Department for Education

# The back on track alternative provision pilots

## Final report

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National Foundation for Educational Research

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# Executive Summary

## The Back on Track alternative provision pilots: Final report

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## Introduction

This report sets out the findings from research into the Back on Track alternative provision pilots. These projects stemmed from a commitment in the 2008 White Paper, *Back on Track: A strategy for modernising alternative provision for young people* (DCSF, 2008), to transform the quality of alternative education for those who are excluded from, or who for some other reason are unable to attend school. As part of the Back on Track agenda, £26.5 million was allocated to fund 12 innovative pilot projects to develop best practice and encourage greater diversity in alternative provision. The pilot programme commenced in April 2009 and funding, the majority of which was ringfenced for capital development, ceased in April 2011. During this time, significant economic and political changes occurred that impacted on the contexts in which the pilots operated.

### Scope of the research

The overarching aim of this research was to develop insights from the 12 specifically funded projects as part of the Back on Track pilot programme to investigate what can work in alternative provision, how and for whom, in order to advance understandings and inform future policy and practice. To achieve this, the study focused on developing knowledge through the varying experiences of the Back on Track pilots in relation to:

> ➢ the structure, content and operation of the alternative provision pilot projects

> ➢ the key ingredients of delivery that lead to effective alternative provision in the pilot projects

> ➢ the outcomes, impacts and achievements of the alternative provision pilot projects.

- The research was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) and carried out by a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

- The report's findings are based on qualitative information derived from case-study visits carried out between autumn 2009 and spring 2012 involving individual, face-to-face, group and telephone interviews with pilot project staff (operational and strategic level); school/pupil referral unit (PRU) staff; local authority staff (operational and strategic); young people; parents/carers; and others, including other service providers and partners.

## Conclusions

- The Back on Track pilot programme encompassed a variety of approaches to improving alternative provision involving PRUs, private providers, third sector providers, social enterprises, local authorities, schools and strategic partnerships. Pilots operated along a continuum with some working directly with a small, tightly defined group of learners, some working with broader groups of young people across one or more settings, whilst others had local authority-wide and strategic goals.

- Capital investment through Back on Track has led to the majority of pilots operating in, and through, a wide range of newly built and refurbished settings including PRUs, schools, youth centres, farms, retail and catering establishments, college, training and workplace environments.

- Numerous combinations of academic, vocational, therapeutic, social, emotional, personal and behavioural curriculum content and activities have been delivered to young people with a range of multiple and complex needs in part-time temporary and time-limited contexts as well as permanent, full-time comprehensive provision.

- There are variations in the extent to which the different projects have 'piloted' new and innovative approaches to alternative provision as opposed to continuing and expanding existing forms and formats of provision. There are also varying degrees of success in terms of delivering stated outcomes, and varied experiences in relation to sustainability and legacy.

- There is considerable variation in the timeframes required to embed the necessary developments and changes that may underpin future outcomes and achievements, many of which were not fully observed within the duration of this research.

- A combination of accountability and monitoring approaches and systems is required to effectively ensure pilots are on track to meet their aims and secure appropriate outcomes for young people. Accountability systems used by pilots range from ongoing, often informal processes within pilots to more formal external inspections and assessments. Monitoring approaches include tracking individual young people's progress, provision-level assessments of achievement, and monitoring of the performance of partners and providers by local authorities and other commissioners of alternative provision.

- Pilot-specific outcomes and achievements are inevitably varied and not directly comparable within and across the pilot programme. However, all pilots have demonstrated local improvements in providing a wide range of young people with increased access to meaningful and appropriate learning activities and environments.

## Achievements for young people

- Across the pilot programme, there is evidence of significant improvements in the attendance and punctuality of many young people relative to previous levels of attendance at school or at other forms of provision, often reflecting attitudinal changes in relation to education and learning.

- Young people have secured a wide range of learning outcomes and achievements reflecting their individual circumstances and situations. GCSEs and equivalents as well as a range of vocationally-orientated accreditation have been secured, although generally still below levels for young people accessing mainstream education. Notwithstanding the actual level of academic outcomes generated, many young people have experienced positive changes in their outlooks towards education and their ability to achieve.

- Key enhancements evident in young people's personal, social and emotional development while attending the pilot projects include: increased contentment and the

emergence of more positive outlooks; increased self-confidence and self-esteem; the development of a greater sense of responsibility and maturity and other behavioural improvements. Changes have also been observed in many of the young people attending the pilots manifest in their interactions with others, including their improved capacity to communicate effectively and appropriately with a wide range of people, including parents/carers, peers, alternative provision staff, school staff and adults in general.

- Young people have experienced a range of positive post-pilot progressions, including re-integration to mainstream school, progression to further education and training and employment. However, retention at subsequent destinations in some cases remains an area for development and across the pilots, not all young people secured positive destinations.

## Issues and challenges

- A key challenge for many pilots involved meeting the immediate critical social, emotional and behavioural needs of young people as a basis for pursuing the core educational-orientated aims of the pilot. Where such needs have been successfully met, an ongoing issue for pilots relates to the difficulties in ensuring that these gains can be effectively transferred and sustained if, and when, young people re-integrate back into mainstream school settings or progress to other destinations.

- Pilots faced difficulties associated with the availability, consistency and quality of information underpinning the referral process. Referrals based on inadequate information could lead to inappropriate matching of young people and provision. The ability of some pilots to successfully offer appropriate levels and types of intervention and support for young people with SEN and significant behavioural issues varied, with some vocationally-orientated alternative educational projects, for example, experiencing particular difficulties.

- Deteriorating economic conditions posed significant difficulties for some pilots, either directly through the lack of extended funding opportunities, or indirectly through changing local spending priorities. Of critical importance was the perceived reduction in the commissioning of alternative provision by schools and local authorities.

## Key facilitating factors

- Effective strategic positioning of the pilots was essential in ensuring their integration into wider structures of local alternative and mainstream provision.

- Effective dialogue, communication and coordinated working alongside schools, the local authority and local FE establishments underpinned pilots' roles and reputations in their localities.

- Pilots' ability to deliver appropriate content and activities to young people entails the development and maintenance of links with families and communities. High-profile open days inviting local communities into the project have been especially valuable as a means of highlighting the quality and relevance of the provision on offer and countering negative perceptions and stereotypes of alternative provision and the young people who attend.

- There is evidence from across the pilots that effectiveness stems from providing learning activities and content that are based on considerations of the particular needs and circumstances of individual young people. However, the extent to which alternative provision packages can be personalised is influenced, to varying degrees, by the parameters and structures in which the pilots operate.

- Pilots also demonstrate increasing commitment to delivering high-quality academic curriculum content as a means of supporting pupils' reintegration to mainstream school

as well as equipping them for post-16 progressions. Central to effective curriculum construction and delivery is the need to maintain high expectations and aspirations for and of young people whilst maximising opportunities for success.

- The individual and collective characteristics, qualities and approaches of the staff working in the Back on Track pilots were critical drivers of their success in generating positive outcomes for young people. Specific factors relate to the importance of staff having a history of, or newly discovered talents and affinities for working with hard-to-reach students, underpinning a commitment to building relationships.

- Effective delivery of alternative provision through the Back on Track pilots was also supported through appropriate leadership approaches and the impact of specific personalities. Key personnel were essential in promoting the philosophy and vision of the pilots, and promoting their value and that of alternative provision in general.

## Recommendations

- There should be enhanced efforts to ensure that alternative provision, in its many varied forms is appropriately conceptualised, understood and promoted. There is a need to broaden understandings of the scope and value of alternative provision, in terms of what it constitutes, how it operates and is delivered, and the extent and nature of the contributions it can make to the lives and future life chances of young people.

- The value and effectiveness of pursuing personalised approaches to alternative provision need to be recognised and supported, especially in the commissioning process. Consideration should be given to tensions between the role of alternative provision in meeting the hierarchy of needs of individual young people through personalised approaches, and the imperatives to generate outcomes centred on academic-related performance targets.

- Efforts need to be made to ensure alternative provision is integrated into wider local systems and structures of service delivery. The effectiveness of alternative provision is enhanced when it is perceived and commissioned as an essential component of a continuum of local provision and support, with coordinated routes in and out, to facilitate appropriate positive transitions for young people.

- The timescales in which alternative provision operates, and its impacts and outcomes considered, need to be extended.

- The measurement and assessment of the impacts, outcomes and achievements of alternative provision need further consideration and development. There remains a critical need to develop meaningful achievable outcome measures that, whilst taking into account the variations and differences in circumstances of young people and the aims/remit of the provision, can deliver valuable assessments of their capacity to effect positive change. There is a need for the development of an appropriate set of metrics that can be successfully and consistently applied to facilitate accurately comparable assessment of the progress and impacts generated by and through the whole range of alternative provision.

# 1. The contexts and aims of the Back on Track research

## 1.1 The contexts of the Back on Track pilot programme

The 2008 White Paper, *Back on Track: A strategy for modernising alternative provision for young people* (DCSF, 2008), set out a plan to transform the quality of alternative education for those who are excluded from, or who for some other reason are unable to attend school. The strategy was founded on the following core principles:

- start from what works best for each young person taking account of his or her different needs and in consultation with parents and carers;
- secure a core educational entitlement for all young people in alternative provision;
- ensure better planning and commissioning of alternative provision both at an area level and for the individual;
- hold local authorities to account for outcomes from the alternative provision they deliver or commission;
- provide professional support for those working in the sector and better accommodation and facilities;
- improve partnership working between alternative provision, other parts of the education sector and other agencies and services working with young people to facilitate early intervention and ensure an integrated approach to meeting the young person's needs; and
- learn from the best and support innovation.

As part of this strategy, £26.5 million was allocated by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), now the Department for Education (DfE), to fund 12 innovative pilot projects to develop best practice and encourage greater diversity in alternative provision. Local authorities were invited to submit proposals for pilot projects from which the DCSF made its selection and allocated funding accordingly. The majority of funding for each pilot area was ringfenced for capital expenditure to purchase significant assets, such as land and buildings and to renovate existing premises. The remaining, much smaller, proportion was revenue funding, for day-to-day pilot expenditure, such as staffing, supplies and purchase of services from external providers. Following the commencement of the Back on Track pilot programme, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned to conduct a longitudinal research study to document the progress and experiences of the 12 pilot projects.

The Back on Track pilot began in April 2009 and funding ceased in April 2011. The programme has, therefore, spanned key contextual developments including a significant economic downturn, which placed increasing pressures on local authorities' and schools' budgets for alternative education. A change of UK government also occurred part way through the pilot programme. Reflecting ongoing concerns in relation to the nature and quality of alternative provision nationally, a decision was made by the DfE to continue to fund and support the Back on Track pilot projects to the end of the planned pilot phase.

Of further significance is the changing policy landscape in which the Back on Track pilot programme operated. Part way through the pilots' implementation, the new coalition government set out plans in *The Importance of Teaching: the Schools White* (DfE, 2010) to overhaul the way alternative provision is funded and delivered. The Education Act 2011 provided the legislative basis for these changes, which include giving alternative providers greater autonomy by enabling Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) to have delegated budgets and pursue academy status, as well as permitting other alternative providers to establish themselves as free schools (England and Wales. Statutes, 2011).

These new reforms are located alongside longer-term plans to increase schools' responsibility for excluded pupils. This proposal will see the role of local authorities as direct providers of alternative provision diminish as schools commission and fund places themselves. Schools will also become responsible for ensuring the quality of alternative education excluded pupils receive and their academic achievements will contribute to national measurements of schools' performance. In addition, the new Pupil Premium will provide additional funding for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing difficulties at school and may be used by schools to purchase alternative education. The government also confirmed its commitment to raising the participation age to 18 by 2015. Together these will have a range of implications for the ways in which alternative provision is constructed and used by schools (DfE, 2010).

The Schools White Paper also announced plans to introduce a quality mark, or tighter regulation for alternative provision, subject to a review by Ofsted (DfE, 2010). One of the key drivers underpinning this relates to the continuing poor academic outcomes of pupils in alternative education settings. Recent statistics show for example, that despite the many and complex difficulties of young people in alternative provision, only 1.4 per cent of young people in attending PRUs in the academic year 2009/10 achieved five or more GCSEs at grade A*-C or equivalent (including English and mathematics GCSEs or iGCSEs). This compares with 53.4 per cent of young people in all schools in England (DfE, 2011). While the statistics on attainment suggests that academic poor performance is a fairly consistent issue across the sector, it is important to recognise the diversity and levels of needs among of young people attending alternative provision settings. In 2008, 75 per cent of pupils in PRUs had special educational needs (SEN), 62 per cent without statements and 13 per cent with statements (DCSF, 2008). This increased slightly in 2011 to 79

per cent (Taylor, 2012). It is also widely accepted that for many young people placed in alternative provision, their full range of needs may not have been identified, as social, emotional and behavioural issues may mask underlying learning needs or disabilities. This indicates that in many ways, alternative provision is used for more than just education purposes and there are ongoing calls from within the sector to recognise the more holistic contributions made by the range of alternative providers.

Indeed, following a review of alternative provision conducted in 2010, Ofsted concluded that the quality of provision appears to be highly variable, with significant proportions of PRUs judged outstanding and many others judged inadequate. At its best, they found alternative provision was selected carefully and was being used to support learners as part of their whole curriculum. In these conditions, students were usually motivated by their placement and started to see the point of their work in school and many gained appropriate qualifications. However, this was not always the case: some of the schools and units visited often found it difficult to evaluate the overall impact of alternative provision because, in addition to not monitoring progress well, they did not define clear success criteria at the outset (Ofsted, 2011).

The national spotlight shifted on alternative provision once again in 2011 following the summer disturbances. The young people involved in the riots that were brought before the courts, were found, on average, to have missed almost one day of school per week and were also more likely and to have been excluded from school at least once. Referring to this situation, the Secretary of State for Education highlighted the importance of high-quality alternative provision as a way of counteracting the prospect of an emerging 'educational underclass', consisting of young people outside the mainstream education, who fail to achieve academically and grow up without the skills to become successful adults and members of society (Taylor, 2012). The government's Expert Adviser on Behaviour, Charlie Taylor was subsequently commissioned by the government to undertake a review of alternative provision and make proposals for improving the outcomes for those who access it. In all, the report provided 28 recommendations, generally following the current orthodoxy of the need to adopt early intervention where possible; better sharing of information and better commissioning, better initial teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD), and greater emphasis on subjects like English and maths to aid progression. All the recommendations were accepted by government and have been since been published for public consultation (Taylor, 2012).

The significant changes to the policy surrounding alternative provision since the introduction of the Back on Track pilot programme in 2009, combined with economic developments, have required local authorities, schools and alternative providers to adapt to these dynamic situations. However, a constant thread remains that continued efforts must be undertaken to raise the standard and quality of alternative provision. Within these contexts, the experiences and knowledge that can be drawn from the Back on Track pilots, set out in this report, provide valuable learning that may contribute to the evolution and improvement of alternative provision for some of

the most vulnerable young people in, at the margins of, or excluded from mainstream education.

## 1.2 The research aims

The overarching aim of this research was to develop insights from 12 specifically funded projects as part of the Back on Track pilot programme to investigate what can work in alternative provision, how and for whom, in order to advance understandings and inform future policy and practice. To achieve this, the study focuses on developing knowledge through the varying experiences of the Back on Track pilots in relation to the following areas:

- the structure, content and operation of the alternative provision pilot projects;
- the key ingredients of delivery that lead to effective alternative provision in the pilot projects; and
- the outcomes, impacts and achievements of the alternative provision pilot projects.

This study involves a small and specific range of types and approaches to alternative provision and as such is not representative of the entirety of alternative provision operating at a national level. However, knowledge and lessons derived from this research may be transferable and have wider application and relevance beyond the 12 pilots.

## 1.3 The research process

The Back on Track alternative pilot projects were located in the following areas:

- Darlington (North East)
- Wakefield (Yorkshire and Humberside)
- Rotherham (Yorkshire and Humberside)
- Knowsley (North West)
- Liverpool (North West)
- Nottingham City (East Midlands)
- Coventry (West Midlands)
- Herefordshire (West Midlands)
- Oxfordshire (South East)
- Haringey (London)
- Westminster (London)
- Pan-London (covering multiple London boroughs).

The NFER team gathered data from these 12 settings between autumn 2009 and spring 2012. Throughout the course of the research, there were up to eight points of contact with the pilot projects, the timing of which varied depending on the stage of individual pilots' development and specific circumstances. Data collection entailed a combination of in-depth visits involving a range of methods including individual face-to-face interviews, informal discussions, focus group discussions, observations of activities and collection of additional relevant data and documentation where appropriate. Where possible, and whilst trying to minimise disruption, interviews and conversations with young people took place within the sessions they were attending. Carrying out conversations, discussions and interviews in the locations and settings they were familiar with and alongside and during the activities they were participating in was deemed to be an effective means of engaging the young people in the research process. Although there were variations between the different pilot projects, research participants included a range of LA and pilot project staff, pupils and their parents/carers, as well as key partners, other stakeholders working with, or benefiting from, the pilot provision. During the course of the research, qualitative information and data was collected through conducting 354 interviews and conversations with a range of stakeholders:

- Pilot project staff        (129)
- School/PRU staff        (41)
- Local authority staff        (58)
- Young people        (86)
- Parents carers.        (21)
- Others        (19)

All research participants were fully informed of the purpose of the research, nature of the information being collected, and the way that the information would be processed and used. All interviewees were individually invited to participate in the process and were given opportunities to opt out of the research should they wish to change their mind. Most interviews and discussions were recorded (subject to the agreement of the participants) and these were then summarised into standardised templates to facilitate thematic analysis across the individual pilots. Interviewees were assured anonymity within the research and reporting processes.

During this three-year study, there were changes in the composition of key personnel in the majority of the pilot projects, however, where possible core participants were re-interviewed in order to develop cumulative knowledge and information. There was also fluidity and flexibility built into the methodology to ensure the inclusion of additional perspectives from other interviewees at each point of contact. Where necessary, data was supplemented by further information collected via telephone interviews in between scheduled visits to the pilot projects.

## 1.4  The report structure

This report, based on qualitative enquiry, draws together learning from the individual Back on Track pilots and presents details of: the emerging impacts; key elements of effectiveness; illustrations of best practice; and the challenges faced within the pilots. The pilots are delivering a range of alternative provision offers, to a broad spectrum of young people, in and through a variety of settings and formats. As such, they demonstrate considerable diversity and the findings highlighted within this report do not necessarily relate to, or are experienced to the same extent by, each of these unique pilot projects. The report is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 provides an **overview of the individual pilot projects** that comprise the Back on Track pilot programme. It presents details of the core elements of the pilots, including their aims and rationale, the range of pupil needs and how the projects sought to fulfil their aims.

Chapter 3 presents perspectives of the **variety of achievements and impacts** stemming from, and associated with the Back on Track pilots, including the range of impacts on young people and the outcomes generated for them. It also includes a discussion of wider impacts and implications of the pilots within their local areas, including for schools, families and wider communities.

Chapter 4 considers the **infrastructure of alternative provision**, principally focussing on where, how and by whom the activities and curriculum content is provided. It illustrates how the core principles of Back on Track, relating to improvements in the physical infrastructure and developments in the staffing have been approached by the pilots.

Chapter 5 focuses on the **alternative provision offer**, including perspectives on delivering a bespoke and personalised offer and the development of core educational entitlements. It includes consideration of constituent elements that lead to the development of multifaceted alternative provision packages, such as, referral and commissioning, information exchange, needs assessments, relationship and partnership working and the timing of alternative provision.

Chapter 6 explores the processes of **monitoring and accountability** across the Back on Track pilots and illustrates the methods and approaches employed to ensure that the pilots are effectively delivering appropriate and high-quality experiences to young people as well as highlighting the key challenges encountered.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of the **challenges and key drivers of success and sustainability of the Back on Track pilots** that influence their ability to meet their initial and on-going aims and objectives.

Chapter 8 presents **conclusions and recommendations** from the Back on Track pilots to inform future policy and decision-making and local practice implementation in relation to alternative provision.

# 2. An overview of the Back on Track pilots

This chapter provides a brief overview of the individual projects that comprised the Back on Track pilot programme and presents details of:

- backgrounds in which the pilots operate
- the characteristics and needs of beneficiaries being supported through the pilot provision
- the rationale, core aims and formats of the pilots.

## 2.1 Contexts and background

The Back on Track pilots constituted alternative education projects, interventions, initiatives and strategies although their aims, objectives and outcomes were inevitably influenced, to varying degrees, by other agendas and policy areas. The pilots needed to reconcile meeting the basic needs of some very challenging and vulnerable young people with requirements to meet national priorities regarding educational standards. Pilots worked to ensure young people were able to maximise their educational opportunities and achieve to their highest potential, whilst addressing the underlying barriers that some of these young people faced. In this way, it is not possible to detach funding, operation, delivery and impacts of the Back on Track pilots from the other work taking place in the local authorities.

Involvement in the Back on Track pilot programme provided local authorities and their partners with opportunities to respond to local need and implement something new, and/or enhance and expand existing approaches in the delivery of alternative provision. As such, there was great diversity across the 12 pilots in terms of the scale, reach and nature of their operation. Alongside this diversity, there are also aspects of commonality, as pilots were all operating within national social, political and economic contexts (see Chapter 1, for details). These conditions exerted pressures and influence that variously promoted, supported and challenged the projects throughout the Back on Track programme.

Reflecting differences in their scope, size and remit, the Back on Track pilots were accompanied by varying levels of funding comprising various combinations of capital and revenue funding allocations.

- Within the overall funding allocation: one pilot received less than £500,000; three pilots received between £500,000-£1,000,000; two pilots received between £1,000,000-£1,500,000, five pilots received between £1,500,000-£2,500,000 and one pilot received between £2,500,000-£3,000,000.

- In terms of capital funding two pilots received less than £500,000; one pilot received between £500,000-£1,000,000; one pilot received between £1,000,000-£1,500,000; five pilots received between £1,500,000-£2,000,000, two pilots received £2,000,000-£2,500,000 and one pilot received between £2,500,000-£3,000,000.

- In terms of revenue and operational funding: three pilots received less than £250,000; six pilots received between £250,000-£500,000; and three pilots received between £500,000-£1,000,000.

## 2.2 The characteristics and needs of beneficiaries

Young people with a wide range of multi-level needs access the alternative provision pilots. These young people are primarily identified, by professionals working with them, as being at risk of not achieving to their maximum potential in, and through, mainstream education alone. Their circumstances and needs are understood and classified in a variety of ways and they can be simultaneously ascribed to more than one classification forming a depiction of the hierarchy of their needs. The relative importance of specific needs can be influenced by the perceptions and standpoints of the professionals involved, and also by the point in time at which the decision-making process about alternative provision takes place. The prioritisation of particular needs can also change during the time a young person is attending alternative provision and, in this way, classifications of need are used in the measurement of progress and distance travelled.

The identified circumstances and characteristics of young people attending the alternative provision pilots are typically described as falling into the following categories:

| | |
|---|---|
| • permanently excluded from school or being in danger of exclusion | • young people from disadvantaged or challenging family backgrounds |
| • persistent absence from school including anxious school refusers | • young carers |
| • long gaps in education | • teenage parents and pregnant teenagers |
| • young people with SEN (diagnosed or not, SEN statement or not) | • those with health problems, especially mental health problems |
| • receiving education other than at school | • alcohol or drug misusers |
| • not engaging with school and learning | • looked after children |
| • new arrivals without a school place<br>• those with complex social and emotional needs | • young people at risk of, or engaging in, offending behaviours |

These various classifications and circumstances of young people attending the alternative provision pilots are associated with a wide variety of learning, social, emotional, behavioural and health-related needs. The majority of young people across the pilots predominantly presented at school, and on entry to the pilot projects, with behavioural issues. However, pilot project staff recognise that behaviour-related difficulties often stem from, and are manifestations of, wider needs including SEN, whether or not officially diagnosed and statemented. In general, pilots do not restrict their focus to supporting a particular type of identified need or specific group of young people. This reflects the multiple elements of the pilots that offer diverse and holistic packages of support to address the wide range of needs.

Over the course of the pilot programme, some projects have seen changes in the number of young people they work with. In several instances, pilots have actually delivered provision to lower numbers of young people than originally planned and anticipated as a result of initial underestimates of the nature and level of needs presented by some young people, as well as the associated implications for staffing requirements.

> *At the time of the bid, we were hoping to have larger class sizes in order to make it realistically costed. But, these pupils have taken more input, so defeating the economies of scale that we had planned. They need a lot of intense work.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Pilot costing structures based on assessments of young person-to-staff ratios of 10:1, for example, have prohibited the employment of additional staff members when revised average staffing ratios of 5:1 or less have been produced in order to meet the complex needs of these young people. As a result, in order to deliver effective provision, the numbers of places made available have been reduced. Some pilots have also made adjustments to their overall reach and the ways in which they respond to the types and severity of the compound (behaviour-related) difficulties presented by many of the young people referred to them.

Some pilots have also experienced considerable development and evolution in terms of the characteristics of young people and the range of associated needs that are catered for. This broadening of the reach and offer of some pilots signifies a recognition of the potential universal beneficial impacts of the pilots applicable beyond the specific or targeted 'Back on Track' core clientele.

## 2.3 The rationale, core aims and formats of the Back on Track pilots

### 2.3.1 Rationale and aims of the Back on Track pilots

Given the wider contexts in which the pilots operate, and the diverse nature of the needs and circumstances of many of the young people they work with, the projects

are founded on, and characterised by, numerous aims and rationales. Over the course of the Back on Track pilot programme, these aims have not been static but operate dynamically (and often in multiple combinations) and at different levels of priority, according to the specific needs of individual young people at different times/stages of their participation in the pilots.

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### The core aims of the Back on Track Pilots

- to provide support to enhance and maintain engagement with education, predominately in the mainstream setting, through the provision of complementary and alternative interventions

- to prepare young people for reintegration into education and learning and/or prevent exclusion from mainstream settings (generally shorter-term, time-limited interventions)

- to re-engage young people into education and learning through the provision of alternative experiences to mainstream school and education more broadly (generally more open-ended interventions)

- to support young people's acquisition of accredited outcomes

- to raise standards and improve practice in relation to alternative provision through structural, process and systemic change

- to develop strategic approaches that contribute to local authority-wide priorities of delivering structural, process and systemic change in, and through, the delivery of alternative education.

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Educational-related outcomes constitute a primary focus in the aims and remits of the pilots. However, there is variation across the Back on Track programme in the extent to which the focus on securing positive personal, social and emotional outcomes and improving the future life chances of young people is explicitly stated. Despite this disparity, links between educational achievements and young people's wellbeing are widely acknowledged and implicitly understood.

## 2.3.2 Formats of the Back on Track pilots

The pilots have been designed to operate, to varying degrees, as partnerships between each participating local authority and one or more alternative providers. In order to meet their core aims in their local contexts, the pilot projects take the following formats, drawn from, or in addition to, the models of provision identified in the White Paper, *Back on Track: A strategy for modernising alternative provision for young people* (DCSF, 2008):

> ## The formats and models of the Back on Track Pilots
>
> - a single school, including special schools and academies, running a PRU jointly with, or on behalf of, a local authority
>
> - a group of schools running a PRU jointly with, or on behalf of, a local authority
>
> - an external provider of alternative provision (private and voluntary sector) working with, or on behalf of, local authorities/schools
>
> - a peripatetic PRU using youth, private and voluntary sector sites, resourced and managed by a partnership of local schools, local authority and private and voluntary sector organisations
>
> - a PRU working in partnership with schools to offer respite, re-integration and full-time alternative placements for young people at risk of exclusion, or otherwise not fulfilling their potential
>
> - a partnership approach to early intervention for young people with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) through a comprehensive training programme and development of enhanced provision
>
> - a strategic partnership approach to deliver pan-London improvement in PRU provision.

Within this overall framework of approaches and categorisation of models of delivery of alternative provision, the individual pilots are manifested and operate in numerous ways. The following section presents a brief overview of the individual approaches of the pilots.

### Direct delivery pilots

The Back on Track pilots in **Nottingham** and **Coventry** consist of PRU and extended learning centre-based approaches to meeting a wide range of pupil needs, typically for those young people aged 14-16 who have been excluded, or who are at risk of exclusion, from mainstream school; those without a school place, or who are otherwise unsuited to mainstream environments. Alongside academic and pastoral support, these initiatives entail the provision of vocationally-orientated learning opportunities, a significant proportion of which are externally-commissioned and delivered off-site in Nottingham. In Coventry, private sector providers have been commissioned by the local authority to operate the learning centres.

Since its inception, the pilot in **Nottingham** has been further developed in order to improve the offer to young people by providing them with wider scope to achieve, for example, by enabling young people attending the PRU to access GCSEs (such as in English language and/or literacy, maths and/or numeracy, science (single award) and art and design), and by extending the range of useful vocational accreditation. The programme has also been developed to create a much more explicit structure around care, guidance and support. Vocational training is available across a range of subject areas, including sports, construction, performing arts, childcare, animal care, hair and

beauty, catering and horticulture, with the emphasis being on positive opportunities for young people that are both useful and universally recognisable.

In **Coventry**, provision has been developed to broaden the offer for some of the most disengaged Year 11 students in the authority at risk of permanent exclusion. The LA placed a strong emphasis on commissioning arrangements and in the first year of the pilot three private providers, including local and national organisations were appointed to deliver distinct programmes of learning. This included a provider focusing on the delivery of academic outcomes, a vocational learning provider, and a training organisation offering wider key skills. Full-time provision was commissioned for a total of 30 young people (on average 10 learners per provider) and delivered from provider premises in locations across the authority. A contract management group (including LA staff and key stakeholders) undertook quarterly monitoring of the providers and reviewed performance against targets (e.g. for pupil attendance, attainment and post-16 progression) set out in service specifications. In the second year of the pilot, provision for all 30 learners was transferred to the academic provider. This organisation places a strong focus on achieving qualifications at GCSE level (or equivalent) in core subjects (e.g. English language, English literature and Maths) and the attainment of functional skills and wider key skills through the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN). This is combined with the provision of additional extracurricular activities (including work related learning) and an emphasis on developing pupils' personal and social skills to prepare them for post-16 progression and adult life more generally. The philosophy of the provider is based on having high expectations of learners, which leads to raised self-esteem and confidence. The aim is for every student to receive a positive experience in their final school year. Changes to the curriculum and staffing composition of this provision occurred over the course of the pilot which led to the development of a core academic curriculum augmented by a range of optional subjects (such as Sport, Media, ICT, Science and Public Services). In this way, students are able to access a wider choice of educational content and enhanced progression pathways. The capital funding in Coventry has been used to create a purpose built learning centre for alternative provision. The new build is situated adjacent to an FE college. It includes teaching and learning spaces for small groups of learners, catering facilities, which have the potential to be used as a community café, indoor recreation spaces and confidential meeting rooms for staff and students. The building became fully operational in the second year of the pilot and was occupied by the academic provider who had previously been operating from two separate locations.

In **Rotherham**, the Back on Track pilot constitutes a local authority-wide approach to the delivery of flexible and effective learning programmes to all young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and experiencing difficulties in the mainstream setting. This approach is operationalised through the establishment of three Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships, whereby the component secondary schools are centrally responsible for the management of a Key Stage 3/4 Learning and Support Centre (or PRU) in their locality, with support from the LAs Strategic Leader

for Behaviour and Education Other Than At School. One school partnership used the Back on Track funding to create a new purpose-built learning centre facility, the other partnerships utilised funding to enhance their existing learning centre environments. The maintenance of links between young people attending the learning centres and their 'home schools' (i.e. the mainstream school where they remain on roll) is of crucial importance in promoting and sustaining schools' responsibilities for young people accessing alternative provision and reintegration into mainstream education remains a key ambition of the pilot. Young people attend learning centre provisions on a full-time or part-time basis depending on their needs and circumstances, which may change over time. Where appropriate, pupils are able to attend a combination of settings and access learning delivered by their home school, another school within the partnership and at a learning centre. The partnerships have focused on improving the attendance, engagement and achievement of pupils by developing specific provision to meet their needs. Learning centres deliver GCSE courses and additional short courses through awarding bodies such as ASDAN and OCN, as well as sustained courses of study leading to NVQ and BTEC. Qualifications range from Entry Level to Level 2. Other providers are also used as part of a flexible curriculum package. In addition to the delivery of core subjects such as English, maths and ICT, learning centres also deliver 'in house' work-related learning in areas such as catering, hairdressing, cycle maintenance and horticulture through new facilities funded through Back on Track. The enhanced learning centre facilities are also accessed by mainstream schools and by members of the local community. Funding in Rotherham was also utilised to enhance the facilities of an LA-wide specialist unit for pregnant school girls and school-aged mothers aged between 11 and 16. This provision includes specialist teaching rooms, sport and recreation areas, confidential meeting rooms for one-to-one advice and support and a large on-site nursery, allowing pupils to return to study following the birth of their babies. As well as continuing their academic studies, pupils at the unit access support and guidance on parenting skills and their babies benefit from the early years foundation stage agenda in the nursery. The improved facilities have also enabled a post-16 offer to be delivered to teenage mothers who were formerly NEET.

The pilot operating in **Herefordshire** also has an authority-wide reach, involving provision delivered in 14 Customised School Based Intervention Centres. Known as Student Services Centres, the content and offer of these individual provisions reflects the position that all students may need support at some point their academic career. The centres operate with a specific early intervention focus, encompassing the drive towards reducing persistent absence, reducing exclusions from school and offering support to increase engagement with learning. In planning the purpose-built intervention centres, great emphasis has been placed on ensuring that they are placed at the heart of the school to demonstrate their inclusivity. Although primarily school based, pilot project staff work alongside a range of professionals from other agencies to deliver appropriate emotional, behavioural and academic support. Pilot activities include a mixture of the school curriculum and schemes of work, alongside specific materials to support targeted interventions. These materials are being developed by individual schools in cooperation with the local authority, in order to

most appropriately meet local need. At the same time, the specific nature of the activities offered to students is dependent upon the focus of the project at each intervention centre. Across all intervention centres, however, pilot activities are directed towards supporting emotional literacy, behaviour management, and literacy and numeracy.

Similarly, the provision in **Oxfordshire** also operates via multiple sites throughout the county and seeks to offer early identification and intensive support to prevent disengagement and help reintegrate young people aged 11-14 years back into mainstream education. Several community sites have been refurbished across the authority as part of the pilot, including youth centres and a youth theatre. Time-limited courses focus on developing pupils' self-management competencies in the classroom. A 20-day full-time course involves a week of self-audit; two weeks of exploring and building skills; and one week of putting skills and strategies into practice. The content is delivered through a range of activities including role play, dance, drama, music, art work, outdoor pursuits and physical activities, meditation, circle time activities, discovering learning styles, and talks and visits from external partners. Following research with schools, an additional programme has been implemented offering a similar content and style of provision to the original full-time programme but for two days per week over an eight-week period. This programme is aimed specifically at Year 9 students (Triple 9) who spend one day a week going out to participate in a particular activity such as outdoor pursuits, and one day undertaking sessions exploring various aspects of how to effectively manage behaviour. The remaining three days per week are spent in school to practice and apply the skills learned on the project.

The **Darlington** and **Knowsley** pilots have been established to deliver alternative provision through specific specialist providers to a range of young people, especially those exhibiting high levels of social emotional difficulties and disengagement from school and learning. The Darlington pilot centres around provision delivered through two main sites operated by the Clervaux Trust, providing young people with opportunities to develop and learn through practical, vocational and artisan-based activities (for example, blacksmithing, green woodworking, pottery, land-based activities such as fencing and land maintenance, as well as construction and catering) in order to help them prepare for a variety of post-16 progressions. One of the two sites is enhancing this curriculum offer by providing opportunities for additional activities, including baking, food processing and retail/business skill development. Young people choose the activities they want to participate in and then work closely, in small groups, with the tutors in very practical, hands-on activities. Students are involved in the whole spectrum of tasks associated with their chosen activities, such as digging the clay to provide the raw materials for making pottery, and some were even involved in building the wood-fired kiln. Similarly, students were involved in coppicing the trees to provide the raw material – charcoal – necessary to power the forge for them to engage in blacksmithing. In addition to these activities, pilot staff work to support the literacy and numeracy needs of students. As the pilot has progressed, increasing attention has been placed on the pursuit of accredited

outcomes – this has involved the employment of additional staff to oversee moves in this direction and close relationships have been built with a local FE provider alongside the development of a wide range of post-16 (and residential) learning opportunities for increasingly diverse cohorts of learners.

The Knowsley Skills Academy offers part-time alternative provision programmes for young people aged 14-16 experiencing significant disengagement from mainstream school. The active learning approaches and methodology employed offers young people a practical approach to developing Functional Skills and Personal Learning and Thinking Skills. The acquisition of life skills, problem solving and developing skills to support future employment are key areas of the pilot's focus. The young people attend the Academy for three days a week and then return to school to continue their education for the remaining two days. It was originally intended that these students follow a 15 week 'STEP UP' entry-level programme with the National Open College Network (NOCN). More recently, however, a more flexible approach has been adopted whereby young people follow a seven week transitional programme which leads to an ASDAN award. In time, it is hoped that the Academy will also be able to deliver a STEP UP qualification to the younger cohort. In addition, the Academy runs a second vocationally-oriented programme which caters for young people aged 16-19 who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). This is a 22 week roll on, roll off programme which young people attend for three days a week and follow a module based programme, working towards a level 1 NOCN qualification. Other qualifications available to them include first aid and Duke of Edinburgh awards. Both programmes are structured on a military style training syllabus, incorporating a range of life and basic skills (such as first aid, fieldcraft, survival skills, problem solving, physical training, health and hygiene, drug and alcohol awareness, drill, map reading, swimming and adventure training). New premises offer classroom space, an IT suite and gymnasium although a large proportion of the programme is delivered outside, as it was found that young people were most receptive to outdoor, practical-based activities.

The Back on Track pilot in **Wakefield** initially consisted of provision delivered via a partnership involving a local authority PRU and an independent specialist provider. Young people described as hard-to-reach, and experiencing significant disengagement from school, were offered extended learning opportunities focussed on land-based skills training, environmental education, experimental fish farming and hydroponics, self-sustaining food production, enterprise education, improved recycling, construction, functional and core skill development, work based learning, as well as personal and social development. Students spend two days per week studying a themed curriculum, such as joinery, environment, horticulture, and two days in work-related learning or on work experience. The remaining day is spent participating in sport and studying English, Maths and PHSE. More recently, the pilot has been developed to include a greater focus on core skills and classroom-based learning, complemented by bought-in vocational provision and work related-learning. Students also receive one-to-one support, and basic skills training. All students work towards accreditation and have access to online learning resources. Preparation for

onward progression, both academically and socially, is a key ambition of this provision.

The pilot operating in **Westminster** offers education and therapeutic support to pupils ranging in age from 11-16 presenting with behavioural social and emotional difficulties who are viewed as being hard-to-place and struggling in mainstream education. Provision is delivered through a partnership of the local authority and a specialist third sector organisation. Operating at different levels, the pilot aims to support the reintegration of young people in to some form of mainstream education where appropriate and to prepare others for post-16 transitions. Over the first year of operation, the timetable and curriculum has been consolidated with work being done to identify opportunities for accreditation and linking in with the partner schools' re-integration and wider inclusion programmes. As the pilot has progressed, the full-time offer comprised:

- curriculum subjects including Maths/numeracy, English/literacy, ICT, Science, PSHE, Art, Woodwork and Cookery, leading towards AQA accreditation (as, in most cases, GSCEs have not been a realistic goal);

- Prince's Trust 'xl' award programme, through which students have been able to undertake structured projects, accredited by ASDAN, that develop personal and life skills;

- therapeutic services involving therapeutic/positive relationships, family support, counselling, art and massage therapy;

- sports and other positive activities including trips to leisure centres, the theatre and work experience opportunities.

The pilot in **Liverpool** was initially intended to provide alternative educational and learning experiences for young people experiencing disengagement from school as well as offering extended activities to young people after school and at weekends through a refurbished vacant school building. A partnership involving the local authority, a social enterprise youth support origination and a third sector provider was to be responsible for delivering this provision. The eventual unavailability of the initial site led to a considerable shift in orientation, scale and reach of the project. As a result, Back on Track funding was redirected in order to enhance existing provision within the authority, for example to facilitate improvements to an existing inclusion education programme. This programme offers disengaged young people aged 14-16 between two and four days of classes in urban arts (performing and visual), personal development, IT, literacy and maths. It incorporates a personal development programme which includes workshops in anger management, drug and alcohol awareness, PSHE, careers education and relationship education. The programme also offers work placement opportunities in construction, hospitality and catering, administration and venue departments. The plan was to use Back on Track funding to make improvements to the programme's accommodation, in order to provide young people with access to a wider range of courses. However, staff changes hindered the progress of this venture. A small amount of Back on Track funding was awarded to a school-based project, run by a local voluntary organisation and charity,

which aims to demonstrate the use of global learning approaches and drama in re-engaging a group of Year 9 girls at risk of exclusion.

## Strategic focussed pilots

In addition to the pilots projects designed to work directly with young people, two further projects were initially classified as being strategic in nature were selected for inclusion in the pilot programme. The **Pan-London** pilot constitutes a multi-strand strategic approach to strengthen the quality of alternative provision offered to young people attending PRUs across London. A reduction in geographical variations and increases in consistency of curriculum standards; improved networking and development opportunities for staff; and the production and implementation of advice, guidance and approaches that contribute to increased safety and improved relationships within PRUs are key elements of this approach. Three fundamental approaches were initially identified to underpin and deliver the pilot's core aims, each comprising a number of various component/constituent elements. These were: research and innovation; the promotion and dissemination of best practice; and improving accountability and outcomes. To this end, the following individual workstreams were developed.

- Workstream 1: Leadership
- Workstream 2: Commissioning and Quality Assurance - alternative provision Key Stage 4
- Workstream 3: A good place to learn
- Workstream 4: Restorative Approaches (RA) and creative problem solving
- Workstream 5: Hearing the pupils
- Workstream 6: Safety and cohesion programme
- Workstream 7: Curriculum workbook

**The PRU Headteacher Network** is a core element of the entire pilot intended to provide opportunities for closer working, support and development for PRU leaders across the city, meeting several times a year on centralised and a sub-regional basis. Demonstrating the need for leadership support networks and providing a 'voice' for London PRUs, the establishment of this network is crucial for the implementation and facilitation of other elements of the pilot. An associated element, and a key part of the legacy of the whole project, involves the development of a website (http://londonprus.co.uk) containing information and a platform for supporting the community of PRUs and practitioners in London. The **Safety and cohesion** strand of the pilot provides support for PRUs in delivering initiatives such as the Safety and Cohesion Award Programme and advice regarding the implementation of S.H.A.R.P (School Help Advice Reporting Page) and the DCSF Prevention of Violent Extremism toolkit. The pilot aims to support PRUs to ensure that they can offer young people safe learning environments. A further workstream focuses on issues of **quality assurance** surrounding PRU provision to increase understandings of the quality of provision that should be expected when commissioning alternative provision. Alongside this, the pilot also contains an element that focuses on developing a

**design blueprint for PRUs** based on the formation of a series of statements of principles and practices to assist local authorities' assessments of potential designs for PRU construction or refurbishment. Furthermore, this pilot also contains a significant workstream focussing on developing **restorative approaches** in PRU settings, involving the delivery of specialist training to staff and the promotion of organisational and cultural change in relation to conflict resolution. Work towards producing a **curriculum development model** aims to provide a curriculum self-review workbook through which PRU heads can improve their practice in the context of agreed London-wide curriculum principles. For example, these include the need to ensure that provision effectively responds to individual needs; PRU pupils achieve nationally accredited learning outcomes and that attainment is used as the key measure of accountability. A key element of this pilot's overall design and operation centred on leadership by partnership involving contributions from number of key individuals and representatives of organisations, including London Councils, GLA and National Strategies.

In **Haringey**, Back on Track funding has contributed to the authority's overall strategy which aims to drive early intervention for young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) by building capacity in universal services through a comprehensive staff-training programme and the development of specialist local provision. The authority's strategy places a strong emphasis on schools maintaining ownership and oversight of pupils requiring additional support for SEBD. Over the course of the pilot, the LA has developed and refined its plans in order to meet changing local needs and to ensure that provision implemented through Back on Track is fit for purpose and sustainable. Significant enhancements have been made to facilities at the primary Pupil Support Centre (PSC), a registered PRU. This includes enhanced teaching and learning spaces and resources, new assessment and therapeutic facilities and improved recreation and outdoor areas. Staff at the PSC have also participated in a range of training activities to develop their skills and support their use of new ICT resources for example. In addition to this specialist provision, all primary schools receive additional devolved funds to purchase services to intervene early, including individual counselling from voluntary sector organisations. At secondary level, there is provision in each school, which includes on-site dedicated space for personalised work with young people with SEBD. The Young People's Centre (YPC), a registered KS3/4 PRU operates from new premises obtained as part of the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. This building has been further enhanced through Back on Track funding and includes a new assessment area, which is used in a number of ways. Staff use the facility, for example, to conduct preventative work with students at risk of permanent exclusion, carry out multi-agency work with families and complete pupil inductions and assessments, allowing students to adjust to their new environment and to build relationships with staff prior to their integration into a class. The strategy is supported by a fully accredited behaviour management training programme for staff including behaviour specialists, lead teachers and teaching assistants in primary and secondary schools across the authority as well as the PSC and YPC. The training is

based on the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) and NPSL (National Programme for Specialist Leaders) programmes.

## Changes to the delivery and strategic pilots

Over the course of the pilot programme, the initial stated aims, rationale and formats of delivery have generally remained central to the pilots' continued and actual operation, although there has been modification and refinement over time. In some cases, for example, initial aims focussed on meeting specified targets for young people's academic attainment have been widened and re-orientated with a greater emphasis placed on identifying and meeting wider social and emotional needs that act to inhibit educational progress. This perhaps reflects increasing recognition of the complexity of challenges, difficulties and needs of some young people accessing alternative provision.

# 3. The achievements and outcomes of the Back on Track pilots

**Back on Track - five key messages: Achievements of Back on Track pilots**

- Stakeholders perceive there have been a wide range of positive achievements across the pilots operating at different levels, including the generation of positive outcomes for young people, their families, schools and alternative providers, local authorities, and the local community. While the achievements may be numerous, varied and multi-dimensional, they are often not quantifiable in a way that makes them comparable. Achievements are also subject to change over time and the true extent of impacts and outcomes of some pilots may not yet be fully apparent.

- Overall, pilots have perhaps had the most significant impact in relation to effecting positive attitudinal change amongst young people. Within the pilot programme as a whole, there is evidence that less progress has been made towards meeting national targets for young people's academic achievement. However, there is a general consensus that many young people accessing the pilots have experienced greater levels of success in their education and learning than if they had not attended the provision.

- It is evident that specific inputs designed to have particular primary outcomes may also deliver a variety of secondary and possibly unanticipated impacts. Therefore, the true value of the Back on Track pilots may not yet be fully identified or apparent. There is a strong view that much of the value delivered by the pilots relates to their impact in preparing young people for positive future progressions.

- Much of the Back on Track programme was weighted towards improving the infrastructure of alternative provision, and as such, many of the impacts and outcomes may not be fully achievable in the short to medium term and will require more time to become embedded within local structures and systems of delivery.

- Impacts achieved by different pilot provisions may not be necessarily directly replicable in different settings, at different times and for different young people. There are a range of variables at play that influence the nature and level of achievements secured by young people attending the pilots.

This chapter describes the variety of achievements and impacts stemming from, and associated with the Back on Track pilots, including the range of impacts on young people and the outcomes generated for them. It also includes a discussion of wider impacts and implications of the pilots within their local areas, including for, schools, families and wider communities in which the pilot projects operate. Illustrative examples of impacts achieved by the pilot projects are provided throughout and the voices of young people, parents/carers and practitioners are presented through

verbatim quotes to highlight their personal experiences of the Back on Track pilot programme.  The chapter begins by presenting the various influences on the progress made by the individual pilot projects and locates their achievements, outcomes and impacts in wider contexts.

## 3.1  Influences on the achievements of the Back on Track pilots

The alternative provision pilot projects demonstrate a broad spectrum of aims, objectives and targets and form a continuum of approaches to, and levels of, intervention. Within this, some aim to offer short-term preventative packages of support whilst others focus on longer-term, broader reach alternatives to mainstream provision. Within each of the pilots operating along this continuum, the young people attending the provisions also display different levels of need, which is reflected in the wide range of outcomes evident across the pilots. Some of these outcomes are tangible and quantifiable while others can be described as 'softer outcomes', which extend beyond education-related progress, such as self-confidence and self-esteem, and are invariably harder to measure.

Pilots also exhibit different approaches in the recording of information and the measurement of young people's outcomes and achievements, presenting barriers to cross-pilot comparability. Some pilots focus on demonstrating outcomes through the attainment of nationally recognised qualifications at Key Stage 4. In other pilots, there is a greater focus on recognising the achievements made by individual young people in relation to specific elements of the pilots' content. As such, tailored outcome measures are used to document the change and development experienced by these young people in relation to their personalised alternative curriculum offer.

Assessment of success is highly dependent on the criteria and parameters of impact, which vary among the young people attending the pilots and across the pilot programme. In many cases, the key outcomes delivered consist of a series of lower-level developments, such as the ability to make eye contact and use appropriate language etc. These have intrinsic value in their own right, and may also have greater significance in providing the essential foundations for longer-term, larger-scale, achievements and progressions. Furthermore, variations in the outlook of staff (and their professional role and remit) may also influence the ways in which success is perceived among the whole range of stakeholders involved in alternative provision:

> *The head of centre will have quite a holistic view and he will want them* [young people] *to be better people, more engaged, with outcomes. You talk to the Key Stage 3 coordinator, and she would be very much about qualifications, what they need to progress. If you talk to student support, it will be about how well they are prepared for life and if you talk to some of the teaching assistants it is around them being happy. That's why these places*

> *work well because each member of staff is looking for a different outcome.*
> *They all want the kids to achieve but they all have a different passion.*
>
> (Local authority staff)

The capital build element of the Back on Track programme may also have implications for the timeframes in which the delivery of outcomes is secured and observed. This constitutes a further element of variability across the pilots as the relative progress made towards infrastructural developments influences the degree to which pilots' have, to date, become embedded and fully operational. The outcomes and impacts that have been observed may also continue to develop throughout and beyond a young person's immediate involvement with the alternative provision pilot and the extent to which positive progress is made may vary over time. As such, the ultimate outcomes supported by the pilot projects may only become fully evident in the longer term. This is especially the case of the pilot operating at a strategic level, supporting the development of systemic and attitudinal change within and beyond alternative provision on a regional level.

Given the broad spectrum of aims and objectives associated with each individual pilot project; the wide range of needs and abilities of young people attending the provisions; the variability in the levels and approaches to data collection and outcome measures; and the stage in the pilots development, it is not possible or appropriate to present a comparative audit of the achievements delivered through the individual Back on Track pilots. However, within this, there is considerable value, individually and collectively, in documenting and celebrating the successes of the pilot projects.

## 3.2 The achievements of young people attending the Back on Track pilots

This section provides a thematic overview of the ways in which young people have benefited from participating in the Back on Track alternative provision pilots. These achievements have been grouped into the following key areas:

- increases in attendance and retention in education and learning;
- developments in social, emotional and health related well-being;
- behavioural improvements;
- improvements in learning experiences and outcomes; and
- post-pilot progressions.

It must be noted, however, that alongside the many positive developments and improvements presented, it is evident that some young people across the pilots, have not experienced the levels of impacts anticipated and/or have not been able to achieve the desired outcomes. This chapter therefore also contains some references from stakeholders in relation to the challenges faced by Back on Track pilots in

securing positive outcomes for young people. This is explored in further detail in Chapter 7.

### 3.2.1 Improvements in attendance and retention in education and learning

Securing improvements in the attendance and retention of young people in alternative provision are key cornerstones upon which other intended impacts and outcomes are built. While there is variation across the Back on Track alternative provision pilots, it is apparent that many of the young people presented with significant gaps in their education and had experienced long periods of time outside of school systems and environments upon entry to the pilot provision. Securing improved levels of attendance is implicit in the stated aims of the majority of pilots and as such, key defining elements of their content and delivery are focussed specifically on facilitating access to, and supporting, young people's sustained attendance.

> *On the whole these kids were home tuition students that weren't in school for whatever reasons, whether they were excluded or they wouldn't attend. That's been quite problematic because we're really struggling with our attendance. A lot haven't been in school for years so they're in that routine of just being at home. It's really hard to break that and it's caused us a lot of problems. Our attendance is around 50 per cent.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Across the pilot programme, there is evidence of significant improvements in the attendance and punctuality of many young people compared with their previous levels of attendance at school or at other forms of provision. Such improvements often reflect attitudinal changes in relation to education and learning of both young people and, at times, their parents/carers. There is also some evidence of the impact on attendance resulting from relationships with staff and from the friendship groups and networks that may exist or develop amongst young people attending the pilot. In this way, the connections that develop between young people may act as drivers to support their increased attendance and that of others within the pilot. However, an ongoing issue for pilots relates to the difficulties in ensuring that these gains or improvements can be effectively transferred and sustained if, and when, young people re-integrate back into mainstream school settings or attend other provision.

> *Schools are wanting to see improved attendance, that's a massive issue for this group of kids. In this particular group, their maximum attendance at school is 75-80 per cent. They are all persistent absentees at school, but* [at the early intervention project] they *all have 100 per cent. That's a real impact, but the big job is to get that into school. An improvement of 10 per cent really is massive for these kids.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Patterns of sporadic and fluctuating attendance are evident across the pilot provisions and are often associated with complexities and changes within the wider circumstances and contexts of young people's lives. Many young people, for

example, experience instability in their home and family situations, which negatively influence their ability to engage. This can present significant and ongoing challenges to pilots in sustaining improvements in attendance. In such cases, quantitative recording and statistical averaging of attendance data will not reflect the significance and value of improvements that have temporarily taken place and therefore will not accurately represent the pilots' overall impact. This may be especially pertinent to pilots working with small numbers of young people where the poor attendance of a minority of individuals negatively influences assessments of overall performance.

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**Voices from Back on Track: Improvements in attendance and retention**

*One of the major successes is taking young people who haven't been in full-time education and getting them to attend full time. All of a sudden, they have full-time provision and that's a major shock to them.*

(Pilot project staff)

*There's kids in school now that wouldn't have been if this course had not run. They might have gone somewhere else and got GCSEs, but they may also have fallen down that black hole.*

(Pilot project staff)

*Last year, we definitely helped re-engage some students' interest in education. We got them to attend and to do something, anything at all. This in itself was a major achievement for some of them.*

(Pilot project staff)

*For some of them, we've shifted our attention from getting qualifications to just trying to engage them, just getting them here and on time is a major achievement.*

(Pilot project staff)

*Bearing in mind some of the kids are on 20 to 30 percent total attendance when they start attending the* [pilot provision], *it has definitely brought them up. We're not talking about kids moving from 95 to 97 per cent, we're talking about kids moving from 20 percent to 50 or 60 percent. I think that has to do with how they feel, the warmth that they're getting from the staff and the new building. What they've got to offer now is completely different to what they used to have.*

(Local authority staff)

**Back on Track illustrative example: Improving attendance**

This pilot works with disengaged Year 11 students who have a wide range of needs. Prior to attending this provision the young people were on roll at the local authority PRU or received home tuition. They had not accessed mainstream school or regularly attended full-time education in some time. The provider implements various strategies to support attendance, these include, for example:

- allocating overall responsibility for attendance issues to one member of staff

- making phone calls and sending text messages to young people and their parents/carers to maintain contact and encourage attendance

- carrying out home visits for those who are absent

- providing breakfast and opportunities for social interaction before lessons begin

- structuring the timetable so that young people receive short bursts of academic learning combined with lifelong learning activities in the afternoon to retain pupils throughout the school day

- a traffic light system for easy identification of attendance issues which are used in target and assessment meetings with students

- a reward system for improved attendance

- weekly meetings with the Education Welfare Officer (EWO) and referral of pupils who require further support.

In addition, Back on Track capital funding was used to create purpose-built premises in the heart of the city. The new location, which opened in the second year of the pilot, has good public transport links and has improved young people's ease of access to the facility.

The local authority sets the provider annual attendance targets in the service specification. In each year the pilot has been in operation the overall attendance of pupils has increased significantly compared to previous very low levels of attendance, however, it remains well below the target. The provider notes that despite numerous efforts some young people have not attended for the whole academic year and attendance figures are affected by the persistent absence of a few within a small cohort.

### 3.2.2 Developments in social, emotional and health related well-being

There are numerous examples across the Back on Track alternative provision pilots demonstrating impacts on aspects of young people's personal development. Although inherently difficult to define, and subsequently to measure, such outcomes are not only highly valuable in their own right but are recognised as being essential in the generation of other outcomes, particularly in relation to attendance, attainment and improved behaviour. Often referred to as 'soft outcomes' these impacts tend to be those which enable the young people to maximise their experience of learning.

Key enhancements evident in young people's personal, social and emotional development while attending the pilot projects include: increased contentment and the emergence of more positive outlooks; increased self-confidence and self-esteem; and the development of a greater sense of responsibility and maturity. Changes have also been observed in many of the young people attending the pilots manifest in their interactions with others, including their improved capacity to communicate effectively and appropriately with wide range of people, including parents/carers, peers, alternative provision staff, school staff and adults in general. Key related achievements also involve young people's increasing abilities to develop and maintain quality relationships in a variety of settings. Given the complex difficulties of many of these young people, such developments are seen as highly significant indicators of the extent of progress made.

Changes in the attitudes of young people are often associated with the positive impacts and outcomes they experience whilst attending the Back on Track pilot provision and are discussed throughout this section of the report. Such attitudinal change is evidenced through young people's increased engagement with the content and activities delivered through pilot provision. In addition, perceptual changes in the relevance and benefits of education and learning for young people's future progressions are also apparent.

Lifestyle and health-related impacts are also observed in some of the Back on Track pilot projects which have actively sought to promote healthy eating and exercise amongst young people through various aspects of the provision's content and delivery. This includes, for example, the provision of breakfast clubs, food-growing activities, opportunities to produce meals for young people and staff attending the provision, and through sport and physical activities that appeal to the young people.

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**Back on Track illustrative example: Developments in social, emotional and health related well-being**

This pilot offers full-time curriculum-wide provision, in partnership with external learning providers, for 14-16 year olds who are at risk of permanent exclusion or who have been permanently excluded, are without a school place, or are otherwise unsuited to a mainstream school environment. Provision staff identify that the young people who attend the provision may often feel marginalised, labelled, and socially and educationally excluded. The core rationale of the project, therefore, is to provide young people with an appropriate balance of pastoral care, guidance and support, alongside academic opportunities: 'to ensure that students leave the [provision] well-qualified and prepared to be adults in the wider world' (Pilot project staff). Developments in social, emotional and health related well-being are central to this aim, and the pilot provides:

- a weekly dedicated sports and physical well-being afternoon, encouraging young people to develop their confidence and sense of wellbeing, and to foster positive relationships with others;

- an on-site kitchen, which young people can use to prepare meals for themselves and their peers;
- citizenship, diversity and cultural heritage lessons, to help young people understand more about themselves, their peers, and their roles in society;
- therapeutic enrichment work focused on supporting young people to overcome their specific social and emotional challenges;
- health-related activities to meet specific curriculum needs (for example, sexual health), and weekly nurse visits so that young people can access health services on a regular basis.

The progress made by young people is overseen by a dedicated learning mentor, who is responsible for ensuring that appropriate support is put in place for each individual. Students themselves report that they highly value this relationship with a trusted mentor, who they can approach to address concerns and celebrate success. As a result of these interventions, staff at the pilot report that their students have increased self-esteem and sense of pride in their achievements, which is reflected in their aspirations and ability to plan for the future. Furthermore, both staff and students report that they feel safe at the provision, which has enabled them to build positive relationships with their peers and families. Students have also learned important life and independent living skills which support their preparation to adult life.

*For many of our youngsters, their backgrounds and their lives are in chaos and we provide the only structure to their lives. Interestingly, in our Ofsted inspection our youngsters did say that they feel safe when they are here and don't often feel safe when they are not here. That was something we aimed to achieve because without them feeling safe, happy and secure we don't feel that they are able to achieve and function.*

(Pilot project staff)

*My view has changed* [since coming to the pilot]*. One time I got up in the morning and I was a bit late, and my mum said you don't need to go to school if you don't want to. And I said no, I want to go to school. That's what I like about this place is that it makes me want to come here because you can do your work but you can have fun at the same time.*

(Young person)

**Voices from Back on Track: Developments in social, emotional and health related well-being**

**Voices of pilot project staff:**

*A lot of them are so damaged, developmentally, that a lot of what we do is trying to catch that up. They might have some kind of learning disability, or if they've been abused, traumatised, had a terrible upbringing. We work so hard looking at how we can get them to catch up in those areas where they've been emotionally stunted.*

*They come in wearing hoodies, not talking, smoking, fighting with each other. We eventually get them to go to orienteering sessions, working in groups, making shelters cooking food, looking after their kit, working together. It is impossible to quantify these things, these are skills that they need for the rest of their lives. The majority of these kids will not ever move out of their area. They need to build*

*resilience and independence if they are to have any chance at all in the future.*

**Voices of parent/carers:**

*He's improving at school and his attitude is changing. He is becoming more respectful and is apologising without being asked to. It's bringing out his good side. He's much more confident about things, and much less quick to say 'I'm stupid'. He's proud of the things he does here. He shows me a bit more respect to me as well. He's thinking through his actions more now. At school, he's learned to not respect anybody, but by coming here, there's been a huge turnaround in just eight weeks.*

**Voices of young people:**

*I used to be dead bossy with people and couldn't stand working with anyone else. But here, all we do is team building and it teaches you how to meet new people and how to get on with everybody without winding them up. I like working in a team now and I now know that if you listen to everyone's opinions, then you can get it done quicker.*

*I'm much happier now than I was. When I was at school kicking off, I did feel happy because it was good fun, but I also felt angry. Teachers used to say 'put your hand up if you need help and we'll come and help' but I used to feel embarrassed because all the other kids could do their reading and writing properly. So I'd just cause trouble. It's different here, because I know they understand me and they will help, so I don't have to fight everybody and everything. It's just calmer now and I can think straight 'cos I don't feel bad about myself like I used to.*

### 3.2.3 Behavioural improvements

Many of the young people accessing the Back on Track alternative provision pilots exhibited a range of highly challenging behaviours which made it difficult for them to maintain a full or part-time place within mainstream school either through their own agency or as a result of exclusion or a managed move. Pilot provisions aim to support and improve the behaviour of young people so that they are able to engage with, and succeed in, education and learning and to develop and maintain appropriate relationships in, and beyond, their educational provision more generally.

Young people attending the pilots have demonstrated a number of behaviour-related changes and when considering the outcomes and impacts generated by the alternative provision pilots, it is essential to focus on the distance travelled by individual young people in meeting and addressing their specific behaviour-related needs. The extent and range of the behavioural difficulties exhibited by young people attending pilot provisions mean that even small improvements in behaviour are often viewed as significant achievements. It is also the case, however, that positive developments in behaviour may not always be sustained and the extent of improvements may be subject to fluctuations over time.

#### Attendance behaviour

One of the key changes across the pilot provisions relates to modifications in young people's patterns of behaviour including, for example, their willingness and capacity to regularly attend a particular provision. Therefore, whilst young people accessing

the Back on Track pilots may not always meet required levels of attendance, their actual presence at the provision for at least some of the time is viewed as a success and projects seek to build on these transforming and evolving positive behaviours. This is especially pertinent for those pilots working with young people who have been out of, or missing from education for long periods of time, or those young people with entrenched behaviours of non-attendance at school.

> *The project is really good at working with some young people that have chosen to disengage from formal education… and good at engaging and keeping those young people engaged in the provision. What we've got* [at the pilot] *is the ability to keep their interest and keep them coming ... that's a real positive for me, we've got something that is clearly capturing the attention and keeping the interest going for that particularly difficult group of young people to engage.*
>
> (Local authority staff)

## Conduct and demeanour

One of the most prominent changes in the behaviours of young people observed by staff, parents and young people themselves is a change in their general demeanour and conduct. This is manifest in many ways, including for example, acting with greater maturity, showing greater respect to the staff, an increased willingness to take on responsibilities and acting as mentors to other young people in the provision. Often such changes represent highly significant transformations and contribute to the foundations upon which further positive developments (social and educational) can be built.

> *When they come in, there is a huge lack of respect and their total reluctance to sit in a classroom is absolutely phenomenal. They will do what they want to do and they will not move from that. They sit in the corner, smoke and play on their phones, tell the staff to 'F' off. The thing I find most upsetting and concerning is that they don't care about the consequences, now, and for their futures.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Although various pilot personnel (and school staff) note positive changes in the way young people present themselves whilst attending the projects, it is recognised that many young people still exhibit serious signs of disengagement and unwillingness and inability to work with the pilot. In many cases, this indicates the need for earlier intervention and increased time spent at the provision in order to effect long lasting, positive changes.

## Engagement and participation

Young people's challenging behaviour in school may stem from their difficulties in maintaining concentration and from becoming bored or distracted, leading to problems with classroom management and disrupting the learning of their peers. As a result, many of the pilots therefore seek to improve young people's ability to actively participate and engage whilst attending the provision and also back in school if they are still on roll. This is evidenced through improvements in many of the young

people's attitudes towards, and active participation in, the curriculum and activities that have been designed to provide interesting, relevant and engaging opportunities to help reconnect young people with learning.

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**Back on Track illustrative example: Increased engagement and participation**

This Year 11 pupil is on the roll of a special school and attends the Back on Track alternative provision project part time. This young person's needs present significant barriers to learning and include learning difficulties and social and emotional problems related to complex family circumstances and home environment. Although still attending school, there is a high level of unauthorised absence (30 per cent). The school supports attendance though a strategy of incentives and rewards, including recreational activities.

*When he is here in school, he doesn't buy into to any lesson or anything. He has to be taken to lessons and kept there with threat of consequence, because he is terrified of failure and will not try anything new. He gives off this massively aggressive set of signals, threatening staff members, refusing to leave rooms and kicking doors. His physical and emotional refusal to go to lessons is a coping mechanism that he has for not being able to do anything.*

*But, when he's* [at attending the alternative provision project], *he'll happily spend three hours* [engaged in a variety of creative activities]. *For him, that is an unbelievable success. He'll actually come into school and tell me what he's done. It is absolutely massive that he is doing that. And as a result, week-by-week, he is behaving better at school, and beginning to engage more here as well.*

(School/PRU staff)

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## Self-management

Further positive outcomes demonstrated by young people attending the pilots also extend to greater self-control and an increased ability to remain calm in challenging situations, understanding the key risks and responding appropriately without resorting to aggression. As a result of the strategies, techniques and support provided through pilot projects many young people have demonstrated reductions in disruptive, violent and other anti-social behaviours inside and outside of school. A key impact of the pilots has been to improve the conditions, triggers and pressure points, supporting young people to modify and develop their own behaviours and to display greater levels of concern and empathy for others.

> *An offshoot, what we didn't expect, was 85 per cent of parents saying there was improved behaviour at home – they're off the streets, not engaging in antisocial behaviour. A lot of benefits for the community and these kids are happier.*
>
> (School/PRU staff)

Although many of the improvements in behaviour are not formally measured or quantified they may be associated with tangible outcomes such as reductions in

behaviour related fixed-term and permanent exclusions and other school based-sanctions. A reduction in young people's offending behaviour was identified as an effect in some of the pilots as the provisions occupied and stimulated the young people during the day filling their time with credible and alternative activities.

In those pilots where young people returned to mainstream school after attending alternative provision (generally as a time-limited, short-term intervention), positive outcomes have been observed in relation to their ability to remain focused and behave appropriately in lessons. Students are felt to be more able to work productively in a busy classroom environment (often supported by a dedicated member of support staff), and are less likely to respond disruptively in challenging situations. In some cases, it was felt that young people have developed the necessary skills to avoid conflict with others (related to, for example, their ability to foster positive relationships with peers, and increased respect for staff). In other cases, young people feel able to temporarily withdraw themselves from lessons and invoke coping strategies developed in the pilots in order to resolve any concerns. Successful outcomes in mainstream school contexts appear, however, to be dependent upon the continuity of support across settings: a consistent approach to managing behaviour in both the pilot and mainstream environments is an essential condition for success in order to sustain and enhance the positive impacts generated through the pilot provisions. As such, communication and relationships between alternative provision and mainstream schools are key.

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**Voices from Back on Track: Behavioural improvements**

**Voices of young people:**

*It's taught me to behave more, think about other people's feelings and be aware of what I'm doing to other people and that teachers at school have a life too. They are still humans and they do have lives and they can get upset as well by the things I do so I'll act differently when I go back.*

*Before I came here I used to be a little s\*\*\* at school, always getting kicked out and that. There was always loads of trouble going on, so I joined in, kicking doors in, winding up the teachers, fighting with the immigrant kids, and just doing what I wanted. We all just used to mess about like a riot. The teachers used to chase us round the corridors. I was just bad really. I've been to three different schools. I was just running round, chucking chairs round the classroom. At my last school I just walked out after smacking a teacher in the face. I've really started to sort myself out by coming here.*

*I get on with people now and I don't hardly fight anymore. It's hard to say why, but it just feels better here. I'm not on edge so I don't have to behave badly. I suppose it's about growing up and getting on with doing stuff.*

*I was always into fighting at school. I got excluded for fighting and putting one lad in hospital. I'm different from coming here because I've got the discipline and learned how I should and shouldn't behave. I don't go out any more, I don't go fighting, I don't drink any more. I stay out of trouble and stay on my own and I don't go out*

> *causing trouble because it's pointless, it's nothing clever and if I get nicked, it's not going to help me in the future is it?*
> *All my mates still hang round on the streets, causing trouble, smoking weed. I've told them I don't want to spend my life like that no more. They'll probably be on the dole, or get a job in* [a fast food restaurant] *if they're lucky. I walked away from all that. But you have to want to change your what you're doing, you have to want to change your life. You have to want to make it work. There's plenty of idiots who just come here and mess around.*

### 3.2.4 Improvements in learning experiences and outcomes

The learning achievements secured by young people attending the Back on Track pilot projects vary considerably, and are subject to a wide range of influences. Principally, the young people attending the pilot provisions do not constitute a homogenous group of learners. For some, gaining GCSEs or securing success in equivalent curriculum areas is a realistic and achievable outcome. However, at the other end of the continuum, young people who have been out of education for significant periods of time may present with low levels of basic and functional skills. For these young people, merely attending some form of alternative provision and participating in education and learning activities might, in themselves be considered to constitute significant academic outcomes. In such cases, pilots often focus on preparing these young people for positive progressions to future learning opportunities.

Within the overall diversity of the Back on Track pilots, providing access to high quality educational content and input is a vital component underpinning all the delivery pilots, although the quantity and type of provision varies across the different approaches. As a result, the learning achievements of young people are evident in many forms, ranging from a general improvement in, and engagement with, learning through to the achievement of formal accreditation and qualifications.

Ultimately, the learning achievements secured depend on many factors including, for example, the route of referral into the pilot, the specific point in time in a young person's educational career, their relationship with education and learning as well as the nature of their overarching abilities. There is also variation in the aims and rationales of the Back on Track pilots, and although they all seek to support the educational development and progression of young people in the long-term, there is disparity in their emphasis on delivering immediate accredited outcomes. For example, in one pilot, the offer is oriented around delivering an academic curriculum to a group of Year 11 pupils over one academic year with the ultimate intention of securing national standards at GCSE level. By way of contrast, in another pilot provision, the project consists of short-term early intervention courses for Key Stage 3 learners designed to increase their engagement with mainstream school and reduce the risk of exclusion.

All of these contexts and situations underpin the personalised nature of the alternative provision offers made to these young people and influence the nature of their learning experiences and achievements. Therefore, across the pilots there is

great diversity in the learning outcomes delivered to young people with a broad spectrum of needs, characteristics and contexts, which reduces the possibilities for, and value of, cross project comparison.

## Attitudes towards learning

Across the pilots, there is considerable evidence of emerging attitudinal change experienced by the young people towards education and learning. The positive impacts delivered by the pilots include facilitating young people's awareness and understanding of their current abilities and their potential to achieve. Much of the pilots' content and activities focus on the provision of opportunities for young people to experience success in a way that they may not have done previously. As well as providing a sense of accomplishment, successes in learning can also provide an essential foundation for incremental developments in their engagement with, and progress in, education. Changes observed among young people attending the pilots include: a greater interest in learning and the acquisition of knowledge generally, paying greater attention in class, and completing set work and tasks. There is also evidence of young people's increasing recognition and acceptance of the need to make further improvements in aspects of their learning, especially when considered in relation to their future progression opportunities and life prospects. Central to this is young people's greater awareness and acceptance of the value of acquiring qualifications in order to successfully transfer from the pilot to further education, training or employment, or return to mainstream school. Many pilot staff members commented that some of the most significant impacts of the various elements of provision and interventions in place revolved around changing young people's perceptions of the value of education.

## Participating in broader areas of learning

Many of the pilots are particularly successful in facilitating young people's access to bespoke personalised learning offers that entail opportunities to learn in a variety of new academic or vocational areas. Further impacts stem from the different approaches to teaching and learning delivered in and through a variety of alternative environments. Combined with improvements in attitudes towards learning, this has enabled some young people to participate in aspects of learning that have previously been inaccessible to them in mainstream or other alternative settings. Through these opportunities, young people have discovered that they have abilities and talents which they can apply and develop in order to generate successful outcomes whilst attending the pilot and possibly beyond into future education and employment destinations. There is also evidence that many of these young people are now beginning to actively and meaningfully engage in learning activities.

## Progress towards achieving accredited outcomes

A further significant outcome of the Back on Track pilot programme stems from the increasing emphasis that pilots place on ensuring young people have access to appropriate accredited curriculum content and activities. This has led to young people participating in accredited courses in the areas of functional skills education, academic, vocational and work-related learning, personal and social development

and sports and leisure related pursuits (see Chapter 2 for an overview of the range of the accredited outcomes offered by individual pilots). This emphasis on providing access to a wide range of accreditation routes increases young people's opportunities to progress from pilot provisions with formal and transferable qualifications for the learning they have experienced.

As with other areas of impact, notably attendance, the formal recording and assessment of the learning outcomes experienced by young people attending the pilot provision may not accurately reflect the true significance and value of improvements that have taken place. Some of the learning outcomes are immediately evident while others may emerge later in the learning careers of young people. Equally, learning achievements can be subject to a wide range of other influences and there is variation in the level to which these pilots contribute to overall learning outcomes. This adds further complexities in the measurement and attribution of pilots' impacts on young people. Despite this, there is a perception amongst project staff, school representatives, local authority personnel and young people and their parents/carers that through attending the pilots, young people are experiencing (and expect to obtain) greater achievements than they had previously in either mainstream school or other forms of alternative provision.

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### Voices from Back on Track: Educational achievement

**Voices of young people:**

[The pilot project] *helped me to get GCSEs, which I know I wouldn't have got without them.*

*Because of the extra support here, you can get lots of qualifications if you're willing to put in the work.*

*I'm glad I came here, as I think it was the best place for me. I couldn't have coped in mainstream and probably wouldn't have got any GCSEs.*

**Voices of pilot project staff:**

*When they get the awards* [project based achievements]*, it is a sense of achievement to them. And they are starting to realise that they will need qualifications to get a job and to get on in life. This is achievable to these young people because we deliver courses made of small manageable chunks. At school, for them GCSEs were never going to happen, so they retreated from it and behaved in ways that got them into trouble at school.*

*They get a real sense of achievement – they like being outside doing things. In school, they'd be in isolation all day, and in trouble all the time, but here, their self esteem goes up because they are succeeding at something.*

*Our point score last year was something like four times the national average for PRU provisions. The national average is 60, 70 and we have got 240 points which would be almost respectable for mainstream. The outcomes for the kids are massive considering what they've have been through, they have achieved so much more with us than perhaps if we hadn't existed.*

**Back on Track illustrative examples: Improving attainment**

This pilot focuses on the achievement of academic qualifications. It works with some of the local authority's most disengaged and challenging Year 11 students for one year. Many of the young people join the pilot provision after having previously attended the local authority PRU or accessed home tuition. They generally have very poor levels of prior attendance and engagement and may not have accessed the GCSE syllabus or completed any coursework previously.

*We have high expectations of students at* [the pilot project], *and are committed to teaching GCSEs. This has been a successful ethos, as our expectation of students has led to them becoming more confident and believing that they can succeed.*

(Pilot project staff)

The attainment targets set out by the local authority in the service specification are challenging given the nature of the cohort of young people and the time-limited nature of the provision. This highlights the need to set targets that are realistic and achievable whilst still being aspirational in order to ensure that appropriate provision is in place for the whole cohort of learners attending a particular pilot.

**Example 1**
A young person with a statement of SEN had previously attended a number of different educational environments. Whilst attending this pilot project, staff noted that this student has become more engaged in education and focussed on completing assignments and participating in other learning activities. As a result, this student has successfully completed GCSE coursework requirements in at least one core area as well as achieving a BTEC qualification in a vocational area. Central to this student's achievements have been increased self-confidence, motivation and dedication to learning facilitated and supported by pilot personnel.

**Example 2**
This young person participated in a range of academic and vocational curriculum areas, English literature, English language, Maths, ICT, Media, Sports Leadership and BTEC Sports sessions, all at GCSE level or equivalent. Initially, low levels of attendance and continued disengagement from learning, led to cautiously low assessments of performance and predicted grades. As involvement in the pilot progressed, there were some improvements in attendance levels and staff noted significant developments in the student's attitude towards learning, reflecting the realisation this was the final opportunity to gain academic qualifications.

This was evident in the efforts made to complete GCSE coursework, in some instances staying after hours to make sure the work produced exceeded the minimum standard or requirement. This attitude continued into the exam period, and the young person sat every required exam, ultimately leading to the achievement of 'C' and 'D' grade GCSE qualifications in core areas.

## 3.2.5 Post-pilot progression

The aims of all the Back on Track pilot projects contain an emphasis on supporting and preparing young people to secure appropriate progression opportunities and positive future destinations. Reflecting the range of contexts and situations of the young people there is significant diversity in the future pathways sought by the pilots.

## Re-engagement and reintegration with school and learning

The successful post-pilot outcomes for young people who have completed short-term, time-limited, early intervention provision are principally evidenced through enhancements in their engagement with mainstream school and learning. Further successful outcomes also involve young people experiencing repaired relationships with school staff and peers and their increasing ability to build resilience and implement strategies to self-regulate their behaviour, reduce their risk of exclusion and maintain their continued presence at school.

Young people accessing the Back on Track alternative provision pilots have experienced varying levels and types of post-pilot reintegration outcomes. For some young people this includes return to full-time education in either their home-school or another school, whilst reintegration outcomes for others entail a combination of school-based and alternative provision-based learning. A significant challenge faced by all pilots involves the difficulties sustaining improvements generated for young people whilst attending the pilot project when they transfer back to mainstream or progress on to other educational provision. In addition, the limited availability of suitable next-step provision has also been seen as significant challenge to reintegration and progression in some cases. Although the post-pilot destinations for a cohort of young people attending one provision include a small number of young people engaging in reintegration programmes in either mainstream or other alternative provision environments, significant barriers to the success of these still remain. In discussing the potential for positive reintegration to mainstream school, a member of staff at a pilot commented: 'these kids' emotional issues don't go away when they leave here, and their parents who've got all the issues don't go away either'.

> [Name of young person] *was doing really well when they left here and went back into* [educational provision], *but mum has started drinking again and attendance has dropped off.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

> [Name of young person] *did really well here. He had a goal that he wanted to get out of here and he engaged well in the reintegration programme, until he got himself involved with a couple of the dodgy characters in the mainstream school. As a result, he's too scared to carry on attending the programme.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

**Back on Track illustrative example: Outcomes of early intervention and preventative strategies**

One pilot provision working specifically with Key Stage 3 pupils has an early intervention aim to prevent young people from becoming further disengaged from education. As such, content is delivered that focuses on identifying and addressing issues, challenges and behaviours that are increasing the risk of these young people becoming significantly disengaged from education and potentially excluded from school. Over the course of the pilot programme, multi-dimensional intervention packages have been delivered and this has been regarded as highly successful. Demand from schools for places on these time-limited courses has exceeded capacity, illustrating the positive perceptions of their input and value.

*Many kids have built up a whole mountain of fixed-term exclusions before they come here, so we're really looking to reduce this rate because it has such an impact on permanent exclusions. In the first year that this project has been running, permanent exclusions have dropped by 50 per cent. Data from last year shows that 67 per cent of schools said that their kids were less likely to be permanently excluded as a result of this course. For the first year of a project that started from scratch, that's not bad.*

(Pilot project staff)

## Post- 16 progressions

The majority of the Back on Track pilots are supporting young people in Key Stage 4 and therefore the post-pilot outcomes for this cohort of learners are typically diverse and are particularly orientated towards preparing young people for transitions to positive destinations.

> *For some of them, the ones who have not been in school for two years or more, it would be impossible for them to fully re-integrate into school. They come to us until they reach leaving age and we build in the additional things that they need, like numeracy and literacy, but first of all, we have just got to get them to engage before we can start tackling that. Then we try and prepare them for moving on.*

(Pilot project staff)

Across the pilots, outcomes are evidenced through the successful progression of young people to post-16 learning activities delivered through the alternative provision pilot itself or via associated or subcontracted providers. Such outcomes include for example, accessing further education, training or employment opportunities, or a combination of these elements. In addition, there are also numerous instances whereby young people themselves are beginning to actively consider and seek out post-16 progressions as a result of attending the pilot projects. Hence, key impacts of the pilots also centre on aspirational developments and changes in young people's perceptions and attitudes that can support successful transitions to adult life.

One of the key successes of many of the pilots working with learners in Year 11 has been in securing positive post-16 destinations to college-based courses, focussing on academic and vocational learning as well as independent living and life skills

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training. Some young people accessing the alternative provision pilots have also obtained placements at, and transferred to, training providers where they can continue and develop the vocational learning pathways which they began whilst attending the pilot provision. There is also evidence that a small number of young people have been able secure part- or full-time employment including apprenticeships with local employers. However, despite the success of pilots in helping young people to secure post-16 placements, these may not always culminate in successful transfer and retention. The economic climate may make this even more challenging for all young people especially those leaving alternative provision.

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### Back on Track illustrative examples: Post-pilot progressions

Key achievements associated with this particular pilot project centre on the emergence and increased availability of a range of opportunities through which young people can continue their personal, social and educational development at, and through the project, in post-16 contexts. A variety of positive destinations and progressions have been secured for a number of young people with particularly challenging and complex needs. Despite several young people not continuing their attendance at the project, and others not successfully making appropriate transitions, fourteen young people have secured positive destinations into employment, apprenticeships, and further education, including through the pilot's post-16 provision opportunities. The range of destinations, including employment and training opportunities available through the pilot demonstrate its contribution to expanding the reach of educational and social provision in the area.

**Example 1**
This young person had a history of academic underachievement at mainstream school, and was experiencing sustained and persistent absence from school combined with mental health issues, substance misuse and a disjointed home/family. On joining the alternative provision pilot, this young person presented with significant self-esteem and self-confidence issues, and was unable to make eye contact and engage with others. Whilst attending the provision, vocationally-oriented accreditation units were gained, self confidence increased which led to enrolment on a mainstream college course. Although this was not ultimately completed, the pilot's impacts on this young person have supported and enabled this learner to find local employment in an area of interest developed and nurtured whilst attending the pilot project. The young person states that s/he will always remember how important the project has been to him/her, how it has helped him/her, and that that no matter what s/he did, staff would always support him.

Following his transition from the pilot, this young person has sustained and continued to improve more positive family relationships brokered and encouraged through support accessed via the project and has ceased misusing substances. Although now no longer formally accessing the provision, links have been maintained and support and advice is still available. There is a general agreement that if s/he had not attended the pilot, this young person would not have been willing or, emotionally and academically able, to access employment and was likely to become NEET. Furthermore, family relationships could have continued to deteriorate which could have culminated in homelessness and involvement in offending behaviour.

**Example 2**
This young person attended the pilot provision for three years following a significantly fragmented educational history, involving several permanent exclusions. Whilst attending this project, particular skills have been developed, and with the support of project staff, this learner has been offered a place at college to pursue a vocational qualification. As well as the specific activity-based input, the alternative provision project has, and continues, to provide a wide range of associated learning, social and practical support to ensure the transition to this positive future pathway is achieved. This has included intensive literacy and numeracy support (delivered by pilot staff and senior personnel from key educational provider partners) to ensure that this young person can meet the college's required level of functional skills, the production of a high quality portfolio demonstrating technical ability, as well as advice and guidance surrounding interview skills. In addition, a key member of staff accompanied the learner to the college interview and the pilot project provided financial and logistical support to ensure potential barriers to attending the interview were reduced.

## Voices from Back on Track: Post-pilot progressions

**Nurturing aspirations** *We are getting these kids back on track by getting them to think about their futures, to make them think about their responsibilities and to make them aspire to be good at something. If we can inspire that, the kids will take that with them wherever they go. That's our duty and that's our key achievement. We're making a difference to their futures. We have turned them round after the very difficult lives they've had so far. We have lost one or two, and they have gone down a very rocky road.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Enhancing employability skills**: *One of the most important things we've given them is an understanding of employability skills. They now know what it's like having to be somewhere on time, learning that they will have to do things they don't want to do in the workplace. It is really useful that they learn to do this here, in a safe place, rather than in the workplace where they will be sacked if they kick off. Here they keep getting second chances until they understand, so it gives them the space to get ready to move on.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Progression to FE college:** *There have been better vocational outcomes so some of the Year 11's have been allowed to progress into college. The fact that they're in an environment here that is similar to college, but they're allowed to have blow-out spaces to learn how they're supposed to behave in these environments, has made it easier for them to progress successfully.*

(Local authority staff)

**Progression to mainstream school 6th form:** *We are reducing our NEET figures all the time. A lot of NEETs are PRU kids, but for the first time this year five of our leavers have gone on to school 6th form which is massive. Previously they would have been permanently excluded and they would never have been allowed to access any school provision post-16. That figure is out of about 80 leavers but it's a massive change because they are actually choosing to go back to their old school, where they felt some level of rejection, and carry on learning and that is totally through this work. Because they're still on the mainstream school roll they have*

*access to their school inclusion managers, they they're still developing and getting accredited outcomes that are going them enough points to get in and because they have kept those links they still have the relationships.*

(Local authority staff)

**Progression for teenage parents**: *Connexions are saying that there are nearly over 300 teenage parents in between the ages of 16 and 18* [in this local authority] *so we've now developed a post-16 offer in partnership with the local college. The plan is we'll have an induction day on the first week and then this group will come in on the second week for three days a week. What we would like to see is them do a 12 week programme and then hopefully progress them into college and then take the next group. In addition to that what I have said to Connexions and the College, is that I am offering child care places in the nursery for teenage parents who can access the nursery if they live locally and then if they want to leave them here and then go onto college, because the new nursery will take 27.*

(Pilot project staff)

## 3.3 The wider achievements of the Back on Track pilots

Along with the numerous impacts and outcomes evidenced for young people attending the Back on Track alternative provision pilots, many other positive developments and achievements have been experienced by a range of stakeholders in various contexts and settings. This includes benefits for:

- pilot local authorities
- schools and other education providers
- families
- wider communities.

Many of these impacts and outcomes are overlapping and particular achievements of the pilots may be relevant to, and experienced by, various different parties.

### 3.3.1 Impacts within pilot local authorities

A fundamental impact of the Back on Track alternative provision pilot programme stems from the availability of dedicated and protected government funding. This has been of critical importance especially during the climate of economic instability and downturn which developed over the course of the pilot programme and which saw the cessation of other public programmes of capital investment such as Building Schools for the Future (BSF). Through the Back on Track ringfenced funding, local authorities, in partnership with other providers, have had the opportunity to maintain and improve provision for young people identified being at risk of not succeeding to their maximum potential in mainstream schools alone. A key achievement of the pilots has been the support available for local authorities' on-going commitment to, and prioritisation of, approaches to delivering high quality alternative provision. There are several key elements of this:

- infrastructural achievements

- workforce developments

- improved local perceptions and increased profile of alternative provision

- developments in professional connections and networks.

## Infrastructural achievements

The Back on Track pilot programme has provided opportunities for local authorities to reflect on and identify gaps or deficiencies in existing provision. It has enabled and empowered local responses and solutions to locally identified need and as a result, has broadened the range and diversity of young people able to access suitable provision. A central achievement of the pilot programme therefore relates to local authorities' enhanced abilities to offer many young people increased access to a greater variety of high quality and appropriate local alternative provision in order to meet a range of needs and secure relevant outcomes.

The Back on Track pilot projects have been particularly successful in improving the physical infrastructure of alternative provision in their localities through a commitment to new build schemes or extensions to existing sites; programmes of extensive refurbishment; or a combination of these two approaches (see Chapter 4 for further details on infrastructure developments). Fundamental to this are the increased understandings and awareness of the importance of considering the connections between the built environment and physical infrastructure and improvements in the alternative provision opportunities on offer to young people. A central element of one strategic pilot, for example, focussed on developing resources and support to be used in the conceptualisation, design and operation of alternative provision spaces.

> *We've come up with the key, un-deniable factors that you need to think about when designing a PRU which is fit for purpose, safe for young people and will really help them to learn and make progress.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

These investments in the infrastructure of alternative provision have underpinned pilots' ability to develop and evolve their methods and approaches to teaching and learning. They have also provided opportunities to deliver new and enhanced educational activities, content and curriculum areas and to further support aspects of young people's social, emotional and behavioural development. In this way, pilots have, for example:

- increased their capacity to offer enhanced vocational learning opportunities on-site

- integrated educational and learning experiences with 'real life' everyday settings and contexts

- engendered increased feelings and perceptions of safety and security amongst young people attending the provision

- facilitated improvements in access to, and effective delivery of, a range advice, information and guidance as well as various therapeutic interventions within specific sites.

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**Voices of Back on Track: New buildings**

*Because of this new building and refurbished site we've been able to radically improve what we deliver to these young people, and how we do it. It's a whole new way of thinking and working because we have access to this space. This is a real cafe. The young people know that what they're doing matters. They have to make good quality food that people will pay for, they can't get away with second best. If they don't try their best and come up with good quality, then they will have to deal with real customers and they have to learn to interact appropriately. It's not a training exercise, it is real world and it is such a good learning experience for them and they respond and rise to it so well.*

(Pilot project staff)

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## Workforce developments

Alongside the expanded activities and opportunities associated with the physical infrastructure of the Back on Track pilots, significant positive developments have been identified for elements of the alternative provision workforce. Firstly, revenue funding has in some of the pilots allowed increases in staffing numbers, either through the direct employment of staff, or through the increased ability to contract-in external practitioners in order to maximise the potential benefits of the new capital and physical infrastructure. Furthermore, the provision and operation of new and improved buildings with associated enhanced resources and facilities is, in many cases, accompanied by the recruitment of specialist staff through Back on Track, contributing to the overall effectiveness of the provision on offer. These include for example, specialist teachers and practitioners, technical experts in various practical and vocational areas such as horticulture, music, engineering, ICT, media, sports, catering, and retail. (For a broader overview, see Chapter 4).

As a result, expanded alternative provision workforces with enhanced, broadening skill-sets, abilities and approaches, are developing across the pilots supporting and improving the ability within local authorities and their partners to establish personalised packages of provision for many young people. Across the pilots, there is evidence that improvements in the physical infrastructure of the pilots have also provided an impetus for the provision of enhanced staff training and professional development opportunities.  Alongside positive developments in working environments and conditions, such situations have been seen as driving improvements in staff recruitment, retention and morale within the pilots.

## Improved local perceptions and increased profile of alternative provision

The Back on Track pilot programme has also provided local opportunities to reconceptualise and reconsider alternative provision, and there is evidence of increased understanding and awareness amongst education and social care providers within local authorities of the potential and value of alternative provision. Senior staff in various local authorities have outlined clear visions for, and acknowledgment of, the pilots' strategic contributions to, and positioning in, local and regional alternative provision frameworks. There is also some strength of feeling that the status and profile of alternative provision is being raised within the pilot localities, partly as a result of the levels of capital investment and the consequent improvements in the physical manifestations of the pilots. Key achievements therefore involve the symbolism associated with high quality of the infrastructure, resources and locations of the pilots, which have been identified as helping to counter negative perceptions of the marginality of alternative provision and those accessing it.

> *This pilot has helped to guard and protect alternative provision from being conceptualised as low quality provision that is in place for those that mainstream schools don't want. It is not just somewhere to put them until they are old enough to go somewhere else, like the army or prison because there are no jobs for them.*
>
> (Local authority staff)

The majority of the Back on Track pilots have also been successful in generating longer-term impacts and legacies for the future development and improvement of alternative provision. Although the physical infrastructure delivered through Back on Track is key to this, there is also evidence that the pilot programme has also had positive achievements in terms of highlighting the possibilities of, and visions for, alternative provision.

## Developments in professional connections and networks

There is evidence across several pilots that connections and relationships have developed between professionals working within the local education sector as a result of the Back on Track pilot programme. The pilots have also contributed to the development of increasing inter-sector relationships and cross-cutting work between professionals from different agencies and organisations operating locally and in some cases, regionally. One of the strategic pilots has been effective in creating links between its core areas of activity and other strategies, policies and networks in the region. Key achievements and learning from this pilot have, for example, been incorporated into the capacity building and expertise-sharing events held by other high profile strategies in the locality.

**Back on Track illustrative example: Developments in professional connections and networks**

One of the Back on Track pilots specifically aims to promote strategic approaches to improving the experience of young people and professionals working in the local authority PRU sector. The development of a network of PRU head teachers has been established through this pilot, although challenges have been encountered resulting from wider instability and disruptions within the PRU sector. Despite problems associated with staff turnover, the network that has been established provides participating professionals with opportunities to meet three times a year, as well as facilitating access to an enhanced on-line communication infrastructure. Through this, training and professional development via leadership coaching and mentoring support is available so increasing the regional and sub-regional capacity and quality of PRU based alternative provision. There is a sense that access to this professional network has begun to increase communication and cohesion between professionals working in dispersed geographical locations, and diverse social and economic contexts.

**Voices from Back on Track: Impacts within pilot local authorities**

**Raising the profile of alternative provision:**

*At the starting point, there was a real downer on PRUs – there was a lot of negative feeling about and towards them. We've shown there is a lot of exemplary practice and this needs celebrating. We have demonstrated that we can do some good things, we have achieved some good work, and there are things that have yet to come of age, but we can demonstrate that we've got the processes in place - we can demonstrate legacy. We now have no PRUs in special measures and that wasn't the case when we started.*

(Local authority staff)

**Developments in networks and cross-sector working:**

*The London Serious Youth Violence Board has been holding a series of best practice seminars, and one was on the restorative approaches work undertaken by our pilot. There was over one hundred people attending and although some were from PRUs, most were from YOTs, the police and local authorities.  So the Back on Track brand and our successful restorative work was the hook that their organisations could use to get wider understandings of how they could learn from, and work with us. That's a very good value added outcome of this pilot.*

(Local authority staff)

*There's been a lot of cross-cutting work between the pilot and the work of other partners. PRU heads can now access resources and advice and support from people in other sectors that they couldn't access. There's now a lot of linkage through this work, whereas before, things happened separately.*

(Local authority staff)

### 3.3.2 Impacts on schools and other educational providers

The impacts of the Back on Track pilot programme have been felt by schools at various different levels and in different ways. One of the most common impacts evident across the pilot programme relates to schools' increased access to enhanced alternative provision for some of their pupils. Within this, school staff involved in referring young people to alternative provision have a wider choice of opportunities available to them either though the introduction of new and innovative approaches or the expansion and enhancement of existing provision.

New and increased opportunities for contact between school staff and pilot provisions have underpinned developments in staff perceptions and understandings of the needs of young people and the ways in which they can be met through alternative provision. In addition to this, there is increasing recognition of the role and value of alternative provision in delivering a range of positive outcomes for young people.

As an additional development, school staff can benefit from the varying forms and areas of expertise within the alternative provision workforce. In one of the strategic pilots, for example, a core area of activity focuses on improving the design of the physical infrastructure of alternative provision, in a way that will also provide opportunities for enhancing and building capacity within mainstream settings. A recommendation developed in the outputs of this pilot contains the principle that the effective design of new or refurbished alternative provision centres ensures enough flexibility for it to be used with, and by its partner schools

In some cases, pilots have provided CPD opportunities for teachers either through increased contact with pilot staff, or through the delivery of specific training programmes to increase the school's capacity to meet the needs of all its pupils. Furthermore, in several of the pilot areas, the wider pupil populations within schools may also benefit through current and future opportunities to access the resources and facilities offered through, or available at the pilot provisions.

Schools also benefit from the positive effects of any gains made by their pupils while attending alternative provision pilots upon their reintegration to, and retention at school. Similarly, where a pupil accesses some form of alternative provision whilst remaining on a school roll, the attendance, attainment and behaviour related outcomes they achieve also have corresponding impacts on their school's performance against national indicators. Within this, some of the most significant achievements of alternative provision experienced by schools, may not relate directly to academic outcomes generated for these young people:

> *I have struggled to get a qualification for many of these young people because they came to us for such a short time, with such low educational histories. The schools accept that these pupils will not get a qualification from us, but they are happy that the youngster has a much improved attendance history because they've been to us and they have learned to behave*

*appropriately. We provide stepping stone to something else once they have become engaged and their general behaviour has improved.*

(Pilot project staff)

In addition, relationships between schools and parents/carers are seen to have improved as the latter have increasing evidence of the positive steps being taken by schools to support and maintain their child in school by taking up the opportunities offered by the pilots. Several parents commented, for example, that efforts made by schools to source and support appropriate alternative provision for their children demonstrate the level of commitment the schools have for young people.

*Rather than just giving up on* [name of young person], *because he can be a real pain, and I'm sure the school would sometimes be happier to get rid of him, they've tried really hard to find something that he likes, somewhere that he can be good at something, and it is helping him to get on better when he's back in school. It shows they care.*

(Parent)

Finally, there are also examples of how the diversification and expansion of alternative provision opportunities in a local area as result of the Back on Track pilot programme has contributed to raising standards of provision. The presence of new providers is seen to have had an inspiring and motivational function as well as having introduced some element of competition in the local alternative provision market.

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**Voices from Back on Track: Impacts on the standards of other alternative provision**

*I think the key thing is that we have moved from having a single provider with a monopoly, a traditional PRU, to a situation of where you have a range of different providers. So we have Back on Track providers, we have the local authority PRU but also we have the four mainstream satellites, and each is trying to maximise the outcomes for the youngsters that they are responsible for. There is a much stronger focus on outcomes than there was previously and I think that has been brought about partly by having a number of different providers and there being an awareness. The game is being raised, the bar is being raised, the expectations are being raised. So, within the local authority PRU, they have raised their game. They have got much better outcomes than they had prior to Back on Track and now the average point score for the students is going up, year on year.*

(Local authority staff)

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### 3.3.3 Family impacts

Across the pilots, some of the parents and carers of young people attending the provision had poor experiences of school themselves and this could have influenced their children's relationships with school and education. There is some evidence that attempts by pilot staff and other practitioners to actively involve parents have been successful in increasing their participation and roles in the decision making process surrounding their child's attendance at a pilot provision. This increased participation in the early stages can be an essential factor in determining the ongoing success of

their child's attitude and relationship with the provider and the setting. Parents' relationships with education have also improved through feelings of greater connectivity with pilot provision staff and other sources of support. This includes formal advice and guidance such as the provision of parenting courses, as well as informal support and contact on an ad-hoc basis when issues arise.

The impacts and outcomes for young people delivered by and through attending the pilot provision are seen to have associated consequences for enhancing and developing relationships in the home environment. This is evidenced through perceptions of increased levels and frequency of positive interactions within the family, improved and more appropriate communication and reduced incidences of conflict, tension, and arguments. These impacts underpin and also reflect the possible transformations in parents' attitudes towards the behaviour and achievements of their children as a result of their attendance at the pilots.

A wider impact of one of the pilots in particular is evidenced through the work undertaken alongside, and in association with, several local authorities to develop approaches to identifying the needs, and providing support for the parents of young people accessing PRU provision. Although not directly responsible for delivering the actual content, the Back on Track pilot has been instrumental in identifying the need to develop practice in this area and in securing funding from another partner. As a result, five local authorities are being supported in a pilot programme focussed on implementing advocacy programmes for young people and their families to help them maximise their potential through attending PRUs.

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**Back on Track illustrative examples: Family impacts**

Working closely with other local authority support services, one pilot has developed provision for groups of vulnerable young parents. This resource-intensive provision offers an alternative to existing parenting courses 'where the mums are in the classroom and the babies are in the crèche looked after by someone else'. This provision is underpinned by a holistic, integrated approach designed to counter the issues and challenges that may put these families at risk of disruption and separation. Course participants develop skills and functions that help them to look after themselves and their children in ways that prepare them to cope more independently.

*There is so much learning embedded in all of this; they learn how to play without plastic, TV, computers and IT. They learn how to cook with a baby round their feet, how to feed a baby, how to communicate to it. There's a lot of self-assessment and self-development work as well. Their attitudes towards food, how they look after their home have all changed and they have a more positive approach to life. The aim is that they then become part of this whole big community, so that they, and their babies, won't need this level of intervention in the future.*

(Pilot project staff)

*Eleven of the first 12 girls have gone on to do college courses and one plans to go to university to do child development. She is now employed by us to help deliver*

*the other courses. One couple who attended the course have now been able to get their two kids back from care and are now successfully operating as a family, with a lot of support from the local authority.*

(Pilot project staff)

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**Voices from Back on Track: Family impacts**

**Informing parents of issues**: *Kids aren't here because they are born naughty, often it is because they have family issues. So if you have a child that's been in trouble for a one off, parents are looking for them to go back to mainstream as quick as possible, they will be very interested. They will be very critical, and they will want to know the outcomes. A child that has always had issues, always had family issues, it is very difficult to engage the parents. I make a point to ring parents if it is good, bad or indifferent news so they will answer the phone to me because if it is always bad news they will not answer the phone. I like parents to contact me if they have had a bad night or there have been issues at the weekend. There's now good relationships with all parents.*

(Local authority staff)

**Enhancing the range of communication methods**: *Linking with all the families is difficult because we are a borough-wide provision also because of the size of the numbers involved, we can't just have parent gathering. Parents will come in if they have a problem, so dialogue is there. If we need to do a home visit, we will. We do a newsletter, we communicate with parents by ringing them up. We are sending more letters now as follow up. We are sending more reviews home for the girls, so every six weeks there is a review done and sent home. We don't have a parents' evening but I keep thinking about that. I am also looking at how we would populate a website. It is sort of in place and that would be another link to parents. The other thing that we are doing is planners, because in schools kids have planners, we can get the girls to put things in there and the parents can look in there.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Celebration events**: *The parents have been a key dimension in what we've done, because we've tried to maintain a lot of contact with parents. We had a presentation ceremony and we invited all the families and all the work-related learning providers to say thank you to everybody who had contributed. That was really nice, chatting to some of the parents who said some fantastic things. One Mum said 'thank you for putting up with him because not only have you had an impact on* [my son's] *life, but you've actually had an impact on the whole family's life as well.' Another parent was saying that she believed if her son hadn't come to* [the project] *he wouldn't have been in the positive position that he is now.*

(Pilot project staff)

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### 3.3.4 Community impacts

As highlighted previously, the Back on Track pilots are diverse and dynamic in their aims and operation, and some were initially conceptualised and designed to have an element of community involvement and impact, whilst the focus of other pilots was more centrally orientated towards delivering support specifically to young people.

Despite this variation, it is apparent that the Back on Track pilots have a number of positive impacts on the communities in which they operate.

## Increased access to resources and activities

Several of the buildings constructed or refurbished through Back on Track pilots have increasing community access as an ancillary aim and function. In some cases, this is manifest as the increased availability of particular resources and spaces that can be used by the local community including, for example, sports, leisure and ICT facilities, and other education and learning related resources (see Chapter 4 on infrastructure for further details). Pilots have been successful in hiring out sports halls, meeting rooms, conference facilities, opening up access to training courses which on some occasions create work opportunities for young people attending the pilot as well as other local people. This involvement also provides some pilots with revenue streams that contribute to their sustainability and on-going operation. One pilot in particular demonstrates particular success in engaging with the local community through its commercial and retail operations in which the young people play a critical role. This centres on the establishment of a series of interconnected enterprises and activities within the umbrella of the pilot. This entails the production of organic produce which is sold to the cafe (which is a central component of the pilot), as well as to other local wholesalers and also through a 'veg box' scheme. This has firmly cemented the pilot, and the young people accessing it, in wider social and commercial structures in the locality.

## Increased opportunities for local participation

Local people have become involved in several of the pilots, either as volunteers, or as paid members of staff. As well as providing positive opportunities for these individuals, this also broadens the range of skills, experiences and outlooks present within the pilot, so enhancing the offer made to young people. In addition, publicity and promotional events, such as open days and festivals of celebration, have made significant contributions to forging closer links between local (alternative) education provision and the young people attending it with their local communities.

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**Voices from Back on Track: Wider community impacts**

*At least when they're here, they're not on the streets causing trouble – saving the tax payer money and improving the quality of life for the local community. So the achievements are visible. What they learn here about respect and behaving properly, they take with them and they do apply it outside, in the community.*

(Pilot project staff)

*There's massive difficulties with territorial rivalries and a lot of gang-related trouble in the local community. We used to make sure that different people from different areas came in on different days to avoid tensions and trouble. Then we decided to pair them up with other kids they saw as coming from the 'enemy' area. It worked very well. To start with, they wouldn't talk to each other unless they were making threats, but then we took them away from their normal environment, put them in the woods to do an orienteering exercise. They had to cooperate and work together to*

*get back. After some time, this worked and it was sustained. So those territorial problems reduced and they'd see each other on the streets, at night, and they'd still be getting on OK.*

(Pilot project staff)

*Back on Track has opened up the building, they have these great big mirrors put up in the gym – you know like dance mirrors. The gym has been offered to the public now, classes take place there, and they open it up at night to the community. So the community will go in and use and obviously their perceptions of it, and the kids that go there have changed.*

(Pilot project staff)

*Because of the extension to the catering they're opening up, almost like a little conference centre where the kids will produce all the food, and we now get all our buffets from the* [pilot project provision], *so they bring it in, they provide the tea and coffee. So, there's more people that come in and see it.*

(Local authority staff)

*There were two buildings that were foul, they were eyesores really so it's enhanced that part of* [the local area], *and I think it will definitely help with the community work.*

(Local authority staff)

# 4. The infrastructure of the Back on Track pilots

## Back on Track - five key messages: The infrastructure of the Back on Track pilots

- The Back on Track pilots provide opportunities for young people to access high quality buildings and resources, experiences and activities that may otherwise be unavailable to them. The attractiveness and condition of buildings is seen to be particularly important for these young people in terms of making them feel valued, supporting increased motivation and engagement

- The enhanced spaces, places and facilities of Back on Track in themselves cannot promote change and deliver the pilots' intended outcomes, but they do provide the necessary physical contexts that can be brought to life and given increased meaning and value by the staff who work in and through them. Effective delivery of a wide range of alternative provision curriculum content and activities can stem from the creative interface of the places and people involved in alternative provision – the physical and the social infrastructure of the pilots.

- Opportunities for pursuing innovation and creativity in approaches to staffing in the Back on Track pilots have been beneficial in the effective delivery of the alternative provision offer. Increasing the breadth and depth, and promoting diversity within the workforce can support the engagement of young people.

- The effectiveness of alternative provision can be positively influenced by the interplay between the nature of the provision and the characteristics of the staff, highlighting the value of matching staff with the ethos of the provision. Focussing on relationship building within the pilots is key to securing young people's engagement with the curriculum content and activities.

- The Back on Track pilots have illustrated strategic approaches to reducing isolation and promoting networks of support for practitioners and have promoted sharing of good practice within and between different sectors involved in working with, and delivering a range of services to, young people accessing alternative provision.

This chapter illustrates the ways in which the infrastructure of alternative provision impacts on the delivery of the offer made to young people. As such, key elements of pilots' approaches to improving the built-environment of alternative provision, as well the issues and challenges they face in doing so, are discussed. Key features of the workforce, particularly the characteristics of staff are also explored to highlight the ways in which they contribute to improving the delivery of the alternative provision offer across the pilots.

## 4.1　The physical infrastructure of alternative provision

Much, but by no means all, of the accommodation traditionally associated with alternative provision is regarded as being of poor quality, and as such, presents a range of challenges to the effective delivery of high-quality educational experiences. Impoverished facilities and restricted resources can limit the activities and content that can be delivered. Furthermore, the symbolic and perceptual connotations associated with such environments can inhibit young people's engagement and buy-in to the provision, mitigating against the formation of positive self-imagery, belief and aspirations.

> *A lot of the PRUs look like Victorian workhouses. They're often old school buildings that then got turned into special schools, and when they got new premises, they eventually got turned into PRUs. The young people don't like going to them and the local residents are not happy about them being there. PRU buildings have such negative associations.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

The Back on Track pilot programme has provided opportunities to re-conceptualise the design process and principles underlying the creation of fit-for-purpose, effective and inspiring buildings and spaces. The significant capital investment has improved the physical infrastructure of alternative provision in these areas and has resulted in enhanced settings in, and through which, high-quality provision can be developed. The majority of Back on Track capital build funding has been directed towards Key stage 3 and 4 facilities with the exception of one pilot with an early intervention focus, which directed some of its capital investment to a primary (Key Stage 1 and 2) provision.

Across and within the pilot programme a combination of the following developments occurred:

- the construction of entirely new and discrete purpose-built alternative provision premises
- the provision of new buildings on, or significant extensions to, existing school and other educational sites (including the purchase of land)
- programmes of significant refurbishment and upgrading of existing buildings, including schools and PRU sites, youth centres and commercial premises
- the purchase of non-permanent structures, including prefabricated rooms, mobile units and outbuildings such as sheds and greenhouses.

Pilots have focused on developing high-quality physical environments to facilitate positive atmospheres, where young people feel comfortable, secure and valued. Buildings have also been created and enhanced to broaden the curriculum offer so that young people can access areas of learning that are appropriate to their needs and are interesting and engaging to them. Across the pilots, developments in the

infrastructure differ depending on the nature of alternative provision being offered and specific local needs. The infrastructure of the Back on Track pilots includes:

| | |
|---|---|
| • catering facilities | • crèche facilities |
| • hair and beauty salons | • gyms and changing facilities |
| • agricultural and horticultural facilities | • outdoor sports facilities |
| • specialist crafts and trades workshops | • commercial café and in-house bakery |
| • aquaponic systems (indoor or outdoor) | • breakout and anger management rooms |
| • cycle maintenance workshops | • 'chill-out' room, common room and socialisation spaces |
| • BMX bike track | • confidential meeting and counselling rooms |
| • ICT suites | • family reception areas |
| • science labs | • assessment areas |
| • design and technology workshops | • enrichment rooms and sensory spaces |
| • medical room | • training and conference facilities |

In addition to these specific elements, pilot projects have also designed new (and adapted existing) layouts to make their buildings more suitable for the effective delivery of alternative provision. Typically, this involves expanding provision in order to support a greater number of learners, including post-16 provision, and/or providing a greater amount of space to offer additional activities. The creation of workshops, teaching rooms and vocational areas in some pilots, for example, enables pilot staff to deliver a broader range of activities on site. Similarly, the additional space allows others to offer new activities that former premises prohibited, such as breakfast and after school clubs and more diverse extra-curricular activities. In one pilot for example, 'learning pods', which are distinct purpose-built private areas have been constructed for students to work alongside learning coaches. A further key element within a number of the new builds and refurbishments within the Back on Track programme is to create an infrastructure with capacity that allows for expansion and growth, thus increasing the potential for pilot provisions to evolve and to be accessed by wider groups of learners, partners and the local community in the future.

Across the pilots, the infrastructure of provision has been developed to make it more aesthetically appealing and engaging to young people and staff. This includes creating environments which replicate the appearance, character and format of other learning establishments such as, schools and colleges as well as workplace settings. In several cases, the creation of high-quality buildings combined with state of the art facilities offer learners parity in the quality of provision typically accessed by their peers in mainstream education. In some settings, the range and quality of these facilities even exceeds those available in other local schools.

The developments in infrastructure also mean improved working environments for staff. In addition to providing personal office-space for senior staff and enhanced staffroom facilities, new and enhanced buildings, spaces and resources support teachers' ability to deliver wider elements of the curriculum, and allow them to implement varied teaching and learning styles. In designing new spaces for alternative provision, some pilots specifically include areas to permanently or temporarily accommodate other service providers, for example, youth service, Connexions, health and therapeutic professionals. In addition to co-location, these enhanced and expanded spaces also provide opportunities to support improvements in multiagency working.  Infrastructural developments have also contributed to fulfilling safeguarding responsibilities by providing young people with safer learning environments. This includes the addition of formal and separate entrances to provisions that are supervised by staff and improved approaches to security such as lockable gates, fences and CCTV systems.

In developing new alternative provision settings through the Back on Track programme, much consideration has been given to the location of new premises. For some pilots, provision is concentrated in one centralised setting, for others there has been distribution of provision across several sites in the authority. Both of these approaches are underpinned by the need to increase the physical accessibility to alternative provision as a means of encouraging improved attendance. The decision to situate new buildings in close proximity to other educational establishments has also been made with the intention of sending clear messages to young people and their families they are valued parts of wider local learning communities. Such locational characteristics can also facilitate enhanced post-pilot progressions such as reintegration into mainstream environments or onto nearby colleges.

> *In terms of its old location it was at the extreme end of the borough. Some of our young people were having to get three buses to get here and we believe that impacted on attendance. Now we are much more central and we are much more assessable to everybody.*
>
> (Local authority staff)

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**Back on Track illustrative example: Developing new physical environments for alternative provision**

In one pilot, a central element of the design of the physical environment focuses on ensuring the creation of conditions and environments that could improve young people's engagement with learning and education. As a result, across the five newly built centres, the seven centres created from redevelopments of existing school buildings and the two centres incorporated into new build schools, the design features support and symbolise inclusion. Attempts have been made to ensure, that although having distinct identities, these specialist centres form, and are understood as, integral parts of the schools that they support.

**Voices from Back on Track: The impacts of improving alternative provision facilities**

**Improved perception of alternative provision**: *What Back on Track has done* [in this local authority] *is ensure that there is now a lot of thought that goes into the learning environment for these pupils. Key to their engagement is that they feel that you're investing in them and they have got good quality facilities so that they immediately feel that you're bothered. Initially, they are going to feel that coming out of the mainstream system for any amount of time is a rejection. A lot of the children have attachment issues so that really impacts on them. By having good facilities that will meet their needs that overcomes a lot of barriers straight away.*

(Local authority staff)

**Creating familiar high-quality environments**: *We did some interviews with young people a few weeks after moving in* [to the new building], *they were very clear in saying that it feels like a real school. They have come from schools that are very technology-rich and now they can carry that on because it now feels as if they are coming into an environment where they are valued.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Enhanced interface between mainstream and alternative provision**: *The thing that the partnership schools want most out of the building is the catering area, because none of the five mainstream schools have catering as one of their vocational areas. What they're wanting to do is use it as a part-time provision for kids at* [the pilot provision], *but staff it with staff from the five partnership schools, so that the partnerships can use it. So again it's blurring that boundary* [between mainstream and alternative provision].

(Local authority staff)

**Improving the offer and profile of alternative provision**: *I'd say that now some of the provision is even better than what they've got in mainstream so that also enhances engagement. One of the partnership schools in the cluster has a group of kids who come here, not PRU kids, just other kids that come and access the ICT technology area as a discrete lesson. The kids who come here because they've got to, see that other kids come here to access the facilities, which again emphasises to them that they are getting a better deal than other kids.*

(Local authority staff)

**Supporting engagement with learning**: *In our old building, one of the Ofsted limiting factors was the fact that the nursery is next to where the girls are taught. Back on Track has had a massive impact because now the girls have got a proper learning environment which they didn't have before. It enhances the curriculum, enhances the resources. We can have proper lessons in a single classroom rather than parallel lessons. They can have lessons away from the nursery. It's had a massive impact and that is leading them much more to leaving their children. So they are less distracted by the little ones.*

(Pilot provision staff)

**Increased ability for higher-level accreditation**: *The money has allowed us to extend the range of assessments that we can do on site and off site with our horticultural skills. It emerged that there were certain assessments that you couldn't do with the set up we had. So by introducing things like the greenhouse, this has*

*meant that they can do more stuff. Last year the ceiling on our offer was a level one certificate, we now have a number of youngsters going for the diploma.*

(Pilot provision staff)

**Increased opportunities for early intervention and partnership working**:
*Through Back on Track we have an assessment corridor for early intervention and preventative stuff. We are really working well with the schools to prevent children coming here. When a young person is referred to us, often the family, not just the young person are pretty distraught about the fact that there has been this permanent exclusion and are reluctant to come in. So we try to keep them separate for the first week so that the young person is away of the rest of the group. The other thing that has allowed us to do is that a number of schools will ring us and say, 'we are in danger of excluding this young person, can you help?' and they will come to us for that assessment. That kind of level of assessment did happen before but not for as many people. The new building has allowed us to do much more intervention to prevent the permanent exclusions.*

(Pilot provision staff)

**Facilitating interaction with parents**: *I think from a parent's point of view, and other agencies actually, it allows an area where there aren't other young people to be concerned about, because there are some issues with postcodes in the borough* [gang rivalries and territoriality issues]. *Also, the parents feel that they've got a place where they can come and meet with people that they will then get support from. Previously the space was really tight for meetings and now that we have got this luxury of having rooms that we can either use for a one-to-one, or multi-agency meeting. It's a room that people can speak confidentially in and know they are not going to be interrupted because it's quite separate from the rest of the school and the students.*

(Pilot provision staff)

## 4.1.1 Effective approaches in the design of high-quality alternative provision spaces and places

A core element of one of the strategic Back on Track pilots involves supporting innovation and creativity in the design of alternative provision centres. Although focussing primarily on the design of PRUs, the overarching principles and guidance produced are transferable to and applicable across, other settings and establishments. This includes the refurbishment of a single classroom, an entire PRU or a new-build provision on a new site. Central areas to which the principles and statements relate, include the need to consider role and contribution of a building design's role in:

- reflecting and supporting the visions and values of the establishment so that the design and physical manifestation of the provision can offer a level of care that will help young people to get back on track and promote access and inclusion

- supporting partnership working, including facilitating access to other partners, enhancing the centrality of PRUs in providing key resources and expertise

- enhancing curriculum delivery

- promoting personal development and wellbeing of young people by accommodating approaches to address conflict and bullying within the school community.

These principles and associated design statements have been developed with the overarching aim of producing a framework for consistency in the design of new buildings that senior leaders and other stakeholders will buy-into when considering the form of new or refurbished buildings. A key strength of the approach taken stems from the opportunity provided through Back on Track to assemble a diverse group of professionals to explore and devise solutions to the difficulties and challenges associated with the design of some existing PRU (and by extension, other alternative provision) settings.

In addition to the lead role played by professionals from the PRU-based alternative provision sector, efforts have been made to capitalise on the rich diversity of expertise available in the region. The inclusion of representatives of arts and cultural organisations, behaviour specialists as well as architects provides a broad range of perspectives to underpin the process and can ensure that discussions remain focussed on producing realistic and achievable design principles that when applied, will result in the delivery of fit-for-purpose buildings. The process is further enhanced by research and best-practice visits to existing sites to explore the possibilities associated with designing appropriate, high quality alternative provision facilities.

> *Our work is successful because it is grounded in the real world experience of those involved. This makes certain that all the conversations held around the table about creating the vision of what makes the ideal alternative provision establishment have relevance to what's actually happening, and what can actually be achieved, out there in reality.*
>
> (Local authority staff)

## 4.1.2 Issues and challenges associated with the physical infrastructure of alternative provision

In addition to the benefits of the resources associated with Back on Track, representatives of some pilots suggest that the delays in receiving Back on Track capital funding allocations presented significant challenges to their ability to finalise plans for their proposed infrastructural projects. This entailed difficulties in identifying appropriate sites and premises and their ability to commence appropriate contract negotiations with relevant contractors. When the funding did become available, several pilots faced significant pressures in allocating and spending the monies within the required timeframes. This is seen to have increased the risk of inappropriate decisions being taken and the possible under-utilisation of funding, including less well considered decisions being made.

Alongside issues of timing, the other key challenges encountered centred on difficulties in securing required consents and permissions and official and unofficial challenges to proposed developments. Several pilots faced particular difficulties arising from opposition from elements within local communities. In addition, the benefits of some of the Back on Track capital will not be fully experienced by current cohorts of young people attending the provisions. In part, this situation has arisen as a result of the timeframes of operation and the delays encountered.  Furthermore, an additional central challenge to the potential impacts of Back on Track stems from the curtailment of BSF funding that was a key source of capital investment intended to support the rebuilding a considerable number of PRUs across the country, including the pilot local authorities. As a result, the intended building programme associated with one pilot faced significant delays and resulted in a considerable reduction in its ability to deliver its intended content to the numbers of young people initially anticipated.

Stakeholders have also expressed concerns that in some instances, the pilots have not been able to experience the full impact of the funding and that capital resources have been used to support developments outside the central focus of Back on Track.

> *When we were allocated this building, we were going to have sole use of it. But in reality, the capital funding has been used by the* [local authority] *to refurbish a part of the building to house* [other council services].
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Finally, although some of the pilots intentionally created an infrastructure with capacity to allow for future expansion and growth, there are some instances where new facilities have been provided but not yet utilised to their full extent. In part, this has arisen from existing budget limitations that place restrictions on the presence and availability of staff to operate and deliver learning in, and through, these new resources and settings. Furthermore, the lower levels of ring-fenced revenue funding received by pilots through the Back on Track programme, combined with difficulties in securing and/or maintaining funding from other sources, have also contributed to the current and (potential) future under-utilisation of some infrastructural developments. In addition, there is some evidence that the skills and competencies within the existing workforce do not fully support the optimum use of these new resources and facilities. This may stem from issues within the initial planning and design processes of some pilot projects, possibly indicating an over-emphasis on developing facilities without appropriate and coordinated consideration of the additional staffing requirements that such recourses would require.

> *The refurbishment of the technology workshop has been fantastic. To be honest, because of my circumstances with my baseline budget, I haven't been able to introduce a technology specialist. We have been using the facilities but not to the extent that I would like. I can't afford to take on a technology specialist in the present climate. My ambition is to get hold of someone from our partner schools to do the teaching.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

## 4.2 Staffing developments

The Back on Track strategy recognised that ensuring high quality staffing is key in effectively meeting the range of needs presented by many young people accessing alternative provision. As such, the pilot programme provides opportunities for creativity and innovation in the staffing of alternative provision. Across the pilots, there are numerous examples of attempts to increase the capacity and development of the workforce associated with alternative provision, including the possible expansion and broadening of the workforce, and strategies to build existing capacity.

The following circumstances and characteristics are seen as essential elements of the pilots that are instrumental in improving the mechanisms through which the alternative provision offer is delivered.

### 4.2.1 Backgrounds and skills of staff

The opportunities for creativity within the pilot programme are seen as supporting the broadening of the characteristics of the alternative provision workforce within some pilot areas. Across the Back on Track pilot projects, individuals are drawn from a variety of different backgrounds, including: teachers, youth workers, social care and health professionals, ex-service personnel, artisan crafts people, farmers, bakers, caterers, musicians, and ex-professional football players. This diversity is recognised as a key strength of many pilots as staff bring with them different sets of skills, attributes and ways of engaging young people that may not be possible or appropriate in mainstream school settings.

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**Voices from Back on Track: Staff skills and attributes**

*I've got no teaching experience at all, but I've always wanted to work with young people with difficulties. I have worked in places in the past with lads who had problems and I was able to help them. I've a lot of experience and a lot of patience. I can relate to them because I'm a man of the world and I understand a lot of what they're going through.*

(Pilot project staff)

*Here the students can see that what I do is a practical means to an end – by doing this they could set up their own business, they could get a job. It hopefully rubs off on the students that I'm passionate and happy about what I do so it can inspire them to do the same in whatever area they're interested in.*

(Pilot project staff)

*Delivery wise, we have subject experts, so my maths teacher is maths teacher from a mainstream school who teaches GCSE maths. So there are specialists teachers and I think that is important.*

(Pilot project staff)

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Alongside the different perspectives that diverse staffing components bring to the pilots, there is also significant value in the potential role-model, or inspirational function that certain members of staff can have for some young people. In one pilot, for example, young people work alongside a range of independent artisan craftspeople as a means of increasing their engagement and development through practical activities. Although not designed to furnish these young people with all the skills and competencies to immediately progress to employment in these craft areas, the experiences and learning they are exposed to contribute to supporting their future progression. A key factor in this is that the tutors demonstrate to the young people, in real world contexts, that there are possibilities and positive opportunities for them.

Across the pilot programme, there is acknowledgement that many have been successful in their efforts to employ appropriately and highly skilled individuals. There is a wide range of staff able to offer a variety of skills and expertise in numerous settings and contexts. Within this, staff's behaviour management skills and approaches are seen as critical elements common to all pilots. The development and promotion restorative approaches in several settings is seen as a key development, reflected in the recruitment of staff with expertise in this area.

> *All the staff have their own areas in which they excel. The absolute strength of one of our senior practitioners is behaviour management, and her emphasis is on working with restorative approaches with her team, promoting this approach in relationships between staff members, between staff and students and between students. She now takes the lead role in behaviour management across the project.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

## 4.2.2 The characteristics and approaches of staff

Several pilots demonstrate close matching of the qualities and characteristics of staff with the underlying values and principles of the pilot project. Approaches to recruitment in several pilots are identified as being particularly effective in allowing the selection of a range of individuals with specific qualities that will make unique contributions to the overall staffing of the project.

> *At least two staff did horrendous interviews, but when we put them with the kids, they were amazing. We put them with the most difficult kids we could and they stormed it. You could just tell they just get these kids. They just have this ability to connect with them. That's the key to it all.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

There is universal agreement across the pilots that relationships are pivotal in the success of alternative provision projects whether short-term, lighter touch interventions, medium-term re-integration focussed initiatives or full-time provision for young people unable to succeed in mainstream settings (see Chapter 5 for details). Various characteristics and approaches of staff are identified as supporting the development and maintenance of effective and appropriate relationships within the pilot projects. Some of the key elements are highlighted below.

**Voices from Back on Track: Key elements underpinning effective relationships**

**Flexible approach**: *You have to be completely different with every kid. You have to be very familiar with them, build really good relationships, kind of be their mum or their friend. You also have to be a figure of authority and have boundaries. For me, it's getting that balance right that makes it successful. I have staff who struggle with that balance, the kids love them and they have really good relationships with them but they can't get them to do anything because they've taken that sort of 'I'm your mate approach' too far and they're not seen as a figure of authority. Some people go the other way and stand up to them all the time but the kids won't do anything for them because they've got no respect, they haven't built up that kind of relationship.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Mutual respect:** *The staff here are lively and engaging, they value the young people and there is respect and we can see that here. It's not an authoritarian approach, the staff make the effort to develop the relationships with the youngster and show positive regard for them. Once the youngster begins to feel that they are liked and respected that puts things on to a very positive footing which is the foundation upon which everything else grows and is built.*

(Local authority staff)

**High expectations**: *Staff have to believe in and promote high expectations for these young people, because quite often we're trying to combat quite a negative self-image and low self-esteem on the part of the young person.*

(Local authority staff)

*Being aspirational for the young people is absolutely key. If my staff don't expect the best from each young person, and don't do their absolute best to make sure they achieve it, there's no place for them here. All my staff are absolutely committed to making sure these kids do the best they possibly can.*

(Pilot project staff)

**The ability to build rapport**: *The kids don't get, or show respect at home, or at school. The son/mother relationship is difficult, and often these lads rule the roost at home if the dad's are away inside. We try and address this through promoting a series of rules like no mobiles, no smoking, no swearing – all the things that they take for granted elsewhere.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Resilience**: *Staff demonstrate a lot of perseverance, a thick skin and an incredible sense of humour. They've got to be really committed to working with these young people, and be resilient because they can be quite challenging on occasion. It's the fresh start that's really key. You can have some disappointing times but you've got to climb back out again and think no, I've got to give them another go.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Commitment:** *Underpinning it all is that the people that work here are massively committed and they want it to work. They will stop at nothing to make it happen for these young people. They go way beyond what other providers might do.*

(Pilot project staff)

> **Demonstrating empathy**: *The staff are all from the local area and have seen that side of lives themselves so they can empathise with the youngsters and talk about their issues and understand what it is like to live the sorts of lives they are living. So it's about being non-judgemental, empathetic rather than sympathetic, because it doesn't help anybody if you just feel sorry for them.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)
>
> **The ability to innovate**: *It works here because our staff will think of anything, and try anything that that might help make a difference in these young people's lives. We have people who are maybe prepared to take a different approach to more traditional approaches, but at the same time not letting them get away with things that won't help them in the real world and back in education.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)
>
> **Effective communicators**: *School could be a much better place if the teachers were all like the people here. No one would mess around and everyone would be better behaved. We do what these people here tell us. Teachers at school shout at me and I shout back. People here don't really shout, they speak to you in a civil way. They respect us more and treat us like adults but in school they treat you like a kid. In school, I only behave like a kid because they treat me like one – here I behave like an adult.*
>
> (Young person)

## 4.2.3 Training and professional development opportunities for staff

Pilots provide, to varying degrees, opportunities for proactive self-reflection and development amongst staff leading to skill development and capacity building amongst individuals and the projects as a whole. This is seen to be particularly valuable when staff have exposure to, and experience of, a wide-ranging portfolio of enhanced skill development opportunities in areas beyond traditional teaching and learning. In one pilot, for example, a scheme has been developed that actively encourages staff to attend several weekend residential training courses. The aims of these practical skills and therapeutic education courses are to help strategic and operational staff within the pilot develop wider understandings and empathy by becoming immersed in the learning process, generating learner-focussed perspectives on the activities and experiences that the young people themselves are involved in.

A key factor in relation to effective training stems from the encouragement of staff to develop their own bespoke training and development approach:

> *There is the hunger for people to progress. We've been working on everyone's aspirations and getting them to develop their own practice, supporting them with what can they do to help themselves.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

The training and career development opportunities and approaches of some pilots are seen to be of central importance in maintaining stability and consistency of the

workforce, encouraging retention and commitment. However, significant challenges to this have been identified throughout the course of the pilot programme as the economic climate deteriorated:

> *We see CPD as really important – it's the way we retain staff, but it has been really difficult.  I'm telling staff to have ambitions, but we don't know the funding situation will change and they'll be out of a job next term.*

(Pilot project staff)

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**Back on Track illustrative example: Approaches to staff training and development**

One pilot focussing on delivering early intervention support to Key Stage 3 pupils is underpinned by a multi-layered approach to training and staff development. This involves on-going informal development opportunities through de-brief sessions where practitioners and managers reflect on the events of the day. This includes the identification and celebration of particularly successful practice as well as discussions of possible areas for improvements. The sharing of collective knowledge and experience of staff forms a crucial part of development activities and approaches.

Alongside this, more formal termly group training sessions take place. In the first year of the pilot's operation, the content of this was largely focussed on behaviour management work. As the pilot has progressed, the emphasis has shifted towards providing staff with opportunities to identify and pursue particular areas specifically relevant to their own professional development. Training involves cascading of knowledge from more senior practitioners and professionals within the pilot to others, as well as opportunities to access external training.

*All the training is goal-orientated in terms of the goals of the project and of the individual staff. For example, one staff member has ambition to become a leader in the project. We've talked and I've told him the things I want to see for him to progress to the next stage. He's asked me to come in and observe his teaching using Ofsted criteria so I can feedback to him and can work on putting those points into play for his next observation.*

(Pilot project staff)

[One member of staff] *has been on a restorative interventions training course,* [another] *is working on her teaching and delivery of sessions,* [and another] *is coming with me into the schools to develop his understanding of how the whole process fits together. We support training in any way that helps the staff develop their own areas of interest.*

(Pilot project staff)

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## 4.3 The interface of the physical infrastructure and the alternative provision workforce

There are close links between the people and places of the Back on Track pilot projects. Often, the ambience and atmosphere of the pilot created by and through the staffs' characteristics and approaches is reflected in, and strongly influenced by, the provision's physical environment and contexts.

There are many factors at work in creating the right physical environment. The ability to offer small group sizes, for example, is often identified as a key factor of the pilots' success because of the opportunities for high levels of personalised interaction between staff and young people, as well as the reduction of the pressures and tensions often felt in larger group situations (as often experienced in school-based settings).

> *At school, I got pushed to the side and all the Down 's syndrome kids got all the attention. Here at the* [name of alternative provision], *they give me one-to-one help with reading and there's only three or four kids in the classroom. At secondary school, there's too many kids in the classroom. I can learn better here.*
>
> (Young person)

Ensuring appropriate group composition is essential to the effective operation of the pilot and the achievements of the young people. Communication, dialogue information exchange and comprehensive needs assessments are vital components of this and pilots have demonstrated considerable creativity and flexibility in their efforts to create suitable learning environments. Pilots often face significant challenges in this as a result of the complexities and difficulties faced by many young people originating in social relationships and situations beyond the pilot. Several pilots benefit from having either multiple sites, or a large site with various separate areas, as well as working with young people on a part-time basis, meaning that they can: 'avoid inappropriate mixing through our use of space and time' (Pilot project staff).

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**Voices from Back on Track: Ensuring appropriate group composition**

*We talk as much as possible to the people who work with these kids and those who know them well. We have different groups on different days, so we can fit different people into different groups according to their particular needs. We don't have the anxious school refusers attending at the same time as the more aggressive bullies.*

(Pilot project staff)

*A young girl came on a Wednesday, but this did not work for her as she was the only girl. We changed her days, but then another group of referrals came in, including a girl from the same care home. They'd had a huge fight a few weeks*

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> *earlier and the whole thing fell apart. We changed days again, and found a group with some of her friends so it's working well now. But it took time for us to get to know all the details so we could get it right.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

The nature, characteristics and layout of the physical environments are key considerations in establishing the most appropriate settings in which individuals can learn effectively in alternative provision settings. In some situations, elements of alternative provision are effectively delivered to young people in school-like settings, with associated structures and processes, timetables and codes of behaviours. For other young people, effectiveness stems from creating environments that provide alternatives to the settings from which they disengaged, did not experience success in, or were not compatible with.  Across the pilots, there are a variety of contexts which promote change and modifications in young people's behaviour, attitudes and capacity to learn. Within this, the layout of rooms, setting tables and chairs in circular patterns have been seen to make significant differences in young peoples' engagement. In one pilot, levels of engagement in the daily round-up session where all the staff and young people come together to discuss the events of day have improved by replacing a large single linear table arrangement, with a number of smaller tables facilitating small group formations. This replication of a 'cafe style' environment helps to create an atmosphere in which young people may feel more relaxed and able to express their thoughts and feelings – an essential component of the provision's approach and offer.  Similarly, the ability of some pilots to offer real-world work experience opportunities and environments is regarded as key to the success of the offer they make to young people.

> *We've noticed that a lot of young people just seem to have different relationships in different settings. Most of them will accept the rules if they understand why they are there. At school, they have to put their hand up to go to toilet. The kids don't like this. But when they're at* [a hairdressing provision]*, they just ask the shop owner and she will let them go. But, if the shop is busy, she will tell them that it might be better if they could have their break in a little while when it is less busy. The kids understand this and accept the decision, but crucially they don't see it as authority, they see it as a reasonable situation. But at school, they'd still react against it. It's down to the environment, and some environments just give off the 'don't conform' message.*
>
> (Local authority staff)

The environments of provision, combined with the approach and attitude of project staff mean that the various alternative provision offers can be delivered with a great deal of flexibility. There are numerous examples where pilots have been able to tailor the activities and content on offer to young people, and the ways in which they are delivered to suit their individual requirements. As well as offering a carousel of activities throughout the duration of a young person's attendance, at several pilots, there is also evidence of considerable flexibility on a daily basis. A critical factor in this stems from individual staff members' identification of what will work best for

particular individuals at particular times, and their ability to be creative in adapting the activities or content to meet their needs.

> *Their concentration can be low, so we can move them round here – three or four sessions a day to keep them interested. We're very flexible here in a way the mainstream schools can't be. When* [name of young person] *first started, I had to structure his day into three different sessions, because he just couldn't cope with a whole day. Now he can do a full day, but he has a lot of home problems to deal with. Sometimes all he wants to do sit down and have a chat, so we do. We have a cup of tea and a talk – it's all part of what we do.*

> (Pilot project staff)

A key element also centres on the ability of staff to create and apply appropriate boundaries within the overall flexibility of their approach to delivering alternative provision offers. For example, whilst it is often seen as necessary to allow learners choice in the nature of their learning activities, it is also essential to put appropriate parameters in place. This is especially important when pilots are focussing on preparing young people for future transitions especially towards work or college destinations. Whilst flexibility is necessary to encourage and support their engagement, young people must also be prepared and equipped to respond equally well in environments where they have less agency.

> *Just because they say they don't want to do something, doesn't mean we'll give in to them. They have to learn that in the world of work, they have to do things they don't want to do. The key here is that staff are skilled in recognising when, and how to be flexible with different young people.*

> (Pilot project staff)

Various combinations of these factors contribute to the creation of a range of ethos and atmospheres in the pilot provisions and staff have a pivotal role in creating the conditions that inspire and motivate young people to attend. This is essential in developing engagement with the project, then with learning.

> *We have an overall ethos which has been used successfully for over 20 years. It's about having the right people that work with these young people in the right way, that is appropriate for them, to give them the skills that they find useful, and meaningful for their futures, that they enjoy learning through a whole range of kinaesthetic and therapeutic learning experiences.*

> (Pilot project staff)

# 5. Constructing the Back on Track alternative provision offer

**Back on Track - five key messages: Constructing the alternative provision offer**

- Overall, the Back on Track pilots demonstrate success in promoting and delivering alternative provision offers, resources and facilities that equal, or in many ways exceed, the quality of provision that young people could access elsewhere.

- Developments and improvements in referral systems and processes in some pilots support the closer matching of individual young peoples' needs and the nature and composition of the package of provision devised.

- The Back on Track pilots have been particularly successful in offering a personalised approach to constructing and delivering alternative provision to a wide range of young people. In isolation, or as part of a wider portfolio of provision, the pilots make significant contributions to increasing the relevance and appropriateness of learning opportunities on offer to a diverse range of young people.

- The Back on Track pilots have provided opportunities for appropriate achievement and accreditation across the broad range of curriculum content and activities. This includes academic and vocational learning, and personal and social development. There have been significant advancements in ensuring that such accreditation is meaningful, relevant and transferable to enable young people to move forward successfully into post-16 provision or employment.

- The Back on Track pilots have demonstrated approaches to developing and delivering offers that appropriately meet all the needs of the young people. This encompasses the need to strike the right balance between the drive towards accreditation whilst simultaneously not being excessively focused on securing only 'soft' outcomes. The pilots illustrate the need to guard against replicating the approaches and environments that have been unsuccessful for these young people in the past, whilst also striving to maximise aspirations and potential to achieve in, and more importantly, beyond the pilot.

This section of the report illustrates and explores the key developments made by the Back on Track alternative provision pilots in order to offer young people high-quality learning opportunities and experiences that meet their varied needs, abilities and interests. It also highlights the issues and challenges encountered by the pilots in applying these key underlying principles of Back on Track to ensure the centrality of the learner and improve the educational quality of their offer. The following sections describe how the pilots developed to ensure:

- learners' needs are at the centre of the alternative provision offer

- the construction of appropriate curriculum content

- the quality of the educational provision on offer

- the effective timing and implementation of interventions.

## 5.1 Ensuring learners' needs are at the centre of the alternative provision offer

A key principle underlying the Back on Track strategy is that provision should start from what will work best for each young person, taking account of his or her different needs. Within the structures and contexts in which they operate, pilots are, to varying levels, personalising their approaches to alternative provision and successfully developing bespoke packages of educational content and wider support. In ensuring learners' needs are at the centre of the alternative provision offer, pilots have:

- involved young people and their families in developing the alternative provision offer

- established robust referral and commissioning processes

- ensured effective data collection and information exchange

- developed relationships and partnership working.

### 5.1.1 Involving young people and their families in developing the alternative provision offer

In order to encourage buy-in to individual projects and counter common stereotypes and negative perceptions, the Back on Track pilots actively seek to present young people and their families with positive messages about alternative provision and its associated opportunities. The level of capital investment underpinning the Back on Track pilot programme is seen as instrumental in reinforcing these positive portrayals and promoting the validity and value of alternative provision projects, those who work in them, and the learners who attend.

Across the pilots, various strategies are employed to encourage the engagement of young people and their families in the decisions surrounding the type and content of alternative provision they access. These include providing opportunities from the outset for young people to discuss and identify potential academic and vocational areas of interest, preferred learning environments, and approaches to teaching and learning that they feel would generate success in, and through, alternative provision. A key element in the success of alternative provision depends on the extent to which young people, and their families, regard it as being of value to them. Stakeholders and representatives from different pilots suggest that it is essential to try and ground the nature of provision within the localities in which they operate.

*To make it work, we have to look at the families, the cultures, the communities and the neighbourhoods, to provide the type of alternative provision that will help to reengage these youngsters. For nearly all of them here, it is about a career, it is about getting a job at the end of it. It is a working class thing they are looking to get skills to help them get jobs, so they have to see it is relevant.*

(Local authority staff)

Efforts made by the pilots to support the active involvement of young people and their families in securing the most appropriate provision include:

- the distribution of pilot project information and the use of promotional DVDs
- discussions with pilot project staff in the home or at school
- the facilitation of visits to the pilot projects and
- the opportunity to take part in various taster activities on-site.

Providing opportunities for young people to be involved in shaping their future learning experiences helps to ensure that the alternative provision offer is seen as having direct personal relevance, so increasing their motivation to engage and attend.

*Getting them on board with the project has to be a negotiated process. They* [young people] *have to understand that alternative provision is not something that is being done to them, that they have no say in what happens, but it is a great opportunity for them to succeed in a different environment to mainstream. They see now, that coming to this project doesn't mean they're a failure. They are valued and important.*

(Pilot project staff)

*We've been really successful in spending so much time at the beginning with them, really working hard to make sure they understand exactly what we are about. For many of them, they've been referred here as a last resort, they've been excluded, and have self-excluded from everywhere else. We've got them on board and we are the only place that they will actually attend that can actually offer them what they need. We've got them to choose to come here.*

(Pilot project staff)

### Back on Track illustrative example: Engaging young people and families in constructing the alternative provision offer

This particular pilot places great emphasis on building positive relationships with families, which includes involving parents in decisions about their children from the very beginning of their engagement in the project. Staff report that this is particularly important because many parents have negative experiences of education themselves. A significant element in this relationship building centres on establishing trust as well as defining parents' roles and responsibilities in supporting their child's participation in the pilot.

> To ensure that a young person is well matched to the provision, all are given a detailed brief about the project, including the opportunity to view a promotional video showing the various activities on offer at the pilot with testimonials from previous attendees. This is followed by a one-to-one interview with a member of staff, which allows the project to assess whether the provision is right for the young person. Young people and their parents are invited to visit the provision to gain firsthand understandings of the way that it operates and the nature of the activities on offer.

## 5.1.2 Establishing robust commissioning and referral processes

In recognising the importance of ensuring young people are matched with provision that can best meet their individual needs, the Back on Track alternative provision pilots have implemented new approaches to referral and commissioning and refined existing processes.

Across the pilots, commissioning of alternative provision takes place along a continuum, ranging from open tendering systems for new providers to deliver the entirety of the Back on Track offer, to closed systems whereby provision is delivered solely by local authorities' key delivery partners, typically a PRU. Between these two extremes, there are examples whereby the local authority's key Back on Track partner also commissions additional services and activities provided by third party organisations, which make varying contributions to the overall alternative provision offer. Notwithstanding the various complexities and differences in commissioning, a key feature identified as underpinning effectiveness centres on the establishment of clear frameworks of expectations. Across the pilots, this includes the specification of outcomes and achievements for learners formalised in contracts and service-level agreements.

Commissioning frameworks and associated referral processes serve to ensure that the provision offered to young people accurately reflects and meets their needs. Several of the pilots focusing primarily on supporting pupils at risk of exclusion (especially working with Key Stage 3 pupils) have implemented direct referral policies, where applications to alternative provision come mainly from mainstream schools and sometimes PRUs. In one pilot in particular, this is accompanied by a change in the funding model, where the schools (working in partnership), rather than the local authority, have become the key budget holder for alternative provision funding.

In a pilot consisting of a number of intervention centres, the referral processes are usually based on teacher feedback and supported by tools such as Pupil Behaviour Assessment System (PBAS), Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS), Emotional Literacy Assessment Tool (ELAT) and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) to identify the correct types of provision for individual young people. As the pilot has progressed, it is suggested that, in addition to the referral process involving

weekly school-based pastoral team meetings: 'the success of the facility has evolved to a stage whereby children are now comfortable in self-referring' (School/PRU staff).

Key elements of this direct referral process relate to the involvement of schools at all stages of the process, from the initial identification of need, through to securing an appropriate place in alternative provision. School staff's detailed understanding of young people's needs, abilities and interests, along with their knowledge of the nature of alternative provision opportunities available locally, helps ensure that a referral is made to a provision that can best meet the requirements of individual young people. A school's role in direct referral can send positive messages to pupils, parents/carers and alternative providers about its commitment to maintaining connections with, and responsibility for, those whose needs necessitate varying degrees of off-site provision. Additional benefits may stem from the timeframes in which direct referrals can take place, potentially leading to swifter access to alternative provision.

Direct referrals to alternative providers from other agencies, although less common (occurring in just two of the pilot areas), reflect the complex needs of the young people being referred and the significant input they receive from wider agencies as a result.

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**Back on Track illustrative examples: Direct referrals**

**Direct referrals from schools**:
*It's a very simple process. The key worker in each of the schools working with these kids knows what they're like, and after talking to the pupil, sends a referral form in to us.*

(Local authority staff)

*The schools now know there is whole range of provision out there and they are beginning to understand the character and nature of the alternative provision market. They know that if they choose us, we'll deliver. Several of the schools know and trust us – we are starting to build relationships with others.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Direct referrals with multi-agency input**:
Working with hard-to-place (Key Stage 3-4) students with serious BESD, this pilot provision includes young people (predominantly boys) with statements of special educational need (SEN) who have in some cases already been excluded from both mainstream provision and specialist schools. It is common for these young people to have, or have had, involvement with other agencies such as the Youth Offending Team (YOT), social services, and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Referrals to the pilot may come from these sources as well as via schools and the SEN team.

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In other pilot areas, authority-wide approaches have been implemented and developed to improve young people's referral pathways to pilot projects. Authority-wide approaches are typically used to identify alternative provision for pupils

excluded from mainstream school, but are also increasingly being used for pupils with multiple and complex needs that cannot be met in the school environment alone. Authority-wide referral panels and forums have varying degrees of multi-agency input, typically including, senior school leaders and practitioners, local authority staff, health professionals and representatives of the private/voluntary providers. This ensures the collation of a wide range of information and perspectives on young people's needs that can then be used in the consideration of how to refer to and commission the most appropriate alternative provision package.

The creation of more structured and coordinated approaches to referral and commissioning across pilot areas can culminate in a single referral pathway. This approach can prevent situations whereby a number of individual referring agencies potentially overload specific alternative providers and reduces the potential for referrals being made largely to providers that have been used extensively in the past. Such developments reflect increasing transparency, neutrality and proactivity within the referral process of the Back on Track pilot projects, strengthening the basis upon which appropriate personalised packages of alternative provision can be established.

## Back on Track illustrative examples: Collaborative referrals and commissioning

**Example 1**
In the first year of operation, the majority of young people were directly referred by the local authority's two PRUs. There were difficulties associated with this process, which led to the inappropriate placing of students in the provision. This involved excessive numbers of young people being referred simultaneously, leading to an inappropriate mix of young people who presented with levels of need that the pilot was not initially intended to meet. Developments in the local authority's pupil placement panel, led to improvements in mechanisms for considering young people's needs and the subsequent identification and commissioning of suitable provision. Combined with evolving relationships between the pilot and other stakeholders, young people are now referred to the pilot provision in a more structured manner.

*Everybody, including the PRU and council, have got better at matching pupils' needs and provision. All pupils go through the pupil panel which is skilled at identifying which pupils will benefit the most from attending this provision and will have a better success here than anywhere else.*

(Pilot project staff)

*If they* [the PRU] *want to place a student, then it is on a planned programme of integration – they get a bigger induction process and they get more individual attention. They integrate better into what we're doing.*

(Pilot project staff)

> **Example 2**
> The referral process operating in this pilot, working with highly disengaged young people and those at risk of exclusion from school, involves joint working between a range of stakeholders to identify the most appropriate form of provision. Following the identification of young people's needs, school staff and local authority personnel hold a meeting to review the provision available, then invite young people and potential provider representatives to discuss the most appropriate options for meeting these needs.
>
> *The local authority is meticulous in making sure that a full circle of people is consulted before a young person joins us. We all sit down and discuss the needs, any social or domestic problems, welfare issues at school, education and learning needs. It works well because everybody is signed up to it, everybody gets to have a say about what they think will work best for each young person that might, or might not, end up coming to us.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

The success of both direct and authority-wide approaches to referral and commissioning can be enhanced where the infrastructure of alternative provision continues to support further flexibility and adaptability. Across the pilots, there is evidence that once the referral to a provider has been made, opportunities remain for the review and reconsideration of various elements of the provision to ensure the success of that referral. In several pilot areas, for example, providers operating across several sites are able to offer flexibility in order to overcome some of the challenges arising from pupil placement and group composition. Once the needs, personalities and behaviours of all learners have been assessed, the pilot staff are able to re-direct particular young people from one part of the provision to another, in order to create more positive and productive group dynamics, support retention and prevent placement breakdown.

The Back on Track pilots demonstrate further improvements in their approaches to referral, including increased dialogue and communication between all stakeholders throughout the process, to clarify understandings and expectations, and the formalisation of the roles and responsibilities of both the provider and the referring establishment. This can include contractual agreements requiring the commissioned providers to demonstrate their approaches to, and progress secured, in delivering appropriate specified outcomes for young people. Alongside target setting, several pilots have established and formalised terms and conditions that schools must agree and adhere to, prior to, and during, the referral process and throughout a young person's involvement with the project or intervention, clearly set out in handbooks distributed to schools.

> *We are very clear with schools about the criteria for referral. It is all in our handbook so there can be no misunderstandings. We are very much about pre-exclusions, they can't use us for anything else.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Other refinements in the referral process centre on pilot staff taking on greater roles within the process. This includes spending more time talking to the young people as

a means of establishing the extent to which the young person and the particular provision are compatible.

> *We've learned to get to understand the youngsters' motivations more, we've learned to be much better at asking the right questions when we interview them so we can really unpick what they're about. We try to establish whether they really want to come to this course or is it just something they're not really interested in, but will get them out of school? So, we're directing a lot of energy towards getting the young people who will really benefit from this, rather than trying to secure higher numbers of referrals. We now don't just accept anybody that comes our way. It's not so good for our business plan, but it's good for the kids.*

(Pilot project staff)

> *Not everybody needs this provision. We only have a couple of kids each year that do not buy-in to the school at all. Many kids would benefit from attending the project, but not all of them actually need it. We have to really spend time with each young person to understand the individual, exactly what they want and need, to make sure attending the project will be absolutely perfect for them.*

(School/PRU staff)

### 5.1.3 Ensuring effective data collection and information exchange

A personalised approach to creating and delivering appropriate alternative provision depends on information flow and exchange. Meaningful and effective information exchange occurs across the pilots through comprehensive referral processes that allow appropriate information to be conveyed, either through formal written or electronic means, or through the verbal transmission of information between professionals. This can include the transfer of young people's educational records, as well as sufficiently detailed information on their family backgrounds or social circumstances, their involvement with other services, and details of their views and desires for alternative provision which have been collected by staff who work with them. This helps to reduce the risk of an inappropriate placement by fully informing both initial and ongoing assessments of the suitability of the referral.

Improvements in the nature of information required by several pilots has been evidenced to underpin more effective decision making in relation to operational and logistical elements of a provision. This includes, for example, defining and delineating the size and composition of groups of learners attending certain provisions, where gang membership and rivalry might be an issue, or where more vulnerable pupils are concerned.

> *We now ask schools and the local authority, when they refer a young person to us, or when they first approach us and ask about a possible referral, to tell us as much as they can about them. If the referral proceeds, we insist that they must provide contextual background information so we can make informed decisions about how we can fit them into existing groups.*

(Pilot project staff)

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> *There's kids that live less than quarter of a mile from here, but will not be able to attend if there's kids from another part of the city here at the same time. If we make a bad decision and put someone in the wrong group, there can be serious problems, in the project and beyond. That's why it is vital that we get this information.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Across the pilot projects, there is variation in the sources of data available and mechanisms of information exchange employed to support the referral process. Some pilots have been successful in sharing information through the use of Information Passports (IPs); Common Assessment Frameworks (CAFs); statements of SEN; Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and project-specific referral forms encompassing academic, attendance and behaviour-related data supplied by schools or other referring bodies. There is, however, a general acknowledgment that serious challenges remain unresolved, in terms of the information that surrounds and accompanies many referrals.

> *The referral forms that we get are not very good, not very informative and are of no real use. It is so school-based and I can look at them until I'm blue in the face but nine out of 10 are incorrect and information relating to how poor they are in reading and writing often does not get through to us, maybe because they haven't been to school for months. Students who say they've got Level 1 from another provider, can't even do our diagnostic tests. That is frustrating. You need decent information.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Alongside appropriate and effective referral and commissioning processes, the success of personalised approaches to alternative provision depends on developing clear understandings of the needs of individuals. Effective and appropriately timed needs assessments are critical elements of pilots' approaches to devising and providing tailored curriculum content and activities to young people. Various assessment mechanisms are employed across the Back on Track alternative provision pilots in order to do this. There are a small number of incidences where needs assessments involve the use of standardised validated tools, including strengths and difficulties questionnaires. Other pilots have developed project-specific needs assessment frameworks tailored to their aims, objectives and overall offer. Informal approaches to understanding and assessing young people's needs are common across the pilots and consist primarily of observations of young people's abilities and behaviours. This form of needs assessment is commonly implemented where the nature and severity of a young person's needs means that the effective completion of a paper-based or on-line assessment tool is not appropriate or achievable. The general picture emerging from the pilots is, however, one of inconsistency in the extent and nature of the use of comparable data exchange and assessment mechanisms.

> ### Voices from Back on Track: Approaches to needs assessments
>
> *We've tried using formal assessment tools but these kids feel like they've been assessed to death already, and they probably have. The types of kids that come to us, when they arrive, we just can't get them to sit down with us to fill one of these things in. It tells us nothing anyway because until we've got their trust they won't engage with it or give any useful information.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)
>
> *We assess them all on an individual basis, identify their needs and work out how we meet these needs. This can be a significant challenge, as many of the students referred to us are not always the cohort that we are used to working with. We discover their needs are not really or primarily about learning, but they have horrendous backgrounds and lots of offending. The needs assessment process for each young person usually lasts two or three days and they work round the different activities and work with the different members of staff. We can then identify the needs they have got and then we look at what we can offer them.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)
>
> *The assessment process that we use is based on a referral form, which is like the information passport that schools are supposed to be using. We ask for standard information, as well as additional things that we needed to know about the students' capabilities and emotional responses and so on but this information is very sparse. Our assessment process works because the staff members doing it are very skilled at this sort of assessment because they are very insightful in terms of where a student is at, and are very good at intervening and confronting them on a personal level about where they are at, what they want out of life, and how they can work with us to make this happen for them. We are good at going beyond the information that is available, and often not very good, to really work with young people to truly understand their needs.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)
>
> *When they arrive here, we do our own diagnostics. There's no point taking any notice of information that comes with them because it's usually either non-existent, incomplete or just wrong. We do our own so that we can establish what level of literacy and numeracy they're capable of because that impacts on the type of qualification approach we offer.*
> *Then we do a very basic thing called 'All About Me' which deals with their likes and dislikes about school and what they'd like to achieve here, what qualifications they'd like to get at school, and why they decided to come to this project.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

## 5.2  Ensuring appropriate curriculum content

A key element underpinning the success of Back on Track pilots is their ability to increase flexibility in the overall approach to differentiating the curriculum content and activities available to young people with a wide range of needs. In isolation, through joint working or via formally established partnerships, the pilots support and enhance

the delivery of varying combinations of functional, academic, vocational and personal/social curriculum elements to the young people (see Chapter 2 for details).

The majority of the pilot provisions are, in themselves, not solely responsible for delivering subject learning and academic core skills to young people where they remain on the roll of a school or PRU. Within this, however, there is evidence that pilots make particular efforts to support the academic development of young people by, for example, establishing links and connections with pilot activities and content and the school-based curriculum in which young people are engaged.

> *It makes a huge difference if we can offer them something that improves what they are doing at school. We try and find out from schools where they need extra support, usually in relation to their maths and English because that's really key. Then we'll try and find a way of incorporating this into the activities that they do here so that we're helping the schools support their learning.*

> (Pilot project staff)

Furthermore, efforts are also made, to ensure that the time spent accessing alternative provision and the curriculum content offered, actively supports reintegration into mainstream school, if that is a realistic and agreed option for individuals.

> *Once you take them out, it would be so difficult to ever get them in again because they would have had a taste of something so different – going back in would feel like going backwards for them. If we don't try and link in with their mainstream curriculum, they'll be behind when they go back to school, and all the old problems will resurface.*
> (Pilot project staff)

Pilots also enhance opportunities for personalisation through the delivery of vocational opportunities, encompassing a broad range of work-related subject areas, including construction, agriculture, horticulture, animal care, retail, catering, childcare, hair and beauty, motor mechanics, and sport and leisure. The ability to provide high-quality vocational learning opportunities and experiences that often cannot be accessed in quite the same way elsewhere, helps to ensure that the educational offer is tailored to meet young people's particular needs and interests. This helps to ensure the appropriateness of the curriculum offer as the skills and competencies young people develop in a particular vocational area are usually portable, and can be transferred and applied in a range of different environments. There are several examples where pilot provisions work collaboratively with schools to provide enhanced learning packages of vocational, practical and academic content.

> *At school, we offer students a land and environment course. The work we do in the classroom at school goes hand-in-hand with what they learn from their time at the project where they get to have a go at activities.*
> (School/PRU staff)

In addition, common to the pilots is the emphasis they place on supporting young people's personal and social development. Such aspects of learning and development are embedded in a wide range of activities offered and the level of need to access these depends on the individual requirements of each learner. Activities may include, for example, helping a young person to deal with specific issues such as: personal safety; social skills; friends and relationships; bullying; peer pressure; and life and independent living skills. Some pilots also provide extra-curricular activities to facilitate and increase opportunities for social interaction through, for example, participating in sports, leisure and recreational pursuits.

## 5.3    Ensuring high-quality educational provision

The Back on Track agenda contained a key principle that focused on increasing the quality of learning opportunities and experiences on offer to young people in alternative provision. Pilot projects recognise the need to fulfil their responsibilities to ensure that young people receive their full educational entitlements and have the opportunity to maximise their education and learning potential in provision that equals the quality available to learners in other sectors. All the pilots specified in their initial aims, the types, nature and in some cases, the extent, of educational outcomes they sought to deliver to young people. The following section details the ways in which the pilots have attempted to ensure that the engaging, personalised learning opportunities they offer young people are underpinned by a focus on improving the quality and standards of their academic content. Across the range of pilot projects, there is evidence that this is variously achieved through:

- prioritisation of the pilot's academic focus and orientation
- ensuring a mix of appropriately skilled specialist staff
- reviewing and adapting the alternative provision offer.

### 5.3.1 Prioritisation of the pilot's academic focus and orientation

Reviews and discussions within the projects, and on-going dialogue and communication between the pilot and other stakeholders, including schools and colleges, as well as feedback from young people, have led to developments in the nature and quality of pilots' educational content over the course of the Back on Track programme.

> *The schools were telling us that, although everything was good, we needed to focus more on the learning element.*

(Pilot project staff)

In one particular pilot working with Key Stage 3 pupils, for example, such developments have in part, been achieved through a senior member of staff taking on additional responsibilities for ensuring that the pilot meets this key target of improving the teaching and learning elements of the provision. This role entails

leadership, team development and training to ensure that all staff are confident in their abilities and consistent in their approaches to supporting young people's educational progress. Hence, within the overall delivery of the pilot's content (focused on preparing young people for successful re-engagement, integration into, and retention at school), a highly detailed micro-level approach to educational performance is promoted and prioritised throughout all the pilot's activities:

> [The member of staff] *has been so clear with the kids about the need to really focus on the quality of the work they are doing, by picking up on the smallest thing, getting them to really focus on the detail of their work and improve what they're doing. It shows them that they can produce really high quality work. This member of staff has really set an example to her team of what is possible with these kids to raise standards.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Personnel from several pilots, however, note the difficulties they face as a result of pressures to prioritise securing academic qualifications for some young people, especially given the circumstances and timing of referral, and the original remit of the pilot. These issues are most commonly highlighted in pilots working with the most disengaged young people, especially those in Key Stage 4, and those with the most complex needs.

> *I find it frustrating. There will be a meeting with a 15 year old, local authority staff, a school teacher, parents if they're bothered to turn up, and they will all say to me 'what qualification are you going to get for this lad?' Looking at the portfolio of the needs, this young person happens to be a serial non-attender, is disruptive in class, is abusive to teachers and can barely read or write. I find it a bit ironic that schools haven't been able to achieve anything in four years, but they expect us to provide something to help the school tick its box to say he's got a qualification, which will probably be meaningless to him unless we sort all these other problems out first.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

## 5.3.2 Ensuring a mix of appropriately skilled specialist staff

The importance of teaching and the emphasis on attempting to secure high-quality educational outcomes are reflected in the senior leadership and staffing composition of pilots. Given the broad range of needs of the young people, and the diverse aims within, and between the pilots, there are various combinations of staff types, including individuals both with and without formal teaching backgrounds, qualifications and experiences. A key element of successful delivery stems from achieving the right balance of appropriately trained and skilled staff that can engage, interest and retain young people, whilst meeting their social and emotional development needs and ensuring their educational entitlement is fully delivered. Across the pilots, there are various examples of the ways in which appropriate staffing supports and facilitates suitable alternative provision experiences and opportunities for young people.

**Back on Track illustrative examples: Appropriate staffing in alternative provision**

**Example 1**

In one pilot offering multi-site provision, all 14 intervention centres are staffed differently, according to the characteristics of local need. For example, one large school-based centre is staffed by a number of teaching staff, EWOs, achievement mentors, and specialist support staff. The intervention centre in another, smaller school is staffed by just one senior teacher. Generally, the centres use a combination of specialist staff, such as behaviour consultants, and mainstream classroom teachers. Whilst recognising that there is a need for specialist support for some pupils, project staff do not believe that this should be at the expense of providing pupils with the best possible teachers. Therefore, the strongest classroom teachers are encouraged to teach within the intervention centres on a regular basis. This has the combined effect of: ensuring that all young people receive quality provision; breaking down students' perceptions of a barrier between the experiences of young people accessing support and those who are not; and placing the intervention centre at the heart of the ethos and culture of the school. A fundamental principle underlying this approach is that the classroom teacher retains responsibility for individual young people accessing the various different elements of support.

**Example 2**

In a learning centre-based pilot provision there is equal emphasis on providing young people with academic and personal, social and emotional development opportunities.

The approach is relatively resource-intensive involving three achievement managers, each line managing a team of achievement mentors, each of whom carry a caseload of young people and are responsible for supporting them on an ongoing basis. The achievement mentoring team is perceived to be of critical importance in keeping young people on track and supporting them to achieve. The centre has employed a transitions coordinator to specifically provide support and ensure that young people's learning programmes are appropriate, as well having responsibility for liaising with young people's families.

*If it was just a learning centre, then there would probably be less need for a whole team of achievement mentors, you could work with teaching assistants. But because they are out on a number of external provisions, the scope of that means that the safeguarding aspect, the need to constantly track where the young people are and monitor their support needs whilst they are attending those provisions is necessary. There are extra strands to what a conventional PRU might look like. I would be very worried if we didn't have the achievement mentors linking in because we are working with the most disaffected young people in a very disaffected city, and the support that they provide is an enabling support to allow them to get to school on time, with the right equipment to boost their chances of achieving.*

(School/PRU staff)

Several pilots have attempted to ensure the appropriate prioritisation of, or emphasis on, delivering educational outcomes through the nature of the strategic leadership and direction of the project. Furthermore, as the pilots have progressed, there have

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been instances of re-structuring of management and staffing elements to reflect this. The employment of senior leaders with established and successful teaching and education backgrounds is, for example, seen as a key driver in embedding the value and securing the actual delivery of, enhanced qualification pathways. Such developments can be seen as manifestations of pilots' evolution and growth over time, responding to on-going reviews of young people's needs and the projects' capacity to meet them.

> *By making some strategic and operational staff appointments, we've improved our focus on accredited outcomes. Whilst we still prioritise all the other needs, we now have a much stronger focus on educational development because we simply have to get these young people something that will get them somewhere when they leave here.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

One pilot has, for example, developed its capacity to deliver an enhanced academic component of its overall offer to highly disengaged young people through strategic developments in the pilot. These have culminated in the recruitment of key personnel with a specific remit to develop the pilot's focus on maximising the educational outcomes of the young people through curriculum development. The creation of a specific post to direct the form and delivery of the educational offer has been augmented through the employment of an experienced teacher to focus solely on the learning needs of young people, taking on the responsibilities for creating aspirational and achievable learning pathways for each individual. Central to this role is the additional responsibility for assessing and reviewing young people's progress, conducting internal verification procedures and ensuring that individual tutors in the pilot are adequately supported to meet the targets set out in young people's individual education plans (IEPs) and completing portfolios to formally evidence their learning achievements.

> *We've deliberately looked at our staffing and we realised that, although we're very strong at the pastoral, social and emotional side of things, we needed to recruit more qualified teachers to make sure that we can offer functional skills to a much higher level. These kids come with such low levels, we really have to work so hard to get them anything at all.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

### 5.3.3 Reviewing and adapting the alternative provision offer

Alongside, and as a result of, staffing and leadership characteristics, there are instances of pilots reviewing, and subsequently developing, their curriculum offer. Much of this revolves around increased attention towards the pursuit of nationally recognised, transferable accreditation and qualifications.

Over the course of its development, a pilot working with a range of highly disengaged young people has evolved its offer and has succeeded in increasing the engagement and retention of a significant number of young people who had previously not successfully participated in education. Alongside this, and of central importance in

demonstrating a further dimension of its credibility, this pilot has increased its capacity to deliver learning experiences and outcomes that are centrally located within mainstream accreditation frameworks. It is acknowledged, however, that this requires significant thought and effort to successfully navigate and reconcile the potential tensions associated with the need to remain true to the original and underlying philosophy and ethos of the pilot, whilst delivering, and being seen by stakeholders outside the pilot, to be delivering, high quality academic outcomes for young people.

> *We identified that we were not focused enough educationally, so we significantly increased our focus on the educational elements. Potentially, we might now have gone a little too much towards prioritising accreditation, but we needed to do this to show commissioners that we know what we're doing, that we're a professional educational body, we can deliver education and learning to a high standard, as well as doing all the other things that the young people need in their lives.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

The drive towards increased accreditation may be regarded as a significant move towards the 'professionalisation' of several alternative provision projects and interventions, providing a cornerstone upon which greater accountability (and quantifiable outcomes) can be built. However, in another pilot, also working with young people experiencing high levels of disengagement from school, and presenting with significant social, emotional and behavioural problems, similar pressures to increase the focus on securing educational outcomes are regarded as potentially weakening its overall offer:

> *This is a unique project and we were going to provide a specific set of experiences and opportunities, but qualifications became a stumbling block that made us water down what we are doing and we've become too diversified. We're not able to focus on delivering what we're best at, what the project was supposed to be all about, what these kids really need here and now.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Whilst staff in all the pilot projects acknowledge the need to offer young people a range of opportunities to achieve qualifications and accreditation there are, however, also concerns that some of these pathways may not necessarily provide the most appropriate options for some young people at particular points in time. This can be because certain individuals may not be at a stage in their lives where they can effectively engage and succeed in accredited pathways.

> *Most people coming into alternative provision are doing so to address their disengagement, and they are not highly motivated enough to achieve a high-level qualification. We can make good progress, but they are usually referred late on, so there's only a short timescale. You can't expect them to get Level 2. It is a bonus if they do get it but you can't expect it. If they get Level 1, they've got a decent qualification that represents considerable distance travelled for these kids, considering how much education they've missed. But, we would be doing them an injustice by pursuing Level 2 if they're not ready*

*for it, just to satisfy school requirements and tick the boxes of the league tables.*

(Pilot project staff).

*There is a big drive towards achieving qualifications coming from the schools, it's about churning them through. Some schools are demanding that the providers will be able to ensure that the young people get at least Level 2. In the commissioning process, to make sure we get the right provision in place, we will say to the schools: 'You diagnosed this kid with low levels of literacy and numeracy – you couldn't get them to achieve Level 2, so how can you expect an AP provider to do that? The local authority has to try and ensure that alternative provision is appropriate.*

(Local authority staff)

Further challenges relate to the value ascribed to some forms of accreditation by other educational stakeholders and establishments and potential employers. This is especially the case in relation to some vocational and practical qualifications that form considerable proportions of the curriculum offer of many of the pilots. Several young people attending a particular pilot themselves raised concerns and questioned the value of engaging in activities that are not accompanied by accreditation opportunities that carry GCSE equivalence.

*What's the point of doing all this stuff that just leads to a certificate in something that nobody else has even heard of? Doing stuff like that just proves to people that you are stupid. It doesn't make them think you are any good at anything, it just shows them you can't do anything else.*

(Young person)

However, there is a counter perspective that in offering a range of accreditation options, pilots are supporting the generation of success for young people at different levels, in different areas of need and over different timescales. Hence, when used in the appropriate circumstances, numerous accreditation schemes can be effective for a variety of young people.

*There are issues around the value of certain forms of accreditation, like BTEC, but they do make a real difference because they give our young people confidence and skills to then go on to have other educational input that is more likely to lead directly to employment.*

(Pilot project staff)

Some pilots have successfully navigated and responded positively to the issues and challenges surrounding the delivery of appropriately accredited curricula within the overarching drive to raise academic standards within alternative provision. In the context of increasing emphasis on securing academic outcomes, the content and nature of the curriculum offer has significantly evolved in several pilots. A key element of this includes proactive moves towards embedding functional skills development and associated accreditation opportunities in the range of high quality practically orientated learning activities that pilots are effective in delivering.

**Back on Track illustrative examples: Reviewing and adapting the alternative provision offer**

**Example 1**

*There's no point saying you can do practical work Monday to Wednesday, then do maths and English on Friday. It has to be integrated into everything else they're doing. They'll embrace that once they realise that they need it themselves. So, we are active in trying to embed literacy and numeracy in with the other activities that they do, so we'll get them to strip down a car engine, then go and fill in the worksheets surrounding it. Or we get them to calculate the amount of bricks they'll need to build a wall, or slabs they'll need to pave a patio, then get them to go and do the work. I asked one of them to tile my kitchen, and asked him how much he was going to charge. He said he didn't know, so I told him he'd better go and work it out or he's not getting paid. That soon focuses them, they realise that they need maths to work out how much they're going to make, then realise they have to be able write to be able to do quotes and invoices for people.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Example 2**

This young person was referred from mainstream school as a result of behavioural issues and low levels of academic attainment. A combined package has been put in place, to support emotional and behavioural difficulties. Functional skills development is wholly embedded in pilot activities centred on selling produce grown at the pilot to a number of local retail outlets.

[Name of young person] *has to communicate with the apprentices to find out what veg is available this week, then alter the list on the computer and email this to the cafe.* [The young person] *then phones up and gets the order from the cafe and amends the order, tells the apprentices what is required. The order is made up and it is delivered, and sometimes s/he goes to deliver the veg and meet the customers.*

(Pilot project staff)

As a result, this learner's numeracy, literacy and communication skills have developed significantly, and progress is being made towards BTEC qualifications in customer relations skills.

Pilot staff have also demonstrated innovation and creativity in terms of the nature, application and purpose of the approaches to accreditation taken in some circumstances. For example, in the initial stages of operation, one pilot working with highly disengaged young people offered various practically orientated courses through which individual units of accreditation could be achieved. As the pilot has progressed, there has been increasing realisation that these particular units do not have sufficient currency for the young people when looking to progress to employment or further education and training. This has led to a more cohesive approach to accreditation that has entailed the construction of new units, in association with external educational experts. To accommodate the needs and strengths of young people, this curriculum is heavily focused on practical activities, in which functional learning is embedded and can be accredited by a nationally recognised awarding body.

A perceived effectiveness of this approach stems from the recognition and formal acknowledgment that young people are, for example, developing literacy and numeracy skills within a given practical activity, as well as other competencies that will support their accredited outcomes. To further strengthen and validate this curriculum, representations have also been made to employment representative groups, such as the land-based training body LANTRA, and several Skills Councils. This reflects the need for any qualification scheme in which young people participate to lead to accreditation that is appropriate and relevant for future employability.

## 5.4 The timing and duration of the alternative provision offer

There is a general acknowledgement across the pilots that the timing and duration of young people's involvement with alternative provision are key considerations in successful approaches to devising, constructing and delivering appropriate and personalised offers. Within this, the effectiveness of commissioning and referral processes can significantly impact on the extent to which pilots provide young people with the appropriate offer to secure desired outcomes.

> *I wish that they'd sent me to the* [name of PRU] *earlier. I wouldn't be half as bad as I am. I'd be better behaved, and I'd have learned much more. I'd just be better at getting on with people and everything but I spent too much time messing about at school. It makes me angry what I've missed out on.*

> (Young person)

The differing approaches, remits and formats of the pilots are simultaneously reflections of, and responses to, the needs and difficulties young people encounter and the particular stages in their educational careers. Across the pilots, many stakeholders highlight the consequences and dangers resulting from failing to offer, and facilitate access to the right provision at the right time. Central to this is the widely held belief that young people are often referred to alternative provision too late in their academic careers. The need for increased communication between schools, alternative providers and others with commissioning responsibilities is acknowledged by a range of stakeholders.

> *Maybe there's a need to work with the primary schools to get to the Year 6 pupils who are on the cusp of disengaging who just need to be turned around. By the time they get to Year 7, you've lost them. Some of the pupils referred at Year 10 have missed two years of school and it's too late for them. They've fallen below the radar. In Year 10 they get shoved out to alternative provision when it is too late. We need to get in there earlier.*
> (Local authority staff)

> *We are very clear with the schools that they have to come to us earlier. We get too many pupils too late on, who are too academically weak and have*

> *gone too far down the line to achieve a qualification. How can I do it in 12 weeks when they've had all these years of failure at school?*

> (Pilot project staff)

Other stakeholders also suggest that alternative provision can be (inappropriately) commissioned as a last resort when young people's difficulties and challenges have escalated to such a point that other educational provision and strategies fail to meet their needs. Effective identification of need and early intervention are key elements underpinning the successful operation of pilot projects. This is the case for all pilots not just those with a specific focus on delivering support to those young people in Key Stage 3. There is evidence that effective early intervention is not solely related to the age of the young person, but should be triggered by need, as and when it is identified.

As well as appropriately timed referrals, there is also a need to have clear expectations about the appropriate duration of particular alternative provision placements and experiences. There is a view that, in some cases where re-integration to mainstream education is a core goal, then the time-limited nature of alternative provision must be understood by all involved. There are concerns that young people's connections and relationships with their mainstream school can deteriorate and fragment further, the longer they are away from that school. The pilots working with Key Stage 3 pupils make particular efforts to ensure that regular, constructive dialogue takes place between school staff, pilot staff and young people and their families. In addition to maintaining, or repairing relationships, this communication also serves to demonstrate to the young people that the school is still responsible for them, their welfare and achievements. Schools are also reminded that such provision is time-limited, and the young people will be returning to school so it cannot be viewed as a long-term alternative.

> *We make it very clear to schools from the start, these kids are going back into school. They can't just wash their hands of them, they can't use this project as a dumping ground. If we feel a school wants to use us in that way, we will not take the referral because it will not work for that young person.*

> (Pilot project staff)

In some instances, pilots promote, either directly or indirectly, longer lasting connections with young people and the other service providers working with them after official involvement with the pilot has come to an end. In some cases, this involves the delivery of on-going training, as well as targeted reintegration support to schools to ensure the progress made at the pilot is sustained and enhanced back in the school environment. The holistic approach of a pilot working with a range of highly-disengaged young people, for example, encourages them to maintain their relationships with the project and are supported in doing so by the central location of one of the sites in the town centre. Various observations from staff indicate that the philosophy and ethos of the pilot means that support and guidance will be there for

life if the young people require it, through a wider community of care that is being established, with the pilot acting as a central hub.

## 5.5 Relationships and partnerships

All the elements previously highlighted that underpinning the construction of appropriate, high-quality, alternative provision offers and experiences for young people depend on effective communication and cooperation. It is essential that the whole range of stakeholders, including the young people themselves, are supported in working together to provide the best possible provision to meet individual young people's needs. A key principle of the Back on Track agenda involved the drive towards increased partnership working in the delivery of alternative provision. As noted previously, the pilots all initially consisted of varying degrees of formal partnership between individual local authorities and another provider/delivery agency. The following section details some of the ways in which relationships and partnerships support the construction and delivery of high quality alternative provision in a variety of contexts.

### 5.5.1 Relationships and partnerships at a strategic level

To a great extent, the nature and structure of strategic partnerships are defined in the constitution and operation of the pilots that centre on the direct relationships between individual schools within those pilots. Schools can form practitioner groups that are in regular communication to monitor and steer the overall performance and direction of the pilot project. In one local authority, the secondary schools formed behaviour partnerships, which are jointly responsible for managing alternative provision within the authority to meet the needs of all young people. Other partnerships have been developed through the commissioning process whereby particular providers have become central elements of local systems and frameworks of provision. This has entailed proactive and dynamic interactions that go beyond the commercially defined relationships, with commissioners and suppliers of alternative provision working together to shape, modify and improve the content and activities available locally to better suit the needs of young people.

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**Back on Track illustrative example: A strategic partnership approach to authority-wide alternative provision**

One Back on Track pilot operates through three behavior and attendance partnerships formed by local secondary schools, each being responsible for managing a Key Stage 3/4 Learning and Support Centre. The partnership approach supports school collaboration as a means of increasing responsibility and accountability for pupils accessing alternative provision. All pupils accessing the learning and support centres remain on the roll of their mainstream school and are encouraged to take up learning opportunities offered by schools across the partnership. There is a drive to ensure pupils' relationships with their 'home school' are retained and that they are reintegrated into mainstream education and learning.

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Partnership working is supported through the composition of management committees of each Learning and Support Centre, including the head of centre, representatives from at least four partnership schools, a local authority representative and a parent. In addition, the partnership approach encourages greater integration between mainstream and alternative settings. For example, sharing good practice between Learning and Support Centre staff and those from mainstream school is facilitated through staff visits. Mainstream staff attend the centres, for example to gain experience of working with particularly challenging pupils and, at the same time, are able to share new thinking on teaching and learning. This has included demonstrating lessons, sharing packages of resources and training on the use of multimedia resources.

The extent of partnership working is also enhanced through the involvement of a range of external alternative provision providers that deliver learning and skills for those students whose needs and interests cannot be met by schools within the partnership or by the Learning and Support Centre. Further multi-agency input is provided via children's services multi-disciplinary teams, such as educational psychology and education welfare.

## Back on Track illustrative example: Relationships between pilot provision and local FE establishment

In one pilot, particular relationships have evolved between the key Back on Track provider and a local FE college. Such relationships have taken some time to become firmly established and formalised, based on enhanced communication and increasing willingness to develop mutual understandings of the ethos, nature and value of college-based and alternative provision-based offer. Young people aged 14-16 accessing the provision (the core Back on Track cohort) now have increased opportunities for maintaining their connection with the pilot in order to continue to develop personal, social and emotional skills, whilst also being able to access accredited vocational and academic courses through the college. As a result of commissioning and sub-contracting arrangements, elements of the pilot's core delivery can also now be accredited through the college. Achievements of young people delivered by the pilot contribute to the college's performance figures, and the college management have been instrumental in working with the pilot to develop its procedures and systems. As a result, a relationship of co-dependency has developed, and the outcomes generated for young people attending the pilot contribute to the college's performance.

In addition to the contractual links, strong connections have developed at an operational level that encourage and facilitate young people's attendance, at, and ultimate transition to college. This has entailed the college allowing pilot staff to take young people to look round the college outside of normal open day events; college staff, including tutors and senior managers having breakfast with potential students, to help break the ice in an informal way to demonstrate to the young people that college is a realistic destination for them.

*They* [college representatives] *came in and did observations of our practice, did learning walks through the site, gave feedback, offered us training, got involved about health and safety and safeguarding and asked for our policies on everything. Some of our staff attend business meetings with college management four times a*

> *year and key members of college staff attend our end of year celebrations at [the pilot] giving out the certificates to young people.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)
>
> *The college has a much greater understanding of what we're doing and we've changed and have taken on a more mainstream attitude and approach so that we're more professional and have increased our focus on accreditation. It's a thriving partnership. The college is currently rated as 'Outstanding' and is due an Ofsted inspection. They need their sub-contract providers to be outstanding, so they are nurturing us. It is a very effective, powerful relationship.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

## 5.5.2 Relationships and partnerships at pilot and school level

Across the pilots, there is evidence of the emergence and development of good relationships between alternative providers and local schools and other educational providers. The effectiveness of such relationships is particularly, but not exclusively, evident where the overarching aim is for young people attending the pilots to reintegrate into or return to mainstream schools.

Communication is regarded as a central element of relationship building, entailing efforts to promote and enhance understandings of the nature, aims and remit of the pilot. As part of the proactive approaches to increase engagement 'open door polices' have been highlighted in several projects in order to encourage school staff to visit the provision to develop greater insights into its offer and observe the potential and opportunities they have for young people. An intrinsic element of value in this is that clear understandings can be established at the outset, so that any subsequent referrals are grounded in accurate, firsthand knowledge and experience of the provision and its relative ability to suit particular individual young people.

**Back on Track illustrative example: Pilot-school relationships to support young people's reintegration into mainstream school**

In a pilot delivering early intervention and support to prevent young people's further disengagement and reduce their risk of exclusion from mainstream school, a significant emphasis is placed on working with the school staff to ensure that the pilot's potential impact in effecting positive, long-lasting change on young people is maximised. During the initial referral process, conversations between school and pilot staff take place to ensure that there are clear understandings about the needs of the young person and the suitability of the provision to meet these needs. In addition, the expectations, roles and responsibilities of the school and the pilot are explicitly defined, underpinning the nature of the relationship. In this way, school staff understand that the work carried out by the pilot needs to be continued once the young person returns to school in order for the reintegration to be successful.

Although the pilot intervention is short-term and time limited, support is provided to the school to ensure the strategies and approaches put in place to support the young person can be consistently and continually applied in the mainstream setting. This includes the provision of individual strategy sheets for specific young people, as well as generic training and support for school staff. In addition to opportunities

for school staff to visit young people whilst attending the pilot, such processes contribute to a more seamless connection between alternative provision and mainstream education in which all practitioners are responsible for working together to ensure success for the young people.

*The important thing about reintegration is that schools plan for it, because we're* [the pilot] *there to support reintegration, not to run it. To support reintegration we have a traffic light sheet to give to all the subject staff, so that it is consistent across the board – here's what to do, here's what not to do, here's some things to try that have worked at the pilot. Every teacher working with that young person needs this sheet and they need to use it consistently. As well as this we do a final progress report for the school which contains more information about how to handle certain situations, and the young people themselves are involved in putting this together. Finally, we have a reintegration meeting and discuss with the schools how we can best support them in ensuring they successfully manage the reintegration process.*

(Pilot project staff)

The establishment of close working relationships can enhance the cohesion and quality of approaches to local provision by reducing possible elements of competition between providers and also contributes towards changing and improving locality-based conceptualisation of educational provision. Across the pilots, there is evidence that local networks, in which alternative provision operates, can serve to strengthen the connections between providers, increasing the potential for appropriate matching of young people's needs with available provision.

*Because of the project, and the way we work together, the school doesn't feel that it has to do it all for the kids because there is support available. Sourcing support elsewhere is not a signal that the school is failing the kids. It is actually a good thing that the school is looking for specialist input elsewhere. The school takes pleasure from the fact that alternative provision works for some of these kids.*

(Pilot project staff)

*There is a complementary relationship between the schools' staff and the* [pilot] *staff. They are talking a common language about the kids, their needs and their difficulties. They talk about what works best for the kids, they share information about the kids and exchange ideas about what might work for each kid. This is all based on a lack of threat and the lack of professional jealousy.*

(Local authority staff)

Strategies and components that support the development of relationships between young people and schools are at the heart of some elements of the content and activities delivered by various pilots. This is seen as essential in supporting effective reintegration into mainstream schools and considerable efforts are made to maintain connections between young people and their schools. In one pilot, for example, such connections are made through the pilot supporting young people in writing to the school and providing details of the work they are undertaking and the progress they are making, academically, socially and behaviourally whilst attending a time-limited

revolving door early intervention project.  In another pilot, relationships and connections are enhanced when successes achieved in the pilot are transferred into the school environment.

> *A really powerful link is when* [pilot staff] *bring things that they have made into the school. Then at school on a Friday, we have a celebration event. I've shown them and they've been really proud of them.*
>
> (School/PRU staff)

Open invitations are also extended to school staff to visit pilots to see the young people operating and succeeding in different contexts. This is particularity valuable in challenging and changing negative perceptions of young people and for re-affirming the school's responsibility for, and commitment to, young people's wellbeing and achievement. Alongside on-going communication throughout the duration of the intervention, a particularly valuable means of relationship enhancement lies in school staff attending end-of-course celebration and graduation events.

> *The key to our success is about building relationships with the schools. They didn't know us when we arrived, didn't know what we did, so in the first year we had an open door policy to get the schools in and to get them to realise that their relationship with us is crucial in making it work. Once schools had become aware of what we could offer, once the relationships had been built, once the kids had been referred, we spent a lot of time telling the schools that they have to come and see it. Schools need to see the quality of what we're offering and the learning that is going on. Schools have really appreciated that and they go back and talk to colleagues and tell them about what we're doing.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

> *It's really good when [name of teacher] comes here* [alternative provision pilot] *to see me because he can see what I'm really like, he can see that I'm not a bad person and that I can behave properly, and that I am not just a problem kid and I can do my work. In school, he just sees me as a pain. Here, he sees I can be all right if I'm treated the right way.*
>
> (Young person)

# 6. Monitoring and accountability in the Back on Track pilots

| Back on track - five key messages: Monitoring and accountability |
| --- |
| <ul><li>There is a variety of levels at which monitoring operates across the pilots including: monitoring of individual young people's progress towards meeting specific aims and outcomes; provision-level assessments of progress and achievements; and monitoring of the performance of partners and providers by local authorities and other commissioners of alternative provision. Within each of these levels, varying levels of quality and effectiveness are evident across the pilots.</li><li>There is great diversity in the range of assessment mechanisms and performance indicators used by different pilots to measure the broad spectrum of outcomes in relation to the individual aims of the pilots. This situation reflects the challenges associated with comparative evaluation of the pilots' individual responses to unique situations.</li><li>National performance indicators currently available, such as numbers of young people attaining GCSE or equivalent qualifications, in isolation do not always provide the necessary breadth and depth to capture, reflect and assess the subtleties of the overall outcomes of pilot projects.</li><li>Various systems and formats of accountability are evident across the pilots. These range from ongoing, often informal processes within pilots themselves, to more formal external inspections and assessments. A combination of such approaches is required in order to effectively ensure pilots are on track to meet their aims and secure appropriate outcomes for young people.</li><li>Within the pilots, there is an increasing awareness of the need to demonstrate the value of the benefits secured in relation to the costs of provision. However, very few rigorous, systematic approaches to assessing value for money, cost-benefits and cost effectiveness are evident in the pilots. This reflects the inherent difficulties associated with quantifying the range of inputs and outputs involved with alternative provision and the lack of appropriate and standardised metrics that reflect the true value of its impact.</li></ul> |

A key principle contained within the Back on Track agenda focussed on increasing the accountability, principally of local authorities, in relation to the quality of the alternative provision offer. This section provides insights into the pilots' approaches to monitoring progress and consequent implications for increasing accountability, on a variety of levels. It presents details of the approaches to monitoring and evaluation evident across the pilots focussing on ways in which the pilots attempt to track the progress of individual young people, as well as efforts made to evaluate project-level outcomes. The following sections present a discussion of:

- indicators of performance

- tracking individual progress

- project-level monitoring and evaluation

- monitoring partner providers

- issues relating to monitoring and evaluation

- accountability

- value for money assessments.

## 6.1 Indicators of performance

As has been demonstrated throughout this report, there is considerable diversity across the Back on Track pilots, although there are elements of commonality in the range of criteria used to monitor progress against the stated aims of, and targets associated with, each of the projects. This includes, for example:

### Behavioural indicators

- reduction in number of permanent and fixed-term exclusions

- reduction in the number of behavioural related incidents recorded

- reduced numbers of requests for out of authority day and residential placements

- reduction of students involved in offending and receiving a custodial sentence

- increased social and emotional ability, and positive changes in attitudes.

### Attendance indicators

- increase in overall attendance

- increase in numbers of students attending regular sessions

- increase in the number of students re-engaged in education.

### Achievement indicators

- increase in levels of academic achievement, including literacy and numeracy

- increase in numbers of students gaining qualifications

- increase in the number of qualifications gained by each student

- increase in the number of new work experience placements

- increase in positive destinations and reduction of young people who are NEET.

### System-level indicators

- greater number of young people placed in appropriate, personalised and local provision

- increased inclusion for children and young people with behavioural, social and emotional needs

- improved experience of schooling and improved feelings of wellbeing

- effective engagement with parents, families and the community

- integrated delivery of multi-agency services.

## 6.2 Tracking individual progress

Processes for monitoring young people's progress and achievement varies, both across and between pilots, depending on the remit and core function of particular pilots. In some cases, for example, systematic, data-driven approaches to measuring young people's progress are evident, focussing primarily on quantitative data relating to defined outcomes and impacts, such as reducing exclusions and behaviour-related incidents. This approach is most apparent in pilot settings and provisions operating closely with mainstream schools, and larger settings attended by many students such as PRUs. In other pilots, more qualitative approaches to measurement of progress are in operation in which practitioners' professional knowledge and understanding of the young people attending the provision are key. This type of approach is applied in the monitoring of young people's attitudinal and behavioural development, and is more common in the pilots working with small numbers of young people that exhibit more complex and multiple difficulties.

### 6.2.1 Baseline assessment

As highlighted in Chapter 5, referral processes generally entail data exchange and assessments of needs, usually conducted by the pilots. Within this, baseline assessments are generally conducted on young people's entry to the provision, especially when the young person being referred has experienced considerable disengagement from school and learning. In such cases, the extent and accuracy (and by implication, usefulness of information accompanying the referral), may be limited, necessitating the need for project-specific baseline assessments. The effectiveness of such assessments is vital for the development of appropriate packages of provision for individuals, supporting the construction of IEPs and other learning and needs-driven strategies and plans. As such, needs assessments are used across the pilots to:

- assess students' specific needs and identifying key areas of concern

- determine the most appropriate support measures for each young person

- set clear progress and achievement targets to support students in their learning.

In all cases, baseline assessments include attempts to collect and analyse existing data relating to attendance, achievement and behaviour as well varying degrees of gathering information directly from young people themselves, through attitude surveys, staff consultations with young people and behavioural observations.

As noted in Chapter 5, several of the pilots also use a variety behavioural assessment tools and surveys as part of their initial evaluation of students' needs.

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Such measures include:
- Pupil Behaviour Assessment System (PBAS)
- Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS)
- Emotional Literacy Assessment Tool (ELAT)
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ).

These tools have some merit in helping pilot staff to explore in-depth patterns of behaviour and disruption, which may contribute to young people's experiences of education. This, in turn, can inform the development of a portfolio of interventions to specifically address these concerns. There is a view amongst various stakeholders across the pilots that an over-reliance on diagnostic tools can be problematic, especially given many young people's inability or unwillingness to engage with the process. Similarly, whilst baseline assessment is a useful tool for assessing students' needs, various pilot staff emphasise that processes for doing so should not be over-complicated: rather, simple forms of assessment that are straightforward to establish are likely to receive greater use, and therefore be more valuable in the longer-term.

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**Back on Track illustrative examples: Baseline assessments**

**Example 1**
The staff at this pilot, that offers range of support and intervention to young people on secondary school rolls, work closely with mainstream classroom teachers to examine existing data for all young people attending the provision, and to consider which types of support are required. Achievement targets are then set in collaboration with the learner, and a personalised education plan is put in place to achieve these goals. Young people are encouraged to give their views at this early stage, and to talk openly about what they hope to achieve through attendance at the pilot. Baseline assessment data is shared with the school's senior leadership team to ensure that they are aware of the young people who receive help and support. This ensures that each learner's personalised education plan can be systematically applied and supported across the school so increasing the reach of the pilot into all areas of school life for the young people involved.

**Example 2**
After trialling range of assessment measures, staff in a pilot offering early intervention, time-limited provision have successfully developed a consistent process for baseline assessment of young people on entry to the pilot. Simplicity is seen as a key factor in the effectiveness of this approach to establishing insightful starting point measures from which to build and deliver provision and assess outcomes.

*We tried a few things* [to measure young people's baseline position] *and didn't really stick with anything* [except] *what we use for our own evaluation... their attendance at school, number of fixed-term exclusion and permanent exclusions, and behaviour descriptions. It's not rocket science and it could be better but we have stuck with it.*

(Pilot project staff)

> **Example 3**
> *We talked about how we were going to evaluate students in order to monitor progress. An inclusion unit nearby does on-line tests for young people. We did try to take some kids over there to do that but some of them wouldn't go, and the rest of them didn't take it seriously anyway because they mess about so you don't get an accurate view anyway. Without the initial assessment data it is really difficult to monitor progress.*
>
> (School/PRU staff)

## 6.2.2 Ongoing monitoring of performance

Effective baseline assessments provide the essential basis upon which the ongoing monitoring of pilots' ability to meet the needs of, and deliver appropriate outcomes for, young people are based. Specific procedures for ongoing monitoring of young people's progress vary across the pilots, and through review and adaptation have become increasingly distinct over time, reflecting the unique position and context of each provision. Nonetheless, the approaches taken to ongoing monitoring can be broadly categorised into the following areas:

- **Continuous, informal monitoring** of young people's progress. This often occurs on a daily basis, with information on the progress of students being discussed and fed back as needs arise. In addition, daily round-up and reflection sessions involving young people and staff in 'circle-time' type activities are seen to be particularly effective in providing immediate feedback on the day's events, progress made and difficulties encountered, as well as providing opportunities to celebrate particular successes and achievements of individuals.

- **Weekly monitoring and progress reports and activity plans**, used to provide a snapshot of each students' progress in relation to work undertaken, academic achievements, motivation and self-confidence.

- **Regular review meetings**, bringing together key professionals working with each young person to discuss progress based on staff observations and put in place strategies to address any concerns.

- **'Live' electronic documents**, detailing all records of student intervention, stored centrally and accessed by all parties, for example, a pupil passport). This provides a transferable record of all interventions put in place for a young person.

- **Student portfolios**, used as a means of recording young people's achievements.

> **Back on Track illustrative examples: Approaches to monitoring**
>
> **Example 1**
> Staff in this pilot complete weekly monitoring forms which give a snapshot of each student's progress and include details of the work they have undertaken and expectations of their overall achievement. This snapshot also records information about students' self-confidence and motivation numerically. These scores are used

by staff to gauge progress towards soft outcomes. They are also used with young people to identify individual targets for them to work towards.

**Example 2**
In one pilot provision, the head of one centre has a visible presence in classes and observes practice and pupil progress. All teachers produce written evaluations of each lesson which are collated and seen by the head on a weekly basis. Discussion of individual students' progress take place at regular staff meetings, and each student has an individual learning plan (ILP), underpinning a traffic light system monitoring system.

**Example 3**
In a pilot focussing on preparing young people for future progression into employment or further education and training, considerable attention has been placed on developing students' individual portfolios of achievement. These contain extensive evidence of their academic, vocational and social/emotional achievements secured whilst attending the pilot. This involves gathering together examples of the work produced, such as the craft artefacts created, as well as collecting evidence of the personal and social 'distance travelled' and achievements made. This includes, providing photographic evidence of students working in teams and collaboratively engaging in tasks and activities.

## 6.2.3 Endpoint evaluations

Several of the pilots also conduct endpoint evaluations of their students' progress. While in some cases this corresponds to students' baseline assessments, there was little evidence that this was being systematically implemented. Instead, pilots undertake endpoint evaluation where it is perceived to be most useful, often drawing upon the wider views and judgements of professionals working with the young person. There is limited evidence that pilots also seek to gather parents' perspectives at this stage of the process, chiefly through the administration of small surveys, and occasionally through home visits and discussion with parents by telephone.

Endpoint evaluation is most commonly undertaken in pilots delivering shorter-term interventions to address specific needs rather than, for example, provision spanning a whole key stage (in these circumstances, pilot staff tend to be more focused on effective transition into further education and employment). Endpoint evaluation is perceived to be important in enabling pilot staff to measure the outcomes realised for young people, with a view to ensuring that appropriate further support is put in place for their transition back into mainstream education.

> *We take immediate evaluations from all concerned during and at the end of the intervention. It is really important that all staff, not just managers read these evaluation forms straight away, it is everybody's responsibility to make this work. Most of it is really positive but there is stuff that needs to be picked out and worked on, especially when students themselves identified things they were not as sure or happy about. All the staff then need to talk about those sessions and decide if or how we need to take action to improve them.*

(Pilot project staff)

A number of pilots also undertake follow-up evaluations with young people on their return to mainstream education, conducting visits and liaising via email and telephone contact with schools to provide updated information on young people's progress as a means of assessing the sustainability of the pilots' impacts. In some cases, local authority participation officers have been involved in consulting with young people to gain their feedback and opinions of the provision. Several stakeholders from various pilots suggest that data exchange and communication surrounding reintegration is an area that could be improved.

## 6.3  Project-level monitoring and evaluation

A variety of approaches to measuring overall progress against project-specific performance measures and targets are in operation across the Back on Track pilots. Central to these is the need to review the progress made by all young people attending the pilot in order to construct a composite view of the extent and nature of the overall impacts generated. Hence, key factors considered across the pilots include: authorised and unauthorised attendance figures; retention rates; the extent of accredited outcomes (including GCSE, NVQs, City and Guilds and other vocationally-related qualifications); improvements in individual's behavioural and emotional well-being and progression and post-pilot destinations (including mainstream school, or other education, training and employment destinations). The regular monitoring of information is key to ensuring that the content of the provision remains appropriately targeted and able to meet the needs of young people.

> *We look at attendance and behaviour and attainment data and try and look for patterns and see how it relates to what we're doing here. We looked at exclusions data for a couple of terms and looked at the reasons for these exclusions then linked it to what we were doing on the programme. We found that rates for exclusions for verbal aggression had dropped, but there are still high rates for physical aggression, so we're looking at what we can do in the programme to address that.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Several pilots operate frameworks against which their progress in relation to service performance can be systematically monitored. Specific factors include assessments of: levels of success in adhering to referral timescales; the quality and range of provision offered to meet young people's individual needs; and effective engagement with parents, families and the community. In the case of one pilot operating in numerous locations, a series of key 'guiding' principles informs the approach to the assessment of pilot-level performance. This is seen as being particularly effective, enabling each site to develop locally relevant and applicable service performance measures underpinned by a unified philosophy and sense of direction.

> **Back on Track illustrative example: Monitoring service performance in a multi-site provision**
>
> Levels of service performance across multiple sites are measured against the ten key guiding principles of the pilot which are as follows:
>
> - establishing bespoke school-based intervention centres which have at their heart the development of sound and lasting relationships
>
> - raising aspirations and having high expectations for all students
>
> - developing the students' confidence to learn
>
> - enabling students to develop the relevant skills to access a relevant curriculum
>
> - giving students an understanding of the positive concept of personal achievement and emotional well being
>
> - ensuring a cohesive approach through the development of effective partnership working both within and between schools, between schools, parents and carers and between schools and other agencies
>
> - developing a sustained programme of CPD for both school and relevant multi-agency staff
>
> - effecting change in the way the school community meets the needs of its students
>
> - embedding the principles and practice of intervention to enhance inclusion
>
> - creating the environment for the sustainability of this pilot.
>
> Each setting within the pilot has determined its own performance measures and targets around these principles, enabling them to monitor progress according to local need.

## 6.4 Monitoring partner providers

A number of pilots working with external providers also have in place robust processes for monitoring and quality assurance of this provision. This can be supported by structures and processes of the local authority, including, for example, the presence of brokering services and provider frameworks. Although not always responsible for commissioning, these frameworks add value to the monitoring and accountability of alternative provision.

> *We try to challenge the providers. At the end of the year, we review the progress and see what qualifications they have achieved. If there's no progress, we challenge them and we won't just accept them saying 'we've reengaged the young person' we need to see more than that. We have to make certain that the provider is trying to move them on. Once a young person attends for a couple of weeks, then they're reengaged, so then it's a case of moving forward and getting some positive outcomes.*

(Pilot project staff)

**Back on Track illustrative example: Monitoring service performance in a multi-site provision**

In this pilot, the lead PRU works with a wide range of vocational providers across the city. The PRU put in place formal procedures to support, monitor and quality assure the provision offered by their partners. Monitoring and quality assurance across the provision includes learning walks, performance management observations, work sampling and learner voice. Monitoring of the vocational provision is conducted via 'spot checks' each half-term, and more comprehensive reviews each term made up of work sampling, lesson observations, policies and systems, accreditations, learner progress and learner voice. A key feature of this quality assurance role involves balancing compliance with the teaching standards of the PRU with the individual nature and characteristics of the separate vocational provisions.

*My role this year is to go out to providers and support them with teaching and learning, but not change what they deliver which is innovative and different to the diet you get in school. It's finding a way of helping them to structure what they are delivering and helping them to evidence it without taking away the joy of what they're doing.*

(Pilot project staff)

## 6.5   Issues relating to monitoring and evaluation

Whilst, there is some evidence of meaningful and fit for purpose monitoring and measurement procedures, underpinned by high levels of commitment to assessment across the pilots, considerable difficulties and barriers are apparent that challenge the comprehensive, rigorous evaluation of the absolute and relative performance of the pilots.

### 6.5.1 Attribution of impact

To varying degrees, stakeholders in the different pilot projects highlight difficulties in isolating the impacts generated specifically through the Back on Track programme from other policies, structures and interventions ongoing in their local authorities. This is particularly the case for pilots receiving composite funding from a range of sources, alongside Back on Track investments.

The considerable benefits that specific Back on Track funding have yielded (for example, through the availability of new capital facilities and resources), operate in wider contexts, frameworks and relationships which contribute to the overall impacts of the pilots. There is also a view that it is not always possible or appropriate to separate these impacts out as the Back on Track pilots may be purposefully and intentionally designed to complement and work alongside these other local and national priorities.

A significant challenge to the measurement of pilots' impact on securing positive academic outcomes for young people stems from the fact that many young people do not complete their learning solely at the pilots themselves. As a result of re-integration into mainstream school, the intended time-limited nature of pilot interventions, or unplanned departures and exits, pilots do not always retain their involvement with the young people all the way through to transition or their next destination. In terms of qualifications, young people may leave the provision before taking exams, or submitting a portfolio of work for assessment. However, the pilots may have had substantial impacts on the distance that these young people have travelled and therefore measurements of the final destinations or outcomes on departure may mask the true value of the pilots' impacts.

## 6.5.2 Ensuring that measurements are appropriate to aims

It is necessary to consider the impacts and achievements of the different pilots in ways that are appropriate to, and accurately reflect, their aims and remits. Within this, multiple and differential measurements may be required to capture the true value of pilots' outcomes. For example, whilst the overarching core aim and rationale of a pilot may centre on reintegrating young people back into mainstream education, the complexities and difficulties faced by these young people could mean that this may not be achievable. Hence, the pilot must then be considered in relation to other impacts in terms of the work done with these young people that could contribute towards their eventual reintegration. Re-engagement with education and learning may then be a necessary precursor to the overall aim of reintegration into mainstream school. Furthermore, prior to re-engagement with learning, the pilots may have to undertake considerable work to support and prepare the young people socially, emotionally, and behaviourally, to help them reach a position where they can even begin to contemplate focusing on pursuing academic outcomes and achievements. For other young people, and in other pilots, the overarching goal of reintegration may be more overtly achievable and measurable in much shorter timeframes. Hence, any assessment and evaluation strategies have to consider the content and operation of the pilot as a whole, not just its overarching aim. Alongside this, there is the need to ensure that expectations and aspirations remain high, and that the maximum possible positive outcomes for individual pupils are worked towards.

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**Voices from Back on Track:  Establishing appropriate targets**

*Targets can be too far in the future, and seen as too unachievable so you tend to not do it. The vision is about having something pervading across all the work we do, then setting appropriate targets and achievable goals for the year can come from this. More than statistical targets, you just need a vision and someone who is going to push it and not forget it. Then you can build systems for measuring your success.*

(Pilot project staff)

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> *Baselines and targets should be about progress. In many cases, it might only seem like small progress but for that kid it might be massive and its going to shift the direction of their life. It's a worry that places like this could be closed and something else could come on board because we're not seen as succeeding, when we might be doing loads of things right, because we can't meet these unrealistic targets for attainment and attendance.*
>
> (School/PRU staff)
>
> *When they come to us, lots of these kids won't even sit in a chair but by the end of a school year with us, they sit a two hour exam. They might get G grades, but from where they were when they started, that's massive progress but it will look like a failure.*
>
> (School/PRU staff)

### 6.5.3 External influences on pilots' outcomes

The extent to which particular provisions can be seen to have met stated aims of reintegrating students back into mainstream school, for example, may also, in part be influenced by the characteristics of the wider educational systems and structures in which the pilot operates.

For example, if the reintegration of a pupil experiencing complex difficulties into a mainstream school entails this pupil returning to the same age-related year group to follow the same curriculum from which s/he became detached, then the likelihood of lasting success could be low. If there is a lack of suitable local opportunities for re-engagement, the fact that young people are unable to move on and progress should not be taken as an indication that the pilot has failed in meeting a specific aim. In the case of one pilot, the lack of appropriate post-16 provision was regarded as a significant barrier to the positive transition opportunities available to students, so potentially limiting the overarching success of the pilot. As a result, significant development work has taken place to develop additional provision within the local area. Hence the pilots should not be assessed without reference to, and understanding of, the wider contexts and structures in which they operate.

## 6.6 Accountability

In line with the principles of Back on Track, efforts have been made to increase the prioritisation of accountability within the pilots, evidenced at different levels and brought about through different channels. The nature and operational systems of individual pilot projects have inherent accountability structures embedded within them through their management and governance arrangements. Individual staff are responsible for delivering high quality content to young people, monitored through regular observation, informal discussion and formal evaluation by senior members of staff. Much of this is, in several cases, closely tied in with performance management and training approaches of the pilots. The 'open door' policy of one particular pilot also means that staff are aware, that, at any time, school staff, local authority

representatives and parents could turn up, un-announced to observe the provision. Changes in the nature of the offer of some pilots have also had implications for accountability. In one instance for example, the drive towards increasing the level of accredited educational opportunities on offer to young people has added an extra dimension in the contexts of accountability. The setting of specified outcomes for young people, in terms of the academic qualifications to be achieved has given staff concrete targets against which their performance and delivery can be assessed.

## Voices from Back on track: Accountability

*We may have lost some of the creativity and freedom, but there is more accountability now because we are following these accreditation pathways. In the past, if the students didn't achieve anything, there was no one going to hold us to account. Now, there is an understanding of why we have all this paperwork to do, monitoring students' progress, meeting targets. There has to be internal verification of what we do because we have to prove to the outside world that we are a quality provision.*

(Pilot project staff)

*There is a lot of emphasis on accountability within the team. The daily debrief session is all about accountability, discussing what did and didn't go well. That is of crucial importance. There is an agreed format for debrief and everything is recorded and evidenced on a proforma. Staff have to get their timetables and session plans to me, I do session observations and I provide feedback. We've recently started using Ofsted criteria. There will come a time when Ofsted will come knocking at the door. So it's about getting my staff used to using the new Ofsted criteria.*

(Pilot project staff)

As well as the defining characteristics underpinning the content and approach of the pilots, the operation of management committees and advisory boards also provide accountability frameworks, especially in the case of pilots with close connections to existing local authority-based provision. Accountability through the commissioning process is also apparent, either through pilots being held to account directly by the referring institution, (mainly schools), or through the presence of partnership and sub-contracting agreements between the pilot and other establishments, such as FE colleges.

Within the range of accountability structures, varying levels of monitoring and evaluation are evident, including:

- light-touch feedback
- collaboration and shared learning
- rigorous assessment and audit.

## 6.6.1 Light-touch feedback

Several pilots highlight relatively infrequent and light touch interaction and communication with the local authority. This is considered to be particularly appropriate for those pilots with existing local authority-based provision or for other forms of provision with other management and accountability in place. As such, additional lines of accountability to the local authority are considered unnecessary in these circumstances. For example in one pilot PRU accountability lies with the management group comprising secondary school headteachers established by the partnership schools who monitor the progress made by individual young people. In other pilots working closely with, or along the lines of, mainstream schools they follow similar reporting and evaluation strategies operating in this sector, such as the self-assessment framework.

However, there are concerns such low-level accountability can challenge the longer-term quality of alternative provision offered to young people. Low levels of interaction with, and engagement from local authorities can lead to diminishing standards and also inhibit the development and dissemination of good and effective practice across the local authority. One stakeholder commented: 'A confident provider doesn't have any problems with being held to account' (Pilot staff).

> *I think there are accountability issues with the monitoring of the project as a whole. We haven't had any visitor from the local authority at all. This is sad, it's a real shame. They have been invited to various events but they haven't been. I was ready, and wanted, to be Ofsted inspected. For us, the only accountability has been to the schools. When they come in, they're like the Ofsted inspectors.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

## 6.6.2 Collaboration and shared learning

In several of the pilots, mechanisms for accountability are characterised by a high degree of collaboration between the key providers and the local authority, underpinned by ongoing professional dialogue. Overall responsibility for the success of the pilot provision is shared in these instances, and sometimes supported by service level agreements outlining the respective roles of both parties. This approach is perceived to be successful in ensuring that positive outcomes are reached through collective commitment and joint responsibility. There is, however, a view that it is necessary to ensure that appropriate forums are put in place to enable cross-fertilisation of ideas and to develop a sense of shared ownership of the pilot (for example, through a practitioner's group to stimulate discussion amongst delivery providers).

Local authorities and providers work together collaboratively in a number of ways to ensure the quality and development of alternative provision. For example, in one pilot (underpinned by strategic aims of systemic and process improvement and development), a local authority research officer has been appointed to monitor and evidence the progress made by the pilot towards meeting its specified aims.

Similarly, in another Back on Track pilot area the local authority supported the full-time employment of a member of staff to develop a data tracking tool through which the progress of all pupils accessing alternative provision in the authority (not just the pilot) could be monitored.

In other pilots, key local authority personnel have critical roles in working, in partnership with the core provider, to analyse the qualitative and quantitative data reports produced. Such personnel could hold strategic posts (such as Head of Inclusion) or could have remits more closely related to the pilot itself (such as those with ultimate responsibility for its management and accountability).

### 6.6.3 Rigorous assessment and audit

Some of the pilots undergo more rigorous local authority assessment and audit as part of their contractual and accountability procedures, although the level of accountability varies between pilots. In some cases, local authorities request reports on the numbers of young people referred and supported, the nature of support provided, attendance figures and other information. In other areas, on-going verbal feedback forms the basis of the approach.

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**Back on Track illustrative example: Monitoring reports**

In this pilot, the key delivery partner is expected, as part of its contract, to provide the following reports to the local authority manager (who in turn reports to the steering group).

**Monthly reports:**
- attendance sheets for individual students, including data on punctuality
- attendance figures for the cohort of students
- details of the overall progress of the pilot, including any significant events or achievements, child protection referrals, and/or complaints.

**Termly reports:**
- achievement of young people's attainment targets as outlined in their referral plan, statement of needs, or other relevant documents
- involvement in any disciplinary incidents
- level of engagement demonstrated.

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## 6.7   Pilots' approaches to value for money

There is a great strength of feeling that the Back on Track pilots are delivering a wide range of positive outcomes that reflect the aims and rationales upon which they are founded. Furthermore, as these were designed as pilots, there is wide

acknowledgement that given continued support (through commissioning and partnership working), the interventions and infrastructures provided and delivered to date, will continue to inspire and facilitate further growth and generate long term impacts. There are legacies in terms of enhanced buildings and spaces associated with Back on Track that have supported staff in their delivery of new and expanded curriculum areas and activities. In addition, improvements in partnership working and opportunities for the growth of networks of providers and professionals have been evidenced, which over time, may act to further consolidate and develop the local delivery of alternative provision. Through these investments, individual young people have been able to secure direct outcomes, and/or increase their preparation and readiness to experience positive and meaningful achievements in the future.

The value for money provided by alternative provision is a central consideration in the commissioning process, but it is apparent that across the Back on Track pilots, there are few rigorous, systematic approaches to assessing the value for money (VfM), cost-benefit and cost effectiveness. There is an increasing awareness amongst stakeholders of the need to be able to demonstrate the absolute and relative benefits of providing high-quality alternative provision (in many and various forms) to a wide range of young people with complex and changing needs.

Various stakeholders identify the potential benefits of approaches such as VfM, social return on investment, and cost-benefit analysis in relation to the outcomes generated through the pilots. Such assessments require valid like-for-like comparisons, which can consist of:

- Comparison *within* an intervention between different approaches to delivering a common set of outcomes (**cost-effectiveness analysis**). For example, this would compare the costs of approaches adopted by different providers to the impacts these have on young peoples' outcomes. The best VfM would be represented by the approaches delivering the greatest impact for the least cost.

- Comparison *between* interventions intended to deliver a common set of outcomes (**cost-effectiveness analysis**). This would rely on comparable evaluation findings relating to similar measures of both costs and impact.

- Comparison *within* an intervention between monetised inputs and outcomes (**cost-benefit analysis**). Such analysis relies on a suitable approach to monetising outcomes, and leads to a cost-benefit ratio describing "£s out for each £ in".

Stakeholders identify a range of difficulties and challenges associated with such measurements. Of crucial significance is the huge variability in the cohorts of young people accessing the wide range of alternative provision opportunities and experiences, making each provision or package almost unique. As such, the development of appropriate and meaningful comparison or control groups against which the rigorous assessment of the value of alternative provision interventions can be made is highly problematic. In addition, establishing the appropriate parameters for evaluating the financial worth of alternative provision is also seen as highly problematic, as indicated in the comments of stakeholders presented below.

**Voices from Back on Track: Difficulties in assessing value for money**

**Ascribing value to alternative provision:** *The question is, what does society want? They have to decide if we are worth it, if these kids are worth it.*

(Local authority staff)

**Identifying appropriate measures:** *What we do is give these kids some hope in their otherwise pretty hopeless lives. How can I say how much that is worth?*

(Pilot project staff)

**Implications of reducing costs in alternative provision:** *If they want it cheaper, we will be only able to offer our service to more compliant people. The young people we currently have would be NEET – they would be doing nothing and be in other systems costing the taxpayer more in terms of costs to social care, health, mental health, criminal justice systems.*

(Pilot project staff)

**The value of longer-term outcomes:** *We're putting a lot of resource into them, but given where they come from, the long term outcomes we're generating for some of these young people are massively significant. They are responding to us when they haven't responded positively anywhere else.*

(Pilot project staff)

**The difficulty in attributing costs to outcomes**: *Their outcomes are going to be better. They are less likely to cause havoc to other people in their lives, less likely to be in hospital, less likely to be in prison, and some are less likely to be dead. They are less likely to have s\*\*t lives. But, I can't cost that.*

(Pilot project staff)

# 7. The challenges and key drivers of success and sustainability of the Back on Track pilots

**Back on Track - five key messages: The challenges and key drivers of success and sustainability of the Back on Track pilots**

- There are numerous factors contributing to the pilots' varying ability to demonstrate sustainability post-Back on Track funding. A significant challenge has been the ability of schools to continue making referrals to external alternative provision.

- Changes and reductions in local authority staffing and budgets specifically for alternative provision as well as for wider behaviour and inclusion-related agendas have impacted on the range and levels of support available to pilot projects. This has implications for pilots' current ability to deliver as well as for planning for future delivery.

- High quality relationships have evolved between some pilots and commissioners of alternative provision in which mutual understandings of the benefits of particular projects and interventions have been developed. These are central factors in establishing the strategic and operational position of these pilots in wider systems of local delivery.

- The evolution and expansion of the offer and content of some pilots has contributed to opportunities for their continued and future growth. Links with post-16 education and social care agencies and providers may provide additional areas in which pilots can continue to operate successfully.

- In addition to broadening their core aims and reach, some Back on Track pilots have explored the commercial possibilities and income streams associated with elements of the physical environments and resources as a means of strengthening their sustainability in the longer term.

This research illustrates the great diversity evident in the Back on Track pilots' individualised local responses to supporting and improving the nature and content of a wide range of alternative provision offers, which are delivered through a variety of formats, operating in a range of settings. Across the pilot programme as a whole, and also within individual pilot projects themselves, there is variation in the degree to which initial and on-going aims and objectives have been met. This results from the interplay between the numerous challenges and inhibiting factors, and the nature and effectiveness of a range of key factors that underpin and drive pilots' successes. Whilst specific challenges, difficulties and facilitating factors have been highlighted throughout this report, the following section provides an overview of some of the broader issues faced by the pilots in delivering and sustaining high quality alternative provision.

## 7.1 Sustainability and moving forward

The ability to demonstrate sustainability following the cessation of initial funding was a core criterion in the process of selecting projects and interventions for inclusion in the Back on Track pilot programme. The pilots have mixed experiences in this area. Eight of the pilots have experienced varying degrees of developments, refinement and adaptation throughout the course of the pilot programme, but broadly continue to deliver the same nature and scale of provision as initially intended. Four of the pilots have not continued to operate to the same extent, or in the same format as had originally been anticipated and planned post-Back on Track funding.

Several pilots encountered challenges in establishing and securing appropriate support from local communities, providers and potential delivery partners in the early stages of development and during their operation. There is, however, evidence that pilot staff worked extremely hard and creatively to encourage positive relationships between these projects and the localities in which they operate. These experiences highlight the need for coordinated, cohesive promotion of the wider (social) benefits that can stem from alternative provision initiatives in order to overcome the barriers associated with negative perceptions. Although one pilot in particular took on a greatly reduced role within the overall pilot programme after the first year, contributions were still made in terms of providing resources and support to several other providers in the area. As a result of this pilot's experiences, strategic lessons have been learned and there are now enhanced understandings of the quality of alternative provision that can, and should, be expected and offered within the local area.

Uncertainty and delays surrounding the capital-build and infrastructural developments have also led to significant changes in the nature and scale of the operational elements of several pilots. This has led to situations whereby some of the longer-term impacts and intended outcomes of these pilots may not be fully realised and experienced by the cohorts of young people initially accessing the pilots. Changes consistent with restructuring and reorganisation within local authority education and social care management and delivery frameworks have also impacted on the longer-term position and operation of at least one pilot, culminating in no new referrals being taken by the project. Despite not continuing as a stand-alone initiative, much of the content and specific activities of the pilot have been incorporated into other aspects of local provision.

The sustainability of pilot provisions has also been influenced by take up and pupil numbers. From the outset, several pilots have worked with smaller numbers of young people than was initially envisaged and several have also experienced considerable declines in the number of young people being referred through local authority structures, or directly from schools. To some, this represents a significant challenge to their effective day-to-day operation and delivery and also to their continued viability. Various strategies have been put in place to overcome this situation including the submission of an application for one pilot to operate within the free

school structure, establishing closer working relationships with schools to encourage an uptake in direct commissioning of places.  Pilots have also engaged in diversification to counter the challenges of reducing referrals through increasing their emphasis and focus on offering post-16 provision opportunities, including in one case, residential provision. Links and partnerships between the pilots and other providers, for example the FE sector, LA and schools/PRUs, continue to evolve as means of supporting their sustainability.

## 7.2  Challenges encountered in delivering alternative provision

The different pilots were devised, constructed and operate, in a variety of contexts and subsequently aim to generate a broad range of outcomes for diverse cohorts of young people. Within this, the pilots variously experience numerous core challenges, elements of which may remain unresolved and which may also become further entrenched, and compounded by additional contextual, economic and policy-related changes. Whist many of the key challenges have been highlighted through this report, the following sections provide a general overview of the key issues faced across the Back on Track pilots.

### 7.2.1 Contextual and inherited challenges

Many of the pilots seek to meet the educational and learning needs of young people with a high threshold of wider multiple and complex needs. A key challenge, therefore, stems from attempting to meet these immediate critical social, emotional and behavioural needs as a basis for pursuing the core educational-orientated aims of the pilot. Many of the young people attending the pilots exhibit extremely challenging behaviour, including bullying, threats of violence and conflict. This creates a number of challenges, which for some pilots have been exacerbated by inappropriate or inadequate accommodation, resulting from delays in accessing newly-built, or refurbished premises. The interventions, spaces and resources designed to help meet these needs have in some cases not been delivered to their full extent because of infrastructural limitations. Geographical issues and the physical location of some pilot projects still present barriers to accessibility which can further challenge young people's attendance, engagement and retention.

A central area of challenge stems from the level and complexity of need, and the nature of difficulties with which many young people present. Stakeholders from all the pilots express concerns about the depth of the disengagement exhibited, along with the low levels of academic ability and the range of issues and challenges resulting from the home, family and community backgrounds of young people. In many cases, this is accompanied by the view that the young people continuing to be referred to alternative provision increasingly represent a cohort that other establishments and service providers cannot effectively work with.

*Most of them come here with no literacy and numeracy skills whatsoever at the age of 14. We found that upsetting. I went in to teach them the 24 hour clock, they couldn't even tell the time. Frankly, the kids were not interested in qualifications. We did ASDAN courses, but even trying to get them to fill in the worksheet was difficult.*

(Pilot project staff)

*GCSEs don't matter. My cousin is 18 and she left school with all As and Bs. She's on the dole. She went on the dole the day after her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. So there's me with my low grade English and maths – what chance have I got?*

(Young Person)

## 7.2.2 Challenges of inappropriate placement

For some pilots, inappropriate placement or referral of young people means that the needs of individual learners will not be adequately met; the provision will not meet its performance targets; and the wider core aims of the pilot (and local authorities' priorities) will also not be successful. Inappropriate placement can result in a counterproductive mix of young people within the provision, leading to disruptive behaviour, so limiting the potential positive impact on all students attending. Ensuring students are appropriately matched within the provision depends on effective needs assessment and information supply. There are still considerable difficulties surrounding the availability and consistency of information exchange associated with young people's transfer and referral to alternative provision.

Inappropriate referral may result in particular pilots, or aspects of their constituent elements, not being equipped to deal with specific needs of the young people they are commissioned to support. The ability of some pilots to successfully offer appropriate levels and types intervention and support for young people with SEN and significant behaviour issues varies, with some vocationally-orientated alternative educational projects, for example, facing particular difficulties.

In this respect, a key challenge identified is to ensure that those employed or commissioned to deliver pilot activities and content are experienced and confident in working with the particular young people and are suitably equipped and prepared to meet their needs. Several examples have been highlighted whereby the expertise and experience of providers has not matched the specific skills, approaches and environments required to effectively deliver to particular groups of young people attending pilot provisions. In these cases, internal monitoring review and evaluation procedures have led to modifications, such as the appointment/commissioning of more appropriate providers and the appointment of additional, more appropriately qualified staff. This is especially important when considering the successful delivery of the educational component of the pilots. Skilled and experienced providers with proven expertise in working with a range of vulnerable young people may require additional support in ensuring that educational outcomes are pursued and achieved by learners. Hence, a key challenge faced by many pilots centres on providing an

appropriate engaging combination of, and tailoring academic curriculum content and project activities of vocational provision to, specific learning objectives for the young people. A challenge for those involved in commissioning therefore involves balancing the need to ensure that the form and functions of the provider(s) can deliver, or contribute to the delivery of, all the pilot's educational aims, whilst also acknowledging the value of the culture and ethos of the vocational, social and other therapeutic aspects of the provision.

Related to this, in some cases there are concerns around the accuracy of information supporting the commissioning process, and the appropriateness of consequent referrals. Several pilot representatives also note that it has been difficult to bring about a common understanding amongst local schools and other referring agencies about the nature and purpose of the provision. There is a view that alternative provision is too often perceived and used as a 'last resort' or 'dumping ground'. However, where the purpose of the pilots is more widely and accurately understood, there can also sometimes be challenges in managing the expectations of schools and other agencies. One pilot staff member, for example, expressed concerns that their provision would be perceived as a 'miracle cure' and expected to successfully meet all the needs of young people that remain unmet by a range of different agencies and providers. Hence, a critical challenge stems from the need to reconcile the possible tensions that may arise between the strategic responsibilities and accountabilities underpinning the pilot (often local authority-driven) and the remits/values and philosophical approaches of those commissioned to deliver these outcomes.

Alongside these challenges are the difficulties faced by some pilots in identifying and delivering the right balance in their nature and content while offering young people what they want, and what they need. One pilot in particular has faced significant difficulties in securing referrals from schools, and retaining young people, because elements of the offer and formats of delivery are seen to be too challenging for them. Whilst there is considerable support from numerous stakeholders for this pilot many young people identified as benefiting from attending have rejected it and elected not to attend.

### 7.2.3 Challenges associated with funding

As the pilot programme progressed, significant challenges have arisen as a result of worsening economic conditions. Alongside problems stemming from the curtailment of national capital investment programmes, most notably BSF, difficulties associated with shortages in revenue funding, from the Back on Track programme as well as external sources, have been highlighted in several pilots. Critically, concerns relate to the impacts of changing priorities, contexts and relationships within different localities, especially in terms of reductions in the number of young people being referred to alternative provision, either directly from schools, or through local authority structures and processes. Alongside the direct threat posed to sustainability, further key implications of funding difficulties include constraints on the

ability of some pilots to offer the desired terms and conditions to staff members – such as long-term and/or permanent contracts. As a result, concerns have been expressed about the pilots' capacity to continue to attract new, high calibre and appropriately qualified personnel, as well as retaining those currently employed. Throughout the course of the pilot programme, individual pilots experienced varying degrees of staff turnover, and in several cases, there have been significant redundancies, reflecting and compounding concerns about their on-going operation and future continuation.

## 7.2.4 Challenges in establishing effective working with providers and partners

Many of the pilots have developed positive working relationships with a range of external partners and service providers. However, there have been some challenges in establishing effective partnership working in some instances. This includes difficulties in establishing the necessary 'buy-in' from partners, achieving the required levels of two-way communication and information sharing, and ensuring shared responsibility and accountability for pupil outcomes.

A key challenge for pilots working to support young people's reintegration into mainstream schools stems from the need to ensure that gains and progress made by the young people when attending the provision can be transferred, continued and consolidated in the future. Of crucial importance in this is the need to secure the commitment from other key partners, especially school staff and parents/carers, in consistently supporting the young person and applying the same techniques and strategies employed successfully by the pilot.

> *Parent support is just as crucial as the school support. If we don't skill up the parents, they won't be able to support the work that we've done and to support the school in taking on new ways of working with the child. It's essential that everybody is on board and working consistently in the same direction together.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Further challenges relate to compatibility and consistency in the approaches to teaching and learning and behaviour management of the pilots and their partners. In one pilot, for example, issues arose in relation to ensuring the delivery of high-quality teaching from (sub-contracted) vocational providers whose staff included those without formal teaching qualifications. This resulted in the need for considerable input and support from the pilot as a whole, which had not been previously anticipated, in order to meet the educational aims of the pilot.

Across the pilots, there are examples of varying degrees of tensions between therapeutic, educational and behavioural components and approaches of different providers or partners and within the pilot as a whole. As the pilots have progressed, there have been moves towards increasing their academic and learning focus whilst

also retaining the social and emotional support elements. A key challenge remains for pilots to ensure this balance does not become polemic and effectively meets the complex and dynamic social, health, academic needs of individual young people.

Whilst the Back on Track pilots have generally been seen to enhance and expand the breadth and depth of educational, social, emotional and behavioural support available in their localities, some concerns have been expressed that the nature of partnership working can be characterised by a degree of imbalance. The emergence of new elements of local provision through Back on Track has been seen in several instances to have been accompanied by reductions in support from other agencies and providers. Hence, a significant challenge to be addressed stems from the need for the pilots' offers to be valued within local systems of delivery, whilst maintaining on-going levels of support and intervention from others.

> *Once the children end up here* [Back on Track pilot project], *it appears that all the other local authority support drops off, and all the interventions that were in place are no longer available to these vulnerable children*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

Others have suggested that economic conditions and the cost-cutting imperatives in many local areas present serious threats to the frameworks and infrastructures that support partnership working in which the Back on Track pilots are central elements. In several instances, staffing and budget reductions in local authorities have coincided with reductions in the numbers of referrals to the pilots as well as the unavailability of associated support services, such as CAHMS, EWS and educational psychology services.

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### Back on Track illustrative examples: key challenges encountered

**Timetabling and timeframes:** The limited timeframes for the initial commissioning of providers and the operationalisation of pilot provisions (in order to comply with the Back on Track spending criteria) was seen as a challenge for the local authorities and the providers themselves. Developments in infrastructure, including the processes of new-build and refurbishment of existing premises, were experienced across the pilots.

**Information exchange underpinning effective referral and evaluation processes:** Many referrals to the pilots were accompanied by inadequate quality and quantity of background information, especially in relation to young peoples' educational histories. Difficulties were encountered in appropriately matching young people's needs, interests and abilities to particular provisions. The lack of quality information can also hinder assessment and evaluation as the absence of a baseline position on entry to the pilot makes subsequent measurement of progress more problematic. The range, depth and complexity of students' needs pose significant challenges to the evaluation of the pilots' impacts and effectiveness. Developing meaningful and appropriate measures is seen as a particular challenge

that needs to be overcome to allow pilots to demonstrate and evidence that a positive difference being made in the lives and life chances of young people.

**Managing challenging pupil behaviour**: Most of the pilot provisions were working with some of the most difficult to engage young people who exhibited challenging behaviours and complex needs. In several instances, the ability of some provider staff to adequately meet these needs required development as the pilot progressed. Referrals were also made to some pilots that were not designed or equipped to deal with the high level of social and emotional needs of some young people.

**Funding and revenue generation:** Imbalances between actual costs and revenue received have been identified across the pilots. Sustainability and financial viability via full cost-reclamation from schools and other commissioners post-Back on Track funding will continue to be a challenge in the current economic climate. This is especially the case for the pilots working with the most challenging young people with the most diverse range of high level, multiple needs.

## 7.3  Drivers of success

The previous chapters have detailed many examples of effective practice within the individual pilots which support the construction and delivery of diverse, high-quality alternative provision. The following sections provide a generic overview of the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the Back on Track alternative provision pilots and their offers.

### 7.3.1 The strategic positioning of the pilots

The Back on Track pilot projects' ability to maximise the potential benefits of their particular offers to young people is influenced by their positioning in relation to local policy and provision. Effective alternative provision is integrated into wider structures of local provision to ensure that it does not operate as a provision of last resort until young people reach statutory school leaving age.

The pilots focussing on supporting the reintegration of young people into mainstream education need to work with, and be supported by, other stakeholders and institutions that are suitably equipped to successfully accept and manage the reintegration of these pupils. There is a view that no matter how effective the alternative provision pilot is in isolation, if it is not connected into, and recognised as part of, a network of provision, then its success risks being compromised. There is evidence that the Back on Track pilots are becoming established and respected in local provision systems through communication and coordinated working alongside schools, the local authority and local FE establishments. These connections may also be enhanced through direct links and associations between key pilot personnel and other professionals working to support the young people in the local community, through for example, involvement in local education partnerships, frameworks and structures.

Effective strategic positioning can be achieved when there is a common understanding of what the pilots offer and what they can realistically achieve with and for the young people they work with. This highlights the importance of effective presentation and promotion of alternative provision in relation to raising its status and profile. This has been achieved to some extent through pilots' connections and involvement with wider local strategies, such as Behaviour and Attendance Partnerships and 14-19 Partnerships. Recent economic and proposed policy changes may, however, have implications for these relationships, as a result of staff changes and re-organisations, especially at local authority level.

## 7.3.2 Relationships and joint working

The effective delivery of alternative provision is underpinned by the creation and maintenance of good links with a wide range of local stakeholders, including mainstream schools, PRUs and other service providers as well as other agencies and commissioning bodies (principally the local authority). Varying degrees of complexity are evident in this. For example, relatively straight-forward relationships between schools and the Back on Track pilot exist where schools form central elements of the pilot's remit and delivery, or where the reintegration focus of a pilot entails coordinated working with a particular school or group of schools. Compatibility of aims and shared philosophies and approaches are the fundamental facilitators of such relationships, and the support from school leaders is identified as being critical to success. In several cases, staff buy-in has been encouraged and strengthened via the active involvement and participation of school representatives in the design and review processes associated with the pilots' development and operation.

In addition to conceptual and philosophical compatibility, working relationships underpinning successful delivery stem from quality support from mainstream schools. Within the Back on Track pilots operating as, or in close connection with, PRUs or learning centres, the development of systems and procedures to promote and support the integration of alternative provision into the operation of mainstream settings is of central importance. Key elements of this include promoting appropriate attitudes towards, and processes that facilitate, information sharing alongside a willingness to assume joint ownership and responsibility for young people attending alternative provision.

The nature and quality of multi-agency involvement and support for the pilots can also be a key element of success. Given the overarching aims of the pilots, and the often complex needs of the young people, the effectiveness of alternative provision content and activities can be enhanced through the combined efforts and inputs of various stakeholders. For example, particularly good relationships are evident between several pilots that are driven by combinations of social care and educational priorities, involving a range of agencies and statutory providers. Partnerships are also enhanced through the facilitating role of local authorities (and key personnel within them), through for example, hosting a practitioners' group that meets to discuss and

develop one of the pilots in relation to other educational provision in the county and to facilitate and encourage school involvement and support.

Pilots' ability to deliver appropriate content and activities also stems from the development and maintenance of links with families and communities. Evidence from one pilot in particular suggests that a series of high profile open days inviting local communities into the project have been especially valuable as a means of highlighting the quality and relevance of the provision on offer. Building relationships with families and the wider community is especially important where there are significant histories of exclusion, and disengagement from school and learning. Several of the Back on Track pilots have experienced considerable difficulties in their relationships with elements of their local communities, reflecting the need to actively promote alternative provision and the wide-ranging, long-lasting beneficial impacts it can have.

### 7.3.3 Effective processes and systems

The development of and improvements in implementing effective processes, protocols and systems may contribute to relationship-building and effective joint and partnership working. Effective systems for information exchange are critical factors in terms of underpinning appropriate and meaningful needs assessment, and facilitating dialogue between schools and the pilots regarding the ongoing progress of students to ensure that the pilot continues to meet their needs.

Commissioning and referral procedures must ensure that individual pupils are matched with provision that can best match their individual needs. In a pilot where commissioning and referral procedures are now seen to be highly developed, this has been attributed to the pilot having become an established and respected provision within the locality. The pilot's management and key drivers have worked hard to challenge attitudes and practices that promoted silo-working and protectionism, so helping to foster a joint ownership of all the young people in the authority by all the service providers. There has been a change in mindset about responsibility for meeting the needs of all young people in the authority. Similarly, in another pilot, the involvement of school-based teachers in planning for the reintegration of students and providing a package of reintegration support is seen as promoting schools' ownership of the reintegration process and, ultimately, increasing the likelihood of positive pupil outcomes.

Support from mainstream schools for the effective matching and referral of pupils can be a key element of success. Several pilots benefit from the direct involvement of school staff in the referral process, helping to appropriately match available provision to pupils' needs. Following effective referral and placement procedures, needs assessments constitute essential elements of the process of matching provision to the unique needs of individual young people.

Various mechanisms are evident across the pilots that enhance the process of adequately devising and supplying appropriate curriculum content, activities and support to young people. In one particular pilot, the role of a transitions coordinator has been created to ensure that detailed needs assessments are undertaken when young people arrive at the provision. The outcome of this then determines which of the differentiated elements of provision the young person will subsequently access. The provision of taster sessions, backed up by appropriate needs assessments, and communication with the young people (which attempts to establish the nature of the curriculum content that they are actually interested in), are seen as highly effective approaches. For this to be fully effective, the lead-in time required for the referral process must not be underestimated, and in one pilot working with significantly disengaged young people, the needs assessment processes take place over several days to ensure that the package of provision established is effectively personalised.

### 7.3.4 The conceptual basis and approach of the pilot

The experience of the Back on Track pilots shows that effective alternative provision has to be built on realistically achievable outcomes for young people, based on reference to, and drawing on knowledge of existing good practice. For example, in developing the content of one pilot, staff have worked closely with the staff of a residential therapeutic unit in another authority, with a view to understanding how it supports young people with very high levels of need so that lessons can be transferred and similar practice replicated.

A key element of effectiveness may also involve the mediation of the core aims of the pilot with specific realistic outcomes for young people. For example, if the pilot has reintegration as its core aim, efforts need to be taken to ensure that this is achievable and realistic for the young people attending. There is a need to ensure realism whilst maintaining high expectations and aspirations for young people. Hence, quality internal monitoring systems must be in place to ensure that the pilot is delivering the maximum possible benefits to the young person within the contexts of their specific needs and circumstances.

> *Our kids, they're not going to get 10 GCSEs. None of them are, but we try to make them into productive citizens, that's a much better focus for them, but so much of this can't be quantified, but education is not all about measurable, quantifiable criteria, it's actually about people.*
>
> (Pilot project staff)

### 7.3.5 Ensuring personalised approaches to alternative provision through flexibility and adaptability

Across the pilots, the value of providing learning activities and content that are based on considerations of the circumstances of individual young people, especially those experiencing the most significant levels of need and disengagement from education, is widely acknowledged. However, the extent to which alternative provision packages can be personalised is influenced, to varying degrees, by the parameters and

structures in which the pilots operate. Young people's previous educational experiences and abilities, as well as the routes that have brought them to the pilot provision (such as permanent exclusion from school), for example, may influence the extent to which pilots can determine the level of personalisation they can offer. Furthermore, pilots may not be operating in isolation but instead they provide one aspect of the wider education offer provided to these young people so limiting the pilot's opportunities to fully personalise their approach. If, for example, a young person is only attending a pilot for a small proportion of their overall timetable, the pilot's scope to construct a bespoke offer may be significantly limited. However, the inclusion of various forms of alternative provision in the overall educational package on offer to young people can make a significant contribution to personalising their learning experiences.

As a means of pursuing personalised approaches to alternative provision, flexibility and adaptability are key elements underpinning pilots' abilities to meet their core aims and the targets for individual young people. Staff in a multi-centre pilot welcomed the devolution of budgets and associated decision-making responsibilities to the individual centres as a means of empowering them to tailor their offer to the specific and changing needs of young people attending. Hence, the ability to adapt the curriculum offer and activities to meet students' developing interests and needs is of central importance.

### 7.3.6 Characteristics, operation and content of the pilots

The ambience and environment of the pilots are essential factors underpinning their success, particularly in relation to their impacts on engaging young people. The capital funding elements of Back on Track have been highly influential in this respect, supporting the development, and illustrating the consequent potential, of high quality, 'fit for purpose' facilities. In addition to the tangible outcomes of enhanced spaces, places and resources, the nature of the physical environment can have significant symbolic value.

> *In respect of the significance of the new buildings, what children need to see is that effort has been made on their behalf – fresh paint, carpet, decent furniture, decent computers and other resources are important as opposed to it being just a new building. It is the sense of being valued that is critical.*

(Pilot project staff)

Furthermore, locating particular alternative provision premises in high-profile settings, either on school sites, or in prominent positions within the wider community, can contribute towards enhanced feelings of inclusion amongst young people attending the provisions, and those working there. Securing the appropriate physical constitution is also a key element. In some pilots, creating pilot environments that are distinctive and represent considerable departures from school environments are key, whilst in other contexts, environments reflect, and are embedded in, school settings.

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The nature and quality of learning opportunities are key factors identified as underpinning the successful engagement and achievement of young people. Effective commissioning and referral processes, combined with needs assessments and on-going reviews contribute to the construction and delivery of personalised packages of provision and support. Creativity and flexibility are key factors evident in some pilots' responses to meeting the alternative provision needs of young people in different contexts.

In relation to meeting their core aims, many pilots offer vocational options, which are increasingly involving the embedding of functional and core skills delivery as a means of securing transferable qualifications for young people. There is a sense that efforts need to be made to understand the nature of the local contexts in which the provision and its participants are located in order to provide learning opportunities and skills that are relevant to the needs of the local labour market. In this way, the development of links between local employers is a critical area for further development. The success of one particular pilot stems, to a considerable extent, from the nature of relationships and networks developed by staff members and local businesses and employers. This has enhanced the pilot's ability to find positive progression routes in a variety of areas as a means of encouraging attendance and retention at the pilot as well as preparing young people to make meaningful transitions. The military training-style approach of another pilot may be a unique draw for some young people, and in addition to being highly relevant to those interested in pursuing careers in uniformed services sectors, can have positive impacts on many aspects of students' behaviour. Appropriate referral and commissioning processes are essential in ensuring the appropriate matching of type of provision to the needs of young people.

Pilots also demonstrate increasing commitment to delivering high-quality academic curriculum content as a means of supporting pupils' reintegration to mainstream school as well as equipping them for post-16 progressions. Central to effective curriculum construction and delivery is the need to maintain high expectations and aspirations for and of young people whilst maximising opportunities for success. Selecting the most appropriate processes underpinning the selection of the type and nature of qualification scheme(s) pursued for individuals within pilots can therefore be a key determinant of success. For example, whilst the overarching aims of the pilots involve ultimately enhancing the educational achievements of young people, consideration is given to selecting the most accessible and appropriate qualification pathway. In many cases, this involves offering a range of qualifications, other than GCSEs to young people in order to generate success.

## 7.3.7 Staffing and leadership

The individual and collective characteristics, qualities and approaches of the staff working in the Back on Track pilots are critical drivers of their success in generating positive outcomes for young people. Specific factors relate to the importance of staff

having a history of, or newly discovered talents and affinities for working with hard-to-reach students, underpinning a commitment to building relationships.

A common feature also relates to the importance of adequate staffing capacity, with the staff-to-student ratio being flexible to accommodate the range of students, their differing needs and changes over time. The 'almost individual attention' received by some students in one provision is regarded as essential to the effective functioning of the provision because of the positive impacts on relationship building. The distance travelled, and progress made by individual young people may be measured in terms of the degree of staff support required. Interviewees in several pilots highlight the importance of enabling young people to develop a close relationship with a trusted adult, which in one pilot was achieved through a model of 'achievement mentors' who have daily contact with their students. As with the key workers in another pilot, such members of staff help the young person to manage their relationships with other agencies such as the Connexions, FE colleges, health and social service providers and Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), including acting as a professional advocate on their behalf.

Effective delivery of alternative provision through the Back on Track pilots is also supported through appropriate leadership structures and the impact of specific personalities. There are examples of charismatic, committed active leaders promoting and driving the pilot forward, internally through providing motivation and direction for other pilot staff, and externally through building networks/links. Effective leadership roles are essential in promoting the philosophy and vision of the pilot, and championing the cause of the pilot and alternative provision in general.

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### Back on Track illustrative examples: key facilitating factors

**Pilots' strategic location, direction and support:** In some cases, pilots' success was seen to be underpinned through the application of proven, established approaches to meeting identified, specified needs of its beneficiaries. Furthermore, strategic support and commitment (at local authority/local partnership level) is also key:

*It is essential to have someone who will take it on board and drive it' (pilot staff). 'It needs a driver – you have to have somebody who is passionate about it and cares about it'*

(local authority staff).

**Staff/student relationships:** The highly diverse workforce across the range of pilots exhibit significance experience in working with hard-to-reach young people and strive to understand individual pupil needs and develop positive relationships with them. Staff demonstrate their commitment to the young people and express their belief in their abilities and what they can achieve, which in turn builds confidence in the young people. The characteristics, skills and appropriateness of individual employees and the nature of staff teams as a whole are seen as key elements underpinning the effectiveness of pilots.

**The staff-pupil ratio:** A key strength of the pilots is the relatively small number of young people worked with at one time, facilitating the availability of sufficient and appropriate opportunities for intensive support, often in small groups with consistency of staffing.

**Flexibility in approach:** Pilots have demonstrated flexibility and adaptation in terms of the content and offer delivered to young people to meet their changing needs, interests and requirements. In a similar way, day-to-day flexibility in staffing and activities helps to support young people's attendance and engagement. The autonomy derived from control over budgets has been seen as a positive element of the Back on Track pilot programme, allowing local decisions to be made about the nature of provision best suited to meet the specific needs of young people.

**Logistics and practical support:** Providing transport to ensure that young people have regular, consistent access to the pilot is seen as a valuable element of provision. Journeys to and from site can provide useful opportunities for nurturing relationships to be developed between pilot staff and students.

**Partnership working:** Dialogue and communication are seen as key to engaging partners and providers to work collaboratively in delivering alternative provision. Service level agreements underpinning commissioning processes, as well as informal agreements and arrangements facilitate jointly agreed decisions about the nature and quality of provision (including outcome targets) to be delivered. Success is enhanced when the particular pilot project is viewed within wider systems of local delivery and not seen as a stand-alone element. Buy-in and support for the pilots from commissioning schools is also a key factor of success, especially when a young person's reintegration into mainstream school is a core outcome target. Close working relationships enhance and support the potential gains and positive developments secured through attending the pilot in young people's subsequent destinations.

**Proactive approach to engaging parents:** Pilots strive to actively encourage parental involvement in young people's connection with the projects, including taking a proactive approach to non-attendance with phone-calls and home visits where appropriate to encourage a shared responsibility for pupil engagement. Open door policies and support for parents in attending celebration events and graduation ceremonies, as well as on-going informal feedback relating to young people's achievements are central elements of this.

**Needs-led content, curriculum and activities:** The content of the provision is needs-led and pilot staff, in consultation with other stakeholders, work with students to ensure that a curriculum that best suits their needs and interests is developed. Practical and vocational activities are seen to be particularly effective in (re) engaging young people and preparing them for post 16 transitions. The embedding of functional skills into such activities is also highlighted as a successful approach. Pilots have also been active in increasing their emphasis on delivering high quality accredited learning opportunities, especially in core subject areas of English and maths.

**The physical environments of alternative provision:** The physical environment of pilot projects are seen to significantly enhance the learning experiences and opportunities available to young people, having both practical and symbolic value.

# 8. Conclusions and recommendations from the Back on Track pilots

The Back on Track pilot programme contains a variety of approaches to improving alternative provision involving PRUs, private providers, third sector providers, social enterprises, local authorities, schools and strategic partnerships. Through the allocation of significant capital investment through Back on Track, the majority of pilots now operate in, and through, a wide range of newly-built and refurbished settings including PRUs, schools, youth centres, farms, retail and catering establishments, college, training and workplace environments. Various combinations of academic, vocational, therapeutic, social, emotional, personal and behavioural content and activities have been delivered to young people with a range of multiple and complex needs in part-time temporary and time-limited contexts as well as permanent, full-time comprehensive provision. There are variations in relation to the extent that the different projects have 'piloted' new and innovative approaches to alternative provision as opposed to continuing and expanding existing forms and formats of provision. There are also varying degrees of success in terms of delivering stated outcomes, and varied experiences in relation to sustainability and legacy.

Generally, pilots have progressed towards meeting their initial overarching aims, demonstrating varying degrees of effectiveness in responding to and meeting needs in their local contexts. Pilots operated along a continuum with some working directly with a small, tightly defined group of learners, some working with broader groups of young people across one or more settings, whilst others had local authority-wide and strategic goals. As such, there is considerable variation in the timeframes required to embed the necessary developments and changes that may underpin future outcomes and achievements, many of which were not fully observed within the duration of this research.

Pilot-specific outcomes and achievements are inevitably varied and not directly comparable within and across the pilot programme. However, most pilots have demonstrated local improvements in providing a wide range of young people with increased access to meaningful and appropriate learning activities and environments. Overall, progress has been made in supporting young people's potential for re-engaging with education, reintegrating into school and/or facilitating effective post-16 transitions. Pilots have been perceived to be particularly successful in recognising the value of, and implementing, strategies and interventions that support young people's behavioural, social and emotional and health related needs as an essential basis for subsequent educational improvements.

Pilots have demonstrated varying degrees of improvements in levels of young people's attendance, attainment, behaviour and engagement in learning. In many cases, this represents significant progress and achievements for individual learners and suggests the increasing effectiveness of local provision. However, there are

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concerns within many pilots that relative to national performance measures, the outcomes generated do not yet indicate that required standards are being met. This finding highlights significant issues in the way in which alternative provision can be effectively and meaningfully measured given the wide range of needs and difficulties of many of the young people attending diverse interventions.

Alongside the positive outcomes and achievements relating directly to young people, pilots have also demonstrated a range of other impacts relating to, for example: system and process change (including improvements in commissioning, referral and monitoring procedures); workforce developments; and improved relationships and partnership working (with school, families and other agencies in their local environments). In addition, the pilot which is entirely strategic in nature produced a series of tangible outputs over the course of its operation including a final report that contains details of the pilot's individual work strands and the resources and sources of advice now available as a means of driving sustainability and promoting longer lasting legacies of the project. In addition, this pilot developed a sector-based network of support to improve provision, share learning and build capacity from within.

On the basis of findings and conclusions drawn from the various experiences of the Back on Track alternative provision pilots the following inter-connected recommendations are made in relation to the planning, delivery and assessment of alternative provision. If applied, these could contribute to ensuring that alternative provision continues to be holistic in nature and increasingly effective in helping young people achieve a range of appropriate positive, meaningful outcomes that also facilitate and support future successes.

## 1. There should be enhanced efforts to ensure that alternative provision, in its many varied forms is appropriately conceptualised, understood and promoted

- There is a need to broaden and enhance wider understandings of the scope and value of alternative provision, in terms of what it constitutes, how it operates and is delivered, and the extent and nature of the contributions it can make to the lives and future life chances of young people.

- Alternative provision needs to be promoted in a way that encapsulates the true value and extent of its opportunities and possibilities. Alternative provision, and those accessing it, will be disadvantaged when this form of provision is viewed and used only as a crisis intervention, a provision of last resort, or as a default position for young people showing signs of difficulty in mainstream educational settings. There is evidence that investments in the human and physical infrastructure of alternative provision provide the necessary contexts to re-engage, support and equip young people with the skills and competencies to improve their life chances.

- Alternative provision needs to be seen in relation to its ability to respond to, and address the hierarchy of needs of exhibited by individual young people and not

just the generation of specific, isolated (educationally-orientated) outcomes and impacts.

- It is essential that efforts are made to promote the value of alternative provision to the young people themselves, and their parents/carers to secure their buy-in and commitment.

## 2. The value and effectiveness of pursuing personalised approaches to alternative provision need to be recognised and supported, especially in the commissioning process

- This research illustrates ways in which alternative provision can offer diverse, highly effective support for a wide variety of young people and the Back on Track pilots demonstrate considerable ability to meet a range of dynamic and interconnected needs. The extent of success and the nature and levels of achievements generated will, however, be limited if young people do not commit to, and engage with, the provision on offer.

- Of critical importance in securing the buy-in of individual young people is the need to ensure that the content, activities and support offered, in conjunction with the environments and formats of delivery, are appropriate to their particular circumstances and situations. Pilots have illustrated numerous factors supporting their commitment to flexibility and adaptability in order to engage, motivate and retain young people in education and learning. Commissioning and funding structures need to recognise and support this prioritisation of personalisation.

- There is an inherent tension in the need for alternative provision to balance the extent to which the hierarchy of needs of individual young people can be met through personalised approaches, with the pressure to generate outcomes that contribute to academic-related performance targets. This situation will persist whilst alternative provision is conceptualised and commissioned as a separate entity and not seen as part of wider educational, learning and developmental offers made to young people.

## 3. Efforts need to be made to ensure alternative provision is integrated into wider local systems and structures of service delivery

- The effectiveness of alternative provision is enhanced when it is perceived and used as an essential component of a continuum of local provision and support, with coordinated routes in, and out, to facilitate appropriate positive transitions for young people.

- The integration of alternative provision into wider systems of local service delivery increases its effectiveness through allowing such provision to focus on making specific contributions to the overall achievements generated for young people, and not being solely responsible for the absolute delivery of their final outcomes.

- In many cases, the central effectiveness of alternative provision stems from its ability to provide the necessary support and preparation that underpins young people's effective post-provision transitions. Where appropriate, in reducing the immediate focus on securing qualification-driven outcomes in the context of good

links with post-16 providers, alternative provision can prioritise meeting the core needs of young people which will prepare them for future engagement with, and success in, education and learning.

- The outputs generated through alternative provision must be seen as part of a wider continuum where the whole range of stakeholders have responsibility for helping to meet these outcomes. Within this, alternative provision providers must ensure that the highest quality educational opportunities are available to all young people.

## 4. The timescales in which alternative provision operates, and its impacts and outcomes considered, need to be extended

- Alternative provision has a vital role to play in early intervention to prevent the escalation of a range of needs and difficulties faced by young people. Early intervention is not restricted to offering support to younger age pupils, but also entails swifter identification of need, and the consequent delivery of appropriate support to pupils of all ages.

- More generally, the legacies and impacts of alternative provision stretch beyond the duration of particular interventions, activities and support. Much of the value of the various contributions of alternative provision lies in the foundations built for young people whilst attending or accessing alternative provision. The pilot projects illustrate the roles of alternative provision in preparing young people to develop in terms of social, emotional, behavioural and learning-related areas, increasing their capacity to move forward in their lives. As such, alternative provision can be most effective when it is accompanied by, and contained within, appropriate timeframes that allow changes and developments to become embedded in order to generate lasting improvements.

- The effects and outcomes generated by, and through, the pilots will require time to become embedded in local policy and practice. It will take time for systemic, structural and strategic change to emerge and become more widely accepted and established. Similarly, some of the outcomes and impacts relating to the new buildings and high-level capital resources acquired and delivered through Back on Track might not be immediately apparent, while others might constitute a series of incremental step changes observable over time.

## 5. The measurement and assessment of the impacts, outcomes and achievements of alternative provision need further consideration and development

- The experience of the Back on Track pilots shows that there are numerous factors that inhibit effective cross-pilot comparisons of performance emanating from the diverse, complex and compound needs of the wide range and variety of young people attending the pilots. The projects comprise multiple combinations of responses to address these needs.

- The diversity and locally specific nature of these pilot projects underpins their strengths, but also challenges effective comparative evaluation. National inspection regimes and generally accepted performance indicators, such as securing GCSE or equivalent qualifications in isolation do not always provide the necessary breadth and depth to capture, reflect and assess the subtleties of the

overall outcomes of these projects, and alternative provision in general can deliver.

- Assessment, measurement and evaluation require further coordinated consideration. There remains a critical need to develop meaningful achievable outcome measures that, whilst taking into account the variations and differences in circumstances of young people and the aims/remit of the provision, can deliver valuable assessments of their capacity to effect positive change.

- There is a need for the development of an appropriate set of metrics that can be successfully and consistently applied to accurately facilitate comparable assessment of the progress and impacts generated by and through the whole range of alternative provision. Such evaluation should focus on the contributions made by the various manifestations of alternative education provision effecting positive change on the young people involved. Appropriate, nationally applicable performance measures and indicators need to relate to the impacts of alternative provision on the gains made by their beneficiaries from the point of arrival, throughout their attendance, and following their departure and progression (be that reintegration into mainstream, or transition to other destinations).

- Schools, local authorities, alternative providers, policy makers and inspection authorities need to establish agreed indicators and methods that can show in a meaningful way, the progress made, and distance travelled, by individual young people, towards achieving aspirational and appropriate outcomes in relation to their identified needs and circumstances – education, behavioural, social and emotional. This requires dialogue underpinning a composite approach to evaluation that encompasses the varied outcomes of bespoke and personalised alternative provision packages.

- Whilst accepting the value of the personalised approach to alternative provision, a framework of evaluation may be required that contains some degree of standardisation and comparability to ensure that commissioners and consumers of alternative provision are able to make informed assessments of the relative quality and value of the provision available to them.

- Enhanced effectiveness in evaluation will depend on the increased availability of data and information exchange processes. Within this, initial assessment processes and baseline evaluations need to be improved and standardised whilst taking still into account the various needs of individual young people, the range of aims of alternative provision providers, and the realistic and aspirational outcomes that can be generated for them.

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