers, AEP providers, teachers, parents and pupils have been undertaken, which ask about forms of alternative provision in the area. It is these data that have been used to compile inventories of AEP at local level. Given the complexity and diversity of AEP, we cannot be certain that the inventories capture *all* of provision which is available to professionals, parents, and pupils in the local authority, but we believe they are sufficiently comprehensive to provide a relatively accurate picture of the local, and even the national, landscape of AEP.

Coding

The completed inventories were analysed to identify the nature of the provider and the type of provision. One of the notable differences of our comparison of the different policy regimes in the UK

[9] Staufenberg, J. (2018) Council Chiefs report 27% rise in home educated pupils. Schoolsweek 15th November, [Available at: https://schoolsweek.co.uk/council-chiefs-report-27-rise-in-home-educated-pupils/]

is the varying extent to which the private and third sector is involved in education provision, so we were concerned to find out have far these variations are replicated in AEP. Categorising welfare provision, including education, has become increasingly complicated. As Burchardt *et al*. (2013)[10] note, since the Conservative administration came to power in 1979, there has been successive redrawing of the boundaries between the public and the private, and, in particular, a moving away from a model of provision that is publicly provided and publicly funded. While the provision being discussed here is still publicly-funded, it is provided by a diverse range of non-public providers.Mapping the extent of the shifting of the boundaries is complex, and has been played out differently in the four jurisdictions of the UK, especially since devolution. There is still some merit in a simple public – non-public division, not only because of clarity, but also because similar issues of governance, funding and regulation apply to non-public provision whether it is third sector or private. So, we have undertaken some comparison using this simply binary division. However, it is perhaps more useful to distinguish between non-public providers that are for-profit or not-for profit. We have therefore also classified providers in terms of whether they are public, private or third sector. We were hoping to subdivide third sector providers into charities and other not-for-profit organisations, such as social enterprises, but this level of detail was difficult to ascertain. We have therefore just used the tripartite classification.

We were also keen to examine the 'reach' of the AP provision and the extent to which provision was offered at 'local', 'national' or UK level. Such an analysis may throw light on the extent to which there is some consistency of AEP across local authority boundaries, as well as the extent to which AEP providers operate across national borders. If there is significant cross-border provision, there will be additional issues of accountability and flows of funding from one system to another.

We also developed a classification system to code the type of AEP that was available. Several systems were trialled, but the most useful was simply based on the nature of the activity being offered (Table 1).

Table 1: Classification of types of AEP

Type of AEP	*Includes….*
Core	All-round (usually full-time) provision, such as offered in PRUs
Arts-based	Provision based on creative experiences, (e.g. music, drama or film)
Physical activity	Sports, boot-camps, military training
Therapy	Counselling, mindfulness, mentoring, nurturing approaches
Tutoring	Tuition in school subjects
Vocational	Work-focused experience and qualifications, e.g. in construction
Nature-based	Outdoors education, involving animals or plants

[10] Burchardt, T. (2013). Re-visiting the conceptual framework for public/private boundaries in welfare. *Social Policy in a Cold Climate Research Note*, *2*.

Alternative Education Provision in the four countries of the UK

England

The overall education landscape

'Mainstream' secondary school provision

England is not only by far the largest of the four jurisdictions, it is also the most complicated in terms of the range of education provision. Successive reforms have led to a widespread diversification of school types, particularly at secondary phase. England still has a small number (163) of traditional fully selective state-maintained grammar schools, as well as 'community schools', 'foundation' and 'voluntary' schools (which often have a faith affiliation), as well as 'academies' and 'free schools' which are run by not-for-profit trusts and operate independently of the local authority. The admissions processes of academies and free schools are complex and vary – they may select pupils on the basis of 'aptitude', although they must not allow for more than 10% of their total intake to be selected on this basis. Of all the countries in the UK, England also has the highest proportion of pupils attending private schools – around 7% overall and significantly higher at secondary school level and in some authorities.

*'Special' and alternative provisio*n

Data from 2022/2023[11] reveals that England has 1022 state-funded special schools and 56 non-maintained special schools. There are 338 PRUs which are maintained by local authorities, and a growing number of Alternative Provision Academies (currently 106) and Alternative Provision Free Schools (currently 59). In 2022, the Department for Education announced that it would approve up to 60 special and AP free schools to open from September 2025, creating around 4,500 places. In addition, there are 277 schools with a SEN unit, and a further 1125 with 'resourced provision'.

There are also 613 private (non-maintained) special schools in England, of which 479 offer special provision for secondary school-age pupils with 'emotional and behavioural difficulties', 'social interaction/language difficulties' and 'learning difficulties'.

Alternative Education Provision at the local level

The inventory that was compiled on the basis of interviews with local authority staff and education professionals in the four LAs reveals a complex pattern of AEP. A total of 128 different AEP providers were identified as being used within the local authorities, with relatively little variation between local authorities which leads us to be relatively confident that these authorities can be seen as representative of others in England. As Table 2 indicates, most AEP is offered by local providers, such as FE colleges, football clubs and farm trusts. There is a small, but significant presence, of UK-wide and national providers, most of which are offering tutoring provision.

Table 2: Reach of AEP provider

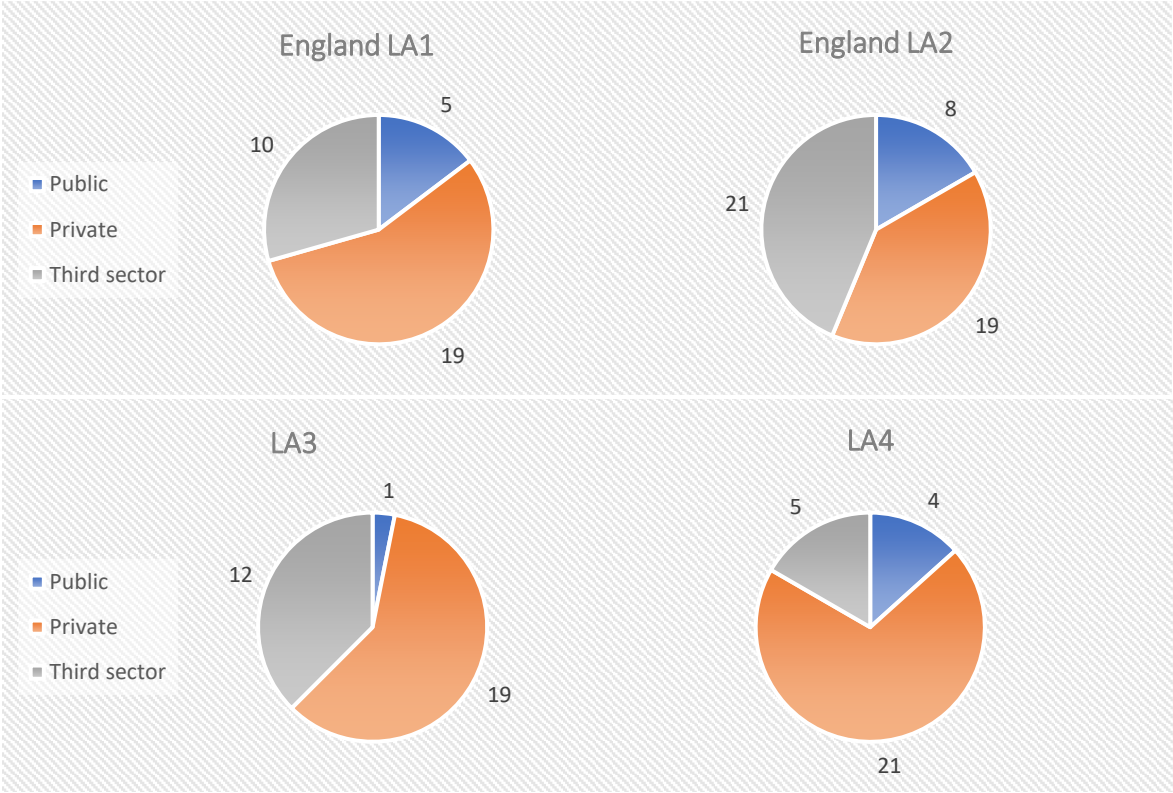
	LA1	LA2	LA3	LA4
UK-wide	1	0	0	0

[11] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics

England	2	5	0	6
Local	32	43	32	24
Total	35	48	32	30

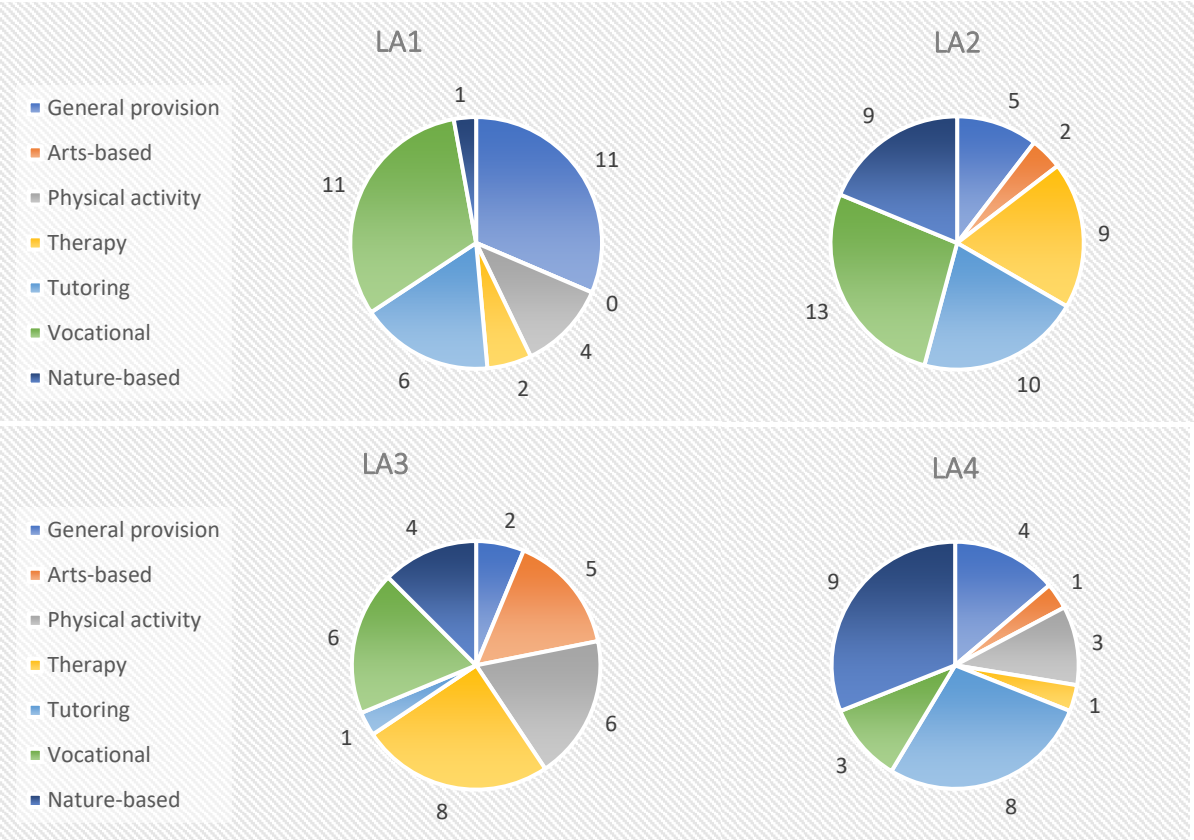
Although there is variation between the four local authorities in terms of the relative presence of public, private and third sector provision – in every local authority, it is the private sector which is the largest provider. In LA4, the private sector provides over two thirds of AEP (Figure 2). In every local authority, the public sector accounts for the smallest number of providers.

Figure 2: Sector of provision in the four case study LAs in England



There is similar diversity in terms of the type of AEP which is available to schools (Figure 3). While all of the LAs have similar levels of diversity, there are differences in terms of the type of AEP available. Differences which are likely to reflect the local context. LA4 stands out from the other LAs in because the large amount of AEP which is 'nature-based'. There are nine providers of AEP involving work with animals, and horses in particular. With the exception of LA3, there are significant amounts of tutoring. There is also a large presence of vocational provision in LAs 1, 2 and 3. There is relatively few providers of AEP offering therapeutic approaches, such as counselling or mindfulness.

Figure 3: Type of AEP available in the four case study LAs in England



Although there are clearly differences between the LAs in terms of the type of AEP providers operating in the area, there overall level of diversity is similar, and the dominance of private sector providers (albeit to a different degree) is also a consistent feature of the English LAs. This leads us to have some confidence that the profiles of these LAs can be extrapolated to give an indication of the landscape of AEP at the national level.

Northern Ireland

The overall education landscape

'Mainstream' secondary school provision

Northern Ireland's education landscape reflects the complex history of the jurisdiction. Churches play a significant role in school governance. The Catholic Church owns and manages maintained and Catholic voluntary schools which enroll 47% of pupils, the majority of whom are themselves Catholic. Most, but not all, controlled and voluntary schools have Protestant Church representation on their Boards of Governors and enrol 45% of pupils: the pupils in these schools comprise 62% Protestant, 30% 'Other' and 8% Catholic. There is a small, but growing, sector of religiously integrated schools, currently enrolling 8% of pupils. There is also a small sector of Irish Medium Education schools where the curriculum is taught through the Irish language, currently enrolling about 2% of pupils. All these school receive public funding, in the vast majority of cases covering all recurrent and capital funding.

Academic selection still operates, with nearly one third of secondary schools (66/192) being classified as 'grammar schools' (though as these cater for around 40% of pupils, they are likely to be less academically selective than their counterparts in England which typically cater for only between 10-15% of pupils in their area).[12] Of all the countries considered here, Northern Ireland has the lowest proportion of pupils in private schools – around 1%.[13]

*'Special' and alternative provisio*n

There are 39 'special schools' in Northern Ireland. 12% of pupils are deemed to have special educational needs (SEN) at Stage 1-2, and 6% have statements of SEN. There is one private school (Camphill Community Glencraig)[14] offering specialist provision for children with a range of emotional, behavioural and language difficulties.

In addition, there are 27 EOTAS centres – all of which are run or overseen by the education authority in the three localities. These provide education for pupils who have been expelled from school or have 'otherwise disengaged' from their school.[15] They are generally seen to be temporary placements, and pupils attend them until they: achieve a new school place; are prepared for re-entry to an existing school place; or reach compulsory school leaving age. The EANI emphasises that this provision 'is not a duplication of mainstream education. It is an educational provision to meet specific, identified pupil needs and is not a standalone alternative.'

The overwhelming majority of students in the EOTAS centres are dual-registered, commonly attending the centre for two days per week and spending the remainder of the week in school. Of the 474 pupils registered as attending a centre in 2021-22, only 28 attended full-time.

Pupils may have longer term placements where the EOTAS Centre delivers the curriculum and supports the pupils in addressing their social, behavioural emotional and wellbeing (SBEW) difficulties, or they may be dual registered, whereby they attend the Centre on a short-term basis in order to address their SBEW needs. Pupils are referred to the EOTAS Centre by their school or as an outcome of an assessment by an educational psychologist. Parents have to give written consent before the referral can take place. The EANI seek to reassure parents that these placements will not have an adverse effect on their child's education:[16]

All the EOTAS Centres are under the control of the three EANI localities. The only locality with diversity of provision is Locality 3, which has two registered charities (Newstart and Pathways) and one private provider (Lagan Valley). It should also be noted that one of the LA ones (Woodlands) is located within a juvenile justice centre.

[12] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/School%20Census%20Key%20Statistics%20202122.pdf
[13] See https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/independent-schools
[14] https://www.glencraig.org.uk/
[15] https://www.eani.org.uk/services/post-primary-behaviour-support-provisions/eotas-placements-for-pupils
[16] https://www.eani.org.uk/services/post-primary-behaviour-support-provisions/frequently-asked-questions

It is difficult ascertain with any precision the strategies these centres employ to address the pupils' SBEW needs, but it appears to be a combination of academic, therapeutic and vocational interventions.

Alternative Education Provision at the local level

To some extent it makes no sense to distinguish between education provision at jurisdiction or national level because there is only one education authority (EA) in Northern Ireland, albeit divided into three localities all of which we consider here. For the sake of symmetry in the comparison, we are replicating the tables and charts for each of the countries.

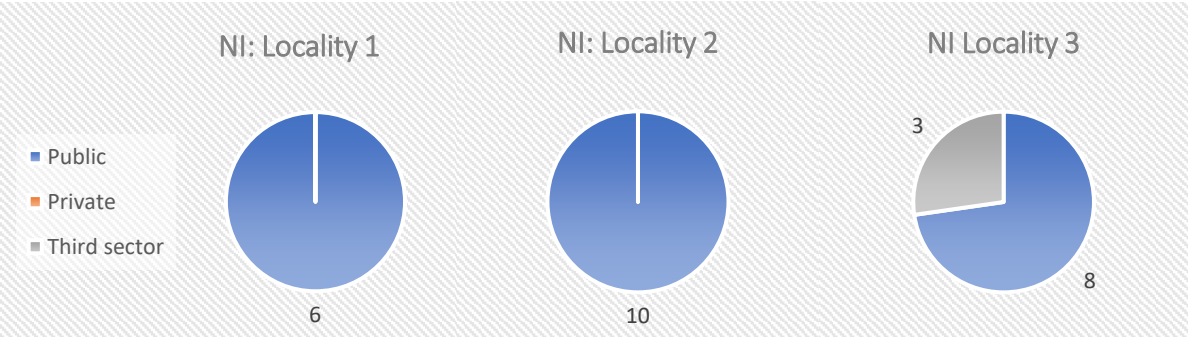
The only form of AEP in the country is provided by the EOTAS centres – a picture which is very different from that of England, Scotland and Wales. The 27 EOTAS centres *are* the alternative provision within the country (Table 3).

Table 3: Reach of AEP provider

	Locality 1	Locality 2	Locality 3
UK-wide	0	0	0
Northern Ireland	0	0	0
Local	6	10	11
Total	6	10	11

If we consider the which sector, public, private or third sector, provides the AEP, we can see that, with the exception of Locality 3, all of the EOTAs are publicly funded and provided (Figure 4). Three of the EOTAS centres in Locality 3 are run by the EA in conjunction with third sector 'community-based' providers.

Figure 4: Sector of provision in Northern Ireland localities



There is a similar uniformity in the type of AEP which is available, so we have not provided visual representation. All of the EOTAS Centres offer a 'general' curriculum, supplemented by a range of behavioural support. With the exception of provision focused on KS3 or KS$, there appears to be little variation at locality level.

Scotland

The overall education landscape

'Mainstream' secondary school provision

Unlike Northern Ireland, Scotland has no selective admissions into the 358 secondary schools. In terms of faith affiliations, there are 54 Roman Catholic secondary schools but the overwhelming majority (85%) are non-denominational. Eighteen schools have a Gaelic language unit. Scotland has a sizeable private school sector, with 71 secondary schools, accounting for 4% of the pupil population.

*'Special' and alternative provisio*n

There are currently 107 special schools.[17] While Scotland has no PRUs, nearly half of the secondary schools (173/360) have an 'integrated special unit' which 'caters for children and young people in mainstream education who, because of their additional support needs, at times require individualised or small group specialist teaching.'[18] In addition, some local authorities have implemented what they refer to as 'enhanced nurture bases'. For example, Glasgow has 14 Nurture Bases located in secondary schools.[19] Pupils are referred to nurture bases with the consent of parents and with tailored plans for their reintegration into the mainstream classes. It is not anticipated that pupils will remain in a nurture base for more than four terms.[20]

There are 21 private (non-maintained) schools which offer special provision for secondary school-age pupils with 'emotional and behavioural difficulties', 'social interaction/language difficulties' and 'learning difficulties'.

Alternative Education Provision at the local level

It is difficult to make comparisons in terms of numbers of providers, because local authorities vary in size, but there appear to be far fewer providers of AEP in the two Scottish local authorities than in the equivalent English authorities. And while the majority of providers are 'local', a significant proportion operate across Scotland as a whole, and a minority operate across the UK (Table 4).

Table 4: Reach of AEP provider

	LA1	LA2
UK-wide	2	5
Scotland	2	10
Local	19	8
Total	23	23

[17] https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/

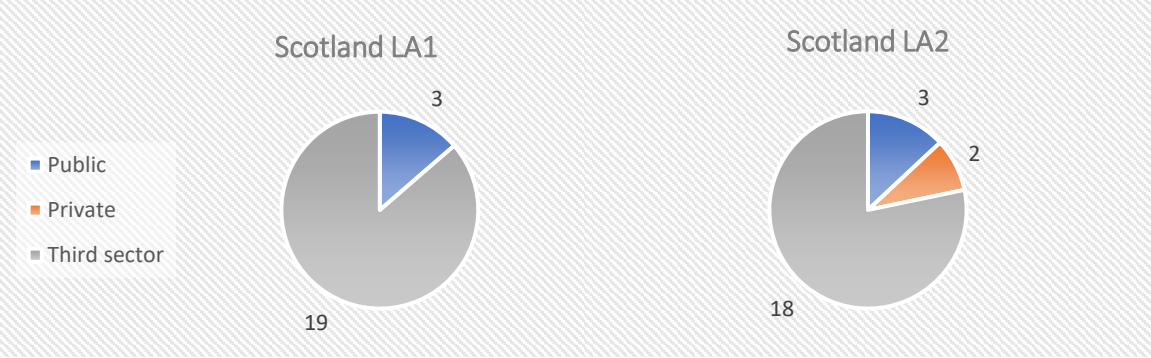
[18] https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/my-school/education-glossary/#:~:text=An%20integrated%20special%20unit%20caters,or%20small%20group%20specialist%20teaching.

[19] https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/glowblogs/glasgowpsychologicalservice/nurture/

[20] https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/gc/public/hillheadhigh/uploads/sites/7656/2017/12/Secondary-Nurture-Guidelines.pdf

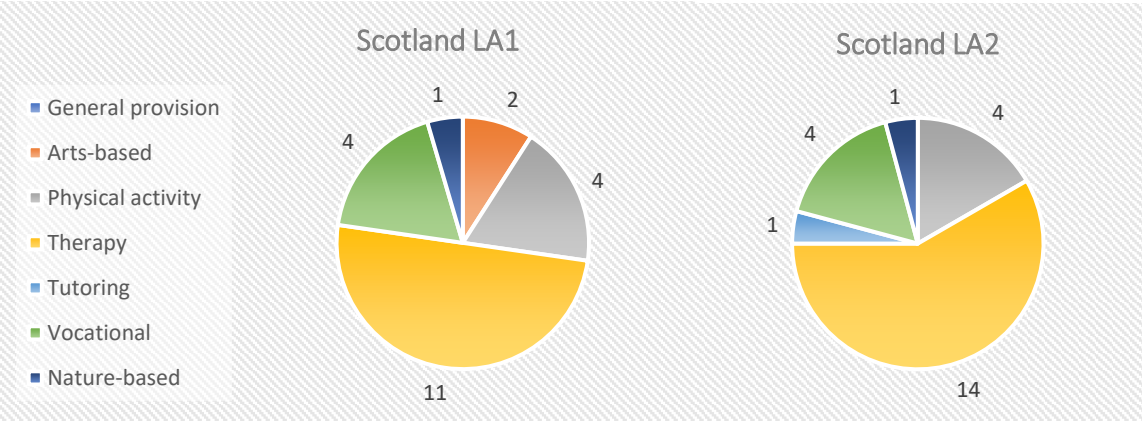
The profile of provider is very different from that in England or Northern Ireland. The vast majority of AP providers are from the third sector. There is relatively difference between the local authorities, with the majority of AEP being provided by third sector organisations (Figure 5), with very little private or public sector provision being offered outside of mainstream provision. Again, though, we have no data on what proportions of children and young people attend these different types of AEP.

Figure 5: Sector of provision in the two case study LAs in Scotland



There also appears to be relatively little difference in terms of the type of AEP that is available (Figure 6). The profile of the two LAs' type of AEP is remarkably similar. In both LAs, the provision largely entails different types of counselling (especially mentoring) and a range of vocational options. Unlike England, there appears to be a marked absence of tutoring.

Figure 6: Types of AEP available in the two case study LAs in Scotland



In terms of the type of provider, the profile is similar across both LAs, which again leads us to have some confidence that these authorities can be seen as indicative of Scottish authorities as a whole, although there may be greater variation among rural authorities.

Wales

The overall education landscape

'Mainstream' secondary school provision

Wales, like Scotland, has no academic selection on entry to secondary school in the maintained sector. There is relatively little diversification of schools, with the exception of faith schools (Roman Catholic and Church in Wales) which cater for around 15% of pupils and Welsh Medium Schools, which cater for 24% of pupils.[21] Like Northern Ireland, it also has a much smaller private sector than Scotland, and especially England. There are only 28 'mainstream' private schools in Wales which education around 2% of pupils.

*'Special' and alternative provisio*n

There are 39 special schools in Wales catering for a range of needs, and 22 Pupil Referral Units which cater for 850 pupils. We know that there are schools with units attached, but there does not appear to be a central database of these.

While the latest available figures indicate that 1785 pupils are being educated 'other than at school', [22] data on various forms and usage of EOTAS are hard to obtain. The most recent data[5] show that the number of pupils receiving EOTAS has risen almost every year over the past six years.[23] The Children's Commissioner has expressed concern about the use of maintained unregistered units which generally comprised 'community-based centres where pupils attend for 'home tuition'. The majority of local authorities maintain unregistered PRUs and tuition centres to provide education for up to 25 hours a week.

Alternative Education Provision at the local level

Forty-five different providers of AEP were identified by LA officers, teachers, parents and pupils in the three case study LAs as being used by the local authority or school Welsh LAs were identified – four of which were used by more than one LA. As with the other jurisdictions, most AEP providers operated at the local level (Table 5). There are fewer Wales-wide AEP providers though than those that operate across national borders – and especially across England and Wales. This is perhaps not surprising given that Welsh education was largely governed by England prior to parliamentary devolution.

Table 5: Reach of AEP provider

	LA1	LA2	LA3
UK-wide (or England & Wales)	7	2	1
Wales	4	2	1
Local	10	12	6
Total	21	16	8

In terms of type of provider (Figure 7), there is significant variation across the three LAs, especially in the presence of the private sector, which accounts for nearly half of the providers in LA1, but is entirely absent in LA3. It should be noted that, as in England, most of the private provision takes the form of

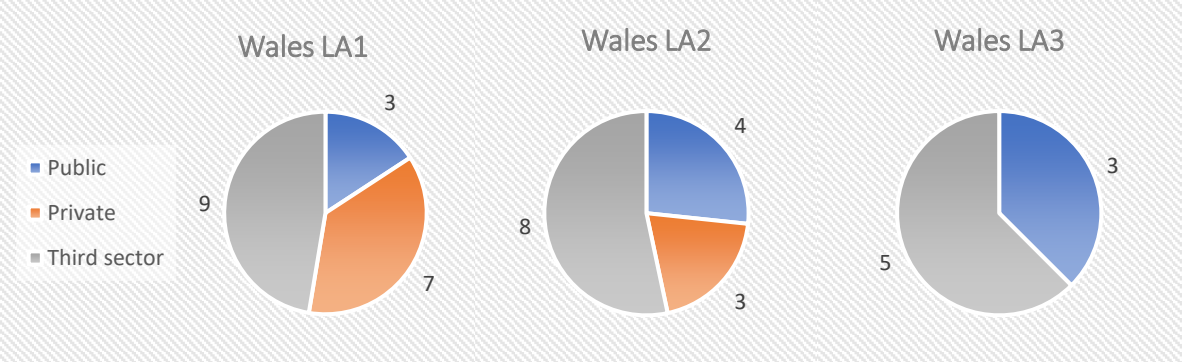
[21] https://www.gov.wales/schools-census-results-april-2021-html

[22] https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Educated-Other-Than-At-School/eotas-by-la-year-gender

[23]https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s95563/EOTAS%2008%20Childrens%20Commissioner%20for%20Wales.pdf

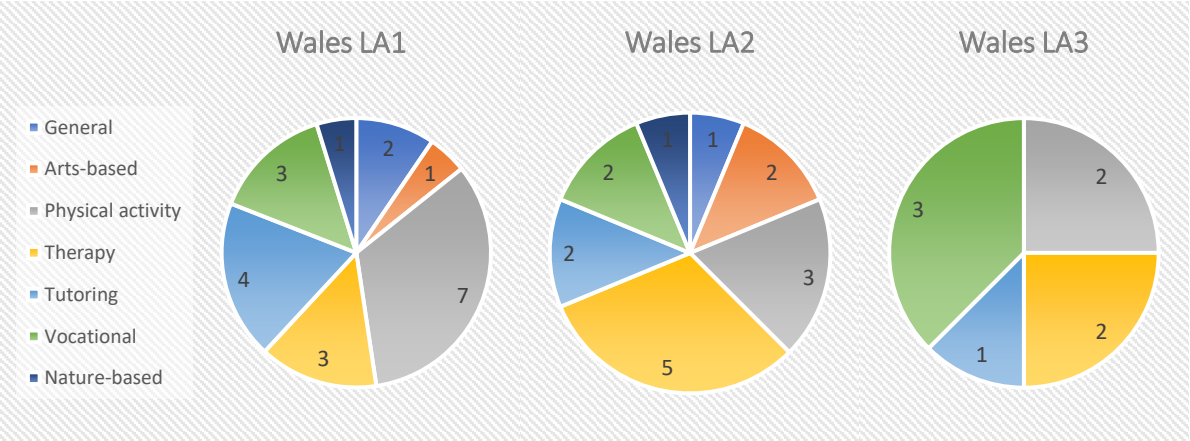
tutoring and three of the private providers are not Wales-based and operate from England. Despite these differences, the third sector is clearly the most significant provider of AEP in these LAs.

Figure 7: Sector of provision in the three case study LAs in Wales



As Figure 8 shows, there is a wide variety of types of AEP available – especially in LAs 1 and 2. LA3 is significantly smaller than LAs 1 and 2, which may account for the lower number of providers and less diversity. Physical activity-based AEP has a strong presence in each of the LAs. Games- and military-based AEP providers were identified more than once. Other forms of AEP though are represented – therapeutic interventions, tutoring, and vocational courses.

Figure 8: Types of AEP available in the three case study LAs in Wales



Again, while each of the LAs have some variation in the number and diversity of AEP providers, there are some marked similarities. There is, in general, a 'mixed economy' in terms of sector of provider, and, in terms of type of provision, a strong presence of sports-based provision. There is no reason to suppose these profiles are that dissimilar to those of AEP providers in other Welsh LAs.

Similarities and differences in AEP across the four nations

The presence of 'special' provision at system level

As we argued earlier, levels of school exclusion and strategies to reduce school exclusion will be related to the nature of inclusivity within the system as a whole. To what extent are pupils with the kind of emotional, social and wellbeing issues that can lead to exclusion generally accommodated within the 'mainstream' education provision in the first place?

In attempting to map these differences it is important to locate alternative provision within the overall landscape of education provision, including the availability of special schools. The availability of this provision is likely to have a bearing on the proportion of children in mainstream maintained schools who have special needs and the range of options available to parents if their child appears to be at risk of exclusion. While special schools provide education for children with range of needs (e.g., sensory and physical, communication and cognition), and not only those associated with emotional, social and wellbeing challenges, the boundaries between these different categories of need are blurred – especially with the increasing diagnoses of ADHD and ASD. We have therefore tried to compare the proportion of pupils in special schools in each of the four nations (Table 6).

Table 6: Schools, PRUs and EOTAS Centres

	Special schools			*PRUs/EOTAS centres*		
	Schools	*Pupils*	*% pupils*	*PRUs etc.*	*Pupils*	*% pupils*
England	1078	145993	1.6	338	11684	0.13
NI	39	6653	1.8	16	474	0.01
Scotland	107	7742	1.1	0	0	0
Wales	39	5473	1.1	22	850	0.17

The data in Table 6 are not without problems, because they do not include units within mainstream schools. Although England provide data on 'resourced' units, Wales does not, nor does Scotland appear to collect data centrally on the number of schools with 'nurture' units or their equivalent. Even if these data were available, we know that schools put in place a range of unofficial spaces in which to educate those students who have been excluded from the mainstream classroom.[24]

However, even with these caveats, there are some interesting contrasts. England and Northern Ireland have significantly more pupils in special schools than Scotland and Wales. Given that the distribution of special need is likely to be broadly similar across the four nations, it can be reasonably assumed that there are more pupils with special needs in the mainstream schools in Scotland and Wales – which may have a bearing on exclusion rates and/or use of AEP.

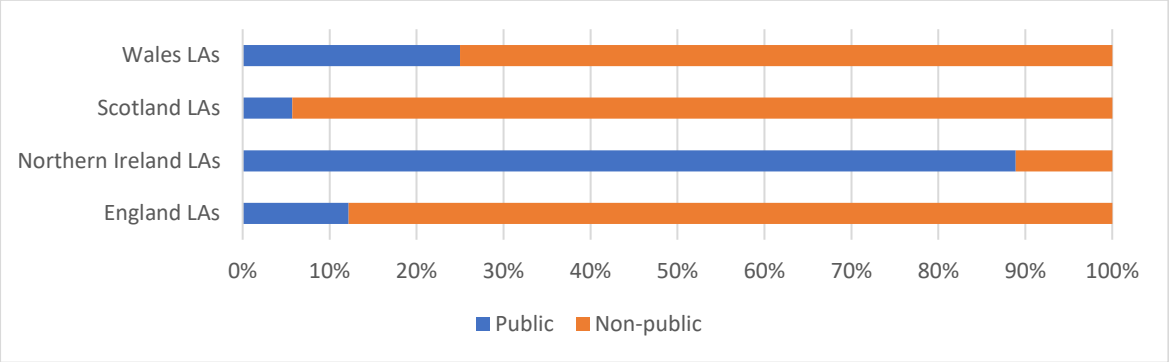
In terms of AEP, as discussed in the last section, there are enough similarities between the local authorities within each country to indicate to us that we can draw some inferences about the nature of AEP at the national level. We have, therefore, extrapolated from the local authority totals to give an indication of the 'national' landscape within each of the four countries.

[24] Power, S., & Taylor, C. (2020). Not in the classroom, but still on the register: hidden forms of school exclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *24*(8), 867-881.

Sector of AEP provider

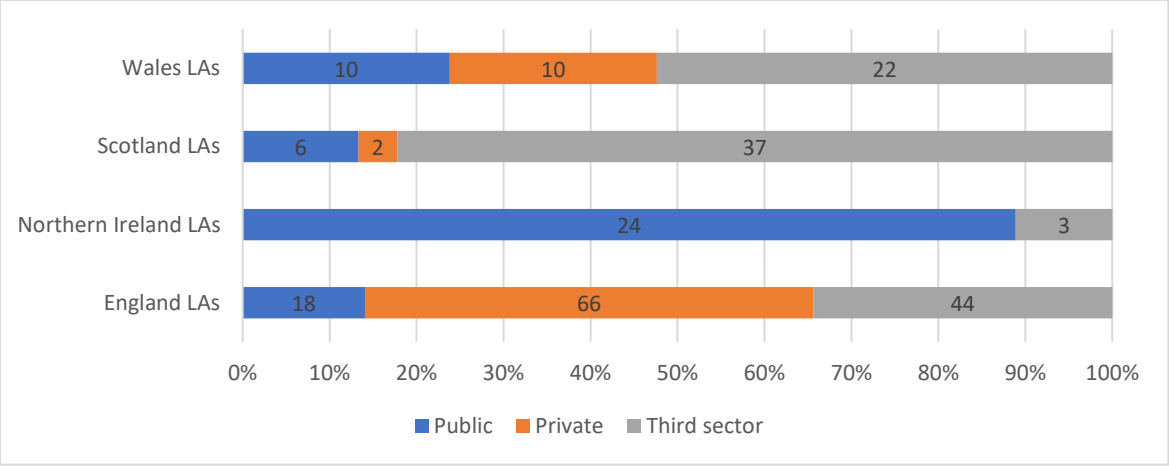
As we noted in the Methods section, there is still some merit in classifying provision in terms of a simple binary publicly-funded public provision and publicly-funded non-public provision, not only in terms of clarity but in terms of the outflow of funding from the public sector and issues of accountability, governance, and regulation. Such a simple division (Figure 9) clearly illustrates the distinctive nature of AEP in Northern Ireland and the extensive amount of non-public provision elsewhere. However, in some ways the simple binary distinction is not very illuminating. For example, the low proportion of public AEP providers in Scotland may be attributed to the incorporation of provision for 'troubled' students within the units embedded within the public 'mainstream' schools.

Figure 9: Relative number of public – non-public AEP providers (LA totals)



A more nuanced representation of who provides AEP in the local authorities is provided by the tripartite distinction between public, third sector and private (Figure 10). This reveals a very different picture. There appears to be a spectrum of privatisation, with England having the most private AEP providers (accounting for over half of all providers), and Northern Ireland the least (having no private AEP providers). Although fewer than a quarter of AEP providers in the Welsh LAs are 'private', its profile is closer to that of England than Scotland, which probably reflects the history of England's control over the Welsh education system.

Figure 10: Sector of AEP provider (% and number)

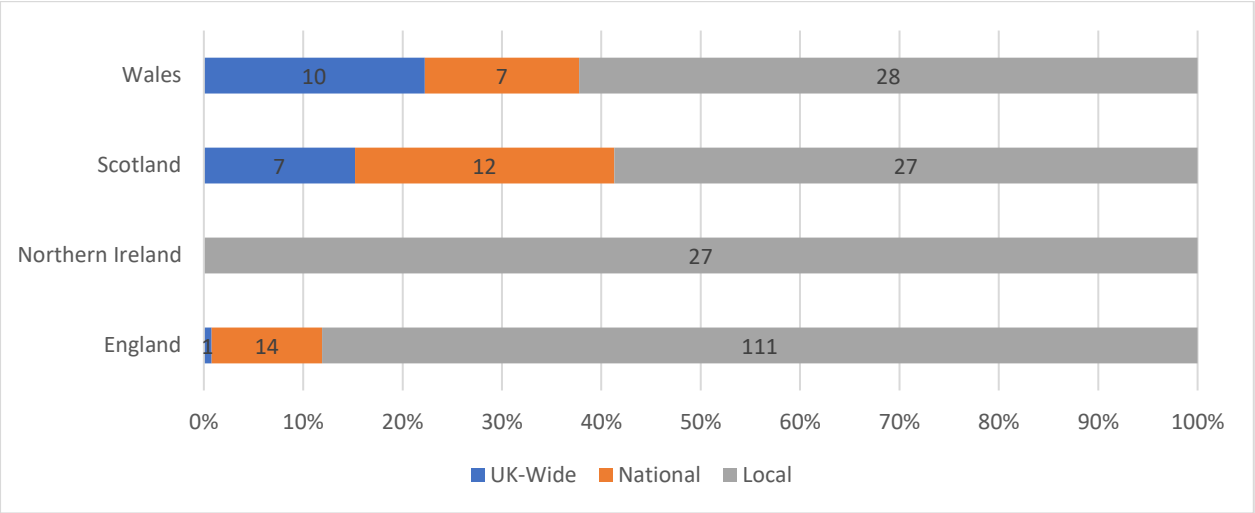


Also of interest is the significant number of third sector providers – which account for 80% of providers operating in the Scottish local authorities, half of those in the Welsh local authorities and one third of those in the English local authorities.

Reach of AEP provider

We were interested in ascertaining the extent to which the providers of AEP operate in local, national or UK-wide contexts. Given the high proportion of non-public providers offering AEP, it is possible that many of them are unconstrained by national borders. The presence of AEP providers that operate at national and UK level may also provide some indications about the consistency of provision available to schools and students. There are also issues of finance. Given the public funding of these non-public providers, any significant cross-border provision may entail transfer of funds – transfers which usually involve a loss of funding to the smaller countries in the UK.

Figure 11: Reach of AEP provider (% and number)



As we can see from Figure 11, only a minority of AEP providers operate across national borders. Wales has the most UK-wide (though usually 'England and Wales') providers – again probably reflecting its recent control by England. Scotland has the most providers that operate at the national level – possibly reflecting its longstanding control of its own education system and larger number of civil society organisations.[25] Overall, though, AEP providers appear to operate at the local level. This is inevitable in Northern Ireland, where there is only one local authority and nearly all provision is publicly provided. But local providers account for most provision in the English LAs (accounting for nearly 90%) and the Welsh LAs (65%). Even in Scotland, they account for nearly 50% of AEP provision.

Types of AEP provision

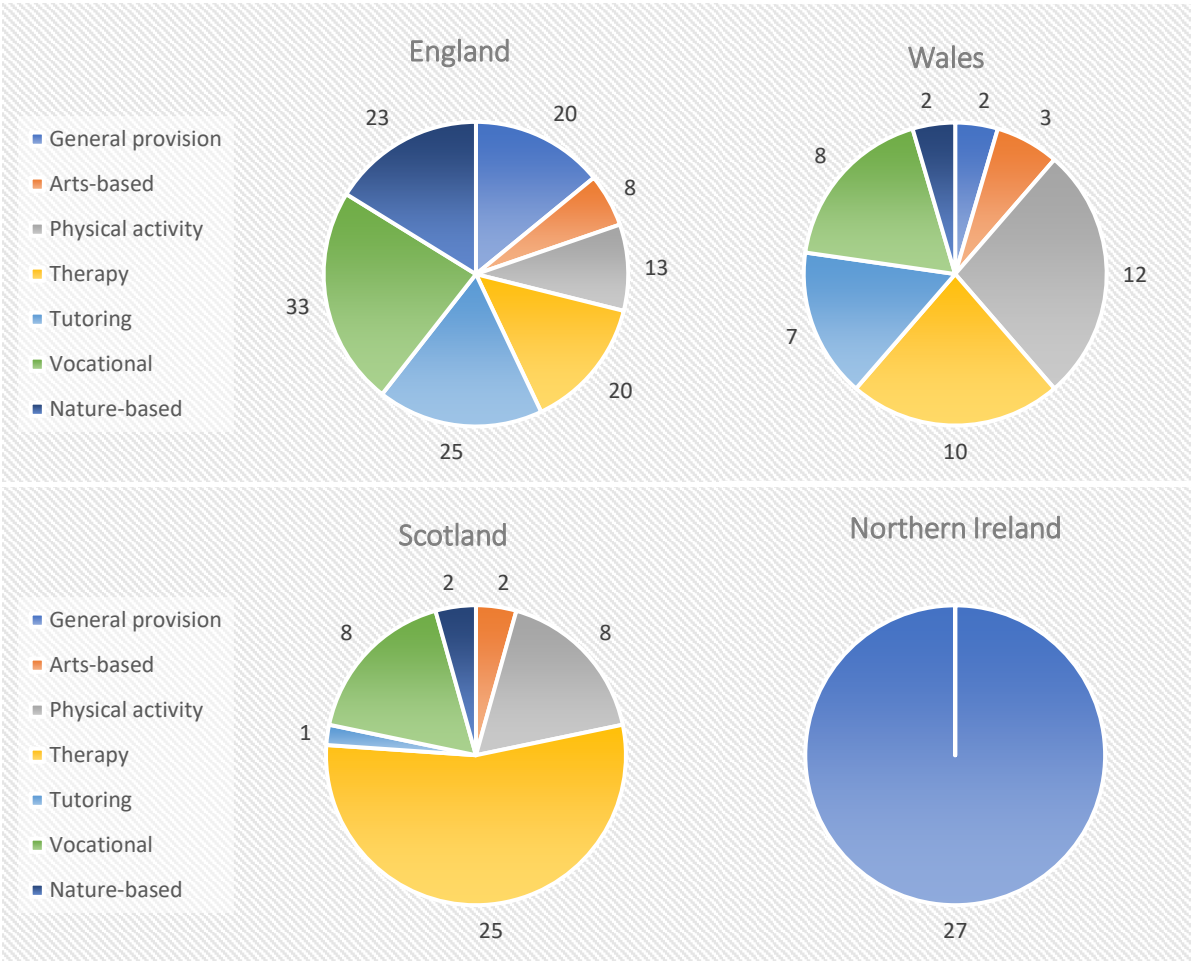
One of the most interesting findings of this 'home international' comparison is the extent and nature of the diversity of types of AEP provision. Aside from Northern Ireland, with its uniform, largely publicly provided, AEP, there are wide variations in the level of diversity (Figure 12). As we saw in the last section, there is not just diversity in the combined LAs but between LAs in England. Overall, England and Wales have the most diversity – with a wide range of types of provision. Scotland has fewer types

[25] Scotland has the highest density of civil society organisations in the UK. Wales has the lowest density. See https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2021/profile/where-are-voluntary-organisations-based/#/

and Northern Ireland has no diversity of type of AEP (or at least no organisationally designated differences).

There are some interesting variations not just in the level of diversity but in the kind of AEP available. Scotland has no 'general' provision in the case study LAs – this is partly because it has no designated equivalents to PRUs or EOTAS centres. Its 'general' provision is offered in units within mainstream schools, and these are not visible in this analysis. In terms of other differences, of the four nations, the English LAs have the largest proportion of providers offering tutoring. The Scottish LAs have by far the highest proportion of providers offering various forms of 'therapeutic' AEP, especially mentoring and counselling – a form of AEP which is relatively under-represented in England. The Welsh LAs have the largest proportion of providers offering AEP based on forms of physical activity, such as rugby and military training. Quite why this should be so is unclear, but may reflect cultural differences. Nature-based provision is available in England, Scotland and Wales. Vocational AEP is also well represented in these three countries.

Figure 12: Types of AEP provision



Conclusions

In the previous sections we have charted the profile of AEP at the local level in ten authorities in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and extrapolated from these profiles to gain a comparative picture of what the landscape of AEP at the national level might look like. This

comparison has revealed significant differences in the nature of such provision. We now return to the two overarching research questions:

- *What do national-level variations in the nature and scale of AEP tells us about the political economies of education in each of the four jurisdictions?*

- *What are the implications of these variations for levels of school exclusions in the UK?*

As previously stated, there is no reliable source of data on provision at system level, so our conclusions can only be tentative. Nevertheless, the data we do have point to some interesting differences and, most of all, the need for further research.

AEP and the political economies of education in the UK

This 'home international' comparison of AEP has indicated that there are significant differences in the landscape of provision – differences that relate to the wider political economies of education in the four nations of the UK.

England's landscape of AEP reflects the characteristics the country's education system as a whole and the ideological preference for quasi-market mechanisms based on diversity and choice – albeit here the choice is generally exercised by the school rather than the parent. In the four English LAs considered here, AEP is highly diversified, with extensive amounts of provision being offered by private AEP providers. Of particular note, is the significant amount of AEP which provides tutoring, perhaps reflecting England's emphasis on high stakes testing.

Scotland's landscape of AEP reflects the Scottish Government's explicit commitment to inclusive education. There is an absence of 'general' AEP for pupils because such provision takes place within units operating within mainstream schools. In terms of AEP provided outwith schools, this is largely offered by third sector organisations, many of them operating at national level, reflecting Scotland's greater density of civil society organisations.

Wales' landscape of AEP appears to bear the legacy of its historic control by England, alongside the Welsh Government's commitment to retaining public provision. So, AEP provision by public providers is stronger than in England, but Wales has more of a 'market' of AEP providers with greater diversity of provision and a higher number of private providers than Scotland. Wales also has the highest proportion of providers operating from outside its borders.

Northern Ireland's landscape of AEP is the most distinctive of all, with little evidence of a 'market' in AEP. Provision is almost entirely publicly provided, with minimal third sector involvement and relatively little diversity of institutional form or type. The explanation for the enduring dominance of public provision in Northern Ireland can only be speculative, but may be attributed to successive periods of where the country has had no devolved government due to difficulties with the political power-sharing arrangements.

Implications for levels of school exclusions in the UK

Perhaps the most important question is whether and how variations in the landscape of AEP affect rates of school exclusion. Does the availability of AEP outwith the mainstream classroom facilitate keeping 'troubled' students on the register, or does it encourage them to be placed elsewhere? There are no simple answers to these questions, not least because there will be variations in when and how AEP is used – whether it is to reduce behaviours that may lead to exclusion or to accommodate pupils whose continued presence in the classroom is untenable.

However, if we are to take official school exclusion rates at face value, it would appear that the availability of diverse types of AEP does *not* reduce school exclusions. England has the highest rates of school exclusion and, on the basis of this analysis, the highest number and greatest diversity of AEP providers. Scotland, has the lowest rates of school exclusions, and relatively low numbers of AEP providers. It certainly does not appear to have the kind of marketised AEP that is present in England. Wales' exclusion rates may also support this hypothesis – as its rates of exclusion lie between those of England and Scotland, and its AEP landscape is less diverse and marketised than England's, but more so than Scotland's. It is difficult to account for Northern Ireland's exclusion rates with this explanation, because the landscape of AEP is so distinctive.

It might also be speculated that not only does an extensive array of AEP *not* reduce exclusions, it may even *contribute* to exclusion rates. In short, it may be that, in the case of AEP, supply creates its own demand.

If there were evidence that AEP successfully reduced levels of exclusion by offering interventions which enabled 'troubled' pupils to remain in schools, or which successfully reintegrated these temporarily-removed pupils back into the mainstream school, it might be possible to counter this argument. However, there is no evidence of this kind – and certainly not at system, authority, or even institutional level.

This is not to say that individuals have not benefited from such provision. Providers often evidence their successes through narratives of blighted school careers being 'turned around'. But without independent systematic evidence, we just do not know how representative these individual narratives of success are.

In addition, the deregulated nature of much AEP makes it difficult to gauge the efficacy of these various interventions on the at-risk or excluded pupils. This does not mean, though, that there may not be some benefits for the schools and classmates they leave behind.

The need for evidence

While this report has highlighted some significant differences in the nature of AEP in the four jurisdictions of the UK, there are some startling omissions. We do not know, for instance, how many pupils are using these different providers. While publicly funded and publicly provided AEP, which usually takes the form of PRUs, EOTAS Centres and further education colleges, will be required to keep records of numbers of students and attendance levels, this is unlikely to be the case for private and third sector providers. So we simply do not know how many pupils are placed in AEP, for how much of their school time, for what duration, and for what purpose.

In terms of funding, much of the AEP is commissioned by schools, so we have no idea how much funding is flowing from the public purse to these businesses, social enterprises and charities. We know

students with social, emotional and wellbeing issues are disproportionately present in schools serving disadvantaged communities. We also know that, despite extra funding determined by rates of eligibility for free school meals, these schools often have the fewest resources. Indeed, there is some evidence that in England, the new funding formula privileges the more affluent schools.[26] It is likely that school-level commissioning of AEP is likely to place significant financial burdens on these schools.

Perhaps most importantly, we have no systemic evidence at how effective they are – either at reducing exclusions or providing the young people with worthwhile educative experiences.

[26] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/02/funding-for-deprived-schools-in-england-has-shifted-to-wealthy-areas-study-finds