EXPLORING GOOD PRACTICE IN THE ORGANISATION AND PROVISION OF SECONDARY EDUCATION FOR PUPILS WITH HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM SPECTRUM CONDITIONS

A thesis submitted to The University Of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Educational and Child Psychology in the Faculty of Humanities

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABA</td>
<td>Applied Behaviour Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOPE</td>
<td>Award of Personal Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APA</td>
<td>American Psychological Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS</td>
<td>Autism spectrum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>Autism spectrum condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASD</td>
<td>Autism spectrum disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASDAN</td>
<td>Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BESD</td>
<td>Behavioural, emotional and social difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td>Business and Technology Education Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>Continuing professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCSF</td>
<td>Department for Children, Schools and Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfE</td>
<td>Department for Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSM-V</td>
<td>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EHC Plan</td>
<td>Education, Health and Care Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP</td>
<td>Educational psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE</td>
<td>General Certificate of Secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HF ASC</td>
<td>High functioning autism spectrum condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HLTA</td>
<td>Higher Level Teaching Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMIE</td>
<td>Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICD-10</td>
<td>International Classification of Diseases, 10th revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP</td>
<td>Individual education plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Local authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAS</td>
<td>National Autistic Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>National Health Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQT</td>
<td>Newly qualified teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ofsted</td>
<td>Office for Standards in Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>PEP</td>
<td>Principal educational psychologist</td>
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<tr>
<td>SATs</td>
<td>Standard Assessment Tests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCERTS</td>
<td>Social communication, emotional regulation and transactional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEAL</td>
<td>Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEN</td>
<td>Special educational needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SENCO</td>
<td>Special educational needs co-ordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLD</td>
<td>Severe learning difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMP</td>
<td>Specialist mainstream provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>Teaching assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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Thesis Abstract

University of Manchester D.Ed.Ch.Psychol. 2012-2015

Lucy Reynolds

Exploring good practice in the organisation and provision of secondary education for pupils with high functioning autism spectrum conditions

Background: Research and professional experience suggest that young people with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) often find secondary school more difficult than primary school. Expert advice suggests that Local Authorities should offer a ‘continuum of provision’ to meet the diverse needs associated with ASC, but the high number of tribunals within England relating to provision for young people with ASC suggests that pupils’ needs are not always being catered for appropriately. This project aimed to explore the range of secondary provision available to young people with ASC within one local authority and the decision-making processes used by parents and professionals to determine which provision is most appropriate for which pupils.

Participants: Four Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) and four parents of pupils with ASC were recruited from four different types of schools catering for secondary-aged pupils with ASC, along with two officers from the local authority involved with school placement decisions for children with ASC.

Methods: This study used an embedded multiple case study design, with each school forming a case within the local authority system. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with each participant; these were audio-recorded and transcribed. Documents were gathered relating to school placement decisions and provision.

Analysis/Findings: Data were analysed using thematic analysis and content analysis. The findings were presented as thematic maps for each individual school followed by a local authority-wide cross-case synthesis. The findings relating to decision-making processes were analysed and presented separately.

Conclusion/Implications: The study extends understanding about the range of educational provision for secondary-aged students with ASC and how placement decisions are made within one local authority. Suggestions are made for further research.
Declaration

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context and rationale for the research

The current trend for the inclusion of children and young people with additional needs in mainstream schools is driven by both national and international legislation. For example the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1994) stated that “those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs”. However mainstream school placements do not always work for students with special educational needs (SEN); the latest government statistics reveal that pupils with SEN account for seven out of ten permanent exclusions (Department for Education (DfE), 2014b). Pupils with statements of special educational needs are six times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than those without SEN, rising to 10 times more likely for pupils with SEN but without a statement (DfE, 2014b).

The most common reason for a child in a mainstream secondary school to have a statement of SEN is that they have an autism spectrum condition (ASC) (DfE, 2014). The three core symptoms of autism are social skills deficits, difficulties with communication, and repetitive behaviours and restricted interests (American Psychological Association (APA), 2000). These symptoms in the absence of general learning difficulties are often referred to as ‘high functioning ASC’ (hereafter referred to as HF ASC), although this is not a diagnostic label in its own right within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) or the International Classification of Diseases, 10th revision (ICD-10).

Day to day involvement in a mainstream secondary school requires some degree of socialising (and an increased focus on peer social groups), communication with peers and adults, and the requirement to adjust behaviour to conform to different teachers’ rules and expectations and to actively engage in a wide variety of subjects. Therefore the expectations associated with attending a mainstream secondary school can be a significant challenge and source of stress for a young person with ASC. This can result in an increase in challenging behaviours, and eventually a breakdown in placement. Surveys suggest that children with ASC are particularly likely to be excluded from mainstream schools (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000; Treehouse, 2009); a 2006 study by the National Autistic Society found that 1 in 5 children with autism has been excluded from school, and 67% of these have been excluded more than once (Batten, Corbett, Rosenblatt, Withers & Yuille,
2006). They may also suffer from increased anxiety (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), possibly leading to school refusal. Children with ASC tend to cope better in the comparatively small, structured and predictable environments offered in primary schools (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), and as such the extent of their difficulties and needs may not be apparent until secondary school transition.

In the researcher’s current placement authority, children can only access specialist provision if they have a statement of SEN or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC plan). The researcher’s experience as a trainee educational psychologist (EP) and conversations with other EPs suggest that children with HF ASC may be unlikely to meet the criteria for a statement of SEN in many local authorities (LAs), as statements are reserved for ‘severe and complex’ difficulties with lower-level funding delegated to schools. If a pupil has a diagnosis he or she is likely, but not guaranteed, to be receiving support within school from the school’s own SEN budget. Another criterion for accessing specialist provision is that the young person’s needs cannot be met in a mainstream school. As a result alternative provision for children with HF ASC is usually only considered once one or more mainstream school placements have irrevocably broken down, usually through exclusion or school refusal.

This research study was conducted as part of the researcher’s Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. The researcher has considerable personal and professional experience of supporting children and young people with autism, their families and other professionals working with them. This includes casework carried out as part of the researcher’s two-year placement within the educational psychology team in a LA in the north-west of England. During this placement the researcher has also been involved in carrying out research towards an ‘invest to save’ project exploring the range of specialist, independent and out-of-county schools catering for pupils with HF ASC within the LA. The managers leading this project were very keen for further research into how the needs of pupils with HF ASC can be met within LA provision.

1.2 Aims of the research and research questions

The researcher’s experience suggests that many LAs have no maintained provision for children with high functioning ASC. Internet research suggests that some LAs have more proactive approaches than others to school provision for children with ASC. However the researcher was unable to find published research regarding what constitutes good practice at a LA or state level, either in the United Kingdom or
internationally; it may be that such research has been carried out at a local level or in other university research projects but without being published in peer-reviewed journals or otherwise widely disseminated. There has been a considerable amount of research on what constitutes good practice at a school level (e.g. Charman et al., 2011) and the Audit Commission report (2007) provided an overview of out of authority placements for pupils with SEN but no research to date has looked at policies and practice related to the full range of provision in Local Authorities for pupils with HF ASC. This thesis will attempt to address this gap through an exploratory investigation into practice within one LA and how this is viewed by various stakeholders.

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the range of secondary school provision for pupils with high functioning ASC in one local authority and how do the types of provision map on to the spectrum of needs of these pupils, in policy and in practice?

2. How are secondary school placement decisions made by the local authority, schools and parents?

1.3 Thesis structure and outline

The remainder of this thesis will be structured as follows:

Chapter two: Literature review. This chapter summarises the current literature relating to secondary school provision and school decision-making processes for pupils with HF ASC and provides an explanation of the rationale behind the research questions.

Chapter three: Methodology. This chapter provides a detailed description of the research design and the processes of data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations are also discussed.

Chapter four: Results. This chapter presents the findings from the data gathering and analysis, beginning with a LA overview before addressing each of the cases in turn. This is followed by a cross-case synthesis. The findings relating to the decision-making processes are then outlined.

Chapter five: Discussion. In this chapter the findings are related back to the existing literature. Implications for various groups including schools, LAs, EPs and diagnostic teams are discussed, along with suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the current literature relating to secondary school provision for children with a high-functioning autism spectrum condition (HF ASC), including the types of school placement available for pupils with HF ASC, the process and efficacy of ‘inclusion’ for this group of pupils, the outcomes associated with different types of school placement, the secondary school experiences of pupils and their parents and the decision-making processes related to secondary school selection. The terminology used reflects that used by the authors of the study; some research is specific to HF ASC whereas other papers look at ASC more broadly.

2.1.1 Structure of the literature review

The chapter will begin with an outline of the method used to systematically identify relevant studies.

The following questions will then be addressed in turn:

- 2.3: What is ASC?
- 2.4: How do schools support pupils with HF ASC?
- 2.5: What experiences do pupils with HF ASC have in secondary school?
- 2.6: What types of provision are available for secondary-aged pupils with HF ASC?
- 2.7: What types of school provide the best outcomes for secondary-age pupils with HF ASC?
- 2.8: How are decisions made regarding school placements for children with HF ASC?

The chapter will conclude with a summary of the literature and a statement of the ‘knowledge gap’, leading to an explanation of how the present research extends existing knowledge and a statement of the research questions. The aims of the research, contribution to knowledge and social and economic impact will be considered.
2.2 Review strategy

In order to find studies related to ‘good practice’ regarding school provision for children with ASC a literature search was carried out using the following databases on 22.03.2014 and updated on 17.04.2015:

- ERIC
- British Education Index

The following search strings were used:

- ab(autism) AND ab(school) AND ab(placement OR provision)
- ab(autism) AND ab(school OR educational) AND ab(placement OR provision)
- ab(autism OR asperger) AND ab(“secondary school”)
- autism AND "secondary school"

As the focus was on school placement in general, any studies purely relating to a specific intervention were excluded. In total there were 40 studies found that met the following inclusion criteria:

- Freely available through the University
- Peer reviewed journal article
- English language
- Focus on one or more of the following:
  - Impact of different types of school placement
  - Secondary school experiences of children with HF ASC and/or their parents in the UK
  - Placement or provision decision-making
- Involved children or young people of secondary school age

Additional studies and literature reviews were identified through reference harvesting of the above studies and of the relevant grey literature. The literature review will begin by drawing upon the wider literature relating to ASC generally before focusing more specifically on those studies identified through the systematic search process.

2.3 What is ASC?

2.3.1 History of autism

The word ‘autism’ comes from the Greek for ‘self’. The term was first applied clinically in the 1940s when Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger independently identified groups of children with similar characteristics, including restricted interests and behaviours and social impairment.
2.3.2 The significance of autism as a spectrum

In the 1970s Lorna Wing and Judith Gould identified three areas of development associated with social difficulties, which became known as the ‘triad of impairments’ (Wing and Gould, 1979):

- Impairment of social relationships
- Impairment of social communication
- Impairment of imagination

In their epidemiological survey they identified a sub-group of children who demonstrated this triad of impairments, along with repetitive behaviours, but who did not fit Kanner’s description of autism. As the children still displayed these difficulties they determined that they may well have the same condition, albeit a lesser severity. Thus autism became known as a spectrum condition.

Autism is typically described as a spectrum because of the varying nature of each individual’s strengths and needs in the three areas of impairment. Some may have significant difficulties in all three areas of the triad, whilst others may have subtle difficulties. Some people may have a greater level of impairment in one or two of the areas than the others. There is also great variance in cognitive ability and in language ability. Some people with autism have accompanying learning difficulties, with others of average or above average intelligence. Language ability can vary from no verbal communication at all to complex, grammatically correct speech. Despite these differences, the three difficulties identified in the triad of impairments will always be present.

2.3.3 Current understanding of autism

The National Autistic Society describes autism as ‘a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them.’ (National Autistic Society, 2014). Cambridge University’s Autism Research Centre extends this definition by explaining autism as ‘a spectrum of neurodevelopmental conditions, characterised by difficulties in the development of social relationships and communication skills, in the presence of unusually strong narrow interests, repetitive behaviour, and difficulties in coping with unexpected change.’ (Autism Research Centre, n.d.). The exact causes of autism are unknown but are believed to be a combination of genetic and environmental factors.
2.3.4 Diagnostic criteria for autism

Diagnosis of autism can be made using criteria from either the ICD-10 (usually used in Europe) or the DSM-V (usually used in the USA). The DSM-V groups all autism spectrum conditions under the single heading of ‘autism spectrum disorder’ or ASD, whereas the ICD-10 identifies two major subgroups: ‘Autistic disorder’ and ‘Asperger Syndrome’.

A diagnosis of ASD according to DSM-V criteria requires symptoms in two areas: ‘Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts’ and ‘Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities’. Severity levels must be specified in the two areas, ranging from level 1 (“requiring support”) to level 3 (“requiring very substantial support”). Diagnosticians are also instructed to specify whether or not there is accompanying intellectual and/or language impairment. Thus a wide range of levels of difficulty should be able to be described with some specificity despite the one overarching diagnosis of ASD.

Autism may co-occur with other impairments; there is a high degree of overlap with other developmental disorders such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and developmental co-ordination disorder (see e.g. Stampoltzis, Papatrecha, Polychronopoulou & Mavronas, 2012).

2.3.5 Terminology: autism, ASD or ASC?

As both the DSM-V and ICD-10 are used in the UK, individuals on the autistic spectrum may receive a diagnosis of ‘Autistic disorder’, ‘Asperger syndrome’ or ‘Autism spectrum disorder’. Those diagnosed before the publication of DSM-V may have a different ‘label’. Despite the differences in terminology, all of these conditions are identified as being part of the autism spectrum.

Whilst ASD is commonly used to describe autism there is a movement towards the use of ASC, identifying autism as a ‘condition’ rather than a ‘disorder’. This is particularly the case for those individuals who are seen as ‘higher functioning’ and who view their autism as a difference rather than a disorder.

The Autism Research Centre (ARC) explain their reasoning behind using the term ASC as follows:

‘Note that in the ARC we prefer the term ASC to the term ASD, in recognition that the term ‘disorder’ is often felt to be stigmatizing and
pejorative, whilst the term 'condition' indicates this is a biomedical issue severe enough to warrant a diagnosis; but the term 'condition' recognizes both the disabling aspects of autism (social-communication disability) as well as the aspects of autism that are simply different (nicely captured by the term 'neurodiversity'). Some of these differences involve areas of strength (e.g., in attention to detail, memory for detail, and pattern-recognition or systemizing), which under the right conditions can even manifest as talent or savantism.’ (Autism Research Centre, n.d.).

As the current research focuses on individuals with 'high functioning' autism, many of whom are successful members of mainstream schools and communities, the term ‘condition’ (and thus the abbreviation ASC) is used throughout.

2.3.6 Prevalence rates for autism

There is no way of knowing the exact numbers of people with ASC. Estimates have been made through epidemiological surveys of distinct populations; the most recent studies suggest that 1.1% of the UK population may have autism (Baird et al., 2006; Brugha et al., 2009; Brugha et al., 2012).

Significantly more males than females are diagnosed with autism; a research review by Fombonne, Quirke and Hagen (2011) found a mean of 5.5 males to 1 female. It is likely that autism is under-diagnosed in females (see e.g. Gould and Aston-Smith, 2011).

2.3.7 Defining 'high functioning’ ASC

The label of ‘high functioning autism’ does not appear as a diagnosis in either the DSM-V or the ICD-10. It is often said to overlap with Asperger Syndrome (see e.g. National Autistic Society, 2015). Asperger syndrome has its own diagnostic criteria in the ICD-10 and was also a separate diagnosis in the DSM-IV, although in the DSM-V it has been incorporated into the broader term of ‘autism spectrum disorder’. The ICD-10 definition of Asperger syndrome states that it is:

'characterized by the same kind of qualitative abnormalities of reciprocal social interaction that typify autism, together with a restricted, stereotyped repetitive repertoire of interests and activities. The disorder differs from autism primarily in that there is no general delay or retardation in language or cognitive development. Most individuals are of normal intelligence.’ (World Health Organisation, 1992).
Despite ‘high functioning autism’ not being a clinical label in its own right, the term is often used to refer to a particular sub-group of individuals with ASC. Great Ormond Street Hospital hosts the National Centre for High Functioning Autism, whose purpose is ‘the assessment of complex cases of suspected autism or Asperger syndrome in children of normal-range or high intelligence’ (Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS [National Health Service] Foundation Trust, n.d.). The centre’s referral criteria include the following guidelines relating to the abilities of the child (Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust, n.d. b):

‘The clinic is a national resource for children with suspected ‘high functioning’ autism or Asperger syndrome. Children with generalised developmental delay will not normally be accepted.

We normally only provide opinions concerning children who are in mainstream school or nursery, and who are regarded as having no generalised learning difficulties. We also see children with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, if the child clearly possesses high or normal intelligence.

Children who are seen by our service may or may not have statements of special educational need.’

Taking the ICD-10 criteria for Asperger syndrome and the National Centre for High Functioning Autism’s referral criteria together, the definition for high functioning autism spectrum conditions as used in this study will be as follows:

- A clinical diagnosis of an autism spectrum condition
- No generalised learning difficulties (may have specific learning difficulties) – academically capable of accessing age-appropriate mainstream education within the normal range of differentiation offered
- Able to communicate verbally (may have difficulties with pragmatic aspects of language)

This definition was discussed with the LA officers, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and parents at the start of each interview.
2.4 How do schools support pupils with ASC?

2.4.1 The school as a system within a bio-ecosystemic model

The bio-ecosystemic model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) provides a theoretical tool to examine the systems around an individual and the interaction between these systems (see figure 2.4.1).

![Figure 2.4.1: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecosystemic model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; image from Humphrey, Bond, Hebron, Symes & Morewood, 2015, p. xxiii)](image)

Bronfenbrenner’s model places the individual at the centre of several nested systems; each of the systems shape an individual’s development in some way through interactions. The macrosystem incorporates the widest contextual elements; for the young person with ASC this would involve, for example, the political agenda for inclusion in schools, the cultural values in the UK and local and national approaches to the identification and assessment of ASC. The next ‘layer’ is the exosystem, whose factors do not involve the individual directly but impact on the individual through other people in their life. This could include, for example, the
parent of a young person with ASC receiving counselling or training on managing challenging behaviours at home. Those factors that influence the individual directly make up the microsystems. An individual can have many of these, for example school, a youth group, speech and language therapy sessions and the family. Where two or more microsystems interact this forms a mesosystem, for example the home-school relationship or a classmate joining an individual in a speech therapy group.

As described above, Bronfenbrenner’s model supports a holistic view of the individual with ASC that incorporates a wide range of contextual and systemic factors. The microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems around an individual will all impact on their development including their education. The model provides a useful structure for this study by encouraging the consideration of factors at each systemic level. The individual’s specific school context, a microsystem, will be considered first.

2.4.2 Impact of ASC on school life

The DSM-V criteria for ASD include ‘Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts’ and ‘Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities’. Even for those who are ‘high functioning’ – that is, who have no generalised difficulties with learning or language – these issues can form a major barrier to inclusion in everyday secondary school life.

Whilst the profile of strengths and needs of each learner with autism will be individual, one thing that they are likely to share with others on the autistic spectrum is a difficulty in acquiring the ‘hidden curriculum’ – that is, skills relating to communication, social understanding and flexibility that ‘typical’ children usually acquire naturally through experience (Jones, 2008). This can impact on informal aspects of school such as social interaction with peers but also, increasingly, in lessons as the language used becomes more complicated – idioms, metaphors, sarcasm and abstract concepts can be difficult for those with ASC. When pupils appear ‘normal’ on the surface this can lead to school staff struggling to recognise the difficulties they may face. Parents often report that, because their child is academically able, their social and emotional needs (such as an ability to take part in group work or to make friends) are not acknowledged or seen as important for intervention (e.g. Jones, 2008). A recent small study looking at girls with HF ASC in primary schools found that they tended to mask and internalise their difficulties with the hidden curriculum, which led to school staff failing to recognise needs or provide adequate support for either the hidden curriculum or the ‘known’ National
Curriculum (Moyse & Porter, 2015). Whilst mainstream schools may struggle to provide pupils with sufficient explicit teaching of the hidden curriculum, the flip side to this is that pupils in specialist provision as a result of needs linked to ASC (for example social and behavioural issues) may not be able to access the full National Curriculum with input from subject specialist teachers (Jones, 2008).

### 2.4.3 School-based adaptations and approaches

In 2011 the Autism Education Trust was asked by the government to carry out research to develop a set of ‘good practice guidelines’ for schools regarding the best ways to support pupils with ASC (Charman et al., 2011). Whilst several consistent themes emerged relating to effective provision, evidence-based interventions were not mentioned. Seen as more important were underlying attitudes and approaches such as having high ambitions and aspirations for pupils, building strong relationships with pupils and their families, individualising and adapting the curriculum as needed for each pupil and ensuring that school staff were well trained and motivated. The provision of a unique ‘autism curriculum’ was mentioned but no specific detail was given as to what this should consist of (Charman et al., 2011). The research gaps identified by the authors included a considerable gap in empirical evidence regarding effective practice and the need for further research on the fidelity of implementation of interventions.

As has already been mentioned, the ‘default’ position for students with ASC is inclusion in a mainstream school. Many children with high-functioning ASC will not meet the criteria for an EHC plan (formerly a statement of SEN) and will therefore not have any funding for additional support. Teachers in mainstream schools often feel that they have not received sufficient training in SEN or in ASC in particular, and without additional funding they may feel very limited in the support they can offer to pupils in school (e.g. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), 2006). Possibly as a result of these factors, along with the diverse profiles of pupils with ASC, many schools use a ‘bottom up’ approach – that is, starting with the individual pupil within the specific educational context and building provision from that point – rather than applying evidence based interventions. One published example of this describes the provision created at ‘The Resource’, an ASC resource base within a mainstream secondary school in Sheffield (Hesmondhalgh & Breakey, 2001). Matthew Hesmondhalgh, project leader and teacher in charge of The Resource, describes in detail his journey to create an effective autism-friendly setting from the bottom up; one quote that sums up the difficulties of creating an ASC-friendly learning environment is the following:
‘This challenge led us on a journey that is not and never will be complete. Each new student we take teaches us things about autism that we have not confronted before. More questions are posed than answered. The disability itself is still in its infancy in terms of practice and experience.’

(Hesmondhalgh & Breakey, 2001, p.14)

Hesmondhalgh outlines several strategies he found to be successful, including writing an individual ‘outline of additional needs’ for each pupil in their care to distribute to teaching staff and generating an ‘introductory teaching pack’ covering skills such as road safety, listening skills and navigating around school buildings.

2.4.4 Evidence based approaches

The approaches used at The Resource and described by Hesmondhalgh were designed and adapted based on existing knowledge and experience and to fit the particular needs of those pupils in that setting. Anecdotal evidence and professional experience suggest that many schools develop strategies and approaches in this manner. Whilst they may be effective and lead to positive outcomes they do not meet the criteria for being ‘evidence based’, that is that they have ‘demonstrated objective capacity to produce socially valid positive changes when used with fidelity’ (Simpson, Mundschenk & Heflin, 2011).

Evidence-based interventions have been reviewed by many researchers in the last decade or so. The National Council for Special Education in Ireland commissioned an international review of the literature on educational provision for pupils with ASC, finding 100 empirical papers; only 12 of these were judged to offer a high weight of evidence, and the authors highlighted the ‘difficulties in carrying out robust, meaningful and ethically appropriate research in the real-world contexts of children and families’ lives, at home and beyond.’ (Parsons et al., 2009). They also raised the issue that only 10% of studies focused on children of secondary school age.

A more recent review of evidence-based practices was carried out by Wong and colleagues in 2014 (Wong et al., 2014). They identified 27 practices that met the criteria for being evidence-based. However these tended to be broad categories of intervention, such as ‘exercise’ and ‘cognitive behaviour interventions’, rather than specific programmes; this raises questions as to implementation fidelity and the utility of the review to front-line practitioners such as teachers and support staff. The researchers partially acknowledge this in the report, stating that the identified practices could provide ‘the basis for designing comprehensive evidence-supported
programs for children and youth with ASD’ (Wong et al., 2014, p.32). This has implications for staffing and training, particularly for those schools catering for pupils with ASC who do not qualify for additional funding or support.

A more recent systematic literature review of evidence-based educational practice and interventions for children with ASC was later commissioned by the National Council for Special Education and has recently been published (Bond, Symes, Hebron, Humphrey & Morewood, 2015). This review provided more detail of specific interventions and their educational utility. They found that an increasing number of interventions were of at least medium standard according to their criteria but that very few scored highly across all areas. The vast majority of studies focused on children aged under eight years.

In summary, efforts to identify the most effective ways to support pupils with ASC in school have been inconclusive, particularly for older children and young people. There is no one approach that works for all pupils and little advice for schools on the best ways to meet needs. Whilst many intervention approaches have evidence behind them there is no clear guidance as to how to pull this together to create a ‘comprehensive evidence-supported program’ or whose responsibility this should be, particularly for pupils who do not qualify for additional funding or staffing and for those in mainstream secondary schools who do not have one particular teacher to oversee their educational experience. The specific difficulties experienced by secondary-aged pupils will be discussed in the next section.

2.5 Secondary school experiences of pupils with ASC

2.5.1 Specific difficulties associated with secondary school

The transition from small, structured primary schools to larger, busier mainstream secondary schools, with an increased focus on social interaction and regular changes of classroom and teacher, is often problematic for pupils with ASC (e.g. Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). The difficulties associated with transition are likely to be exacerbated by the increasing complexity of academic, social and personal factors associated with puberty and maturation in general, for example an increasing workload, greater expectations of independence and organisation, hormonal changes and the increased importance placed on socialising and peer interactions. Difficulties raised by the environmental and organisation challenges inherent in secondary schools may be exacerbated by a lack of teacher training regarding ASC; a survey by the National Autistic Society (Batten et al., 2006) found that only 40% of parents were satisfied with their child’s form teacher’s understanding of autism.
This fell to only 23% of parents who were satisfied at the level of understanding of secondary school subject teachers, which is considerably less than the 51% who were satisfied with the level of understanding shown by mainstream primary school teachers. Only 13% of parents of children in mainstream secondary schools felt that teachers adapted their approach, and 16% did not believe that any of their child’s teachers adapted their approach at all. While focused on Scotland, HMIE’s 2006 report backed up parents’ perceptions of teacher training; staff in mainstream secondary schools, more than any other setting, felt that they did not have a strong enough knowledge of ASC to develop the expected strategies for individual pupils.

Several elements of secondary school life can be challenging for pupils with ASC. A number of studies over the last decade have reported on various aspects of the secondary school experience of children with ASC and the perceptions of both pupils and parents. The next section of this chapter will review the current literature in this area.

### 2.5.2 Research into school experiences

The foci of empirical papers relating to pupil and parent experiences of secondary school in the UK are set out in Table 2.5.2 below. The papers fall into three main categories which will be discussed in turn. These are transitions from primary to secondary school, experiences of day-to-day school life, and social and emotional aspects of secondary school life.
### Authors and Focus

<table>
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Table 2.5.2: Summary of empirical studies relating to pupil and parent experiences of secondary school

#### 2.5.3 Moving from primary school to secondary school

Many people with ASC struggle with change and transitions. Any change in routine can cause anxiety; difficulties with social understanding can also lead to a person taking longer to learn the new expectations and social rules of a new environment such as a different school (Stobart, no date). Therefore the way different types of schools manage transitions can have a large impact on pupil outcomes.

Dann (2011) looked at the transition experiences of six students with ASC transferring to mainstream secondary schools with and without resource bases. She found that pupils transferring to secondary schools with resource bases, and their parents, were very positive about the transition process and the situation post-transition. This was the case for both ASC-specific resource bases and for more general SEN resource bases, although the author acknowledges that the different types of resource base may be beneficial for different pupil profiles. By contrast, the parent of the pupil who transferred to a secondary school without a resource base described his school experience since transition as ‘terrible’; staff training was identified as vital but lacking. This study was limited as only six pupils were
involved, and only one pupil transferred to a mainstream school without any form of resourced provision. However it raises interesting questions about the relative benefits of generic SEN and specialist ASC resourced provision in mainstream schools for different groups of learners with ASC. It also provides a starting point for larger studies comparing different mainstream schools in a variety of local authorities.

Dillon and Underwood (2012), Dann (2011) and Fortuna (2014) carried out very small-scale studies into perceptions of transition from primary to secondary school in the UK. Whilst Dann (2011) found that parents of pupils transferring to schools with resourced provision were largely very happy with post-transition outcomes, Dillon and Underwood (2012) found that parental concern regarding their child’s time at mainstream secondary schools without resourced provision remained high. Dillon and Underwood’s use of focus groups may have led either to already-anxious parents feeding off the anxiety of others or, alternatively, parents feeling that they could vent their anxiety in a safe space. Dann’s (2011) use of individual semi-structured interviews may have contained the anxiety somewhat but an alternative could have been that parents were not comfortable detailing their real anxiety levels to an unknown researcher. Of course it may be simply the case that the post-transition experiences of the majority of parents in Dann’s study (2011) were more positive and the schools more supportive than those in Dillon and Underwood’s study (2012). Parents in Dillon and Underwood’s 2012 study highlighted certain aspects of secondary school as beneficial to the transition process. These included having a ‘safe space’, support through the transition itself, effective two-way home-school communication, teacher training and awareness of ASC and the need for a flexible and individual approach in supporting their child. Support from the local authority regarding transition was described as inadequate by all but one of the parents. Fortuna (2014) focused specifically on pupils’ social and emotional functioning during and after the transition from primary school to secondary school. The results showed that the pupils with ASC experienced transition very differently from each other, even when transitioning to the same secondary school. Fortuna highlights the need for an individual approach to transition rather than attempting to apply a ‘one size fits all’ strategy.

A different approach to transition was reported by Keane, Aldridge, Costley and Clark (2012). They looked at the long-term outcomes of a transition ‘satellite class’ in Australia. Five or six children of pre-school and primary age were taught in ASC-specific classes within mainstream schools in preparation for transition from ASC-specific pre-school provision to more inclusive education settings. The focus of the
class was developing skills such as social and communication skills alongside a specialised academic curriculum. Keane et al. (2012) carried out a survey of people who had been part of a satellite class in order to determine long-term outcomes into secondary school and beyond. The majority of parents reported that their child was progressing well, that the direct teaching of skills and preparation for transition within the satellite class had been vital for a successful transition and that information sharing between satellite class teachers and new teachers was very important. Four graduates were selected for in-depth case studies; all four were currently functioning independently, appeared relatively content and were working or studying. The parents of all four graduates said that the satellite class was a key factor in the students’ progress, particularly the focus on social and communication skills.

While there is no obvious parallel in the UK to the Australian ‘satellite class’ transition programme, the closest would seem to be resourced provision in mainstream schools with the joint focus on an appropriate academic curriculum and the development of specific areas such as social and communication skills. A similar report on the long-term outcomes of pupils attending resourced provision in the UK would be an interesting future project.

2.5.4 Views and experiences of day-to-day secondary school life

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) carried out a small-scale qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews and pupil diaries, to gain the views of 20 pupils with ASC in four mainstream secondary schools in England. Their identified themes are shown in Figure 2.5.4 below.

While this was only a small-scale study, the themes identified reflect those found in other literature, including bullying and teasing (e.g. Rowley et al., 2012) and the issue of disclosure (HMIE, 2006). Pupils also mentioned that their teachers had good subject knowledge but little knowledge about ASC, reflecting the findings in Ofsted’s 2006 report. Peer relationships were a big factor and will be discussed in more detail later in this literature review. The environment also played a large part, with the noise, unpredictability and changes to routine all being specifically mentioned.
Whitaker (2007) looked at the views of parents of children in mainstream provision rather than the views of children themselves. The report does not specify an age range and is therefore likely to include views regarding pre-school and primary schools in addition to secondary schools; it was also carried out in one particular local authority which may reduce its transferability. Parents’ priorities were progress in social skills, staff understanding of individual difficulties, the capacity of staff to manage the child’s behaviour, the level of structure offered and the child’s happiness.

A further small-scale research project by Tobias (2009) considered pupil and parent views of the support received by pupils in a secondary school with resourced provision for SEN. Support perceived as positive included: targeted transition support; having a consistent named mentor with whom to discuss issues; the availability of a quiet, calm space to enhance feelings of security and reduce anxiety; good home-school communication, including around minor issues; staff having a good knowledge of ASC in general and of individual students; individual tailor-made support; a welcoming ethos; thoroughness and consistency; and lower student-staff ratios. While this study only involved 15 participants it provides an insight into what is valued by students and staff as part of a resourced SEN provision.
2.5.5 Social and emotional aspects of secondary school life for pupils with ASC

Anxiety emerged as one of the main themes in Humphrey and Lewis’ 2008 study. Hebron and Humphrey (2014b) looked at mental health in more detail, comparing the mental health profiles of adolescents with ASC, dyslexia and no SEN in 17 mainstream secondary schools. The ASC group mean scores fell close to or within the clinical range for all domains except disruptive behaviour; they also had greater mental health difficulties than the groups with dyslexia and no SEN, particularly in the domains of anxiety and anger. Follow-up interviews with some of the ASC group revealed clearly expressed feelings of anxiety which played a significant part in their lives, particularly in social contexts. Reported coping strategies focused on self-reliance and hiding their anxiety. Social relationships were among the most significant influences on mental health, with all participants mentioning bullying in some form as a key concern. This raises questions regarding the educational provision of children with ASC; provision that leads to stressful social interaction for children who tend to hide their anxiety may lead to ongoing difficulties with mental health. A proactive approach to monitoring anxiety levels and putting strategies in place to reduce anxiety could perhaps be beneficial in schools. A comparative study of the mental health of adolescents with ASC in different types of educational provision would be a useful next step in this area.

Peer interaction, social support and bullying have been studied in detail by Humphrey and Symes (2010, 2010 b, 2011) in the last few years. They found that pupils with ASC in mainstream secondary schools were more likely to be rejected by their peers than pupils with other SEN (dyslexia) and no SEN. They also experienced more bullying and less social support (Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Analysis of observed interaction patterns found that pupils with ASC spent 25% less time engaged in cooperative interaction than pupils with dyslexia or no SEN; this adds to the earlier inclusion debate as, even though in a mainstream school in proximity to typical peers, they are not practicing and developing social and communication skills. The pupils with ASC also experienced more verbal aggression from peers than either control group (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). While pupils with ASC reported much higher levels of bullying than their peers, reductions in bullying frequency were predicted by increased classmate support; this suggests that careful intervention by staff could help in this regard (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). However the likelihood of pupils seeking help from peers or teachers was influenced by prior relationship histories and decisions about how to react to bullying tended to be made based upon perceived efficacy of the response based on previous
experience (Humphrey & Symes, 2010b). Hebron and Humphrey (2014a) explored risk and protective factors for exposure to bullying among pupils with ASC. They found that positive relationships, higher levels of parent engagement and confidence and attending a special school were all associated with a reduction in bullying. Pupils at School Action Plus were at higher risk of bullying than those with a statement of SEN.

These studies taken together suggest that support for peer interactions and the prevention of bullying should be taken into consideration when determining appropriate provision for children with ASC.

2.5.6 Summary of pupil experiences of secondary school

Pupils with ASC, and their parents, have clear views about secondary school education provision. Given that some of the main concerns are around serious topics such as bullying and mental health, local authorities need to ensure these perspectives are taken into account when determining appropriate provision for pupils. Gaining the views of stakeholders is an important part of evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of different schools, including how well policies such as those regarding inclusion translate into practice.

2.6 What types of provision are available for secondary-aged pupils with HF ASC?

2.6.1 ‘Inclusion’ in mainstream schools – the ‘default position’

Current legislation states that the majority of young people, including those with special educational needs, will have their needs met in mainstream schools (Department for Education, 2014c). According to the most recent government statistics 98% of pupils with SEN without statements and 57% of pupils with statements of SEN attend mainstream primary or secondary schools (Department for Education, 2014). Mainstream education for pupils with SEN is often related to the concept of ‘inclusion’, which can be defined as follows:

‘School inclusion is the process of including and educating a pupil within a school (mainstream or special), where the school is able to recognise and assess the pupil’s particular needs and is willing and able to be flexible in how the curriculum is delivered and to adapt the routines and physical environment the pupil is expected to operate within. Particular attention is
given to the relationships the pupil is enabled to develop with other pupils (with and without autism), both within and outside the school, and the potential benefits to other pupils and staff.’ (Jones, 2008, page 11)

2.6.2 Inclusion for pupils with ASC

Humphrey (2008) suggests a ‘four-pronged’ definition of inclusion – presence, participation, acceptance and achievement – and states that it should be seen as an ongoing process, where schools focus on creating a better fit between the environment and the pupil with ASC in order to create opportunities for success. The benefits of inclusion are said to include higher teacher expectations of pupils’ learning potential, behavioural modelling of ‘normally developing’ peers, increased self-esteem, more accepting peer attitudes, and less isolation and stigma for pupils with additional needs and their families (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). So how does inclusion work in practice in mainstream classrooms?

Sansosti and Sansosti (2012) analysed definitions of inclusion through focus groups and interviews with a range of educators from elementary schools. All of the schools had specific ‘Autism Inclusion’ programs. While definitions of inclusion varied there were some main themes: children with ASC should be educated alongside ‘typical’ peers; inclusion involves flexibility and variability; inclusion means not being dependent on an adult aide (e.g. a teaching assistant); and inclusion for students with high functioning ASC is fundamentally different from inclusion for students with other SEN. Participants felt that students with ASC needed support that was largely unique to that population, such as visual timetables, sensory adaptations and social skills instruction. They also noted that students with ASC can stand out more than peers with other SEN because of their difficulties with social skills, communication and behaviour. All participants highlighted that inclusion needed to be defined on an individual basis for each child, which presented a challenge in that there was no single clear approach for schools and teachers to follow. A strong theme was that a child who is reliant on a full-time adult in order to succeed in a mainstream setting is not truly included, with participants feeling that students became reliant on such adults and missed out on some naturalistic learning opportunities due to the adult intervening too early.

The participants in Sansosti and Sansosti’s 2012 study were mainly positive about inclusion, stating that it was valuable both for children with ASC and for their ‘typical’ peers. They felt that mainstream school provided high expectations, numerous opportunities for skill development and the chance for students to learn
social and behavioural skills through peer modelling. They also felt that ‘typical’ peers benefitted from strategies and adaptations put in place for students with ASC.

Despite the perceived benefits of inclusion there are some associated barriers. Teacher training and experience was raised as the biggest barrier to successful inclusion in Sansosti and Sansosti’s study (2012). From parents’ perspectives, Barnard et al. (2000) found that only 12% of parents of children with ASC in unsupported mainstream primary schools described themselves as ‘very satisfied’ with their child’s education, rising to 23-41% in mainstream settings with some support and 54-70% in autism-specific provision (Barnard et al., 2000). This emphasises that inclusion is not simply achieved by placing a child with SEN in a mainstream setting, but rather is about ensuring that the services and support offered by the school are appropriate for the individual and of a high quality.

2.6.3 Alternatives to mainstream – a continuum of provision

As the name suggests, autism is a spectrum condition and encompasses a wide range of individuals with varying levels of strengths and needs across the triad of impairments. As a result it is generally not considered possible to state that a particular type of school placement is the best for all children with autism (e.g. Department for Education and Skills, 2002). There is also considerable variety between different schools, even those offering ostensibly the same type of provision, depending on such factors as staff, experience, access to training and the views and skills of visiting professionals (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005; Jones, 2008); this is likely to contribute to the lack of a clear picture regarding the outcomes of particular types of provision.

The Autism Education Trust (2011) identified eight different types of educational placements for children with ASC (see Figure 2.6.3.1):
Types of educational placements

1. mainstream without support;
2. individual support in a mainstream classroom;
3. resource bases (or ‘units’) specialising in autism or communication disorders attached to mainstream schools. These provide pupils with the opportunity to mix with their typically developing peers as well as providing specialist support and education as needed;
4. schools specifically for children on the autism spectrum;
5. special schools for children with a variety of educational needs due to intellectual impairments or emotional and behavioural difficulties;
6. residential schools for children whose needs cannot be met in day provision (often because of severe behavioural or emotional difficulties, or the family’s needs). These may be for children with autism specifically or for children with varying needs;
7. independent or non-maintained schools funded by the local authority if no other appropriate options are available or in some cases paid for privately by parents;
8. home schooling (generally chosen by parents who want to follow a home-based programme or who do not feel local provision is appropriate or when their child has been excluded).

Figure 2.6.3.1: Types of educational placement for children and young people with ASC (Autism Education Trust, 2011).

An example of the range of provision available for secondary-age pupils with cognition and learning and/or communication and interaction needs in one local authority is shown in Figure 2.6.3.2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary SEN Provision</th>
<th>Enhanced Learning Provision</th>
<th>Local Authority Special Schools</th>
<th>Independent Special Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most pupils with SEN including those with lower level Cognition and Learning and Communication and Interaction needs, emotional and behavioural difficulties (BESD) and physical and sensory needs.</td>
<td>• Pupils with high level learning needs in Cognition and Learning and Communication and Interaction</td>
<td>• Pupils with high level needs in all areas</td>
<td>• A small number of pupils with exceptionally high levels of need</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.6.3.2: The continuum of provision in one local authority for secondary age pupils with cognition and learning and communication and interaction needs (Wiltshire Council, 2011, page 11)

However, similar to the situation with the concept of ‘inclusion’, a local authority having a range of provision available is not in itself enough to ensure good outcomes for pupils with ASD. Schools need to be a good fit for individual pupil
needs, and there can be considerable variety between individual schools of the same type. The following section will discuss research into the effectiveness of different types of school for secondary-age learners with ASC. More research was found regarding younger pupils, but due to the specific needs and difficulties associated with secondary school that have already been highlighted it was felt that such research would be less relevant for this study.

2.7 What types of school provide the best outcomes for secondary-age pupils with ASC?

2.7.1 Difficulties with direct comparisons between schools

One of the major issues in comparing provision is the lack of data or empirical evidence. A research report commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families found that very few local authorities had access to accurate information on the numbers of children with SEN in general or ASC in particular (Lewis et al., 2010). Several attempts have been made to evaluate and compare outcomes for children with ASC who attend different types of educational placements, by academic researchers, autism charities and organisations and government organisations at local and national levels. However this is made difficult by the heterogeneity at all levels: between individuals with ASC; between schools, even those of the same ‘type’; between Local Authorities; and between countries. It has been highlighted that educational practice tends to develop at the ‘coal face’ in response to specific needs, outpacing formal research and evaluation (Parsons et al., 2011); this may be another reason for the variance, as local provision adapts as needed to meet the immediate demands.

2.7.2 Individual differences between schools that may be associated with outcomes for pupils with ASC

Osborne and Reed (2011) looked at the factors within mainstream secondary schools that were associated with progress for pupils with ASC. They assessed the behavioural and emotional functioning and perceptions of school belonging of 105 children from 91 mainstream secondary schools over the course of an academic year using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Autism Behaviour Checklist and Psychological Sense of School Membership scale. They found that pupils with ASC in mainstream schools had high levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties, but that there were improvements in several areas of functioning over a school year; improvements for children with a diagnosis of autism tended to be in
behavioural and emotional areas, while those for children with a diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome were in social behaviours. After controlling for age and autism severity the authors found that larger schools were associated with an improvement in ‘social problems’, and larger classes with improvements in ‘social problems’ and ‘emotional difficulties’. Bigger schools were also associated with a greater sense of pupil belonging, particularly for those pupils with a diagnosis of Asperger’s. A higher proportion of children with SEN was associated with greater improvements in all areas of functioning except for ‘social problems’. Higher numbers of support staff, such as teaching assistants, were associated with lower ‘pro-social behaviours’ but improvements in ‘emotional difficulties’ and the ‘total problem’ score. While the study highlights some interesting associations there could be multiple reasons behind the relationships and the direction of causality. For example, the better outcomes linked to greater numbers of pupils with SEN may be due to schools with more pupils with SEN investing in more training for staff; schools that gain good reputations for their outcomes for pupils with SEN may also attract more applications from the parents of these children.

Frederickson, Jones and Lang (2010) looked at school factors seen as important in the education of pupils with ASC, this time comparing provision in mainstream schools with and without ASC resource bases. In schools with resource bases, 100% of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and 86% of class teachers had received training. In those without resource bases, only 52.6% of SENCOs and 42.1% of class teachers had received training. This was reflected in the modifications, strategies and responses to ‘problem scenarios’ mentioned by teachers from the two types of setting; while similar modifications and strategies tended to be used, they were reported far more widely in those schools with resource bases. Staff from schools with resource bases also reported more pro-active responses to the scenarios given such as looking for triggers to temper tantrums, teaching strategies to cope in future and introducing systemic strategies such as ‘time out’ cards. They were also more likely to mention working on communication skills. The authors concluded that while features previously identified as important to parents of children with ASC, such as good home-school communication and autism-specific teacher training, were more likely to be found in schools with ASC resource bases, there was no reason why mainstream schools could not develop these features. One main limitation of this study was that it relied solely on self-report from teachers employed by one local authority. As the report was commissioned by the local authority teachers may have wanted, or been encouraged by their schools, to give the ‘right answers’ so as to come across more positively.
2.7.3 Government reports into the effectiveness of different types of schools for pupils with additional needs

Two reports have been published by English and Scottish government departments in the last decade relating to the effectiveness of different types of educational provision for children with additional needs. They both identify factors associated with the various school types that impact on outcomes.

Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) (2006) published a report examining factors that promoted good outcomes for pupils with additional needs across a variety of types of provision. They found that there were examples from all types of schools that were highly effective at meeting pupils’ needs and that there was little difference between mainstream and special schools regarding the quality of provision or pupil outcomes. However mainstream schools with resourced provision resulted in the best academic, social and personal pupil outcomes. There were elements that each type of school excelled at, for example special schools were particularly skilled at matching staff skills and interests to the needs of particular pupils, but mainstream school teachers were more knowledgeable about National Curriculum subjects. Mainstream schools with resourced provision were the most successful at ensuring children with additional needs were able to learn alongside ‘typical’ pupils but with appropriate adaptation in place to meet their needs.

While the Ofsted report (2006) provides interesting information it is limited for the purposes of this research project as it covers all learning difficulties and disabilities rather than providing specific information on the quality of provision or outcomes for pupils with ASC. Some information about the study design is provided although the specific measures used and the data collected are not included.

A more ASC-focused report was carried out by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) in Scotland in 2006 looking at how well the needs of pupils with ASC were being met in a range of educational placements. It found that secondary-aged pupils in specialist provision tended to have more ASC-specific targets on their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) than pupils in mainstream schools and that most were making particularly good progress in communication skills. This may be linked to the further finding that specialist and independent schools had particularly good input from speech and language therapists. They found that pupils in mainstream secondary schools tended to be ‘over supported’ by classroom assistants which they felt resulted in over-dependency and that, while break times provided real
situations in which to practice social skills, staff did not support pupils to do this; difficult social interactions with other pupils and reported bullying were both highlighted. In contrast, specialist provision often prioritised the development of social communication and interaction skills; one criticism of this was that it sometimes came at the expense of a broader academic curriculum. A major concern relating to mainstream secondary provision was that the majority of both teaching and non-teaching staff did not have a sufficiently good working knowledge of ASC; support staff reported feeling that the responsibility for both supporting and teaching pupils with ASC fell to them rather than the subject teachers. By contrast staff members in specialist provisions were very well qualified and knowledgeable.

Similar to the 2006 Ofsted report, the 2006 HMIE report includes an outline of the methodology but does not provide access to the data or to the specific measures used. While the views of a wide range of stakeholders were taken into account, the number of schools of certain types visited was quite low – for example, just three special schools were visited. It is also focused on Scotland, which has different educational organisation and structures to England.

### 2.7.4 Parent views regarding different types of schools

The Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) increased the legislative focus on the importance of both pupil and parent views in determining school provision (Department for Education, 2014c) and as such the views of these key stakeholders have now become more important. One support group for parents and carers of children with ASC in a London Borough carried out a survey to gain parental views on their children’s educational provision (Haringey Autism, 2005). The survey was sent to families on the support group’s mailing list and 58 of 150 families replied. There may be some participation bias as those families who felt more strongly about their experiences of education may have been more likely to respond, and families whose children were coping well may not have felt the need to join the support group in the first place. The report seemed to have an agenda against mainstream schools as all of the quotes provided in the report were negative, despite the statistics showing many positive responses. Nonetheless the information provided is interesting. Detailed demographic information and some examples of survey questions and raw data are provided.

20 of the 58 children mentioned in the Haringey survey (2005) were at a mainstream school. Eight were in an ASC or speech and language unit attached to a mainstream school, and 28 were in a special school. One was not in school and one was home educated. Only four of the 20 families with children in mainstream
schools felt that inclusion was working ‘very well’, although a further seven felt it was working ‘fairly well’. The majority of parents with children in specialist provision, either a school or a unit, felt that their child was receiving all of the provision in their statement of SEN and that the statement was effective at meeting their child’s needs; only a minority of parents with children in mainstream schools felt the same way. No parents of children in mainstream schools felt that staff had received adequate training, compared to over half of parents of children in specialist provision. Likewise only a fifth of parents of children in mainstream schools felt that there was a good level of ASC awareness in the school, compared to four fifths of children in specialist provision. Encouragingly, the majority of parents of children in both mainstream and specialist provision agreed or strongly agreed that their child liked school, was making good progress and was not bullied or harassed. The majority also agreed or strongly agreed that there was good communication between parents and school. However the proportions of parents agreeing or strongly agreeing were considerably higher for those with children in specialist provision. Only a minority of parents of children in mainstream schools felt that their child was receiving enough support or that the school had enough resources to meet their child’s needs, compared to a large majority of parents of children in specialist provision.

2.7.5 Empirical research into educational outcomes

Empirical studies into the educational outcomes of children with ASC tend to be small-scale and with a specific focus such as play behaviour or transition experiences. They often involve observations, interviews and/or focus groups. Perhaps due to the emphasis on early intervention, many studies are based around pre-school or primary education; in their international review of evidence Parsons et al. (2011) found 92 empirical papers, 82 of which focused on children under the age of 11. The authors highlighted the lack of research into provision at the post-primary level. The same pattern has been found in subsequent literature reviews, for example Bond et al., 2015.

Papers found during the literature review described above that relate to the impact of certain types of school are summarised in Table 2.7.5 below. Only those papers that involved children of UK secondary school age have been included.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Stage of education</th>
<th>Type/s of provision</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Study design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reed, Osborne &amp; Waddington, 2012</td>
<td>Primary and secondary</td>
<td>Mainstream and special</td>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>86 children: Gilliam Autism Rating Scale; pre- and post-test Strengths &amp; Difficulties Questionnaire and Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowley et al., 2012</td>
<td>Primary and secondary (participants aged 10-12)</td>
<td>Mainstream and special (incorporating schools and units)</td>
<td>Friendship and bullying</td>
<td>Analysis of information from Strengths &amp; Difficulties Questionnaire and Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule for 100 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederickson, Jones &amp; Lang, 2010</td>
<td>Unclear – likely primary and secondary</td>
<td>Mainstream and mainstream with specialist ASC provision</td>
<td>Characteristics of the provision</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews with 39 staff members from 26 schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osborne &amp; Reed, 2011</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>School factors promoting inclusion</td>
<td>Questionnaires answered by parents of 105 children attending 91 schools; data collection from teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dann, 2011</td>
<td>Transition from primary to secondary</td>
<td>Mainstream and mainstream with specialist ASC or SEN provision</td>
<td>School factors affecting transition experiences</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with six pupils with ASD, six parents and 18 staff members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.7.5: Summary of empirical studies relating to the impact of educational provision types for secondary-age children with ASC

2.7.6 Social outcomes

Given the difficulties with social interaction inherent in ASC, developing the social skills needed to form friendships can be a challenge. Rowley et al. (2012) examined parent, teacher and self-report of friendships and victimisation for 100 children with ASC in the UK. 51 were in mainstream schools and 49 in specialist provision, either schools or units. Around 95% of children with ASC described having some sort of friendship, although only around half of these involved mutuality. Three quarters of the children reported having been teased, bullied, excluded by or involved in
conflict with other children. Children with better social skills were more likely to experience victimisation in mainstream schools than in special schools; this may be in part due to these children making more social approaches to their peers. For those children with more impaired social skills the level of victimisation did not vary by school placement. Although there are limitations to this study, such as experiences of friendship and bullying being measured by single items on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, the findings suggest that expecting children with ASC with better social skills to be better able to cope in the mainstream context may be putting them at increased risk of bullying and victimisation.

Although not carried out in the UK, the results of a study by Locke, Ishijima, Kasari and London (2010) make for interesting reading. They looked at the friendship quality and social networks of adolescents with and without autism in an inclusive drama class in a high school with an ASC programme. All seven adolescents with ASC identified another pupil with ASC as a best friend and 22 of the 24 friendship nominations by this group were towards each other, forming two smaller groups on the outskirts of the classroom. None of the seven were significantly connected to any of their classmates without ASC. This again adds to the inclusion debate as it is additional evidence that being taught alongside peers without ASC is not sufficient to foster peer relationships.

2.7.7 Behaviour outcomes

Reed, Osborne and Waddington (2012) compared the behavioural progress made by children with ASC in mainstream and special schools in the UK. Baseline measurements were taken using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale; these were then repeated after nine to ten months by a researcher blind to the type of school placement. Group means showed that there were no significant differences in age, autistic severity or baseline scores between pupils attending mainstream or special schools; a wide range of schools was used, with no more than two pupils included from any one school, to try to avoid any school’s individual characteristics skewing the results. The authors found that children made progress in adaptive behaviours in both mainstream and special schools. Children in special schools made greater improvements in behaviour, specifically conduct and hyperactivity, than those in mainstream schools. This is important given the high exclusion rate for children with ASC, especially as the latest statistics show that externalising behaviours – physical assault against a pupil, physical assault against an adult and persistent
disruptive behaviour – are the three main reasons for pupils with ASC to be excluded from school (Department for Education, 2014b). Relevant to the inclusion debate is the finding that children in mainstream schools did not make greater progress in socialisation than those in special schools despite ongoing access to typically developing peers and social settings.

2.7.8 Summary of research into educational outcomes

Neither the government reports nor the empirical studies provide any conclusive evidence that any one type of school leads to improved outcomes for all pupils with ASC.

Both the Ofsted (2006) and HMIE (2006) reports highlight that children with ASC can be successful in different types of schools, each of which have their strengths and weaknesses. This was also reflected in an international review of empirical and expert evidence regarding best practice in educational provision for children with ASC (Parsons et al., 2011). The review found mixed evidence into the efficacy of any one approach over any other, whether at a specific level such as ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis) versus an eclectic approach or at a more general level such as mainstream versus specialist provision. The authors concluded that both empirical and expert evidence support the maintenance of a range of provision in order to meet the diverse needs of children and young people with ASC. This is also the current message in legislation at national government level in the United Kingdom and is reflected in some documents at local government level. For example the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2014, page 28) states:

‘Children and young people with SEN have different needs and can be educated effectively in a range of mainstream or special settings. Alongside the general presumption of mainstream education, parents of children with an EHC plan and young people with such a plan have the right to seek a place at a special school, special post-16 institution or specialist college.’

So given the lack of conclusive evidence supporting any particular school type, how do parents and Local Authorities decide which children would be most appropriately placed in any particular type of school?
2.8 How are decisions made regarding school placements for pupils with ASC?

2.8.1 Are particular types of school better suited for particular ‘profiles’ of pupils with ASC?

Child characteristics have been found to be associated with the type of placement accessed by the child. Rowley et al. (2012) found that children with ASC attending mainstream school had higher IQ and language scores than those attending special schools; those in special schools had greater needs linked to restrictive and stereotyped behaviour but not social interaction or communication. Some provisions have their own identification tools to help with decision-making processes (e.g. Wiltshire Council, 2011) but this does not currently seem to be common practice.

2.8.2 Do pupils and their parents genuinely have a choice?

Current legislation states that the majority of young people, including those with special educational needs, will have their needs met through mainstream educational providers (Department for Education, 2014c). However the same document also states that parents and young people should have a choice of education settings and that children with EHC plans, and their parents, have a right to seek a place at a special school. Despite this a report by the National Autistic Society (Batten et al, 2006) found that 55% of parents said they had no choice over the type of school their child attended, increasing to 59% of parents when specifically considering secondary school. The same survey found that over 50% of children were not in the kind of school their parents believed would best support them. So if parents are supposed to have a choice of education settings what is the official decision-making process and why are so many parents dissatisfied with their child’s provision?

Waddington and Reed (2006) held focus groups with parents of children with ASC and local authority officers with experience of working with children with ASC to determine perceptions of factors affecting mainstream inclusion. 44% of parents felt that they had had a choice about educational provision and had decided themselves that mainstream was the best option. However in a separate question 37% of parents admitted that the main factor leading to that decision was the lack of suitable alternatives available; 44% of local authority officers agreed that the lack of alternative provision was leading to many mainstream placements. 44% of
parents wanted the local authority to be more open about alternatives to mainstream education, and none of the parents in the study felt that the local authority had given them any help in deciding on the best school placement.

2.8.3 The importance of an Education, Health and Care Plan (formerly statement of special educational needs)

In order to access anything other than mainstream provision a child needs an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. This is a legal document that outlines a child’s educational needs and the support that must be provided to that child in school. The issuing of an EHC plan follows a statutory assessment process, where various stakeholders are invited to contribute their specialist opinions about the child in order to inform the EHC plan. The SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2014, page 25) states that ‘Where a child or young person has SEN but does not have an EHC plan they must be educated in a mainstream setting except in specific circumstances’.

Not all children and young people with ASC have needs severe and complex enough to meet local authority criteria for a statutory assessment, particularly those who are deemed to be high functioning (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010). Barnard et al. (2000) found that 31% of children at the more able end of the autistic spectrum were not able to get a statement of SEN. Forsyth et al. (2010) found that a willingness by a local authority to acknowledge a child’s special educational needs, even if formal thresholds are not met, is appreciated by families and associated with lower parent-reported unmet need; this may be due to the potential to access specialist provision or simply the feeling that their child’s needs have been recognised.

2.8.4 The importance of a diagnosis

In addition to whether or not a child has a statement of SEN or EHC plan, another barrier to accessing specialist provision is whether or not a child has a clinical diagnosis of ASC. This is particularly likely to be the case for specialist ASC provision, either in units or schools, although Tissot (2011) found that local authority personnel did not feel a label helped the LA to define the best type of educational provision. Russell, Ford, Steer and Golding (2010) analysed information from the 14,536 children in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children cohort to determine behavioural traits associated with a clinical diagnosis of ASC. Using this information they determined that there were a number of undiagnosed
children who displayed behaviours at the same level as those with a diagnosis. 55% of these undiagnosed children had not been identified as needing any special educational provision; those who did receive additional support were generally identified as having ‘cognition and learning’ difficulties rather than ‘communication and interaction’ difficulties despite on paper showing the same behavioural traits. While an obvious limitation is that this was a paper exercise rather than a multidisciplinary assessment, the findings suggest that there are many children who would meet the clinical criteria for ASC but who are not identified in schools as needing any support, or whose needs might be wrongly identified. This raises the issue of what access criteria specialist provision should have: should places be allocated based on diagnosis or assessment of needs? If the latter, who would be responsible for carrying out the assessment, particularly as criteria for accessing a statutory assessment become increasingly strict?

2.8.5 When stakeholders disagree: appeals and tribunals

Parents have the right to appeal a decision made by the local authority regarding their child’s education. This includes a decision not to carry out a statutory assessment, a decision not to issue a statement following a statutory assessment or a decision to name a school other than that wanted by the parent. A 2009 study commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) found that parents, carers and professionals found the SEN system to be complex, particularly regarding resourcing, thresholds for statutory assessments and statementing, and the language used (DCSF, 2009). The system was also found to require a high level of active involvement by parents and carers. Parents often describe having to ‘fight’ to secure appropriate provision for their child (e.g. Batten et al., 2006; Haringey Autism, 2005; Barnard et al., 2000), particularly where they want ASC specialist provision; a 2006 National Autistic Society survey found that 62% of parents with children at an autism-specific special school said it was hard to get a place (Batten et al., 2006).

More appeals have been made to tribunals regarding children with ASC than children with any other category of SEN in every year between 2004 and 2013. Between September 2012 and August 2013 (the most recent data available) 1,231 tribunal appeals were registered regarding pupils with ASC; this represents over a third of the total tribunal appeal registrations regarding SEN (Ministry of Justice, 2013). In 2005 Batten et al. surveyed parents who were members of the National Autistic Society to elicit their views about education (Batten et al., 2006). Of the responding members, 72% who had appealed against a local authority decision not
to carry out a statutory assessment won their case, as did 70% of parents who appealed against a decision not to issue a statement. A quarter of parents in the Haringey Autism survey had gone to tribunal regarding educational provision; other than those cases that were still pending, every case had resulted in the parents being successful in getting the provision they wanted for their child (Haringey Autism, 2005).

2.9 Literature summary and research gap

There are a number of types of provision for children with ASC in England and empirical and expert research suggests that this range of provision should be maintained. The concept of ‘inclusion’ is supported by government legislation but the perceived benefits are not always backed up by research; parental surveys also suggest that mainstream provision is not always perceived to be the best option. Outcomes are likely to be very individual, with pupils having their own profiles and responding differently to the structures and support offered by different schools. Differences between schools of the same supposed type and between what is offered by different local authorities also make it difficult to compare provision. Gaining an overview of the full range of provision available to pupils in one local authority, along with an understanding of how this range of provision caters for the varying needs of pupils with ASC, would seem to be a productive next step that would begin to address a current gap in the literature.

The nearest empirical study to this research project is probably Tissot (2011). She used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to gain the views of parents and local authority personnel regarding the process of deciding upon educational provision for children with ASC. However while she investigated the decision making process, there was no reference to the specific continuum of provision that decisions were being made about or whether that continuum of provision catered appropriately for the needs of pupils in the area. The study was also regarding autism and educational placement in general, rather than any more specific focus. Parental responses to surveys and questionnaires have highlighted secondary provision and provision for those children with high-functioning ASC as priority areas (e.g. Haringey Autism, 2005; Reddick & Higgins, 2011). This project will therefore focus on the range of secondary provision available for pupils with high functioning autism in one local authority and the decision-making processes that go alongside it.
2.10 Research questions

Autism is a spectrum condition and people with ASC are affected in different ways, both across the triad of impairments and through co-occurring issues such as sensory and mental health needs. Differences between schools, even those of the same type, and between Local Authorities also make it hard to directly compare pupil progress and outcomes. Empirical and expert literature both claim that it is best practice for parents to have a choice of school and for there to be a continuum of provision available to match the vast spectrum of needs of pupils with ASC.

Research shows that the process for determining school placements is not straightforward. Parents describe it as complex and bureaucratic with provisions having unclear entrance criteria. The SEN statementing and tribunal processes have also been described as overly complicated and tribunals can be stressful and expensive for all involved.

This project will look at the full continuum of provision available for children with ASC in one local authority, how the provision maps onto the needs of children with ASC in the area and how placement decisions are made. This leads to the two research questions:

1. **What is the range of secondary school provision for pupils with high functioning ASC in one local authority and how do the types of provision map on to the spectrum of needs of these pupils, in policy and in practice?**

2. **How are secondary school placement decisions made by the local authority, schools and parents?**

2.11 Aims of the research

The research will aim to identify the range of provision available for children with high-functioning ASC in one local authority and explore how the local authority caters for the full range of individual needs of these children and how decisions are made about where children are placed. It will hopefully provide a framework for other Local Authorities to consider their own provision and how decisions are made, with an eventual long-term aim of informing a more pro-active approach to placement decisions without the perceived need for so many tribunal cases.
2.12 Contribution to knowledge

There has been little, if any, widely published research to date into what constitutes good practice in provision for secondary-school pupils with high-functioning ASC at a local authority level. By examining policy and practice and stakeholder perceptions of this in one local authority this project will hopefully find examples of perceived good practice and areas of universal need in decisions around educational provision.

2.13 Social/economic impact

Where parents are unhappy with school provision they can take the LA to tribunal, which is costly in terms of both time and money and can be very stressful for everyone involved. The LA may then end up having to pay high fees to send pupils to provisions that are independent and/or out of county. Having appropriate provision within the LA that meets the needs of children with high functioning ASC may help to reduce these stresses and costs.

In most LAs, the expectation is that all children should be educated in mainstream schools where possible. As children with high functioning ASC often cope fairly well in smaller, structured primary school, they are expected to be able to cope in mainstream secondary school; alternative provision is often not considered until a mainstream provision irrevocably breaks down. By this stage the pupil may be disengaged with education, have low self-esteem and low confidence in their ability as a learner, have considerable anxiety about school and possibly be school refusing. Proactively thinking about appropriate school placements, and mechanisms for accessing them, depending on children’s needs may help to avoid this.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter the rationale for the current study was outlined. Two research questions were constructed in order to explore the current range of secondary school provision for children with high functioning autism spectrum conditions and how provision decisions are made. These questions were as follows:

1. What is the range of secondary school provision for pupils with high functioning ASC in one local authority and how do the types of provision map on to the spectrum of needs of these pupils, in policy and in practice?

2. How are secondary school placement decisions made by the local authority, schools and parents?

This chapter will firstly present the philosophical grounding of the research, specifically the epistemological, ontological and axiological positions that were adopted. The design of the study will then be outlined followed by a discussion and critique of the methods used for data collection and data analysis. The chapter will conclude with an exploration of the ethical considerations pertinent to the study.

3.2 Philosophical considerations

A researcher’s philosophical assumptions impact on their research in many ways, for example shaping the perspective taken on the topic, influencing the questions asked and the methods used and guiding decisions about what counts as ‘evidence’ (Denscombe, 2010). As such it is important for researchers to be aware of their research paradigm and to make it explicit to others. The epistemological, ontological and axiological positions assumed in this research will be discussed below.

3.2.1 Ontological considerations

Ontology can be described as ‘the beliefs that researchers hold about the nature of social reality’ (Denscombe, 2010, p. 118). There is a dichotomy between ‘realism’ – the belief that there is an objective reality that exists outside of peoples’ perceptions of it – and ‘constructionism’ – the view that reality is a social construct based on perceptions and interactions.
The researcher’s ontological position was that of critical realism; this incorporates elements of both realism and constructionism and will be discussed further in the following sections.

### 3.2.2 Epistemological considerations

Epistemology can be described as ‘*the ways that humans create their knowledge about the social world*’ (Denscombe, 2010, p. 119). It relates to how we gain knowledge about ‘reality’ rather than what ‘reality’ actually is.

Neither a purely positivist nor a purely interpretivist approach felt appropriate to the researcher for this piece of research. It was felt that a positivist approach, with its focus on objective observation and measurement, would not allow for rich data on stakeholders’ possibly conflicting views to be investigated in sufficient depth. However the researcher felt that different school settings may provide different external social realities; a purely interpretivist approach would not have allowed for investigation of this.

This research used a post-positivist critical realist approach in order to incorporate elements of both positivism and interpretivism. This approach accepts that there are limits on the extent to which a ‘true reality’ can be discovered and that there will not always be a ‘perfect’ explanation. One epistemological assumption of critical realism is that there is no direct way of capturing social reality; researchers must produce theories to explain these realities. These theories may themselves shape the reality and they will never be perfect (Denscombe, 2010).

### 3.2.3 Critical realism

This research was carried out within a critical realist paradigm. Critical realism is the view that there is such a thing as an objective reality, but that our knowledge and understanding of this reality are conceptually mediated (Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2001). Critical realism can be seen as particularly well suited to case study research: “*It justifies the study of any situation, regardless of the numbers of research units involved, but only if the process involves thoughtful in depth research with the objective of understanding why things are as they are.*” (Easton, 2010).

Denscombe (2010, pp. 125-126) outlined four ontological assumptions underlying critical realism:
- Reality exists independently of any individual’s experience or interpretation of it
- Reality is not always observable
- The impact of reality is not always predictable
- Social reality is complex and not necessarily revealed by things that can be measured and observed

These assumptions influence methodological decisions. For example, they suggest that no amount of measurement and observation would reveal the complexities of social reality; more interpretive approaches such as analysis of interviews can provide richer sources of data. The third assumption outlines the uncertain nature of critical realist research; the research may reveal patterns of causality but this does not indicate a certain cause-effect relationship. This is important given the small sample size of this exploratory research.

The different types of secondary school provision and the related policies and strategies were felt to form an independent reality as in the first assumption above. However it was acknowledged that different stakeholders were likely to have contrasting perceptions of this reality. Therefore data collection aimed to identify both what existed and how this reality was perceived. Case vignettes were sought to provide further exemplification of how policy translated into practice and to provide another source for data triangulation.

The realist element of the research was considered carefully in the data analysis. The aim was not to privilege any one view over another but to identify key themes, commonalities and differences in perceptions. Contradictions and anomalies were both expected and welcomed; they helped to identify the gap between supposed ‘reality’ and what happened ‘on the ground’ as perceived by stakeholders such as SENCOs and parents. This in itself provided a useful source of information; schools and Local Authorities need to be aware that parents and pupils may not experience procedures as intended.

### 3.2.4 Axiological considerations

Axiology refers to the role of values. No research, or researcher, exists in a vacuum; the researcher’s value base and life experiences will impact on the research from early decision-making stages right through to the analysis and presentation of the findings.
Prior to and during the research process the researcher was involved in supporting several secondary-aged pupils with high-functioning ASC who were not accessing any educational provision for a variety of reasons. All had been placed in mainstream schools but were not attending. There were many similar cases within the local authority in which the researcher was on placement, several of which had gone through tribunals in order to secure what parents perceived to be more appropriate educational provision. There was also an acceptance within the local authority that there was no specialist provision for pupils with high-functioning ASC who found it difficult to attend and learn within mainstream secondary schools.

These factors influenced the choice of research topic and also influenced the choice of local authority in which the research was carried out. A deliberate decision was made to recruit a local authority with a range of types of provision for children with high-functioning ASC and also with a low incidence of tribunals, as it was felt this could generate useful information that could be fed back into other Local Authorities as a form of 'best practice'.

A positive psychology stance was taken throughout this research; schools were nominated by the local authority based on perceptions of 'good practice' and interview questions were designed to elicit the positive aspects of the provision and of the processes linked to placement decisions. A positive psychology stance involves identifying and building on strengths rather than focusing on treating and repairing damage (Seligman, 2007). Seligman (2007) outlines the importance of positive psychology as follows:

"Psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness, and damage; it also is the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is wrong; it also is building what is right. Psychology is not just about illness or health; it is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. And in this quest for what is best, Positive Psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, self-deception or hand-waving; instead it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behaviour presents in all its complexity."

Regarding psychologists' practice, Seligman (2007) states that:

"We need to ask practitioners to recognize that much of the best work they already do in the consulting room is to amplify strengths rather than repair the weaknesses of their clients. We need to emphasize that psychologists
Seligman clearly states the case for the role of a positive psychology approach to research. Focusing on strengths within schools and the wider local authority provides the potential for these strengths to be recognised and amplified more widely.

### 3.3 Research design

This study used an embedded multiple case study design (Yin, 2009). Due to the lack of research in the specific area of the secondary school decision making process it was felt that an in-depth, exploratory design would be most appropriate.

The researcher’s initial aim was to compare secondary school provision and decision-making processes across three local authorities; however it was felt that, within the time frame, the complexities of recruitment, data gathering and travel across three authorities would be unmanageable. As a result one local authority was chosen as a focus. This reduction in breadth also allowed for greater depth, for example gaining the views of stakeholders to see how policies at the local authority level translated into practice.

The researcher would have liked ideally to also include the views of additional stakeholders, particularly the pupils themselves but also local authority educational psychologists. It was felt that it would not have been possible to do this within the timeframe and scope of this particular research project. As the particular focus of the research was on the decision-making processes it was felt that it would be most appropriate to involve those stakeholders with the largest roles in decision making, namely parents and those local authority officers involved in the decision-making process.

#### 3.3.1 Case study structure

The diagram below shows a representation of the structure of the study. Each school made up an individual case.

Two units of analysis applied to each case:

- **Unit of analysis 1**: How does the provision meet the needs of pupils with high functioning ASC?
• **Unit of analysis 2**: How do children become placed at the provision?

Within each case information was gathered using the following methods, described in more detail in section 3.5:

- Document analysis
- Interviews with two parents
- An interview with a member of staff responsible for special educational needs.

Contextual-level information was gathered through interviews with relevant members of staff from the local authority and through local authority-level document analysis.

![Figure 3.3.1: Case study structure](image)

### 3.3.2 Reasons for choosing a case study design

Whilst other methods such as a survey or a questionnaire would have allowed for more views to be collected, the current evidence base was not felt to be sufficient to generate appropriate questions. Exploratory case studies such as this one allow for the collection of a far greater range of information albeit from fewer sources; this information could potentially be used to create a questionnaire to collect a wider range of views in future.

Yin (2009) outlines three criteria which make case studies a suitable methodology:
i. The research question is asking ‘how’ or ‘why’ something occurs;
ii. The researcher has minimal control over events;
iii. The focus is on a current issue within a real-life context.

It was felt that the current study met all three of these criteria. The second research question was around how provision is determined. The issue of secondary school provision was current to all participants (either parents of children within secondary schools or secondary school or local authority staff) and was something over which the researcher had no control.

### 3.3.3 Critique of case study designs

All research designs have strengths and weaknesses. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, p. 256) identified three main weaknesses identified with case study designs:

- The results may not be generalisable except where other readers/researchers see their application.
- They are not easily open to cross-checking, hence they may be selective, biased, personal and subjective.
- They are prone to problems of observer bias, despite attempts made to address reflexivity.

Shaughnessy, Zechmeister and Zechmeister (2003) highlight that bias can come from the participant/s, the researcher or both and can be a particular issue where the research relies on a participant’s memory. Case studies involve a considerable amount of selection both before and during the study, for example based on which cases to study, what questions to ask and how much of the analysis to report. This links with another critique of case study research - a lack of rigour, for example the researcher not following a systematic procedure or allowing biased views to affect the results (Yin, 2009). However Yin (2009) argues that unsystematic procedures may occur in any research method and that case studies can be carried out systematically so long as the researcher is aware of the need and the study is carefully planned.

To counter these potential issues it is important for the researcher to be explicit about the procedures used, including strategies for recruitment, data collection and data analysis. The researcher should acknowledge issues around generalisability given the small sample size inherent in case study research. Consideration should also be given to avoiding bias. Further details on such approaches used in this study can be found in section 3.7.
3.4 Participant recruitment

A non-probability sampling strategy was used to recruit participants in this study. This type of sampling is appropriate for exploratory case study research; as described by Cohen et al. (2007), "each type of sample seeks only to represent itself or instances of itself in a similar population, rather than attempting to represent the whole, undifferentiated population" (p. 113). The specific strategy used was purposive sampling. Participants at all levels were selected based on specific criteria and desired characteristics, as described below. As an exploratory case study the aim of the research was to acquire in-depth information from those in a position to give it; purposive sampling allows direct access to ‘knowledgeable people’, for example those staff members involved with student transition from primary to secondary school and parents of children with ASC who have direct experience of the processes. The aim was not to generalise to any general population but to gain an understanding of current procedures and practice as well as specific elements that participants identified as good practice.

3.4.1 Local authority recruitment

Contacts within the researcher’s university who were involved in autism research were approached in order to identify appropriate potential local authorities. A large local authority was sought as it was felt that a larger local authority would be more likely to have a wider range of educational provision, purely as a result of catering for a greater number of pupils over a bigger geographical area. Another criterion was that the local authority should already be perceived to demonstrate good practice in its secondary school provision for children with high functioning ASC. This was felt to be important in order to maximise the potential usefulness of the findings for other Local Authorities and schools. In reality this was difficult to assess; the researcher was guided by university staff members who had carried out autism research in various local authorities and also by proxy measures such as the number of autism-related tribunals in the local authority.

Two potential local authorities were identified and introductory emails were sent to the Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) of each. One was unable to participate due to staffing issues but the other expressed an interest. During a follow-up phone call the PEP of this local authority was asked to identify the most relevant staff members to take part in the research, including one staff member with an oversight of the range of provision available for children with ASC and one staff member involved in the decision making processes around allocating provision for children.
with SEN. While the PEP could have been one of these contacts, in this particular local authority two other staff members were identified. The PEP contacted these two staff members with the information and consent forms and they then approached the researcher directly to give consent.

### 3.4.2 School recruitment

During the interviews with the two local authority staff members six types of secondary school provision for children with high functioning ASC were identified. The staff members were asked to identify examples of each type of school that they felt demonstrated good practice. The staff member with a strategic lead for ASC contacted school staff directly in order to establish those schools that would like to take part and passed on the appropriate contact information. The researcher then made follow-up phone calls to further discuss the research and sent information and consent forms by email. Two types of school (the specialist mainstream provision and the independent specialist school) were unable to participate.

### 3.4.3 Parent recruitment

Interviews were sought with two parents of children with high-functioning ASC from each provision. SENCOs were asked to recruit the parents on the behalf of the researcher as it was felt that they would have an existing professional relationship and would be well placed to identify those parents who would be interested in taking part. SENCOs were specifically asked not to recruit parents who were in education-related grievance processes such as tribunals. Only one parent was available at the academy and the specialist school, and no parents were available for interview at the special school. Table 3.5.1 shows the final participants from each type of school.

### 3.5 Data gathering

Two primary data collection methods were used during the study: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Case vignettes were also sought although this proved harder to accomplish. The aim of using multiple methods was to increase the validity of findings through triangulation (Cohen et al., 2007) although, in practice, it was difficult to gather documents that suited this purpose. The documents collected for analysis were instead used primarily for contextual information. The opportunity and flexibility to use a range of sources of evidence has been described as a major strength of case studies (Yin, 2009).
The table below shows the methods used to address each research question:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the range of secondary school provision for pupils with high functioning ASC in one local authority and how do the types of provision map on to the spectrum of needs of these pupils, in policy and in practice?</td>
<td>• Semi-structured interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Document analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Case vignettes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How are secondary school placement decisions made by the local authority, schools and parents?</td>
<td>• Semi-structured interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Document analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Case vignettes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.5: Research questions and associated research methods

The rationale for each method and the specifics relating to the study are described in more detail below.

**3.5.1 Semi structured interviews**

Within this study, semi-structured interviews were the main data-collection method. Interviews can be described as a means of enabling participants to discuss their interpretations of their lived experiences and express their own points of view (Cohen et al., 2007). A semi-structured approach was chosen as it supported the systematic procedures deemed as important by Yin (2009) whilst allowing flexibility for participants to add and expand upon areas they deemed to be important (Robson, 2002).

Gillham (2000, p.62) lists five criteria which make interview techniques appropriate:

1. Small numbers of people are involved.
2. They are accessible.
3. They are ‘key’ and you can’t afford to lose any.
4. Your questions (or the most significant ones) are mainly ‘open’ and require an extended response with prompts and probes from you to clarify the answers.
5. If the material is sensitive in character to that trust is involved: people will disclose things in a face-to-face interview that they will not disclose in an anonymous questionnaire.
Criteria 1-4 were appropriate to this study. The participants were ‘key’ primarily as a result of the small numbers involved. Prompts, probes and follow-up questions were felt to be important for clarification and to minimise the risk of misinterpretation (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). In addition, school choice for a child with additional needs was felt to be a complex and potentially emotionally-charged situation for parents, and as such criterion 5 applied particularly to the parent interviews.

Individual interviews were planned to be carried out with two local authority representatives and with two parents and a relevant staff member from each school. In practice it was not possible to interview two parents from each school, and in one school two staff members wanted to be involved in the interview. Table 3.5.1 below outlines a summary of final participants from each setting. Each group of participants (parents, school staff members, local authority staff members) had a slightly different interview schedule due to their different roles and experiences, however all participants within each group (e.g. all parents, all school staff members) were asked the same core questions. Please see appendices five to seven for the interview schedules.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local authority</td>
<td>Two staff members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream school</td>
<td>One staff member, two parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academy</td>
<td>One staff member, one parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic special school</td>
<td>One staff member, no parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist school</td>
<td>Two staff members, one parent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3.5.1: Final participants in each setting*

A case study protocol (see appendix 8) was developed to ensure systematic procedures were used as much as possible during data gathering (Yin, 2009). Each participant was given a copy of the interview schedule in advance, along with the information and consent forms, and invited to contact the researcher with any questions or concerns. Each interview then began with a summary of the research, confirmation of consent and a reminder of confidentiality procedures such as anonymisation (as recommended by Robson, 2002). Each interview was audio-recorded and minimal written notes were made; this allowed the interviewer to engage in active listening and to generate and ask additional prompt and probe questions as appropriate. At the end of each interview participants were asked whether there was anything else they wanted to add that had not been covered. They were invited to contact the interviewer if they had any questions or wanted to
add any further information. The data analysis procedures were explained briefly and all participants agreed to the researcher sending them a copy of the themes for member checking.

3.5.2 Document collection

A variety of documents were collected from the local authority and from individual schools during the research including one school’s intervention timetables, the most recent Ofsted reports for each school and school admissions policies. As stated in Cohen et al. (2007) no written source is ruled out. The documents were largely used to provide contextual information about the schools.

Bailey (1994) presented several strengths and difficulties relating to documentary research. Those pertinent to the current study are outlined below:

**Strengths**

- There is no reactivity on the part of the writer.
- Most documents will not have been written with research in mind but for another specific purpose or audience. This allows insight into dynamic situations.
- Some documents will have involved large sample sizes, for example Ofsted’s parent questionnaires, which would be unrealistic to otherwise access in the scope of the study.
- Some documents in the public domain, e.g. local authority policies, may have been written by individuals with specific skills and knowledge and may therefore contain valuable information and insights that would be difficult to otherwise access.

**Difficulties**

- Documents could be highly biased and subjective as a result of the specific purpose, audience and context for which they were written.
- Some documents may be interpretations of events rather than objective accounts; they may present an incomplete record of the situation.
- Not all documents will be available to the researcher. In this study the researcher was limited to those documents in the public domain (particularly those available online) and those documents voluntarily provided by participants.
Documents come in many different forms, making a standard method of analysis difficult to achieve.

Cohen et al. (2007) add that documents are social products located in specific contexts that, as a result, require interrogation and interpretation rather than just being accepted at face value. The variety of documents available within each school meant that a full content analysis would not have been appropriate. Specific documents that were available for all of the schools were used to compile comparative background information (see appendix nine).

3.5.3 Case vignettes

Yin (2009) suggests using a vignette to introduce each case within a report. A case vignette was sought from each school in order to provide an illustrative example of how the pupil gained entry to the school and how the provision mapped onto their needs. These vignettes were generated through an amalgamation of several pupils along with general school factors and provision in order to preserve anonymity.

3.6 Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full by the researcher as part of the thematic analysis process (see section 4.6.1 below). Document analysis was used to generate background information for each school (see appendix nine). The data collected for each case were analysed separately to provide an overview for each school, following which a cross-case analysis was carried out to provide an overview of the different schools and their similarities and differences. Interviews and documents relating to the local authority were used to generate contextual-level information about the wider LA and the schools’ positions within the LA continuum of provision.

As one of the main critiques of case study research is a lack of rigour the researcher felt it important to take a structured approach to data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) offer clear guidelines for carrying out thematic analysis in a rigorous manner and these guidelines were followed closely. See appendix 10 for samples of each stage of thematic analysis.

3.6.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is widely used within and outside of psychology in order to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
Thematic analysis is a flexible method that can be used within a variety of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Despite its flexibility it is important that researchers are aware of and explicit about their assumptions and specific methods used; without this information it is difficult to evaluate, compare or repeat studies (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis is applicable to critical realist approaches as it can be used both to reflect reality and to unpick what ‘reality’ is to participants.

### 3.6.1.1 Principles guiding analysis

Before carrying out thematic analysis a number of decisions have to be made relating to how data is coded. The first was that a rich description of the entire data set would be provided rather than a detailed account of one particular aspect. This was felt to be important due to the lack of research in the area. A second decision was that the data would be coded using an inductive or ‘bottom up’ approach; themes were generated from the data rather than trying to fit the data into a pre-existing frame, such as the interview questions or research questions. However Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that research and coding do not take place in an ‘epistemological vacuum’ and that theoretical and epistemological frameworks are likely to have an effect on the process of coding and theme generation. A third decision was that themes would be identified at a semantic (or explicit) level rather than an interpretative level; the researcher looks for themes and patterns ‘on the surface’ of the data, such as what has been explicitly said during an interview, rather than examining underlying ideas and assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### 3.6.1.2 Phases of thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six-phase approach to thematic analysis and this was followed in this study. The six phases and the related processes carried out by the researcher are outlined below. Steps 1-5 were carried out for each data set (i.e. each school and the local authority-level contextual information).

1. **Familiarisation with the data**

The researcher listened to each recording and transcribed it. Completed transcriptions were then loaded into NVivo 10 and checked again against the voice recordings. Initial thoughts regarding codes and themes were noted in memos within NVivo.
2. Generating initial codes

Data from each case (school) were coded systematically. The same codes were used for transcriptions within the same school but coding was restarted from scratch with each subsequent school to minimise the impact of previous themes on the researcher’s thought process. The coding for each transcription was reviewed a number of times throughout the process.

3. Searching for themes

Codes were collated into potential themes within each data set (case/school). Mind maps and memos were used to investigate various combinations of themes, sub-themes and codes.

4. Reviewing themes

A ‘thematic map’ was generated for each data set in order to refine the previously generated themes. All of the extracts coded within each particular theme were reviewed to see whether they truly belonged within the theme or whether the meaning had been misinterpreted. The transcriptions for the entire data-set were then re-read to determine whether the thematic map was a good fit for the data as a whole. This thematic map, along with examples of coded data for each theme, was shared and discussed with a fellow trainee EP engaged in qualitative research. It was not feasible for a second researcher to carry out a full analysis and subsequently calculate a percentage rate of agreement; the second trainee EP, however, did feel that there was a clear rationale for the linking between codes and themes. The names of some themes and sub-themes were changed as a result of the discussion in order to more comprehensively reflect the incorporated codes. The thematic maps were also sent to participants to ensure that they were happy with how their contributions had been interpreted; none of the participants responded with any requests for amendments.

5. Defining and naming themes

Finalised thematic maps were generated to fully represent the data set. Consideration was given to the names of themes and sub-themes to ensure an accurate reflection of the data.
6. Producing the report

The thematic map for each data set was written up as a narrative account for the results section.

Although presented in a linear fashion, the thematic analysis process involved several cycles, particularly between steps two to four. Considerable time was spent refining codes and themes. Braun and Clarke’s 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis (2006) was referred to throughout the analysis process.

3.6.2 Document analysis

Some data from written documents were used to provide descriptive contextual summaries, for example relating to the number of pupils within the local authority and within each school. Some, albeit few, documents were similar enough to be directly compared between schools; these included Ofsted reports. The majority of documents were ‘stand alone’ and unique to one particular setting.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

Yin (2009) outlines four tests commonly used to judge the quality of empirical social research, including case studies. These four tests are:

- Construct validity – are appropriate operational measures used for the concepts being studied?
- Internal validity – how confident can we be about identified causal relationships?
- External validity – to what extent can the findings be generalised to other people or situations?
- Reliability – could the study be repeated with the same results?

Internal validity is not applicable to exploratory case study research as no attempt is made to establish causal relationships. Approaches used to address the remaining three tests are shown in the table below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Approaches used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Construct validity** | • The researcher’s definition of high-functioning ASC was discussed with all participants  
• All students discussed had a medical diagnosis of an ASC  
• The purpose of the research was discussed in detail with participants  
• Multiple sources of evidence were gathered  
• A clear audit trail was established throughout data gathering and analysis  
• Participants were sent a copy of the appropriate thematic map to ensure their views had been correctly interpreted  
• Thematic maps were reviewed by and discussed with an independent researcher involved in qualitative research |
| **External validity**   | • Existing theory and literature were used to inform the research  
• The views of three participants from each setting were sought  
• Various sources of data were sought  
• Issues around generalisability were discussed at the planning stage as this was an exploratory case study looking for specific examples of good practice |
| **Reliability**        | • A clear audit trail was established throughout data gathering and analysis and the case study protocol (see appendix 8)  
• Thematic maps were reviewed by and discussed with an independent researcher involved in qualitative research  
• Data gathering and analysis methods were transparent and clearly described |

Table 3.7: Approaches used to address concerns about reliability and validity

### 3.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the project was given on 19.03.2014 by the School Research Integrity Committee (see appendix one).

All aspects of the research were undertaken in accordance with the British Psychological Society’s Code of Ethics (2006) and the Health and Care Professions Council’s Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics (2008). Therefore the usual ethical considerations regarding informed consent, the right to withdraw and data confidentiality were followed. See appendices two to four for the information and consent forms given to each participant.
3.8.1 Anonymisation

All identifying information has been anonymised and stored securely in line with University protocols. Participants were asked to check the themes identified in the transcripts; at this stage they were asked to comment on whether they felt any identifying information remained, for example whether they felt their specific school or child could be identified from information given. Any concerns were discussed and adaptations were made where needed until mutual satisfaction was achieved. Very little contextual information has been given about the local authority in order to minimise the chance of identification.

3.8.2 Local authority staff

Conversations with the local authority staff members were arguably within their job roles. However due to the national budget cuts and time pressures on local authority staff plenty of notice was given when asking for information. All participants were aware that identifying information would be anonymised, including the names of LAs and schools, to minimise the risk of LA officers feeling uncomfortable reporting data perceived as negative such as the number of provision-related tribunals.

3.8.3 SENCOs

SENCOs may have felt uncomfortable talking about their views of where they work, particularly if they wanted to give a negative opinion. It was highlighted throughout the recruitment, data gathering and data analysis processes that the focus of the research was looking for positives and examples of good practice. Where questions were asked about less positive situations they were phrased along the lines of ‘in an ideal world, how would you like it to be?’ rather than specifically asking about current problems.

A further ethical consideration relating to SENCOs was that of distinction in the dual scientist-practitioner role. It was made clear to SENCOs throughout the recruitment and data gathering processes that the researcher was visiting the provision in a researcher role rather than an educational psychologist role. This was helped by the local authority not being that in which the researcher was on placement. The boundaries of the project were explained at the start of the process, with an emphasis placed on whole school provision rather than issues regarding individual children.
3.8.4 Parents

As with the SENCOs it was important to ensure that parents fully understood the rationale and scope of the project before giving consent, for example making sure they were aware that the project was looking for good practice at a local authority level and that their input would not affect their child’s provision.

Parents were contacted by the SENCO of the school rather than by the researcher. In all cases the parents of pupils with ASC had an existing professional relationship with the SENCO and it was felt that they would feel under less perceived pressure to consent than if approached directly by a researcher. SENCOs were asked to use their knowledge of and relationships with parents when approaching representatives, for example avoiding recruiting parents who were in grievance processes with the school or LA or who might find it particularly upsetting to talk about their experiences with their child’s education. They then distributed information and consent forms to selected parents; these included the researcher’s contact details in case of any queries or concerns.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

All names in this section, including those of the local authority, schools and individual participants, have been changed to ensure anonymity. Only very broad demographic information is provided for the same reason. The pen portrait for each school does not describe any specific individual pupil, rather it is a ‘typical pupil profile’ composite created through discussion with school staff. Demographic and statistical information has been gathered from websites and official documentation of the local authority, schools and Ofsted; these references have not been included, again to preserve anonymity.

The section will begin with an overview of the LA and the range of secondary school provision available for pupils with ASC. Each of the four school case studies will then be presented in turn, with the school’s background, a ‘typical pupil’ pen portrait, thematic maps of the school factors and pupil factors relating to HF ASC and a discussion of the key themes. A cross-case synthesis will then compare the findings from these four schools. Following this the processes of school allocation and decision-making will be discussed, incorporating LA and parent processes and the views of key stakeholders.

4.2 Local authority overview

4.2.1 Demographics and context

Landshire is a large, mainly rural local authority located in the north of England. Around 20% of the population live in its major towns, with over 50% of the population living in areas defined as ‘sparse’ or ‘super sparse’. Unemployment rates are slightly lower than the national average. The main employment sectors are agriculture, tourism and service.

4.2.2 Overview of secondary provision within the local authority

The majority of secondary-aged pupils in Landshire are educated in mainstream comprehensive schools or academies. Some secondary schools offer specialist enhanced provision, hereafter referred to as ‘specialist mainstream provision’ or SMP, for pupils with specific additional needs through a team of specialist staff.
These staff support staff members and pupils within the school and also offer outreach support in other mainstream schools. They also support a small number of pupils through ‘in-reach’ places. Landshire also has a number of special schools catering for pupils with a wide range of needs including moderate learning difficulties, severe and complex learning difficulties and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. All pupils in these special schools have a Statement of SEN or an EHC Plan.

4.2.3 Thematic analysis

During the interviews with the LA officers, seven types of school were named as settings that catered for pupils with ASC. The interviewees also mentioned pupil referral units and home education. These have not been discussed further; it was felt that a pupil referral unit would not be chosen as a secondary school destination for a pupil who had been identified with ASC, and home education is not a local authority secondary school provision.

Two main themes emerged for each of the types of provision identified by the LA officers: school factors and pupil factors. The pupil factors described the needs of pupils that they felt would be appropriately placed at the school, and the school factors highlighted the aspects of the school that made it suitable for that cohort. The factors are presented in table 4.2.3 below.

The initial aim was to gather interview data from staff members and parents at each type of provision that had been identified. Unfortunately it was not possible to collect this data from a mainstream with an SMP or an SMP inreach unit specifically due to staff illness. Each of the remaining four types of provision will now be presented in turn, incorporating document analysis and thematic analysis of interviews with parents and staff. Due to the volume of data collected in the interviews it would have been impossible to present every aspect in detail. The discussions therefore focus on the most salient themes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Pupil factors</th>
<th>School factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Mainstream     | • More subtle needs, not always recognised as ASC  
• Usually at School Action or School Action Plus; a few pupils have statements  
• Unlikely to meet criteria for NHS input e.g. speech and language therapy, occupational therapy | • Academic input from subject specialist teachers  
• Expectation that pupils will fit in with school structure  
• Less flexible curriculum  
• Staff don’t always have the ASC skills needed |
| Academy        | • Usually more academically able  
• Sensory needs can be missed  
• May have subtle difficulties with social communication | • Expectation that pupils will fit in with school structure  
• Often rigid, formal structure  
• Often more selective than mainstream |
| Mainstream with SMP | • LA targets provision at pupils with the highest level of ASC needs – for example may have significant sensory needs or may require considerable structure and routine | • All staff better trained at meeting needs – whole staff training and understanding  
• Autism-friendly ethos, teaching, classroom organisation  
• Autism inclusion at heart of provision  
• Functions as typical high school  
• Specialist support within school |
| SMP inreach    | • Accessing mainstream academics  
• Statement / EHC for autism  
• Challenging behaviours  
• Complex, significant, long-term needs  
• Mental health – anxiety, stress  
• Often missed a lot of learning, previous placement breakdown, school refusers  
• Sensory difficulties  
• Some areas in line with age related expectations | • Area’s ‘centre of excellence’ for autism  
• Knowledge and experience to ‘unpick’ situations  
• More flexible, personalised curriculum, substantial differentiation  
• Specialist provision as and when needed – specialist teacher and teaching assistants on site  
• Staff work in a more preventative way to deal with complex behaviours  
• Reduced pressure – ‘unit children’ don’t count towards Ofsted data |
| Generic special school | • Anxiety  
• School refusal  
• Challenging behaviours  
• Often have additional learning | • Awareness of communication and interaction needs  
• Awareness of sensory needs, can make adaptations |
4.3 Mainstream secondary

4.3.1 School background

School A is a small, rural mainstream high school with around 300 pupils across years 7-11. It does not have a sixth form. The majority of pupils travel to school by bus. Twenty students in the school have a formal diagnosis of an ASC, with a further 10 described as ‘on the radar’ and/or actively undergoing assessment. No students have ASC listed as a primary need on a statement or EHC plan although some have statements or EHC plans for other needs with ASC mentioned as an additional need. The school caters for a wide range of pupils and has a key stage three nurture group for those working below level three. No students have been identified as having severe learning difficulties.

In 2014, 57% of pupils achieved five GCSEs at A*-C. This is slightly lower than the LA average but higher than the national average. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is lower than the LA average. All aspects of the school were rated ‘good’ at the last Ofsted inspection. Of those parents who completed the Parent

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Table 4.2.3: School factors and pupil factors associated with different types of secondary school provision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulties</th>
<th>Good at meeting learning and ASC needs</th>
<th>Able to unpick behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May have additional diagnoses e.g. epilepsy</td>
<td>Challenging, complex, extreme behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduced pressure</td>
<td>Mental health difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Able to engage and motivate pupils</td>
<td>Significant sensory challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Needs haven’t been met through the SMP</td>
<td>Specialist support in school e.g. educational psychologist, speech and language therapist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of county ASC-specific special school (incorporating both LA- maintained and independent schools)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Able to unpick behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency around the clock if residential – waking day curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist support in school e.g. educational psychologist, speech and language therapist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
View survey, 90% would recommend the school to another parent and 96% feel that their child is happy at the school.

### 4.3.2 Pupil pen portrait

Adam is a year nine pupil with a formal diagnosis of ASC. He does not have a statement. He is in the key stage three nurture group for extra support in English but studies all other subjects with his year group with differentiation as needed and part-time teaching assistant (TA) support. He has been discharged from speech and language therapy but has weekly sessions in the Learning Resource Centre to support his expressive language skills and vocabulary development. He has just finished a 12-week block of input from specialist staff at the local SMP because of some inappropriate sexualised comments and behaviour towards female peers. This year he has been working with the school’s careers advisor and has chosen his GCSE subjects; he is on course to achieve seven GCSEs and is also taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. He attends the weekly after school gardening club and would like to go to college to study horticulture.

### 4.3.3 Thematic map: school factors

![Thematic map: school factors](image)

**Figure 4.3.3: Mainstream school factors**

### 4.3.4 School factors discussion

During the parent and staff member interviews, several aspects of the school were discussed as making it appropriate for meeting the needs of pupils with HF ASC.
These aspects fell into four broad categories: school ethos and expectations, flexible support within school structure, relationships and staffing. Each will be discussed in turn.

4.3.4.1 School ethos and expectations

The school’s inclusive ethos was mentioned several times by the SENCO during interviews. Inclusivity was described as ‘the norm’:

"We had sports day this week and you know one of the things that the head took away from that was that everybody was included in some way, we had nobody who wasn’t involved, so it is a really inclusive school, it’s just the norm that everyone is involved." [SENCO]

In the interview with the SENCO the size of the school was also felt to contribute to the nurturing approach, particularly with regard to supporting children who had demonstrated challenging behaviours in primary school:

"We’ve had real horror stories about these children before they’ve got here but actually once they’re here it’s not panned out that way at all, just like you say because of the smaller school environment, [it’s a] much more nurturing environment than some of the bigger schools." [SENCO]

The nurturing approach demonstrated by school staff was described by one parent as important in her decision to send her pupil to the school:

"I can just remember coming in and having a look around and I was talking to the staff about children that would probably find a social situation a little bit tricky or stressful, they just seemed to have a nurturing side there that’s needed for <pupil>.” [parent]

Pupils have access to a range of interventions; these are monitored and outcomes tracked using provision maps. In addition, the SENCO reported that staff members often go beyond these identified interventions:

"The English department were doing an exam technique intervention with one young lady during registration time, and I’d said ‘you need that on the provision map’, and it’s like, ‘it’s not an intervention, I’m just helping her!’ So it’s very much they just see it as an extension of what they do really rather than something that’s separate.” [SENCO]
The SENCO also described provision maps as being drawn up based on pupil need rather than a specific diagnosis, with interventions targeted to meet a particular need at a particular time:

"We always work from the ethos that actually whether they’ve got a diagnosis or not isn’t actually that important, what’s important is what needs they’ve presented with this week or today, and that’s what we need to do to help them today." [SENCO]

Whilst the provision maps and nurturing approach enable staff to meet a wide range of needs, the SENCO highlighted the expectation that all pupils will work towards a minimum of five GCSE qualifications:

"It’s always the expectation that we’ll give [GCSEs] a go, sometimes once it gets to the end of year 10 and they do their end of year 10 exams, if it looks like we’re going to be putting too much pressure on them by leaving them in then we’d look at taking them out so they’d be on a reduced timetable but we’d try and keep five.” [SENCO]

In summary, the school is reported to have an inclusive, nurturing ethos. All pupils are expected to take part in school activities and sit a minimum of five GCSEs.

### 4.3.4.2 Flexible support within school structure

The school’s flexible approach to catering for pupils with HF ASC was mentioned by both parents and the SENCO during the interviews. Specific adaptations mentioned included changing a pupil’s seating position in class, reducing the timetable to provide additional support in key areas, allowing a pupil to go home at lunchtime and offering extended work experience placements to target individual needs in a real-life context. One parent summed it up by saying:

"They have flexibility I suppose, flexibility and understanding, and don’t appear to be too rule bound regarding how something has to be delivered to a general class, it’s more tailored.” [parent]

The flexibility, however, did have to be within the constraints of the wider school structure. One such constraint that was specifically mentioned was timetabling. The school operates a small ‘nurturing group’ for pupils in key stage three who are working below level three in English and/or maths. One parent mentioned that her son had been benefiting academically from this group but that he was not happy
because timetabling constraints meant that he had to join the year above for other lessons such as drama, music and art.

Another difficulty mentioned by all interviewees was finding the right balance between pupils having TA support in lessons and developing independence skills:

"I would say that the only difficulty in what I’ve seen in the junior school and here is that he had far more TA support, but I understand from the school’s point of view that they want him to try and reach independence and this sort of thing, but I’ve often mentioned here that I wished he had a bit more TA support.” [parent]

Parents described how pupils had been supported proactively by staff members, from TAs to the headteacher, without parents needing to intervene:

"They’ve moved where he sits in class, the headmaster’s been very proactive with a few issues to do with the teasing and bullying matters, and everything’s just going fine.” [parent]

Where pupils’ needs required specific, targeted support, a graduated response was outlined incorporating classroom-based, school-based and external interventions:

“If I have a student here who had an issue, obviously we’d do our wave one up to wave three bits as well, if that didn’t help the <autism outreach team> would come and work with us here and work with the student if necessary, if that still didn’t help the next level is for our student to be seconded to their school, so that they can work all the time with that student in school with the aim then of feeding them back to us once they’ve got over whatever hurdle it is that they’re working on.” [SENCO]

The role of the autism outreach team in supporting pupils and staff members in the mainstream school was highly valued by the SENCO and by parents. A wide range of involvement from this team was discussed during the interviews, including direct intervention work with individual pupils, support for parents in the home, attending weekly learning support staff team meetings at the school, and offering informal support over the phone.

Support for pupils at key transition points was described in detail and highly valued by the parents interviewed. The SENCO described a thorough process of getting to know year six pupils and supporting them to get to know the school and staff, including conversations with primary school SENCOs and six transition visits with
specific activities before the county-wide year six transition day. Parents also valued the continuity of services between primary and secondary school, particularly where pupils had existing relationships with autism outreach workers.

A second key transition point raised during the interviews was when leaving the school at 16. All interviewees mentioned geographical difficulties with onward transition, with most colleges requiring a fairly long bus journey. Transition into further education was portrayed as a very individualised process which might include visits to the provision with the pupil, introducing them to new staff and liaison with parents.

The process of planning for transition well in advance was described as important. The SENCO described how students with additional needs receive support from the careers advisor from year nine onwards in order to provide appropriate input at key stage four that will support them to go on to their chosen destinations.

Whilst the school does not have a sixth form the SENCO described a newly-introduced key stage five course targeted at pupils with additional needs who might struggle in a college environment, combining academic, vocational and work experience opportunities.

### 4.3.4.3 Relationships

Relationships between school staff and parents were mentioned by all interviewees as being important. Parents mentioned frequent meetings with staff members to discuss any issues and to promote a collaborative approach to problem-solving:

"The head of pastoral care she’s really good, and if there’s anything particular the matter I need to talk to her about she’ll always call me back if she’s not available straight away." [parent]

"He had some art work to hand in but he said I don’t want to go to my art lesson, there’s nowhere for me to go, so I just said to <learning mentor> well maybe it’s just the position of the room or that someone was sat in his seat last time he went to the lesson and he felt that he had nowhere to go, you don’t know do you, you have to just pick away at it, so I think she’s going to speak to his class teacher and see if they can find out what the problem is." [parent]
One parent described being supported with a home based concern while another also reported collaborating with school staff to work at home with their child on educational goals that would help them in school:

“I’ve said that during the holidays I’ll work on particular areas of emotional and social learning development, helping <pupil> to understand that it’s not about who he’s working with in the room, it’s about his own personal learning progress. So that’s my homework project for the summer holidays, to work out a lovely visual aid to do that with him!” [parent]

The SENCO highlighted the school’s small size as being central to the good relationships with parents, as staff members get to know all pupils well and can build relationships with parents over time:

“I think because we’re small we have the real privileged position of being able to get the know the students really really well... we don’t have the kind of yearly getting to know the different set of staff again, and that also makes it really easy to build up relationships with parents as well.” [SENCO]

In addition to the home-school relationship, several other relationships were viewed as important. Both parents mentioned communication with senior management as something they valued, while the SENCO was very positive about the school’s relationships with the autism outreach team and other local schools. Being part of a local teaching alliance was also seen as important, particularly with regard to accessing training opportunities, due to the small size of the school.

4.3.4.4 Staffing

The SENCO reported that all school staff have received training about ASC from the local enhanced provision for autism, with an ‘open invitation’ for any staff with particular queries to visit for further advice:

“Our whole school staff went down to <enhanced provision> and spent a day down there, and we also have basically an open invitation from them, any staff that, you know for example if someone looks down their register for the next year and thinks, oh, the autistic children, not sure how I’m going to deal with that, they can go down to <enhanced provision> and have a look at similar students or whatever they want really.” [SENCO]

Specific staff members within the learning resource centre also receive training on targeted interventions from the autism outreach team and speech and language
therapists, with a focus on ‘upskilling’ staff members and increasing capacity within the school:

"<The speech and language therapists> have been in and done whole staff training with my learning support team on generally supporting communication needs in classrooms and they helped me set up two speech and language interventions." [SENCO]

"At the moment we’ve got four students who’ve got an active intervention from <the outreach team>, and we always try and make sure that whenever they’re working with a student on a particular issue that as well as them doing that work they’re also upskilling our staff... we’ve got a whole raft of interventions that we can do but we make a further referral to them if we’ve tried that but it hasn’t worked or we’ve not got whatever outcome we want." [SENCO]

Parents were accepting of the fact that not all teachers had the same level of knowledge and understanding about ASC, although this had led to some difficult situations:

"We had a little blip because a teacher told him he couldn’t save a seat for his friend and he had to move out of that seat and he’s obviously got himself into a little routine of saving a seat for his friend and then this teacher shouted at him and said 'you need to move out of there now and make way’ so for the following week he wouldn’t have a cooked dinner at all, he would have a packed lunch only, but finally we’ve got over that." [parent]

"I think, realistically, schools are incredibly busy places aren’t they, and there’s lots of different teachers and some are really in tune to children’s characteristics and their individual needs and others are just there to get the subject taught and it’s just one of those things... we’ve got to get through it the best way we can.” [parent]

Despite this acceptance of different teaching approaches, one parent did express a desire for greater knowledge and understanding:

"I’d like them to have a specialist autistic teacher in the school all the time... it’s really hard to put your child in an environment where you feel that the teaching staff don’t get him or don’t understand him fully.” [parent]
4.3.5 Thematic map: pupil factors

Figure 4.3.5: Mainstream school pupil factors

4.3.6 Pupil factors discussion

The ‘pupil factors’ are not representative of any one pupil, but are a generalised overview of the strengths and needs of pupils with HF ASC at the school based on the interviews with the SENCO and parents. Nine themes emerged and will be addressed in turn. During the discussion, themes will be shown in bold text.

The school’s HF ASC pupils were described as making measurable progress academically, albeit often with a ‘spiky profile’ of strengths and needs. Parents felt that pupils had previously been misunderstood, perhaps seen as being lazy or as doing well when actually they were ‘coasting’. Pupils may also have co-occurring needs that impact on their academic progress, such as dyslexia or cerebral palsy. Difficulties with expressive or, more often, receptive language were also mentioned as contributing to academic ability; both parents specifically mentioned that their child didn’t always understand verbally-presented information and instructions and that this then impacted on their learning.

Whilst some HF ASC pupils were described as having sensory and/or physical needs, such as sensitivity to noise or auditory processing difficulties, these were generally able to be met with minor classroom adaptations. Pupils were also
felt to be developing the skills needed to manage school life independently, for example using planners. Some pupils were described as having special interests, but these were often reasonably age-appropriate and could usually be integrated into the curriculum as a way of motivating the pupil; examples mentioned included photography, bird-watching and computing.

Some emotional and mental wellbeing needs were felt to be present in most pupils with HF ASC, primarily anxiety. These needs were reported to present in a variety of ways such as stammering, refusing to eat in school and making negative comments about themselves and their ability. However these mental health needs were generally described as transient and presenting primarily at particularly stressful times.

Pupils had varying social profiles but all were deemed able to interact with other pupils as needed and therefore ‘fit in’ socially. Both parents described their children as happy with the amount of social interaction they engaged in, although this amount was very different for the two pupils. Some pupils were described as ‘very socially aware’ and wanting to appear ‘normal’, whilst others were happier spending breaktimes on the computer with one or two friends.

Routine and structure was felt to be important for the majority of pupils with HF ASC. Rigidity caused problems for some, for example where school rules or teachers’ statements had been taken very literally or where staff members had responded inconsistently.

4.4 Academy

4.4.1 School background

School B is a smaller than average mainstream academy which caters for around 600 pupils across years 7-13. It is not selective. Six students at the school have a formal diagnosis of ASC; a further six are described as ‘on the spectrum’ but without a diagnosis. None of them have a statement of SEN or an EHC plan. The school caters for pupils with a wide range of academic needs and abilities.

In 2014, 39% of pupils achieved five GCSEs at A*-C. This is lower than both the LA and national averages. Sixteen percent of pupils are eligible for free school meals; this is more than twice the LA average. All aspects of the school were rated as either ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ at the last Ofsted inspection. Of those parents who
completed the Parent View survey, 84% would recommend the school to another parent and 92% feel that their child is happy at the school.

4.4.2 Pupil pen portrait

Ben is a year 10 pupil with a formal diagnosis of ASC. He does not have a statement. He is studying for a mixture of BTEC and GCSE courses. He has a small group of friends but tends to spend breaktimes in the learning resource centre where he likes to draw comics. He also usually eats lunch in the learning resource centre with two of his friends as he finds the dining hall too noisy and busy. He goes to homework club every day after school as he likes to keep home and school separate and can get support with his GCSE coursework. He has some literacy difficulties and spends time every week following the ‘Lexia’ program. He has also taken part in a ‘Lego therapy’ group to develop his social interaction skills. He is planning on staying at the school for sixth form to study a level three BTEC course.

4.4.3 Thematic map: school factors

![Thematic map: school factors]

Figure 4.4.3: Academy school factors

4.4.4 School factors discussion

The SENCO and one parent were interviewed from this school. During the interviews, several aspects of the school were discussed as making it appropriate
for meeting the needs of pupils with HF ASC. These aspects fell into four broad categories: curriculum, supportive structures, relationships and staffing. As before, each will be discussed in turn.

4.4.4.1 Curriculum

Providing an individual approach to the curriculum was seen as very important by the parent and was highlighted as a key factor of the school by the SENCO:

“It’s very much tailored to each individual student, because we’re a small school we can do that, so it is very much personalised to whatever a student needs.” [SENCO]

The need for provision to be flexible and adapt to pupils’ changing needs was also important to the parent:

“You can’t really predict things that much, you’ve just got to see the progress and follow what he’s doing, and in a way adapt to him, and as long as he’s happy then we’re happy as well.” [parent]

Pupils are often supported by teaching assistants in lessons, even without a statement or EHC plan:

“He still has support here, I’m not sure exactly which classes, but I know that if there are issues in lessons there will be a teaching assistant in there.” [parent]

Regular monitoring of every pupil’s progress was seen by the SENCO as contributing to a continued individual and flexible approach:

“We will get to know how their attainment is against their target as well as their effort grade... we will look at the ones that have special needs, how are they doing, as well as everybody else to be fair, it is a small school so we can filter everybody.” [SENCO]

The school’s small size was also felt to be important in developing an individual knowledge of pupils in order to better support them:

“Each student who has complex needs will have strategies written up for them and sent out to every member of staff who comes into contact with them, teaches them etc, and we found that works very well.” [SENCO]
The SENCO described the wide range of courses and qualifications on offer as being key to the individualised approach, with all pupils able to access appropriate courses that provided ‘stretch and challenge’ at their own level:

“I would say, going back to what features of the school make it particularly appropriate for the high functioning, it is challenging academically, we have a range of courses to meet all students’ needs… this varies from a level one foundation learning course to BTECs to full blown GCSEs.” [SENCO]

There was a focus on developing pupils’ skills in order to support them to access higher courses:

“We have a number of students that can’t actually in year nine access a level two course, so we have a level one foundation learning course and it’s a very small nurturing group, we have a maximum of 10 students in there, and it is about the social interaction, it is about the teamwork, and they get to experience a number of different courses, so from hospitality to business studies to health and social care, and then when we kind of see where their interest is we can guide them for year 10.” [SENCO]

Despite pupils being supported through a range of courses and qualifications based on need, there was still an explicit expected rate of progress:

“The stretch and challenge is there in the classroom, all students are given two targets, one which is their expected progress whether it’s at the end of key stage three or key stage four which is three levels of progress, and then a ‘good’ progress rate which is four levels, so the students are challenged along the way.” [SENCO]

The school has a sixth form and is able to provide post-16 options on site. The SENCO reported that about half of the pupils with HF ASC stayed at the school:

“We find that the ones that don’t, go to <a local college> because they want to do something more practical, which it tends to be you know the mechanics courses or the construction courses which we obviously can’t offer, so yeah, I’d probably say we take about 50% of them.”[SENCO]

Those pupils who do stay for sixth form can access a range of courses, including the option to continue with foundation learning and to re-sit GCSEs:
“Currently I have six students [studying for the AOPE – the Award of Personal Effectiveness] and they are the ones that maybe would struggle to interact on other courses, and alongside that they would be retaking their English and maths as well. Some of them have already done that but they’re just doing this in order to build on their social skills.” [SENCO]

4.4.4.2 Supportive structures

The SENCO described a graduated approach to providing pupils with support and interventions. All parents are given a leaflet when pupils enter the school; this leaflet outlines the range of interventions on offer, which parents can then enquire about if they feel a listed intervention may benefit their child. The parent interviewed was aware of these, specifically mentioning Lego Therapy and literacy intervention as having been useful for her child:

“He was going to a Lego group at some point which is aiming to, it’s not just play it’s learning to work as part of a team and communicate with other people, that’s the hidden goal, to him it’s like ‘yay I’m missing a lesson I’m playing with Lego’, but really underneath that it was a genuine project to get people on the spectrum or who have maybe social interaction trouble to work as a team... There was something else that he was doing recently and it was to do with his literacy.” [parent]

The SENCO mentioned additional interventions including SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) and social skills programs such as Talkabout which staff members were trained up to deliver and pupils attended by invitation. The SENCO also highlighted the importance of measuring the impact of interventions:

“Everything that we do intervention-wise is evidenced, so it’s all measurable.” [SENCO]

For pupils needing more specialist or targeted support, the SENCO reported good relationships with external agencies including the autism outreach team, an NHS speech and language therapist and counselling services:

"Where appropriate we will refer to different agencies depending on what it is, we have a number of agencies that come into school and work with our students, we have quite a few counselling services that come in, whether it’s one of those that we need to refer to, whether it’s somebody like <autism
outreach team>, whether it’s support from another school, it depends on the individual student.” [SENCO]

In addition to structured interventions, several aspects of the school structure were described as supporting pupils with HF ASC in the more day-to-day aspects of school life. Whilst it was not mentioned by the SENCO, the parent described the school’s consistent behaviour management policy as being important for her child:

“I’ve had phone calls home before when there have been issues with refusal to move chairs, things like that, behaviour, because at the end of the day, special needs or not people still need to know right from wrong... I think probably it’s more important for autistic people because they don’t always know themselves what’s right and wrong, they need to learn to recognise things whereas I would know, or you would know, what’s right or wrong automatically in a way.” [parent]

The school’s inclusion department was described as a nurturing ‘safety hub’ for pupils with additional needs:

“We have a learning zone out here so students can come and work up here if anxiety is an issue, or if they’ve been off long term for a medical issue so they need to catch up on work... we have had some students that have had such complex home needs, actually ended up staying up here for two years and ended up accessing all the work from the classroom up here, and actually came out with A-Cs, so that environment, it’s very work focused but it’s also very nurturing as well.” [SENCO]

In addition to providing an alternative working environment, the inclusion department also provides students with a free breakfast club and a quiet, supervised area for break times and lunchtimes:

“We have a breakfast club that is on offer to all the students, every morning, free of charge, and we will give the students their breakfast and it’s also about building social skills, and we tend to find that a number of our ASD students do access that... This room’s also available at break and at lunch time, at break time all the students will have their break together in the hall, if they don’t like that environment they can come up here, there’s a teaching assistant here, it’s a quieter room. And it’s also available at lunch time as well, if they don’t want to be in the hall they bring their dinner up here, again supported by teaching assistants.” [SENCO]
The school offers several after-school activities every day. The daily homework club and a craft club run by the inclusion department were described as being most popular with pupils with HF ASC:

"[There is a] homework club that is offered every single night after school for an hour, where we find that our students on the spectrum prefer to do their homework in school, so that’s available, there’s staff to help, it’s quite heavily staffed and heavily populated, we have about 60 students a night that go to that." [SENCO]

A final supportive approach that was mentioned by the parent and the SENCO was the school’s transition program. All year six pupils are visited by either the SENCO or the head of year seven in order to identify any needs, followed by a series of targeted transition visits and activities for those who they feel would benefit from additional input before the three transition days offered to all year six pupils:

"In June, while students are in year six, they come up to us for one morning a week for four weeks, get to know key members of staff, get to know their way around the school, take part in activities such as baking, swimming, and we actually find that a lot of the students with needs find that fantastic because by the time they come up in July for the three transition days they actually know their way around and they feel that they’ve got a better knowledge than some of the other students that are coming.” [SENCO]

Plans are then proactively put in place regarding the support that pupils may need on entering the school:

"Anybody with complex issues, so whether it’s any kind of special need or child protection or anything like that, I will go out and visit those, and then we have an action plan of what support will they need when they come to secondary school, and that’s whether it’s TA support, how many hours are they probably going to need, to if they need literacy intervention, whether they need Lego Therapy, all the different interventions that we offer.” [SENCO]

The school’s overall inclusive and supportive approach was recognised through the completion of the ‘Inclusion Quality Mark’:

"One thing that we did do last year is we completed the inclusion quality mark, and we did get the highest grade of level four for that, so they came
in and inspected all of our provision, all of our interventions, and as I say agreed with, you have to self-assess anyway, they agreed with what we had assessed ourselves at.” [SENCO]

### 4.4.4.3 Staffing

It was clear from the parent interview that staff members were perceived as supportive and receptive to needs. This can be summed up with the following quote:

> “I know that if there was an extra something that he needed doing I know it would get done within the school.” [parent]

The parent felt that staff had a good knowledge and understanding of ASC through both training and experience. The experience appeared to be more highly valued than formal training:

> “I know the staff are trained and qualified and they’ve got hands on experience, either or both often personal and professional experience, which I think the personal side helps as well to understand pupils with autism better than just a formal training, because you can train as much as you like but when you haven’t met the individuals you can always put a form or a piece of paper above the name but you have to meet the individual.” [parent]

The SENCO described training offered to all staff within the school; this included general training and more specific sessions aimed at helping staff members to support individual children in their lessons:

> “I do training on an annual basis, and I do workshops after school on a Tuesday night, and what I do is I offer, it’s kind of bite size, for half an hour, these are the students you need to recognise and these are the classroom strategies... they need to know, in a classroom, what do I need to be aware of and what do I need to do?.” [SENCO]

These ‘bite size’ sessions are open to all teachers and teaching assistants on a ‘drop-in’ basis. Particular members of staff may also be invited to specific sessions as part of their CPD (continuing professional development) following classroom observations by senior management.
In addition to school-led training, the SENCO had also arranged for certain members of staff to be trained in specific courses including Talkabout and SEAL.

The SENCO described how her role in the school’s senior leadership team was beneficial in ensuring pupils with additional needs received maximum support:

"I’m part of the leadership team as well... Because it’s whole school provision and I’m not just special needs, it’s pupil premium, it’s catch up, it’s the whole shebang really... It’s a very inclusive school, and our head has particular interest as well in students with needs, and funds the department very well, so if we need something for those students, you know, I keep pushing, last year we got asked if we would take a traveller student and we are an inclusive school so yes absolutely, and that student is thriving with us, so any kind of needs we will tailor what we need to for them.” [SENCO]

4.4.4.4 Relationships

Good home-school relationships and regular communication between parents and staff members were key themes in the interviews with both the parent and the SENCO. The parent mentioned that she had received proactive reassuring phone calls in the pupil’s first few weeks at the school and that she had appreciated this. She also felt that she could discuss any issues with various staff members:

"I’ve discussed things with <SENCO> who’s head of learning support, I can discuss things with <learning manager> who looks after year seven and eight, so any other issues I can discuss things with her as well, I know that if it came to it I could speak to the headteacher as well but it hasn’t come to that!” [parent]

The SENCO highlighted the perceived importance of having staff members with the time and availability to talk to parents:

"We have such a good relationship with parents, because we have non-teaching learning managers they’re available throughout the day to contact parents, meet with them, and I only teach four periods a week so I’m available as well.” [SENCO]

Six-weekly reports and parents’ evenings throughout the year were also seen as a key factor in maintaining regular, open communication.
The school’s small size was felt to be important in developing relationships with parents:

“It’s just going back to knowing them and knowing the parents, we are on first name terms with a lot of the parents, which actually, it makes it nice.” [SENCO]

In addition to home-school relationships, the SENCO described good relationships with other local schools and with individuals from the local authority. This was reported to often stem from outreach work:

“We have in the past had outreach support from some of our local special schools as well where appropriate, so we’re not afraid to ask for help, and actually we have built up some really positive relationships with other schools in the area as well.” [SENCO]

The SENCO felt that the school was well-regarded by the local authority and by the autism outreach team in terms of the support offered to students with ASC. The local autism outreach teacher commented:

“I know the schools that need the support and I know those that just get on and do it, and she said you are that kind of school, she said I have no issues with any of the students who have autism that come here.” [SENCO]
4.4.5 Thematic map: pupil factors

Figure 4.4.5: Academy pupil factors

4.4.6 Pupil factors discussion

The ‘pupil factors’ are not representative of any one pupil, but are a generalised overview of the strengths and needs of pupils with HF ASC at the school based on the interviews combined. Eight themes emerged and will be addressed in turn. During the discussion, themes will be shown in **bold text**.

Pupils at school B are described as generally ‘average’ academically and able to access the curriculum with differentiation as needed. They may receive support for specific learning needs, for example literacy difficulties. **Rigid thinking** may cause some issues in the classroom, for example difficulties adjusting to supply teachers.

Pupils’ **ASC does not usually lead to difficulties with all areas of development**; for example a pupil may have social needs but no learning needs or speech and language needs. For this reason **needs are usually met without a statement or EHC plan**. Pupils who school identify as having ASC traits **may not all have a diagnosis, even if their needs are similar** to those pupils who do have a diagnosis.
Pupils usually have no obvious speech and language needs, although they may have more subtle difficulties with social communication and pragmatics. They are generally able to ‘blend in’ socially, for example developing some friendships and joining in with curriculum activities, although may find higher-level social skills difficult such as managing relationships and demonstrating empathy.

Pupils may show some anxiety in the school setting, for example when established plans or routines change with little warning or when thinking about upcoming stressful events such as exams and work experience.

4.5 Generic special school

4.5.1 School background

School C is a generic special school catering for 138 pupils aged 3-16, around 90 of whom are of secondary age. All pupils need a statement of SEN or an EHC plan. Pupils have a wide range of learning needs and around 40% have a formal diagnosis of ASC. The school describes itself as catering for moderate, severe and complex learning difficulties, speech, language and communication difficulties, physical and sensory impairments, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and autistic spectrum conditions. The school has a very vast catchment area of over 1000 square miles; most pupils travel by school transport. The school does not have a sixth form.

In 2014, no pupils achieved five GCSEs at A*-C. Eighteen percent of pupils are eligible for free school meals, nearly three times the LA average. All aspects of the school were rated as ‘good’ at the last Ofsted inspection. Of those parents who completed the Parent View survey, 97% would recommend the school to another parent and 100% feel that their child is happy at the school.

4.5.2 Pupil pen portrait

Carrie is a year nine pupil with a formal diagnosis of ASC and a statement of SEN. She transferred to the school after two years in a mainstream secondary where she struggled to cope with the pace and the noise despite accessing support from the LA’s autism outreach service. She has expressive and receptive language delays and finds it difficult to process verbal instructions; she has weekly speech and language therapy input on site. She is studying for a range of qualifications at level one and level two including GCSE art and the bronze Duke of Edinburgh’s Award.
She enjoys working with the school’s ponies and would like to go on to study horse care at college.

4.5.3 Thematic maps: school factors

4.5.4 School factors discussion

During the interview with the SENCO, several aspects of the school were discussed as making it appropriate for meeting the needs of pupils with HF ASC. These aspects fell into four broad categories: ASC knowledge and training, provision, relationships and individualised approach.

4.5.4.1 ASC knowledge and training

The school has received accreditation from the National Autistic Society (NAS) regarding the quality of its provision for pupils with ASC. The SENCO described this as a very thorough process:

"The whole staff have been accredited, so it’s a three year process where we’re supported by an NAS advisor and, I mean, it did help us to focus and it goes through the whole, everything, absolutely everything, so your transition, learning, behaviour management, environment, the whole lot... Because it was so robust it made it more valuable when we were accredited,"
because there was no way anybody could hide anything, because they were in out in out and in that respect we were more proud to receive it.” [SENGO]

The school also has continued involvement with the NAS through staff attendance at conferences and away days. Staff members also receive ongoing training in other areas, for example HLTAs (higher level teaching assistants) receiving training from speech and language therapists to enable them to deliver specific interventions.

The SENCO described staff knowledge, expertise and experience as the school’s ‘biggest resource’. She felt that good teaching staff had some sort of unnamed quality that is distinct from skills gained through training:

“Then you’ve got the child with autism and that’s another specialism in its own right, where either you get it or you don’t get it, and we’ve got two NQTs [newly qualified teachers] here who’ve come through mainstream, through primary training, and they’ve 100% got it, these are skilled girls who just have an empathy and an understanding and it’s sort of either there or it isn’t. And you get other people who come and you just know that you can give them all the training in the world but the bottom line is that they’re still just bloody minded!” [SENGO]

4.5.4.2 Provision

The SENCO described a range of environmental factors that she felt made the school suitable for pupils with HF ASC. She identified the main difference from mainstream schools as being ‘a calmer environment’. However she felt there was a balance needed between reducing environmental stimulation and preparing pupils for everyday situations. For some pupils higher levels of environmental adaptation were needed and this was provided through certain classrooms with lower level stimulation. Additional environmental adaptations mentioned included the use of ‘Communicate: in Print’ across the school to support understanding and providing sensory input where needed, for example through a sensory room and specialist seating.

Pupils have access to a range of on-site therapeutic input as needed, including speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy:

"We have two speech and language therapists who are based in the school three days a week but different days, we’ve got occupational therapists that come out very regularly, we’ve got provision maps where pupils have
episodes of care so most pupils are seen over the course of the year, and physios as well.” [SENCO]

Pupils can access therapeutic input in a variety of ways:

“They’re screened on entry by a questionnaire, health needs and speech and language, it’s a questionnaire that goes out to all parents... it gives us pointers... and if there’s any concern at all for occupational therapy, sensory integration work or anything like that, then we make a referral and that person then receives the next episode of care.” [SENCO]

As well as these more specialist episodes of care, pupils can access school-based interventions led by trained school staff; these include narrative therapy, phonics booster groups, Black Sheep and rebound therapy. The delivery of these programs is often adapted based on pupils’ needs rather than being delivered as a distinct program.

In addition to academic and therapeutic input, the school also supports pupils to develop independence skills such as the confidence to stay away from home. Pupils are offered gradually increasing residential opportunities, starting with an overnight sleepover in school and building up to Duke of Edinburgh expeditions and longer outdoor education residencies:

"Because we know a lot of our pupils with autism don’t like going away and don’t like breaking routine we offer a one night stay and parents really welcome that... we do an outdoor ed residential in key stage three and when I looked the ones that were sending their forms straight back were the ones from primary who’d done the one night, then the two nights, then the week, and they were like ‘oh yeah we’ve got another residential’ because they knew what it was about and there was nothing scary and we’d build them up, but the ones that had come from mainstream at year seven clearly, and I was thinking ah, we’ve actually missed addressing their need to support staying away from home. So last week we did an overnight in school, and they loved it.” [SENCO]

4.5.4.3 Individualised approach

The delivery of the curriculum at school C is very much tailored to meet pupils’ individual needs, with a slower pace, reduced reliance on receptive language skills and greater structure:
"We pace the lesson to probably not have as much in there but have it more structured and more organised so that that piece of work can be finished... I think it’s a matter of meeting the student where they’re coming from and looking at expectations from the lesson as to the learning, because I think once you start putting the stress on and the lesson’s coming to an end and there’s no way they’re going to finish it, that learning goes, you know.”

[SENCO]

The SENCO explained that reducing the pace and task demands of lessons also supports the pupils to develop organisation and independent working skills, particularly for those pupils who have previously been supported by TAs in mainstream settings:

“I think the other thing that we do incredibly well is develop independence skills and give the pupils time... we find that children that come to us from the mainstream setting at year seven, their independence skills are somewhat lacking.” [SENCO]

Another benefit of adapting task demands to meet pupil needs was described as the impact on self-esteem and wellbeing:

“He finds literacy incredibly difficult, although his speaking and listening’s probably on par with his age, but recording he finds very difficult, and it’s beyond dyslexia it’s, he sort of really struggles with organising, but his self esteem has just risen... he’s incredibly happy.” [SENCO]

Pupils are able to study for a range of qualifications depending on their strengths and needs, including ASDAN certificates, entry level, foundation skills and GCSE art. The school also has links with a local mainstream high school through which more able pupils are able to study for and sit further GCSEs:

“We send pupils down to the local high school and we had a pupil who got three Cs and a B last year, but he still had significant autism, he couldn’t have coped with mainstream, he was fine with that, popping down for his lesson and coming back, independent, it’s just a walk across the housing estate.” [SENCO]

The majority of pupils, however, are unlikely to achieve multiple GCSEs.

Pupils take part in a range of work experience opportunities within the school and the wider community rather than taking part in the ‘traditional’ work experience
model of independently accessing a workplace for a set length of time, which pupils might struggle to cope with:

“There’s various places that pupils go to, we do a lot of farm studies because we’ve got our own farm here, so we offer agricultural and equine qualifications, we’ve got three ponies here, we do things like a local company who make firewood, pupils do their own things here as well, we’re quite big on enterprise, the pupils run their own bank and we’ve got a really active school council, so as far as being part of the extended environment and community that’s really very valuable to us.” [SENCO]

The individualised approach to meeting pupil needs begins with their transition into the school. Pupils visit several times, initially with parents and/or familiar teaching staff. The school also prepares individualised ‘home video’ style DVDs and photograph books to act as visual reminders, particularly over the long summer holidays. The SENCO summed up the approach by saying:

“Every child is different, diagnosis or no diagnosis, so it’s very personalised and we give them as much as they possibly need.” [SENCO]

4.5.4.4 Relationships

The SENCO described a collaborative approach to working with parents, with regular communication such as termly parents’ evenings and an open door policy. Additional meetings can also be held at any time to discuss progress and any concerns:

“We’ll draw a meeting together at any time to look at provision and look at the statement and have those discussions, looking at the levels, looking at the outcomes, looking at the performance at home and at school, and we would just work in collaboration.” [SENCO]

The school’s large catchment area has necessitated some creative approaches to home-school communication. The SENCO described an ongoing trial of computer software to facilitate more detailed communication rather than staff members having to find time within the school day to write in pupils’ physical planners:

“We’ve got some software that we just purchased where we can actually send emails to parents on pupil progress, so it’s photographing the child with the objective that they’re achieving and the context that they’re working in, and then the next step of learning, and we’re hoping that will
address that issue of parents really wanting to know exactly what the children are doing in school.” [SENCO]

The school also provides parents with a large amount of support and training. They employ a ‘parent partner worker’ who supports parents with paperwork and with supporting their child at home, host monthly speakers on relevant topics and deliver training sessions such as Early Bird and Cygnet. Staff members are also currently being trained to deliver Cygnet Siblings and a specific course on puberty.

As previously mentioned, the school has good relationships with the local high school and works alongside them to help more academically able pupils access GCSE courses. Some staff members at School C also support other local schools through their roles on the local authority’s autism outreach team:

“There’s a central team for <the autism outreach service>, that’s their jobs, fully employed, but I think [the local authority] found it difficult to recruit enough people with knowledge to go out and give that advice, so they dipped in to the special schools which was good, because it’s good for us, on a professional basis, good for us to see what’s happening out there in mainstream and to build those links.” [SENCO]

The school also has strong links with the local provision for SLD (severe learning difficulties) as many of school C’s ‘lower functioning’ pupils transfer to the SLD school for 16-19 provision. The SENCO explained that she would love school C to have its own 16-19 provision but that it was not sustainable because of the SLD school’s proximity. Whilst the SLD 16-19 provision was described as suitable for some pupils from school C, the SENCO felt there was a gap in provision for more able pupils who needed longer before they were ready to move on to college:

“We’ve got pupils who are coming to us in year eight and nine who haven’t really been here very long... they could actually really develop the skills and the qualifications if they had a bit longer, so they’re the ones, it’s the slightly more able streetwise children who could do with another couple of years on consolidating... just get them that bit further on than sometimes sending them off to college when they’re not really ready.” [SENCO]
4.5.5 Thematic map: pupil factors

Figure 4.5.5: Special school pupil factors

4.5.6 Pupil factors discussion

The ‘pupil factors’ are not representative of any one pupil, but are a generalised overview of the strengths and needs of pupils with HF ASC at the school based on the interview with the SENCO. Nine themes emerged and will be addressed in turn. During the discussion, themes will be shown in bold text.

Pupils at school C with HF ASC are likely to be in the ‘middle range’ of ability. They may achieve some GCSEs in collaboration with the local high school or may gain alternative qualifications at entry level and in functional skills. They often have considerable ASC needs that would make it difficult for them to cope in a mainstream environment, for example stimming or significant sensory needs. This combination can create a ‘spiky profile’ of need that can also vary over time; changes such as puberty or a house move may have a considerable impact in school. Pupils may have a range of expressive and/or receptive language difficulties, ranging from pupils who are entirely non-verbal to those with subtle difficulties in following verbal instructions.
Pupils often had no behaviour issues in primary school; they may have been described as ‘passive’ but not made progress, with their capacity to cope only really considered when thinking about secondary school transition. Many pupils struggle with change and benefit from visual support and preparation for transitions.

While pupils may have the academic ability to attend a mainstream secondary, many feel that they don’t ‘fit in’ to mainstream for whatever reason; the SENCO mentioned one pupil who described his mainstream experience as “I’m a primary kid in a secondary school and I just don’t belong here.” Many pupils struggle to cope with fast-paced teaching and benefit from more time to process instructions and organise their equipment and work. Pupils who have come from a mainstream school often present with anxiety and low self-esteem; they may have perceptions of having ‘failed’ in school and may have been school refusers. Some pupils also experience anxiety when attempting GCSE links with the local mainstream school.

4.6 Out-of-county specialist ASC provision

4.6.1 School background

School D is a free school in a neighbouring LA catering specifically for secondary-aged pupils with ASC. All pupils need to have a formal diagnosis of ASC and a statement of SEN or EHC plan. It currently has 30 pupils on roll with capacity for 50 in total, including a sixth form.

No data are available for the proportion of pupils achieving five GCSEs at A*-C due to the small cohort size. Thirty-five percent of pupils are eligible for free school meals; this is five times the LA average. All aspects of the school were rated as ‘good’ at the last Ofsted inspection. No parent survey data were available at the time of writing due to an insufficient number of responses.

4.6.2 Pupil pen portrait

Donna is a year nine pupil with a formal diagnosis of ASC and an additional diagnosis of epilepsy, although this is well managed. She also has selective mutism. She was assessed for an EHC plan in year seven whilst at a mainstream secondary school because of challenging behaviour and withdrawal from an increasing number of lessons. Because she had repeated a year at primary school she entered school D as a year nine pupil. Donna has now been at school D for two terms; she also attended the summer school before starting to help her to get used to the school.
She is currently accessing weekly cognitive behavioural therapy to help with anxiety along with a weekly individual speech and language therapy session. She also attends a ‘girls’ group’ with three other girls at the school and has weekly sessions with her key worker to develop her social communication skills. She is working towards entry level qualifications and the Arts Award and is hoping to achieve GCSEs in English and maths and her Duke of Edinburgh’s Bronze Award. She is also studying for a food technology qualification and will be completing some supported work experience in a local cafe.

4.6.3 Thematic map: school factors

4.6.4 School factors discussion

One parent and two staff members were interviewed; the staff members were interviewed together at their request as they felt they had insight into different aspects of the school. During the interviews, several aspects of the school were discussed as making it appropriate for meeting the needs of pupils with HF ASC. These aspects fell into five broad categories: staff knowledge and experience, broad range of on-site and curriculum input, individual approach, parent support and communication and supportive structures.
**4.6.4.1 Individual approach**

The school places a strong emphasis on knowing each individual pupil very well:

“I think what we’ve tried to do is we look at each child holistically, it’s not just one particular part of it it’s the whole child and the needs of that whole child to enable them to function here, to access learning, for them to develop and to make the progress that they need, and that is a real complex thing isn’t it.” [SENCO]

As part of this process, every pupil has a named ‘key worker’ who attends all meetings, supports the pupil individually and has good relationships with the family:

“Every child has a key worker, they’re the main person that should know everything there is to know about that child, they’re the one that is the main contact with home... the idea is that that child is well known by one particular adult in the school, and they always go to any meetings that are involved with the child and the parents... There’s a lot of information stored on the children, but the expectation is that certainly the key workers know that child really well.” [SENCO]

All pupils have detailed documentation outlining their needs and the agreed approaches and interventions, with regular data collection to measure the impact of this input and to track progress towards outcomes:

“All the students have provision maps and all the students have IEPs [individual education plans] and they all have their own personalised behaviour plan and a personalised risk assessment, and I think that’s one thing that is quite different to some of the other specialist provisions because ours are incredibly detailed.” [SENCO]

“Everything we do we try and assess, so we have baseline assessments, we take a lot of positive behaviour data... we’re documenting to show that the systems we’re using are actually working quite effectively.” [SENCO]

The school offers pupils a ‘tailor made’ package of support, which is often very different to what they would access in a mainstream environment. The parent described it as follows:
“It’s more at pupil’s level I think so it’s not trying to get through a curriculum teaching children of all levels and abilities like in a mainstream school, it’s just, it’s much more at her level... it’s just less, pushing academic levels and achievement, and I know mainstream have to be seen to be getting kids through GCSEs and A levels and meeting targets, it’s more on an individual basis.” [parent]

While pupils’ individual needs are catered for, all teaching happens in small groups:

”[Pupils are] not age grouped, they’re ability grouped... We’ve probably got two of our class groups that fit more on the high functioning side, and we’ve definitely got one classroom which is an incredibly complex needs group which follow a very specific integrated curriculum.” [SENCO]

These ability-based groups were seen as a positive aspect of the school by the parent who was interviewed.

The small group teaching approach is seen as key when determining whether the school would be appropriate for a particular pupil. The wellbeing manager goes to the pupil’s school to observe them in the classroom setting before any decisions are made:

“I as the wellbeing manager get to go out and see a potential year six student in their school placement before we say yes or no as to whether we can meet their needs, because one of the things that’s been really key is making sure not only is the student appropriate for the school but actually where does he fit in terms of a group, because it is so much around the small group teaching element.” [SENCO]

Once the school placement has been agreed a bespoke transition plan is put into place. This involves further observations and a home visit and parent consultation before a three half-day transition visits where the new cohort experience an ‘adapted timetable’:

“All together they follow a similar timetable, do some of the activities that we would do here, do some kind of transitional activities in terms of designing a sign for their locker so that when they come in September they know exactly where that’s going, start doing some of their pupil voice so looking at what things they’re going to like, if we can we tend to identify who may be their key worker so that they can start having some
relationship with the staff here, and that first transition visit is normally accompanied by their current support staff, and then the second one is normally split half and half, some of their current staff and some of ours, and then the last one is just our staff, and that's standardised but we have had some pupils that have come for more visits than that and actually come and visited their specific classroom every morning for the last week of term, so we do kind of do a bit of a bespoke package for the students that need that but our standardised package we've found is quite different as well.” [SENCO]

Once the school has been named for a new pupil, their parents are also invited to attend the regular parents’ meetings and support groups held on site.

4.6.4.2 Broad range of on-site and curriculum input

The school offers a broad curriculum, covering core subjects but also placing high value on other skills:

"We’ve added to our core curriculum speech and language therapy and social and emotional skills through form time... we have six 50 minute lessons a day of which one of the 50 minute lessons is social form time because it’s as important as the other subjects, and they have that every single day... and then they also have either an individual or a group speech therapy session every single week.” [SENCO]

Pupils are able to access a wide range of qualifications including entry level, GCSEs, A-levels and ASDAN as well as the Arts Award and Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. Pupils with particular interests have also been supported to gain relevant qualifications, for example a specific horticulture qualification and a food hygiene certificate. Afternoons are spent on vocational courses such as gardening and food technology, direct teaching of independent living and personal care skills and Independent Travel Training, with options based on pupil need:

"[Afternoon sessions are] really driven from what outcomes they’ve had from their plan or their statement in terms of what do they really need to access in meeting all those goals, so it’s very much delivered around each student’s need.” [SENCO]

"I think the massive link with parents is absolutely key for these students, I mean we teach them to brush their teeth and wash their hands properly..."
There’s this huge link between what we do and what parents can ask us to do, because obviously we’ve got the teaching ability.” [SENCO]

School staff are also developing their own materials due to finding a lack of age-appropriate materials regarding adolescence and puberty aimed at young people with autism:

"We’ve been looking for evidence-based things around adolescence, around puberty teaching, sex ed, and there isn’t a resource for adolescents with autism, so we are having to bespoke make a program which we’re now being able to share with some of the primary schools that have year six students that are joining us.” [SENCO]

An element of the curriculum that was valued by the parent was that pupils do not get homework:

“You know for a lot of kids with autism, home is home and school is school and never the twain may meet, so that’s much better as well, that they’re not feeling pressurised to do things at home.” [parent]

The school day is structured in a similar way to a mainstream high school, with pupils transitioning between lessons:

"It means that, if they’ve had one bad lesson it’s kind of put to bed because you’re going to a new room and it’s a new environment, new teacher and it’s kind of a fresh start, so actually I think it’s been really beneficial and it has meant that they’ve got a real range... They feel like high school students now. And also for some of our students it might be that they return to mainstream, so they need to be used to a high school setting, so that’s why we do it as we do.” [SENCO]

The school has links with an outstanding academy through which teachers are able to keep up to date with subject specific knowledge and training:

“When you’re in a specialist setting, you can be in that special bubble, and we will have students that will be doing high quality qualifications, certainly the Aspergers children, so we owe it to them to make sure we’re up to date with what mainstream schools are offering their high-performing students.” [SENCO]
The use of evidence-based teaching approaches was mentioned throughout the interview with the staff members. These approaches included the SEAL curriculum, SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support) where relevant and some aspects of ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis) such as discrete trial teaching with the complex needs group.

Speech and language was described as a priority across the school. The school employs two speech and language therapists who deliver individual or group sessions to every pupil every week as well as providing weekly staff CPD, observing lessons, checking the word level of lesson plans and carrying out regular assessments to check progress.

Other specialist therapies are also provided on site including occupational therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and weekly input from a therapeutics team to support pupils with emotional needs. School staff members receive training from these specialists, for example in order to deliver a daily occupational therapy session for one particular child.

In addition to curricular and therapeutic input, pupils are also supported in unstructured times. The parent was pleased that her child was now joining in with playground activities:

“*She does things that most 14 year olds would probably find quite childish and babyish but she still enjoys doing... a lot of the kids like <pupil> here still like to go and play tig outside in the playground, <pupil> goes out every playtime now, she never stepped outside in mainstream once in the two years that she was there, because here they play tig and they have footballs and they do things that kids similar to <pupil> still like to do... If you’re in mainstream they’d probably be teased for it.”* [parent]

The school also offers a summer school for two weeks of the summer holidays which all pupils can access, offering fun activities on the school site and acting as a ‘soft transition’ at the start and end of the holiday.

School D is one of the only autism-specific post-16 providers in the area and staff members reported a great deal of parental interest in this aspect, particularly because the provision is full-time:

“*We have them in five days a week, whereas the funding is for three days a week, but we’re building in work placements with that... It may be that*
they’re only on site for teaching three days a week but we’re actively providing them with other alternatives for those two days.” [SENCO]

4.6.4.3 Supportive structures

One of the school’s key aims is to develop futures for its pupils, working with both pupils and employers:

“We want to make sure our students are then able to access work opportunities... we want to educate employers about how they can ensure that young people with autism can be utilised for their strengths, but also we want to set up our own micro businesses so that our students are able to access the workplace and do something that fits their strengths... so setting up a charity shop, setting up a cafe, setting up a gardening company, setting up a software testing company, and this is all through one of our trustees who’s got massive links with industry and has set up loads of companies in the past.” [SENCO]

Another supportive structure within the school is timetabled ‘girl time’ for the small cohort of female pupils:

“We’re really aware that there are far fewer girls on the spectrum, generally, so for them to have reciprocal relationships with somebody who has the same issues is quite important compared to other schools.” [SENCO]

This ‘girl time’ has extended to develop their social interaction outside of school:

“They’ve got a Friday kind of social session that’s been arranged by parents, and three of the girls have personal assistant support through direct payments so we’ve been able to work with parents in using that time to get them together so they have a social session outside of school which is nice.” [SENCO]

One final supportive structure mentioned during the interviews was the school’s approach to behaviour management. A positive approach was seen as particularly important for pupils who had had negative experiences with mainstream sanction systems:

“She’s not coming home and getting all anxious and upset about the school day and being told off at school continuously, it just doesn’t happen here.” [parent]
4.6.4.4 Staff knowledge and experience

Staff members at school D are subject to a rigorous selection process:

“Our senior tutors all have relevant degrees, so in terms of support staff, they’re probably quite highly qualified, we’ve got one with a masters degree!.. Our junior tutors have a pretty rigorous interview process which I think is unusual in terms of recruitment, so there’s a practical element and a written test and a formal interview but we’re really keen in terms of the practical element seeing that they’ve got a good working style to be able to adapt their style for different pupils and I think that really does help.” [SENCO]

Staff members bring a wide range of autism experience including adult learning and special school placements. The school also offers work placements to young adults with autism with tasks based on their strengths:

“We’ve had another student who’s 18 that has very high functioning autism, he’s wanting to come in and do some kind of peer mentoring, peer coaching, so he’s kind of buddying up with students and kind of answering some of their questions, supporting them through some of the tasks that are out and about, so where we want them to blend in a little bit more and it’s better for them to go with another teenage boy than me [the wellbeing manager]! As much as I can try to blend in. So that’s been a real positive thing.” [SENCO]

All staff members receive initial and ongoing training through ‘an absolutely jam-packed CPD schedule’. Induction training provides a detailed background:

“All the staff get a three-day, the volunteers and the lunchtime supervisors get a two-day training, which covers a kind of half a day on autism in itself, and then our practices, and then various different things that are relevant to working with our students which is more tailor made around our school specifically, and they get half a day on speech and language as well.” [SENCO]

Ongoing training consists of weekly speech and language CPD for all staff and a weekly twilight session that alternates between bought-in twilight sessions on specific issues such as selective mutism and personal care. Wellbeing and curriculum meetings also support planning for individual pupils:
“We have designated time to have wellbeing meetings, sometimes it’s really identifying one particular student and going through it as more of a case study, so kind of action impact reviews, making sure that we’re regularly assessing behaviour plans, that we’re looking at that whole student, and it tends to be that when we do a student review the key worker will present to the whole group and then we’ll problem solve as a whole group, so we manage to get through all the students every half term in that team approach to a student, and I think that is massively beneficial, cause it means not only do our key workers have a really good knowledge but the rest of our staff have a really good working knowledge of every single pupil, so that’s really key.” [SENCO]

4.6.4.5 Parent support and communication

The parent interviewed was happy with the level of positive home-school communication, particularly compared to experiences in the mainstream:

“The children have a planner that is written in every day and signed by the key worker which is good, and it’s all positive things on the whole whereas <pupil>, when she was at mainstream, had a home-school diary because of her communication problems, she’d never tell me what kind of day she’d had, and on the whole it was all negative things so <pupil> would often hide it so I couldn’t look at it, here she knows that most of the time it’s good things and it’s not going into great detail about if she’s had a bad day, why she’s had a bad day, whereas sometimes I would get a page full of negative things from mainstream which is not always easy for her or me to have to read and discuss every day!“ [parent]

The parent also reported valuing sensitive communication about ‘bad days’:

“I have had phone calls if <pupil> has had a particularly bad day, her key worker or someone will ring me and tell me why, because again <pupil> won’t tell me, she’ll just say I’ve had a bad day and won’t really enlarge upon it, so it’s nice that if something particularly has happened that I get school’s side of it that I can then talk to <pupil> about really and reassure her sometimes that things are ok.” [parent]

The school also holds monthly ‘parent hub’ meetings, covering topics such as holiday activities and changes to legislation:
“The idea is that it’s creating a support group so that parents get to meet each other but also it’s an information giving session where there’s guest speakers that are brought in... sometimes it’s those opportunities where parents start to realise they’ve got the same issues, they support each other.” [SENCO]

The school also has a parent liaison officer who supports parents through SEN processes and good links with parent partnership:

“We’ve got somebody that works as a parent liaison... she’s a parent at school but she’s also been through the process, she’s been through a tribunal process herself and she’s got quite a lot of knowledge in terms of parental support groups, we have links with parent partnership, so <the parent partnership officer> regularly comes and accesses the parent hub, and the parent liaison is often in close contact with her to set up parents with a link to parent partnership to help them through those more formal processes in terms of change of placement.” [SENCO]

4.6.5 Thematic map: pupil factors

4.6.6 Pupil factors discussion

The ‘pupil factors’ are not representative of any one pupil, but are a generalised overview of the strengths and needs of pupils with HF ASC at the school based on
the interviews combined. 12 themes emerged and will be addressed in turn. During the discussion, themes will be shown in **bold text**.

All pupils at school D need to have a **formal diagnosis of ASC**. Some may have a dual diagnosis, for example ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), epilepsy or a genetic disorder. All pupils also need a **statement of SEN or an EHC plan**. Another admissions criterion is that pupils must be **able to learn in a small-group teaching situation**.

Although all pupils will have needs relating to ASC, these **needs are often not particularly severe in any one particular area**; the parent described the difficulty of finding a provision for her child with “**not particularly very high special needs or behavioural needs or physical problems that a lot of the special schools deal with**”. School staff described the school as catering for ‘**the middle’ of the spectrum**, with the exception of the complex needs group.

Pupils may have difficulties with **anxiety**, often linked to the school environment or to social situations. Pupils are likely to **struggle with social interaction**, with parents reporting having to ‘make a social life’ for them. **Speech and language needs** are common, for example expressive language delay, selective mutism and receptive language difficulties, although many pupils have been discharged from NHS services.

**Many pupils have ‘cohort skipped’** or repeated a year at some point in their school career, often reception or year six; as a result they essentially miss a year of secondary school as they have to return to their chronological cohort in specialist provision. While some pupils enter at the start of year seven, others may come to the school having ‘failed’ in the mainstream; some have been school refusers, for others ‘everything fell apart’. Many have **struggled with aspects of the mainstream environment**, for example class sizes, noise levels and keeping up with verbal instructions. Pupils may have been labelled as **naughty or disruptive**, often because of their reactions to these difficulties.

### 4.7 Cross-case synthesis

Perhaps as a result of intentionally recruiting schools demonstrating good practice, the differences in the provision offered and the pupil needs catered for in the four schools were often quite subtle. This section will summarise the key differences between the four settings under the main thematic headings.
4.7.1 Pupil profile comparison

All pupils were able to be taught in a group setting, although the size of this group varied. Pupils in the mainstream school and the academy were able to cope with whole-class teaching, with appropriate differentiation and TA support as needed and with some in-class adaptations such as specific seating positions. They were generally able to access qualifications such as GCSEs alongside their peers. Those in the special school tended to have greater difficulty with learning in a busy classroom environment, for example being able to cope with fast-paced verbal instructions and switching between tasks. Pupils in the specialist school had a wide range of academic ability but often had more complex needs that would interfere with learning in a mainstream classroom setting including sensory and social communication needs.

Pupils’ additional specific needs were often below the threshold needed to access external services such as speech and language therapy or occupational therapy, regardless of the provision. Pupils in the special and specialist schools were generally described as having more significant and more complex needs but this may have been influenced by increased identification and awareness through thorough screening programs.

Some element of anxiety was mentioned for pupils in all four schools. For pupils in the mainstream school and the academy this was generally kept in check through predictable routines and consistency. For those in the special and specialist school this was often not enough; many pupils had experienced anxiety-related issues such as school refusal or selective mutism.

With regard to behaviour, the SENCO of the special school felt that pupils who had moved from mainstream provision (primary or secondary) were often ‘passive’ but not coping or making progress in a mainstream setting, whereas those who had moved to the specialist school had often demonstrated challenging behaviour in a previous setting. It must be noted that this is only a very small snapshot and cannot be generalised, however it does suggest the potential for further research in this area.

4.7.2 School comparison: Relationships

Parents and SENCOs in all four schools described the importance of regular home-school communication and good relationships; all four offered regular progress reports, both written and in person through parents’ evenings or similar. Other than
this, however, the amount and type of contact varied considerably. Participants at the mainstream school and the academy reported phone and face-to-face contact as needed and joint problem-solving to address issues both at home and at school. There was less direct contact with parents at the special school due to the often very large distances pupils travelled, usually by school transport, but the school had a comprehensive daily reporting system to keep parents informed. The special and specialist schools both offered training and information sessions for parents; the special school offered specific training such as Early Bird and Cygnet and the specialist school hosted a monthly parent support group with presentations.

All four schools mentioned interactions and relationships with other schools and with LA officers. For the mainstream and academy SENCOs the relationships mentioned tended to be with staff members from the autism outreach service and the SMP. Both the special school and the specialist school mentioned links with local mainstream schools in order to support higher-achieving pupils. The specialist school SENCO also mentioned using these links to ensure teachers were able to stay up to date with curriculum knowledge and changes. Some staff members at the special school had additional relationships with other local schools through their role as members of the autism outreach team. The specialist school expressed a desire to become a ‘training hub’ and support other schools with ASC knowledge and skills.

4.7.3 School comparison: Curriculum and qualifications

A wide range of qualifications were on offer across the four schools. Pupils in the mainstream school and the academy were expected to work towards level two courses such as GCSEs and/or BTECs, although they were also able to access elements of ASDAN courses or similar level one qualifications. The special school primarily offered entry level and level one qualifications, with more able pupils able to access GCSEs through the local high school. The specialist school offered the widest range of qualifications, from entry level one through to GCSEs at level two, and were expanding to offer level three qualifications such as AS- and A-levels as their post-16 provision developed. In addition to academic qualifications, pupils were able to access extra-curricular options such as the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award in all four schools.

The curriculum on offer in the mainstream school and the academy was described as primarily academic. The special school supplemented academic work with community work and enterprise, for example helping with the on-site farm animals and ponies and running the school bank. The specialist school SENCO described the
widest curriculum, incorporating academic work, daily speech and language therapy, personal care skills and independent living skills.

A theme of high expectations was evident in all four schools. There were general high expectations of all pupils in the mainstream, with all expected to get five or more GCSEs, with a more individualised focus in the other three schools.

4.7.4 School comparison: Personalisation of support

All schools highlighted a flexible, individual approach as key to supporting pupils with ASC. The extent to which the curriculum could be individualised, however, varied between schools. The mainstream school offered differentiation through sets, with a ‘nurture group’ aimed at pupils achieving below a certain academic level. Specific interventions such as TA support or social skills groups were organised via an individual provision map for every child. The academy offered an ‘action plan’ of support for pupils with additional needs, outlining hours of TA support, access to interventions such as Lego Therapy and the option to complete work in the inclusion department if the larger class setting was causing an issue. Both the mainstream school and the academy stated that, whilst they could be flexible due to their small size, the flexibility was within the limits of the wider structure of the school. In the special school individualisation was facilitated by small classes, a high ratio of staff members to pupils, staff members with specialist skills and knowledge and classes catering for specific pupil needs, for example two classes with reduced sensory stimulation. The specialist school reported the most thorough process of individualisation, with every pupil having a personalised provision plan, IEP, behaviour plan and risk assessment. The school also offered very small classes based on ability rather than age and designed the entire afternoon curriculum around pupils’ specific statement targets.

All of the schools offered some internal staff-led therapy sessions according to pupil need. Interventions offered in all four settings were a mix of evidence-based and practice-based, with an apparent focus on social communication interventions such as Lego Therapy and Talkabout. Teaching assistants in both the mainstream school and the academy had been trained to deliver specific speech and language interventions such as Talkabout and narrative therapy; NHS speech and language therapists visited when needed for particular pupils, but this was described as rare for secondary school pupils. In the special and specialist schools all pupils were screened on entry for speech and language needs and offered specific input as needed; both of these schools had speech and language therapists based on site. The specialist school SENCO placed the greatest emphasis on speech and language
development, with all pupils receiving individual or group speech and language therapy at least once a week and the on-site speech and language therapists offering regular staff training, lesson observations and support with planning. This model was a significant departure from the 'standard' role of speech and language therapists and seemed to be highly valued by school staff.

4.7.5 School comparison: Broader school factors

All four schools had fewer than 600 pupils, making the mainstream school and the academy considerably smaller than average. This was felt to contribute to their suitability for pupils with HF ASC with both parents and SENCOs mentioning the small overall pupil numbers, small individual classes and smaller school environment as valued elements when choosing the school. The special school, with fewer than 150 students, and the specialist school with fewer than 50 students offered even smaller setting; this was felt to allow for greater levels of individualisation and specialist support.

All SENCOs mentioned the school’s ethos as important in meeting the needs of learners with HF ASC and ethos was one of the main factors mentioned by the LA officers regarding school suitability. Both the mainstream school and the academy prided themselves on offering a nurturing and inclusive environment where individual pupils were well-known and their needs understood and supported by the majority of staff members within the school. The special school had achieved ASC accreditation through the NAS, with all elements of the environment and curriculum carefully considered to support pupils with ASC, and the specialist school was specifically designed to cater for the needs of learners with ASC.

The priority given to SEN and ASC specifically varied between schools. In the mainstream school and the academy the needs of pupils with ASC had to be balanced with the wide variety of other priorities and needs within the school. Both of these schools had significant senior management buy-in regarding ASC; the headteacher of one school had previously worked within an ASC specialist setting, and the SENCO of the other school was part of the senior management team. The generic special school potentially faced similar issues around balancing the needs of pupils with a wide range of different needs, although this was not mentioned during the interview; the member of staff interviewed was again part of the senior management team and also worked for the LA’s autism outreach team, and the school as a whole demonstrated a particular commitment to the needs of pupils with ASC through seeking NAS accreditation. In the ASC specialist school there were fewer competing priorities although pupils still had a range of co-occurring
needs and varying presentations. The senior management team of this school included the speech and language consultant, demonstrating the school’s commitment to the development of pupils’ speech and language skills.

All schools highlighted staff training as important. The mainstream school offered training for all staff members through the local SMP, with additional support provided by a specialist TA from the SMP who attended regular meetings with the school’s inclusion department staff members. At the academy more of the training was carried out on-site by the SENCO with some staff members accessing additional external training. Whilst staff in the special school already had a good knowledge of ASC, training was described as ongoing and included attendance at conferences, ‘train the trainer’ courses such as those needed to deliver Cygnet to parents and specialised training from the speech and language therapists to enable TAs to deliver interventions. The specialist school placed the greatest emphasis on staff training with weekly speech and language training for all staff members as well as a fortnightly CPD programme, usually delivered by external professionals and aimed at better understanding and meeting particular needs within the school. Both the special and the specialist schools placed significant emphasis on the careful selection of staff members to ensure they had a good understanding of autism and the necessary skills to support learners in school. The ASC-related experience and qualifications of staff members was more detailed, specialist and advanced in the ASC specialist school, with all staff members having degrees and significant relevant experience.

The four schools offered different approaches to supporting pupils during unstructured times. The mainstream facilitated pupil preferences, such as allowing pupils to use the computers during break times, and also offered a range of after-school clubs that tapped into special interests such as a gardening club. The academy offered breakfast, break and lunchtime support in its inclusion room, where pupils could access a quieter, TA-supported environment with various activities such as a television, board games and drawing materials. They also offered a supported after-school homework club for those pupils who preferred to maintain a home-school separation. The special school offered pupils a range of residential opportunities such as outdoor education visits and provided carefully structured support to help pupils with ASC adjust to staying away from home. The specialist school supported developmentally-preferred break time activities for pupils, such as playground games of ‘tig’ and football. They also offered a two-week summer school during the holidays and organised a ‘girls’ group’ for their female pupils, meeting both in and out of school.
4.7.6 School comparison: Transitions

All schools offered supportive and individualised transition for pupils entering the school. This tended to be more in-depth in the special and specialist school due to the often more complex needs of the pupils, but all SENCOs described a willingness to increase and adapt transition support as needed depending on individual pupil needs.

Transition at 16+ was difficult to compare as the academy and the specialist school had on-site post-16 provision whilst the mainstream and special schools did not. Pupils in the mainstream school and the academy generally went on to access local or on-site sixth forms or local colleges if pupils wanted more vocational options; they were supported in this through careers advice and transition visits with familiar staff members. Pupils at the special school took part in visits to various colleges in preparation for transition, with pupils moving on to various destinations including residential or day specialist provisions and a range of local colleges. The specialist school offered on-site 16-19 provision and were looking to expand this further; they described a focus on developing futures for pupils and, in addition to academic provision, they were developing a range of micro-businesses and working with local employers to provide appropriate employment for young adults with ASC.

4.8 School allocation and decision making

This section will summarise the data collected regarding how pupil needs are identified, the LA processes regarding school placement decision making, parents’ decision making processes, and parent, LA and school views on the processes.

Themes relating to the school decision making process were identified from within each interview, collated and then stripped back to the initial codes before being analysed together in order to generate the themes for this section. This was felt to be the most appropriate method due to the small number of participants within each school and the similarities in the processes. The themes that emerged are shown in figure 4.8 below.
4.8.1 Establishing pupil need

4.8.1.1 Diagnosis

Diagnosis was seen as important in helping schools to link patterns of behaviour with underlying difficulties rather than ‘petulance’. An autism diagnosis is also essential in order to access certain ASC-specific services such as an in-reach place at the specialist mainstream school or a placement at the ASC specialist special school. The autism outreach service was described by the LA officers as being commissioned for pupils with a diagnosis of ASC, although an element of ‘professional judgement’ was acknowledged in supporting pupils with ASC traits but no diagnosis.

Whilst all pupils discussed during the interviews did have a formal diagnosis of ASC, the SENCOs from the mainstream school and the academy both felt that a number of other pupils displayed patterns of behaviour indicative of ASC but without a diagnosis. The SENCOs, parents and LA officers suggested a range of reasons for the variance in diagnosis, including a backlog for the diagnostic team, parental preference and even gender, with one parent feeling that getting a diagnosis is more difficult for girls on the spectrum. For some pupils not having a diagnosis was not seen as an issue, particularly if they were attending a supportive school. For others, however, it could be a problem requiring input from the LA:
“There are young people who have struggled without a diagnosis and it’s like watching somebody drown. We have had to step in and our <autism outreach> team have said, look, it is [ASC], so we’ve just carried on and focused less on calling it ASC and more on what does this young person need. And there are times as a professional you have to do that because if one part of the system isn’t quite keeping up, you have to actually come in, you can’t just let somebody suffer.” [LA officer]

“Sometimes we’ve had young people that are functioning well academically but socially they’re a complete wreck, we’ve got a couple of cases, getting a late diagnosis into early teens, where often the first time you’re actually getting an indication of the major problems is you’re getting very depressed and self harming, going back to CAMHS and then they say well there’s really autism and other mental health difficulties.” [LA officer]

Even in supportive schools where pupils were getting appropriate input, a diagnosis was seen as useful for moving on:

“We had a young lady last year who was diagnosed in year 11 and when she got her diagnosis through her mum came in so we could have a meeting about how we were going to support her and actually the meeting was, we don’t need to do anything any different because we’re doing it all already, but the only difference for mum was we’ve now got a bit of paper that we can wave at college when she moves on if you see what I mean.” [SENCO]

4.8.1.2 Statements and EHC plans

The interviews with the LA officers revealed that statements of SEN and EHC plans are not allocated according to any set criteria, but rather according to individual needs:

“It’s not criteria for us but the code of practice, we look at long term complex needs and we look at what the young person’s barrier to learning is... it’s done on an individual basis, we made the decision a very long time ago that it’s not something you can have a blanket policy on, you really have to look at how the holistic whole is impacting on that young person.” [LA officer]

A statement or EHC plan was not seen as being necessary or appropriate for every young person with a diagnosis of ASC:
“They wouldn’t have a statement where they were functioning really well within school and there were no concerns, basically if they’re in school, they’re accessing everything they should, they have a diagnosis but they’re happy, they’re achieving, then they definitely wouldn’t have.” [LA officer]

Statements and EHC plans were generally described as being allocated in response to difficulties:

“We just wait for a red flag to come up, if a red flag comes up we have a look at it.” [LA officer]

“It might be that their needs are now so significant that we actually need to look at something different. We’ve had some late, we’ve had some very late, as in, requests in year 10 and things like that where you’d thought we were swimming along quite nicely and things were starting to go a wee bit pear shaped year 8, by year 9 we’re into puberty and it’s really not going well, and they have a disastrous year 9 and really by year 10 we’re having to do something.” [LA officer]

There were mixed feelings among parents regarding the impact of having a statement or EHC plan on the school decision and allocation process. One parent felt that it would have resulted in more support:

“I think I would have had more support basically in choosing the right environment for <pupil> and I suppose that’s the main thing.” [parent]

However another parent felt that having a statement would have complicated the process:

“I mean my son because he’s, he’s not statemented actually, he was going to be but then he made so much progress in primary school that it was decided not to give him a statement, in a way it was a lot smoother for him, or for us, to pick a school.” [parent]

One parent whose daughter was given a statement in year six reported finding the process stressful, particularly as a result of conflicting advice from professionals:

"It was her paediatric consultant who said we need to look at a statement, I’d never really thought that <pupil> would be appropriate for a statement, I always thought you had to be much worse either physically or mentally to get a statement, so my knowledge of statements wasn’t very good... the
first time they said she wasn’t appropriate to have a statement, so again as parents we sort of accepted that and again it was the consultant who said no, you need to appeal, this isn’t good enough, so again it was consultant led that we appealed and the whole process probably took most of year 6, most of that year to get the statement in place.” [parent]

The SENCOs of the mainstream school and the academy reported that the vast majority of their pupils with ASC did not have a statement or EHC plan and were having their needs met from within school resources with support from the autism outreach team where needed. The special school and the specialist ASC school, however, both required pupils to have a statement or EHC plan as part of the admissions criteria. This could potentially make it more difficult for a pupil who has coped well in a small, structured mainstream primary to access more specialist provision for secondary school on a proactive rather than a reactive basis:

“[Sometimes] they’ve gone through the primary bit, it’s been fine, a lovely rural school, very small, everything’s very rigid and they’ve done very very well... we just wait for a red flag to come up, if a red flag comes up we have a look at it.” [LA officer]

However for one parent the possibility that a mainstream secondary school may not be appropriate was raised during year six:

“She was statemented when she left primary school because of the possibility of failure in mainstream, so the plan was that we could move on to special school much easier with a statement.” [parent]

4.8.1.3 Specific needs

The majority of participants touched upon how the label of ‘high functioning autism’ encompasses a wide range of needs and a range of associated perceptions and preconceptions. The difficulty of accurately assessing those needs was raised by the LA officer:

“None of the typical criteria work for autism, deprivation doesn’t always work, [and] it’s not those children with statements that have the highest needs necessarily.” [LA officer]

When asked what aspects should be incorporated into a comprehensive needs assessment, the LA officer replied:
“It needs to be about emotional wellbeing, it needs to be around their social communication levels, it needs to be around their social competence, their sensory needs, that’s pretty much it really, if you get all those right, but the higher the levels of need here the more input they should get.” [LA officer]

During the LA officer interviews one concern that was raised regarded the lack of specialist input for pupils with ASC in mainstream settings:

“Even with a diagnosis but in non specialist provisions [they’re] not accessing specialist input at all. There’s just an expectation that they’ll fit in to the kind of school structure... They all have quite significant needs, and they’re the children who I have most concerns about, because they’re not accessing specialist services because they don’t meet the thresholds for these services but actually they’ve got very specific needs that aren’t always identified as being related to the autism necessarily, or the skills of the staff within mainstream schools aren’t always at the level that they’re required to be because the display’s much more subtle in those young people. And they’re the ones that either end up displaying outwardly and then challenging behaviours and placement breaks down or they retain all that angst and confusion and they become children that later on require mental health services. So there’s a big need in that cohort of children actually that isn’t always met by mainstream services.” [LA officer]

It was felt that secondary-age pupils in particular are likely to struggle to meet criteria for access to specialist NHS services:

“They might get some health input but it’s unlikely at secondary age that they’d get speech and language input, they might get occupational therapy input but it’s limited, certainly at secondary age again, so there’s very little in terms of specialist intervention or support for those children, other than what school is able to offer through their delegated budget.” [LA officer]

The recognised lack of an accurate means of assessing these needs may result in difficulties for parents and LA officers in determining appropriate provision.
4.8.2 LA decision-making processes

The LA’s processes for placement decisions are outlined in figure 4.8.2 below:

**Pupils with a statement or EHC plan**
- Discussion with parents when pupil in year 5 regarding appropriate types of provision
- Parents visit schools when pupil in year 6, discuss views with Parent Partnership and/or LA case worker
- Consultation at annual review around parent preferences, additional support that may be needed and next steps
- SEND panel discuss whether preferred provision is appropriate and an equitable use of resources
- Parents can appeal through tribunal if needed, although this is a very uncommon occurrence in the LA

**Pupils without a statement or EHC plan**
- Normal parental school choice process - school should offer support, no direct LA involvement
- Parents have normal right to appeal through local schools appeal panel

Figure 4.8.2: LA placement decision-making processes for pupils with and without statements or EHC plans

Whilst tribunals were described by the LA officers as being very unusual, the two scenarios that would be discussed were said to be a) whether the school setting is appropriate for the pupil’s needs, and b) whether the placement is an efficient use of resources.

4.8.3 Parent decision-making processes

Figure 4.8.3 below shows a thematic map of factors that influence parents’ decision making processes, taken from the four interviews with parents.
Several factors relating to the type of school influenced decision making. Some parents knew they wanted their child to go to a mainstream school for reasons such as wanting their child to be ‘normal’ and to be prepared for the ‘big wide world’. Two parents reported that they wanted to see whether their child could cope in mainstream. Some looked at a range of types of provision whereas others only ever considered mainstream schools. One parent felt that special school would be too noisy for her child, based on previous experience in a special primary school. Previous school experiences in general were described as influential in decision making, whether those experiences were of success and progress in a mainstream environment or perceived ‘failure’ of mainstream school.

Particularly when parents were choosing a mainstream school, practical considerations played a large role. These included the distance to the school, transport options and siblings attending the school. Some parents ruled out some specialist options because of the commuting time.

All of the parents researched schools in advance, for example visiting a range of schools and attending open days. This research informed factors relating to individual schools. Three parents talked about the ‘feel’ or ‘atmosphere’ of the school as being important. The size of the school was mentioned frequently, with both a small school and small class sizes seen as positives. For some parents particular staff members within the school contributed to the decision, for example a particularly highly-recommended SENCO or a familiar teaching assistant. A final
factor relating to individual schools was the potential for pupils to stay on for post-16 provision and avoid further transitions.

Some specific schools were felt by parents to be a better match to their **child’s needs and abilities** than others. The main theme that emerged in all of the parent interviews was the attempt to find a school that could support both the child’s academic potential and their need to feel comfortable and be happy. The **child’s own view** also played a role; although some parents reported not taking their child when they went to look at schools, particularly on first visits, the child’s reaction to being in different schools was viewed as important to parents in making placement decisions. Some parents reported that their child gave a verbal indication of preference, whereas others based their decisions on their child’s body language whilst in different school settings.

In addition to the child’s view, the **views of professionals, family members, friends and other parents** also played a part in parents’ decision making. Two parents described how discussions with family and friends and ‘school gate’ conversations with other parents guided them towards particular schools. Professionals such as teachers, SENCOs and LA staff were seen as ‘the ones with expertise and knowledge’ who would know whether or not a child would cope in a given school. Several parents described being reassured by professionals that their child would cope in a mainstream secondary. One parent said that she would have looked at specialist provision had it not been for the reassurance of professionals that mainstream would be fine; she felt that this would have prevented her child from failing in mainstream and needing to be moved after two ‘disastrous’ years.

### 4.8.4 Stakeholder views on decision-making processes

#### 4.8.4.1 LA officer views on the decision-making process

During the interviews with the LA officers it was clear that the parents and pupil should be at the heart of decision making:

> "The young person and the family are the people really that make the decisions, although we may disagree with their views or we may agree with them, you’ve got to remember who’s got the difficulty, it’s not us, we’re not living the life, the young person is.” [LA officer]

One issue with this, however, arose when parental preference was for a school that the LA deemed unsuitable for the pupil, for example parents requesting a school for
children with significant learning difficulties when the pupil was achieving in line with age-related expectations. When such issues arose, significant emphasis was said to be placed on consultations and mediation with parents in order to minimise conflict and the perceived need for tribunals:

"Consultation is exactly that, it’s not a case of you consult and we’re going to whack you in a school, we actually consult to see can we meet need and is there any other reasonable adjustments that need to be made in order to facilitate that parental preference." [LA officer]

"If they’d made a representation for, say, <an independent out-of-county specialist school> and we felt that <the SMP> could meet need we would have a meeting with parents to listen to their views and see exactly what their thoughts were, hopefully we’d have an EP and our <autism outreach> team involved and our <SMP>, we’d give it really careful consideration and come to hopefully an in balance view." [LA officer]

"I think we’re amongst the lowest in the country [for tribunals] but we do a lot of talking and a lot of communication." [LA officer]

The LA offers felt that there was a range of provision available that could meet the needs of secondary pupils with ASC, and that the most appropriate provision depended on the needs of the individual child. They also acknowledged that schools of the same type would not necessarily offer the same provision or support, leading to more potential confusion for parents who may decide that mainstream in general is inappropriate for their child due to one unsuccessful mainstream placement.

Two main areas were identified by the LA officers as causing difficulty within the placement allocation process. The first related to geography – due to the size of the county, specialist provision often involved long journeys or even required residential placements because of the distances involved. The second was a gap in provision for children with HF ASC who had ‘academic potential’ but were unable to cope within a school environment.

One way in which the LA officers felt the needs of pupils with HF ASC could be better met was through offering more support at the ‘universal’ level, particularly helping mainstream schools to develop their understanding of ASC:
“We need to invest a lot of time at the universal and targeted level, working with secondary schools to make those systemic changes that will make them successful for children and young people in a preventative way.” [LA officer]

“There’s a tsunami of children coming through to secondary who have got more and more complex needs and the schools are not ready for it, they’re not in a position where they’re able to meet the needs, it takes a certain mindset, it’s a big cultural shift for secondary schools that needs to take place... the Autism Education Trust have got a national standards document and the competency framework which is a whole school approach really, so in an ideal world to be able to do that or use those training materials and support the schools to implement systemic changes and change those hearts and minds within school settings.” [LA officer]

The LA officers felt that providing more resources and funding at the ‘bottom tier’ of need, the universal level, would help to prevent pupils’ needs escalating and eventually requiring more targeted specialist input:

“Really we need to target the majority of resource in to the bottom end in my eyes, not the top end... if we don’t provide that autism specific knowledge, awareness, training at the lower tiers then we’re going to find ourselves with more and more children at this [higher needs] level, which is what’s happening essentially.” [LA officer]

In summary, the LA officers interviewed felt that there was a range of secondary provision available for pupils with HF ASC and that the most appropriate provision would depend on the individual child. The pupil and their parents were seen as having ownership of the placement decision-making process unless their preference was felt to be inappropriate or an inefficient use of resources, when LA officers would consult and attempt to mediate. Some gaps in provision were acknowledged, particularly for academically able children with environmental needs, and more support and input was felt to be needed at the ‘universal’ level such as in mainstream schools.

4.8.4.2 SENCO views on the decision-making process

The majority of pupils with HF ASC in the mainstream school and the academy did not have statements of SEN or EHC plans and therefore the decision-making process was reported to be entirely parent-led. Both of these schools were reported to be generally under-subscribed and therefore able to accept all pupils for whom
the school is stated as their first preference. Neither of these schools is selective, although the mainstream school SENCO reported that selective academies made up the majority of secondary provision in the local area; this was said to affect the school’s own intake, resulting in particular in a large intake of pupils with challenging behaviour who had not been accepted by the academies.

One SENCO reported that having a statement was causing some difficulty regarding one pupil who was seeking to move to another, bigger mainstream school for key stage four; she felt that the process would be more straightforward without a statement.

All four SENCOs supported the LA officers’ view that parents were the key decision makers and drove the process of school choice for pupils with HF ASC. In both the special and specialist provision the process of school allocation was said to begin with parents visiting and then requesting the school, following which the LA would ask school staff whether they could meet the pupil’s needs. Both of these SENCOs described clear policies relating to the type of needs they could and couldn’t meet within the provision; this included the needs of the individual young person and also the impact on the other students, for example the level of potential disruption and whether the pupil would be a ‘good fit’ with an existing group. Both SENCOs felt that the LA understood and respected their decisions about meeting pupil need.

The SENCOs of both the special and specialist schools described a recent increase in pupil numbers and requests and, increasingly, requests from a number of different LAs. This was felt to be a result of special and specialist provision in general being more in demand, perhaps as a result of increasing academic pressure linked to central government targets. Both also described a number of pupils who entered midway through their secondary education; there was a feeling that some pupils had struggled in mainstream to the extent that it seemed they had almost been ‘set up to fail’ before being able to move to a more specialist provision. This was felt by one SENCO to possibly be linked to the ‘government agenda of inclusion’; she explained that pupils who may previously have been placed in special schools were instead being supported in mainstream schools through the SMP, and that while this worked brilliantly for some pupils it was perhaps being applied too widely:

"What we’re finding now, is that a lot of those children who were dealt with by <the SMP> are actually coming here anyway, so I think that provision works for those pupils it’s right for, slightly off track let’s put them on track, but there’s pupils that however much intervention you put in, mainstream
Isn’t right for them, because the environment, just everything’s not right.” [SENCO]

In summary, all four SENCOs reported that they had no particular difficulties or issues with the LA’s school placement decision-making systems for pupils with HF ASC. The special and specialist schools reported that the number of requests for places for pupils with HF ASC was increasing and that they were both catering for a considerable number of pupils who had ‘failed’ in mainstream provision as well as those who had been placed with them from the start of secondary school.

4.8.4.3 Parent views on the decision-making process

Four parents were interviewed in total, two from the mainstream school, one from the academy and one from the specialist school. No parents were available from the special school. Two of the children had a statement of SEN and two did not; two had been at the same school throughout their secondary education to date whereas two had moved provision.

All parents described the school decision-making process as being primarily their own, in line with the views of the SENCOs and the LA officers. For the two parents whose children had stayed in the same secondary school this was seen as a positive and they described no issues with the process. By contrast, both of the parents whose children had changed provision felt that they would have preferred more support and advice during the decision-making process rather than the onus being entirely on them to make the right choice:

"Which is the right school for the right child, it’s a minefield when you get to that, it’s just probably one of the most horrible decisions you have to make, because there is so much choice... I did feel quite, I don’t know if lost is the right word, but concerned, not knowing what was the right environment for him, just having that air of uncertainty is a horrible place to be.” [parent]

"I suppose I’m quite proactive, but I think sometimes it’s just nice for somebody to come to you and say, are you alright with this, this is what we could offer you. Around that secondary school decision that would have been nice.” [parent]

"I was just given the list [of schools] and basically told I had to go and look, and that they weren’t allowed to lead me in any way... it would have been possibly better for someone who knows <pupil> to have said, these two or
three are the most appropriate for her, but you basically get a long list and you’re having to ring round... if someone was able to do some of that for you that has more contacts with the schools then it might have been a little bit easier, and of course I’m no expert, I don’t know what I’m looking for when I go round these schools, they’re only going to show me the best bits, I don’t know always what questions to ask either, so maybe if someone was there that could have asked the appropriate questions, it might have been easier... and also to know where there are vacancies would have been helpful.” [parent]

Some of the parents expressed frustration that outcomes appeared to be determined by how persistent and proactive they were. This was raised as being potentially unfair for parents who may be less proactive or who have their own difficulties with learning or communication:

“This is what I get really frustrated about, those parents that are proactive and ask schools the questions and ask to go in and have meetings about the children’s development or show concern, they’re the ones that sort of maybe things get moved on a little bit quicker.” [parent]

“I think what prompted the decision was because I just became assertive in the end and said via email to <LA> I’m not sending <pupil> back to a school that are admitting they cannot manage her anymore, and a school that’s causing her so much distress and unhappiness, so basically if you don’t sort it then you need to get a home tutor until you do!” [parent]

“I think it was just because we were quite assertive and on the ball and for other parents that maybe aren’t as knowledgeable or as proactive I think they would have had a harder experience... I think it all depends on how much you’re willing to fight really and what knowledge you have about it.” [parent]

Some other elements of the school decision-making process were felt to be potentially unfair or lacking transparency. Some parents mentioned that they knew people who had ‘played the system’, for example lying about church attendance, to secure a desired school place. There was also a perception that where you live may affect options, a point which was also raised by the LA officers regarding geographical difficulties. Parents were often unaware of how decisions were made and what impact, if any, having a statement of SEN would have on an application:
“I don’t really know how the local authority chooses, if they choose or if it’s just a case of numbers.” [parent]

“We had to go to an appeal for that school and I can remember at the appeal being asked does my child have a statement, and I said no, and does your child have an identified disability, and of course at that time the answer is no, and I did feel that if I’d said yes to either of those two he would have got in, which, you know, it’s the system isn’t it, because there would be money attached to that child, you know, that’s unfair, that’s really unfair.” [parent]

“He’s not statemented actually, in a way it was a lot smoother for him, or for us, to pick a school... because he’s not statemented, that might have been easier for him to come here as well, I don’t know.” [parent]

In summary, parents agreed with other stakeholders that they were primarily responsible for school decision-making. Almost all of the parents, however, said that they would have liked more professional input, advice and support with this process rather than it being left up to them. Parents were often unaware of how decisions were made by schools and the LA and had some misconceptions about the impact of having a statement of SEN or an EHC plan.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the findings of the study in relation to the aims of the research and the existing literature. There will then be a critique of the study and its limitations. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the implications of the study, both for various stakeholder groups and for future research.

5.2 Aims of the study

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. **What is the range of secondary school provision for pupils with high functioning ASC in one local authority and how do the types of provision map on to the spectrum of needs of these pupils, in policy and in practice?**

2. **How are secondary school placement decisions made by the local authority, schools and parents?**

Each research question will now be addressed in turn, with the study findings linked to the existing literature.

5.3 Research question one: What is the range of provision and how does it meet need?

This section will begin with an outline of the range of secondary provision available for pupils with HF ASC in the local authority of Landshire and how this compares to recommendations. There will then be a summary of the ways in which these different types of provision meet the needs of pupils with HF ASC and, again, how this compares to ‘best practice’ recommendations. Similarities and differences between the different school types will be highlighted. The section will finish with a description of how different levels of pupil need are assessed and ‘mapped onto’ the different types of provision.
5.3.1 The range of secondary provision

Several types of school were identified by officers from Landshire local authority as being appropriate for secondary age pupils with high functioning autism spectrum conditions, ranging from mainstream schools through to out-of-county autism-specific residential special schools. The range of schools identified by the LA officers largely mapped on to the list identified by the Autism Education Trust (Charman et al., 2011; see figure 2.6.3.1). In order of increasing ASC specialism, the Landshire school types identified were as follows:

- Mainstream secondary schools and academies
- Mainstream schools with Specialist Mainstream Provision units for ASC
- Inreach support within the Specialist Mainstream Provision units themselves
- Generic special schools
- Out-of-county ASC-specific schools

One gap identified by the LA officers related to in-county HF ASC-specific provision; despite the higher cost associated with out-of-county provision it was not felt to be economically viable to establish a specialist school within Landshire. Pupils requiring that level of ASC specialism were reported to have access to out-of-county provision, including residential options if needed.

5.3.2 Meeting the needs of pupils with HF ASC

All four schools directly involved in this study were specifically recruited on the basis of demonstrating good practice for pupils with HF ASC. What constitutes ‘good practice’ for pupils with ASC has been researched in the past, for example the 2002 DfES publication ‘Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Good Practice Guidance’ and the 2011 Autism Education Trust publication ‘What is Good Practice in Autism Education?’ (Charman et al., 2011). See table 5.3.2 below for a comparison of the key factors identified in each study; shaded rows indicate similarities, with those aspects not mirrored across studies left in white.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>DfES, 2002</strong></th>
<th><strong>Charman et al., 2011</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Practitioner knowledge and understanding of autism</td>
<td>Staff knowledge and training</td>
<td>Staffing – senior management commitment, staff training and knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of supporting families and working in partnership</td>
<td>Effective communication</td>
<td>Home-school relationships and communication, support and advice for parents</td>
</tr>
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<td>Multi-agency co-operation</td>
<td>Involvement of other professionals/services</td>
<td>Relationships – with LA, other schools, external support agencies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear short-term and long-term goals, in particular to develop the social skills of children and young people with autism</td>
<td>Monitoring progress</td>
<td>Ongoing monitoring and tracking, good individual knowledge of every pupil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy and planning at all strategic levels</td>
<td>Adapting the curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum – range of courses and qualifications to meet need, individualised and flexible support, access to targeted interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The need for early identification and intervention</td>
<td>Ambitions and aspirations – school ethos, achieving key skills</td>
<td>Supportive structures – inclusive nurturing approach and ethos, support for transition, extra-curricular support, proactive support, high expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The need to involve children and young people with autism in decisions affecting their education</td>
<td>Broader participation – ambassadors, joint activities with mainstream pupils</td>
<td>Environment – supportive of sensory, language, independence needs</td>
</tr>
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Table 5.3.2: ‘Good practice’ guidelines from DfES (2002) and Charman et al. (2011) compared with key themes from the present study

As can be seen there are many commonalities between the recommendations from the two reports mentioned above and the main themes from the current study. Where this study adds a different perspective is in identifying the subtle differences
in how ‘good practice’ concepts are implemented in practice in a range of different
types of schools, all of which ostensibly demonstrate ‘good practice’ in the views of
the local authority.

The range of key factors identified as contributing to ‘good practice’ creates a
holistic approach to meeting the needs of pupils with HF ASC. This ties in with
Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecosystemic model (2005) as described in section 2.4.1. A
range of factors from table 5.3.2 will now be discussed in turn, using the bio-
ecosystemic model as a framework.

As would be expected, research at the level of individual schools did not usually
highlight macrosystemic factors. The 2002 DfES publication did feature some
broader recommendations; the guidelines were targeted at local authorities and
wider regions in addition to schools, hence the more systemic approach. Policy and
planning at all strategic levels and a commitment to involving children and young
people with autism in decisions affecting their education could both be seen as
involving macrosystems, such as political philosophies and cultural values. The
recent SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014c) places increased emphasis on the
importance of pupil voice regarding their education. However in an international
review of the literature Parsons et al. (2011) found very little research involving
direct elicitation of the views of young people with autism despite the authors' view
that those papers that did exist raised important insights into areas that were not
usually considered in other studies. It could be argued that this focus on broad
cultural and political issues does not directly impact on how individual schools
demonstrate good practice, but viewing good practice from a bio-ecosystemic
viewpoint highlights the importance of these macrosystemic factors. Some
macrosystemic factors were raised within the current study but did not emerge as
key factors; these tended to involve central government policies such as changes in
assessment systems and targets and the pressures of Ofsted inspections driven by
academic targets rather than inclusion and pupil wellbeing. This was felt by one
SENCO to be a key factor in many pupils with HF ASC not being able to cope in
mainstream secondary schools, as they were being placed under increased stress to
meet ever-increasing academic targets. An additional macrosystemic factor was the
local authority's policies; the LA officers subscribed to the principle of offering a
continuum of provision for pupils with HF ASC, therefore supporting the continued
availability and use of a range of school types.

More research on good practice for pupils with HF ASC exists regarding exosystemic
factors, particularly systemic school factors. Many factors identified in table 5.3.2
above are at this level, for example the school's ethos, staff knowledge and training
and the curricular and extra-curricular offer. The impact of a school's ethos was highlighted in research by Humphrey and Lewis (2008); they found that a school's understanding and implementation of 'inclusion' impacted on the extent to which advice and guidance were followed. They also found that senior management played a vital role in both the development of and commitment to an inclusive ethos. Senior management commitment in inclusion was seen as important for all SENCOs in the current study, echoing Humphrey and Lewis' findings, with examples including a headteacher who had previously worked in an SMP for autism and a SENCO who was part of the school's senior management team. The specialist school's ethos included a focus on developing all pupils' speech and language skills; this was reflected in the decision to include the speech and language therapist on the senior management team.

School size was raised as a key issue by the majority of the participants in this study, with a universal belief that small schools were better for pupils with HF ASC. This goes against research by Osborne and Reed (2011) who found that larger schools were associated with an improvement in 'social problems' for pupils with ASC in mainstream secondary schools, and that bigger schools were also associated with a greater sense of pupil belonging for pupils with a diagnosis of Asperger's. There could be many reasons behind these associations and they may not be causal. The clear contrast between Osborne and Reed's findings and the preferences raised in this study for smaller schools would suggest that this is an area where further research would be beneficial.

Staff knowledge and training emerged as a key exosystemic factor in all three studies in the table above and is also frequently raised as important in research involving parent perceptions and views (e.g. Waddington & Reed, 2006; HMIE, 2006; Whitaker, 2007; Jindal-Snape et al., 2005). All four schools involved in this study appeared to have a high level of ASC knowledge and skill among staff members, addressing one of the main concerns of the 2006 HMIE report. On top of this good baseline level of knowledge and skill, as schools became increasingly specialised the level of formal training among staff members increased; all staff members in the specialist school were graduates and many had specific qualifications in ASC. Whilst staff members in the mainstream school and academy had often received training in particular interventions from other professionals, many staff members at the special school were qualified to provide this level of training to others. No data were collected regarding how the level of staff training affected pupils’ access to particular interventions or approaches, and the ‘value added’ to outcomes as a result, but this could be a useful area for further study.
Interestingly, one parent in the present study emphasised the importance of staff members having personal experience of ASC rather than just knowledge gained through training; this ties in with research by Whitaker (2007) which found that parents wanted staff members to be able to empathise with the child with ASC and have some sense of them as a person as well as having academic knowledge about autism.

A further exosystemic factor highlighted in both Charman et al. (2011) and the present study was the school curriculum, including academic, 'hidden' and extra-curricular aspects. The balance between the 'hidden curriculum' and the academic curriculum varies between school types and between individual schools. All four schools involved in this study provided pupils with 'hidden curriculum' input in addition to the academic curriculum, with explicit teaching of skills such as social understanding, social communication and flexibility. In the mainstream school and the academy this was often through specific targeted interventions such as Lego Therapy and Talkabout, whereas in the special and specialist schools explicit teaching of these skills tended to be integrated into the daily curriculum. The specialist school also provided additional targeted input aimed at specific groups, for example a ‘girls’ group’ which met both in and outside of school, allowing particular aspects of the hidden curriculum to be taught and reinforced in appropriate settings and contexts. A recent small study found that girls with HF ASC tended to mask and internalise their difficulties with the hidden curriculum (Moyse & Porter, 2015). Such pupils who are able to effectively mask their difficulties may not be selected for targeted intervention groups despite having ongoing needs. The explicit teaching approach used in the special and specialist schools may therefore be more appropriate for all pupils with HF ASC, even for those who do not appear to be struggling on the surface. Charman et al. (2011) found that parents valued schools going beyond the remit of the National Curriculum in order to help their child to develop 'critical life skills'; special and specialist schools tended to deliver this through an 'autism curriculum' whereas mainstream schools generally delivered the 'typical' curriculum with adjustments and adaptations as needed for individual pupils. Taking the existing literature and the current study together, the balance between the National Curriculum and the 'hidden curriculum' appears to be one of the biggest differences between mainstream and more specialist schools. The extent to which pupils would benefit from a focus on one or the other should be an important consideration when deciding on an appropriate school setting.
As mentioned above, the four schools in this study met the specific needs of their pupils with ASC in different ways including whole-school approaches and specific interventions in small group and individual contexts. A number of recent systematic literature reviews have found that there is a scarcity of high-quality research into evidence-based practice and interventions for pupils with ASC, particular for those children over the age of eight (e.g. Bond et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2014; Parsons et al., 2009). All four schools stated that their practice was evidence-based, but there was a difference in the perceived meaning of this phrase; SENCOs tended to interpret an evidence-based intervention as one for which they kept their own evidence of its impact on pupil progress rather than assessing the research evidence for the intervention itself. As described by Hesmondhalgh and Breakey (2001) many approaches used in the schools in this study were either 'bottom up', that is designed around the needs of the young people in the setting rather than a particular 'off the shelf' intervention, or were interventions that had been adapted to make them more appropriate. This raises issues of treatment fidelity; an intervention that has been found to have a good evidence-base in a particular context may not have the same results if delivered in a different way, as often appears to be the case in schools. This point has been raised in a paper by Simpson et al. (2011); they stated that professionals should be supported to determine the most suitable evidence-based approaches for use within particular settings and with particular individuals, enabling interventions to be delivered exactly as prescribed. However, given the lack of evidence-based interventions for secondary-aged pupils with autism, this does not appear to be a practicable solution at the current time. It may be that the approach used by the schools in the current study, where SENCOs collected detailed data to monitor pupil progress before, during and after interventions, is a more effective way of establishing an evidence base that will be genuinely useful in the educational context.

Little of the existing literature around 'good practice' for ASC in schools focuses on the microsystemic level, perhaps due to the heterogeneity among individuals with ASC. Good practice guidelines for schools tend to focus on systemic recommendations, all of which can used to shape and support microsystemic factors such as classrooms, peer groups and specific extra-curricular activities.

While the individual microsystems tend not to feature in 'good practice' literature, the interactions between them (mesosystemic factors) were raised in all three studies in the table above. The two main mesosystemic factors were home-school relationships and multi-agency relationships. Both of these were described as important aspects of the provision in all four schools in the current study, but the
relationships were qualitatively different across the different types of provision. The SENCOs and parents at the mainstream school and the academy described a lot of joint problem-solving in order to support pupils with ASC; such willingness on the part of school staff to seek and act on advice from parents was perceived very positively by parents in Whitaker’s 2007 study, even when it indicated that the school staff themselves may lack expertise. School staff in the special and specialist schools, however, tended to use their expertise to support parents via support groups and autism-specific training courses; this was valued highly by parents in Charman et al.’s 2011 study and many school staff expressed a desire to provide more such training and support. One SENCO in the current study highlighted the disparity in parent training and support depending on which school a pupil attends; she suggested that one possible approach to improve equality of access could be to extend their training and support groups to parents of pupils at other schools in the local area. Such school partnerships have been the subject of very recent research by the SEN Policy Research Forum (2015) and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

These subtle differences in the implementation of ‘good practice’ concepts between school types are likely to have a significant impact on pupils’ experiences in school and, potentially, beyond. The differences and therefore the impact would be considerably increased when taking into account the range of practice across all mainstream schools and academies rather than just in those already seen as demonstrating good practice. This adds to the importance of well informed decision making when choosing the most appropriate secondary school provision for a child with HF ASC.

5.3.3 Mapping the range of provision onto the needs of pupils

In order for pupils, parents and professionals to make informed decisions about secondary school provision they require information about the relative benefits and drawbacks of different types of provision for pupils with various profiles of need. While the types of provision identified in section 5.3.1 were listed in order of increasing ASC specialism, elements of their offer for pupils with HF ASC shared many commonalities. This may have been exacerbated by the decision to seek out schools demonstrating particularly good practice in terms of ASC provision; the mainstream school and the academy offered a very high level of flexibility and individualisation that other mainstream schools may struggle to replicate. Such differences between schools that are ostensibly the same ‘type’ can lead to further difficulties with matching pupil needs to the most appropriate type of provision.
These difficulties could perhaps be ameliorated through accurate 'local offers'; the new SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014c) outlines requirements for all schools, and local authorities more widely, to make transparent their offer for pupils with SEND. Ways in which this could perhaps be used to best effect will be discussed later in this chapter when considering the implications of the study for local authorities.

When considering the profiles of pupils attending each type of provision in this study, one thing that emerged from the interviews was that there was no one useful measure of ‘severity’ that could easily determine the need for increasingly ASC-specific school types. All SENCOs reported catering for students with ASC and co-occurring difficulties such as ADHD, although the complexity of these co-occurring difficulties tended to be greater in the special and specialist provision. Many of the students across all provisions had commonalities in severity of need, for example having been discharged from NHS speech and language therapy services. The input provided across the schools varied, however, with the special and specialist schools offering a large amount of on-site speech and language therapy. This is in line with the findings of the 2006 HMIE report, along with the 'trade off' between high levels of specialist input and the breadth of the academic curriculum and the range of qualifications on offer. Surprisingly, Charman et al. (2011) did not report any differences between specialist ASC schools, special schools or mainstream schools with autism resource bases with regard to the involvement of external professionals such as speech and language therapists, mental health services and occupational therapists. There may have been more marked differences in this type of provision if mainstream schools without autism resource bases were included in the research. It should also be kept in mind that Charman et al. did not set out to compare different types of school for children with ASC but to identify good practice and that, similar to the current research, they specifically sought out schools that were demonstrating good practice for pupils with ASC.

With many pupils in all types of provision reportedly not meeting thresholds for external support, for example with speech and language therapy, one issue that arises is how to accurately assess and compare the 'sub threshold' levels of need. A pupil whose speech and language needs are only slightly below threshold may benefit greatly from the comprehensive speech and language focus on the ASC specialist school, but if the pupil’s needs are not at the thresholds needed for an EHC plan then they would not be able to access that type of provision. The officers from Landshire LA reported that there are no particular thresholds for access to an EHC plan but that plans were often issued in response to increasing difficulties with
needs being met in the pupil’s current school. As a result a pupil who had experienced no difficulties in primary school would be expected to transfer to a mainstream secondary school, despite the well-documented increased difficulties experienced by pupils with ASC in the secondary school environment (e.g. Humphrey & Lewis, 2008 and Batten et al., 2006).

Two of the four pupils whose parents were interviewed as part of this study had moved secondary schools due to the initial provision proving inappropriate to meet need. Previous research has also found that children with ASC are more likely than others to move between schools; Batten et al. (2006) found that one in three children in their survey had changed schools in the last five years and 10% had changed schools three or more times in the last five years (in addition to normal transitions). Both of the parents in the current study whose children had moved school described the experience of having to continue sending their child to a school that was not meeting their needs as traumatic. Both had also looked into specialist provision at this point. While one parent had opted for a different mainstream school instead of specialist provision, the other was of the opinion that the pupil had already ‘failed in the mainstream’ and therefore another mainstream would also not be able to meet the pupil’s needs. If more careful, multi-agency consideration had been given to appropriate school placement at the decision-making stage the pupils may have been placed more appropriately to start with, removing the ‘traumatic’ parental experience and the upheaval for the pupil.

While there is existing literature regarding parent perceptions of choosing provision and the primary to secondary transition process there appears to be a gap in the literature when it comes to exploring pupil and parent experiences of changing schools after a breakdown in placement. With Batten et al.'s research showing that many children with ASC move schools more often than usual transition processes would predict this would seem to be a useful and relevant area for further research.

5.3.4 Summary of research question one

The current study successfully indentified the range of secondary school provision available for young people with HF ASC in one LA and how this range compared to conceptualisations of ‘good practice’. Analysis of the interviews was also able to identify some of the subtle features of the different school types that made them more or less suitable for pupils with particular profiles of need.

One area of research question one that was not addressed was the distinction between how the range of schools meets needs in policy and in practice. This was
perhaps a result of recruiting schools demonstrating ‘good practice’ as all SENCOs were willing to be very flexible in terms of meeting the needs of all learners with ASC. At a wider LA level there were no particular policies relating to the assessment of needs for pupils with ASC or mapping these needs onto particular schools, with the processes instead tending to focus on parent choice and consultation. This made it difficult to compare 'policy' with practice as the policy was to be flexible depending on parental preferences.

5.4 Research question two: How are secondary school placement decisions made by the local authority, schools and parents?

The LA processes, as described by LA officers, schools and parents, were simple and transparent; they are outlined in section 4.8.2. This section will focus on two particular areas that arose during the interviews: identifying need and perceptions of the process as a whole.

5.4.1 Prerequisites for informed decision making

As discussed above, establishing pupil need accurately was felt to have an important role to play in the decision-making process. This could be through diagnosis, EHC assessment, specific assessments for additional needs or a combination of the above. As has also been previously discussed, not all pupils with a diagnosis of HF ASC will be eligible for an EHC plan and therefore many will not have been through the EHC assessment process (see e.g. Barnard et al., 2000). Some pupils discussed in the study simply had a diagnosis with no further assessments having been carried out. As a result, the decision-making process for many pupils will take place without any formal detailed assessment of their needs.

The main aspects of a pupil’s profile mentioned by schools as important in determining whether or not they would be an appropriate provision included the following:

- Academic strengths and needs
- Ability to work within a group environment (and what size group)
- Speech and language needs – expressive, receptive and pragmatic
- Ability to keep up with classroom pace and switch between tasks
- Sensory needs
- Social interaction skills
- Physical needs (e.g. need for occupational therapy or physiotherapy)
- Mental health and wellbeing, particularly signs of anxiety
- Behaviour in previous school settings – e.g. passive, disruptive, ‘challenging’

A thorough assessment including as many of the above areas as possible could prove beneficial in helping parents and school staff to make an informed decision about whether or not a particular school would be appropriate for the pupil. Similar profiles for schools to complete identifying their support in these areas could further help with the matching process. Educational psychologists would be well placed to carry out and analyse such assessments as they often have a good overview of educational provision in a particular area as well as specialist skills and experience regarding a range of assessment techniques.

Some areas of the UK have begun to develop tools to assist with matching provision to need, for example Wiltshire Council’s continuum of provision mentioned earlier in this study (Wiltshire Council, 2011, see figure 2.6.3.2). Whilst this document outlines broad criteria for the different types of provision available it does not distinguish between generic special and autism specialist provisions and it does not address the differences between individual schools within a broader type of provision. It also does not qualify what counts as 'lower level', 'high level' or 'exceptionally high level' need, which are the descriptors used to justify particular school types. An alternative approach has been taken by Manchester City Council with their 'Matching Provision to Need Tools' (MPNTs) (Manchester City Council, 2014). These tools, adapted for each age range, provide specific descriptors of levels of functioning and expected levels of support across a continuum of graduated response from 'universal provision' to 'statutory assessment / EHC plan'. Many different areas of functioning are included, for example 'fine motor skills', 'organisational skills', 'attainment and achievement' and 'behaviours for learning'. The MPNTs support school staff to allocate the SEND budget appropriately to ensure they meet the needs of all pupils by prompting a graduated response to various levels of need. Although the MPNTs outline the level of need that would warrant an EHC plan they do not give any specific indication of whether pupils may benefit from a more specialist provision or how this could be determined; they appear to be designed purely for use within mainstream schools. They do, however, address a range of needs across different areas; such an approach could be useful in the creation of an extended tool that could highlight areas of particularly high level need and map these onto a range of specialist, special or particularly skilled mainstream provisions.
The emergence of local matching tools such as those used in Wiltshire and Manchester highlights one particular gap between research and practice. Local authorities are obviously meeting a perceived need by creating such tools but they have been practice-led rather than research-led. EPs could play an important role in this process, however the researcher’s experience is that LA-level research is not usually part of the EP job description or something that EPs are given time to participate in. Both LA officers and EPs could potentially benefit by exploring ways in which EPs' research skills and expertise could be used creatively to fill existing gaps between practice and research, for example developing, implementing and evaluating useful evidence-based tools.

5.4.2 Perceptions of the decision-making process

All participants in the study felt that the decision-making process was primarily led by parental preference. While this was generally perceived to be the best scenario, two of the four parents reported that they would have liked more support for this process rather than feeling it was entirely their responsibility. Some professional input was mentioned, for example advice from consultants, primary school staff and external support groups. Advice regarding the range of alternative provision available, however, was reported to be limited; one parent reported that she had received a list of schools but then been expected to do all research and assessments of suitability herself, adding to the stress of the process. A similar situation was described by parents in the focus groups held by Waddington and Reed (2006), none of whom felt that the LA had helped them with their decision making. It may be that professionals feel uncomfortable to be seen as influencing parents’ decisions, or that they do not realise that parents would like more support, but it appears to be an area of weakness in the decision making process as a whole both in this study and previous research. One interesting finding that arose during the interviews was that the autism outreach service reported offering transition support for all pupils with an ASC diagnosis, but none of the four parents interviewed appeared to be aware of this.

Parents also described frustration that those parents who were more proactive and persistent were felt to be more likely to secure the desired provision for their child. The idea of parents feeling the need to ‘fight’ for appropriate provision has been extensively reported in the literature (e.g. Batten et al., 2006; Haringey Autism, 2005; Barnard et al., 2000). A more explicitly needs-based approach to decision making may have potential here, as discrepancies between the pupil’s identified
needs and the support available from schools within a reasonable distance could be clearly identified.

While the LA officers highlighted the importance of consultation and listening to parent views, some of the parents interviewed still spoke of the perceived need to 'fight' for appropriate provision. This discrepancy between the intentions behind professional services and how they are perceived by recipients has been previously highlighted in the literature, e.g. Hodge and Runswick-Cole (2008), and was also found to be the case in a recent study of parent and LA views on the process of obtaining appropriate educational provision for children with ASC (Tissot, 2011). Tissot found that, while most parents of children with ASC were allocated their first-choice school placement for their child, they perceived the process as stressful, time-consuming and bureaucratic. Funding was perceived to play a large role in LA decision making. Tissot concluded that LAs could minimise the tensions and differences of opinion between parents and LA officers through, for example, more effective communication and increased transparency. One of the main reported tensions in Tissot's study regarded financial resourcing, which was also an issue for one parent in the current study. However the reported sources of parental stress in Tissot's study were different to those identified in the current study. Tissot found that 'Discussions with LA staff' were rated as stressful by around 55% of parent respondents, whereas 'lack of support' and 'no independent advice' were only rated as stressful by around 13% of parent respondents. In the current study it was this lack of support and advice that was most frequently mentioned by parents as being problematic. Tissot's study incorporated parent views from around the UK along with interviews with staff members from five LAs, all in the south of England. The variance in the parental perceptions of sources of stress may be linked to the discrepancies in how different LAs assess pupil need and allocate provision, for example the differences in the range of in-county provision and the criteria for allocating an EHC plan. However is should also be borne in mind that the sample size in Tissot's study was much larger (738) and is therefore more representative of parental views in the UK as a whole. It does not, however, allow for meaningful comparisons between parent and LA officer views in any particular local authority.

5.4.3 Summary of research question two

Research question two focused on the processes of secondary school decision making for parents, schools and the LA. The LA processes were felt by all participants to be clear and transparent but were only relevant for those pupils with a statement of SEN or an EHC plan.
Parents described a range of factors that influenced their decision making. While the LA officers appeared to hold the view that parental choice was the 'gold standard', parents themselves reported wanting more professional support and guidance for the decision making process. SENCOs reported playing a very small role in the decision making process.

Several recommendations were generated as a result of this research question to support the process of informed decision-making. These include the development of pupil profiling tools to assess strengths and needs in a wide range of areas, supporting schools to self-assess their individual offers for pupils with ASC and enhancing the information available to parents to support them in the process of finding a suitable school that can meet their child's unique profile of needs.

**5.5 Critique and limitations of the study**

**5.5.1 Limitations linked to study design**

This study was only ever going to be a small-scale case study design. This has obvious implications for generalisability; a very small number of parents were interviewed, linked to a very small number of schools, within one local authority. Local authorities across England are very heterogeneous in terms of size, geography and population density, again affecting the extent to which findings can be generalised; in a smaller LA, for example, pupils may not face the same long journeys to the nearest specialist provision as in a large, rural authority like Landshire. The focus on depth rather than breadth was a deliberate decision as there was no directly relevant previous research to draw on.

In addition to the small sample sizes, another factor which limits the extent to which findings can be generalised was the focus on schools deemed to be demonstrating good practice with regard to provision for pupils with HF ASC. Not all mainstream schools and academies will offer the same level of individualisation, flexibility and staff training as those in the study, and not all generic special schools will have NAS accreditation or senior staff members working for autism outreach teams. The participating schools do, however, show what can be done within that type of provision for pupils with HF ASC.

**5.5.2 Issues arising during the course of the study**

Unfortunately it was not possible to visit an example of every identified school type. Further interviews had been arranged but were then cancelled due to factors
outside of the researcher’s control such as ill health of participants. Broad data about these school types were collected from the interviews with LA officers. It was also not possible to interview two parents from each of the schools, again due to factors outside of the researcher’s control. Following this initial study it may be more practical to gather wider parent and SENCO views through another method, perhaps a questionnaire; this would allow a much greater number of views to be taken into account without the time implications associated with both interviewing individual participants and analysing the interview data.

5.6 Implications of the study for various stakeholders

The findings of this study have implications for a range of stakeholders including each group of participants and other groups of professionals. Arrangements have been made for the researcher to meet with each of the participants in the study to provide feedback on the findings and to discuss the implications in more detail.

5.6.1 Implications for local authorities

Most comments made by participants about the secondary school provision available for pupils with HF ASC were positive. The decision-making process was smooth and without issue for some parents, although others did have difficulty. The main reported issue was around a perceived lack of support in choosing an appropriate school for a pupil. This support could potentially be enhanced in a variety of ways, for example through helping parents to access support services such as Parent Partnership, through establishing or directing parents towards existing parent support groups or through ensuring parents are able to independently access comprehensive but accessible information about different schools. All of this could be incorporated into the LA’s local offer. Publishing a local offer is now a statutory duty for local authorities (DfE, 2014c) and it must be comprehensive, up to date, transparent and accessible. The code of practice also states that the local offer must be developed, and reviewed, in collaboration with children, young people and parents. If parents report that they do not have sufficient support in making decisions about secondary school placements, this could be viewed as feedback towards the local offer; a collaborative approach such as focus groups of parents could be used to improve the published local offer to ensure that parents have access to the information that they feel would be genuinely useful in making school placement decisions. From the experiences of one participant in this study, this could perhaps include:
• Whether the school has spaces in any particular year group, or direct contact details for a person who could answer the question quickly;
• Transport options to the school, for example details of places served by existing school transport;
• Academic levels catered for within the school, for example the range of national curriculum levels pupils are working at and the qualifications pupils are able to access;
• Concrete examples of how pupils with ASC are supported in practice, both with and without a statement of SEN;
• Specific entry criteria, for example a diagnosis of ASC or an EHC plan.

The lack of specialist provision within the LA for pupils with HF ASC was mentioned by both LA officers and parents. The particular gap in provision was that for pupils who were academically able, often achieving above age-related expectations, but whose ASC-related needs such as sensory sensitivities and anxiety prevented successful inclusion in a mainstream setting. Whilst the LA officers described out-of-county provision that catered for these needs, it was also mentioned that the aim was to reduce the number of out-of-county placements. One parent felt that it had been much harder to get an out-of-county placement agreed despite not being able to find appropriate in-county provision; the out-of-county placement was agreed without the need for tribunal but the parent described it as a long and stressful process and felt that it was very much left up to them to prove that no in-county placement would be appropriate.

Pupils in the study LA were only able to access special or specialist provision with a statement of SEN or an EHC plan; these were described as being given according to need rather than set criteria, for example a pupil may undergo an EHC assessment if they were not coping in the mainstream setting despite accessing the full range of support available including outreach. This may contribute to the perception that some pupils are being 'set up to fail' in schools that cannot adequately meet their needs before they are allowed to access special or specialist provision; this was raised as a concern by the SENCos in both the special and the specialist school as well as by some parents. There is some national evidence for the hypothesis that pupils may move to specialist provisions after trying and 'failing in' in-county provision; a 2007 publication by the Audit Commission found that pupils aged 13-15 were the most likely to be in out-of-county provision, suggesting that they had started secondary school in-county and moved to an out-of-county provision later on (Audit Commission, 2007).
As well as requiring a statement or EHC plan, special and specialist school placements, particularly out-of-county placements, are often viewed as suited for those pupils for whom there is no suitable mainstream or in-county provision. Phrasing it in this way suggests that every possible mainstream and in-county provision needs to be assessed for its suitability for the particular pupil, and in the researcher’s professional experience it is often the parent who is responsible for researching and ‘proving’ the inappropriateness of available provision. This can add to the stress of the process for parents and could be particularly problematic for parents who have additional needs themselves. Reducing stress for parents should be an important consideration for LA officers as previous research has found that parents of children with ASC find school decision making processes particularly stressful and face particular stresses above and beyond those faced by parents of children with other types of developmental need (see e.g. Tissot and Evans (2006) and Parsons, Lewis and Ellins, 2009). An alternative to the current special or specialist school entry criteria could be a more positive phrasing – outlining the levels and/or combination of needs that the school is particularly suited to meeting, rather than stating (explicitly or implicitly) that the school caters for students whose needs cannot be met elsewhere. This should be clearly balanced with the ‘trade offs’ as described in the 2006 HMEI report, for example one school may offer a large amount of input for the ‘hidden curriculum’ but only be able to offer GCSEs in maths and English on site, whereas another school may offer a much wider range of GCSEs but only offer ‘hidden curriculum’ support through targeted short-term intervention groups. Having this information in a clearly accessible format that allows for easy comparisons to be made could help the decision-making process to be more transparent and could support parents to make informed decisions; parents could narrow down their choices using such systems, then make personal visits to a smaller number of potentially suitable schools before making a final decision.

In summary, local authorities may want to consider the support and information available to parents when choosing secondary school provision and how accessible this information is to them. As part of the 2014 SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) LAs must involve parents in developing and reviewing their local offer; this statutory collaboration could prove a useful vehicle to ensure the information and services in the local offer are genuinely useful to parents.
5.6.2 Implications for schools

Through recruiting schools delivering good practice for pupils with HF ASC this research has provided examples of what can be achieved in different school types. One key factor was the relationships each school had with a variety of people and organisations. All SENCOs mentioned interactions with staff from other schools of different types as an important contributor to their offer for pupils with HF ASC. Those in the mainstream school and the academy had relationships with the local SMP units and autism outreach teams which enabled them to support pupils with more complex needs. The special school SENCO mentioned links with a local mainstream school through which pupils could access GCSE tuition and examinations if appropriate. The SENCO was also part of the LA’s autism outreach team and offered support to local mainstream schools through this role. The specialist school SENCO described how staff members were creating resources for children with HF ASC and sharing them with other local schools, along with links with a local academy to ensure teachers were able to stay up to date with ‘mainstream’ curriculum developments. The SENCO also expressed a desire for the school to become a ‘training hub’ offering support to other local schools.

It seems clear from the study that staff members from these schools, and undoubtedly others like them, have a lot of knowledge and experience that would be of interest and benefit to staff members from other schools. The LA officers had a clear knowledge of which schools they felt demonstrated good practice; such schools could potentially be supported to deliver workshops or similar to staff members from other schools who would like to develop their own practice.

Given the current political and economic climate schools are having to make changes to the ways in which they operate. The current challenges are outlined in a recent policy paper written by the SEN Policy Research Forum (2015). The relationships between schools and LAs are changing with the increase in academies, which are independent from LAs, and with reductions in LA funding from central government feeding down to changes in funding for schools. Schools are also facing several major changes including those to the curriculum and to assessment. All of these factors are likely to have an impact on how schools cater for all pupils including those with SEN and, more specifically, with HF ASC. With the potential for reduced LA-funded services it may be that increasing numbers of schools form partnerships, alliances and ‘hubs’. All of the schools that were involved in this study mentioned some sort of partnership with other schools, including for example supporting other schools through staff expertise, receiving specialist advice,
enabling pupils to access academically appropriate tuition and assessments or writing and delivering curriculum materials and training packages for specific pupil groups. These partnerships were mentioned very favourably with regard to meeting the needs of pupils with HF ASC and it may be beneficial for other schools to explore similar collaborative approaches.

5.6.3 Implications for ASC specialist teams

Although the LA’s autism outreach team was not directly involved in the research, the SENCO from the special school was also an outreach worker for the team and the role of the team was therefore mentioned within the context of the school interview. The SENCO explained that all parents of pupils with a diagnosis of ASC were able to access support from the autism outreach team regarding secondary school transition and that this information should be provided at the time of diagnosis. None of the parents interviewed, however, appeared to be aware of this source of support. It could be of use for the autism outreach team and the diagnostic teams to consider the appropriate time to provide parents with information and whether this information should be made available again in a timely manner, for example the autism outreach team contacting all parents of children with an ASC diagnosis when the children begin year five of primary school to remind them of the support on offer.

In the mainstream school and the academy the outreach team were seen as a key source of support in meeting the needs of pupils with HF ASC. This was described as part of the school’s graduated response. SENCOs and LA officers reported that it was usually when outreach had been unsuccessful that an EHC plan, and potentially more specialist provision, were considered. Outreach teams should bear in mind that this may lead to a perceived ‘gatekeeper’ role as well as, or rather than, their input being seen as facilitating inclusion. This could be mediated through a clear description of their role being included in the LA’s local offer and this being highlighted to school staff and parents.

5.6.4 Implications for future research

The limitations of this particular study lend themselves to further research in this area, for example using surveys or similar to gather the views of a wider range of parents and school staff from several different local authorities and comparing provision across all schools, not just those deemed to be demonstrating particularly good practice. However the study findings also generated other avenues for potential future research.
One possible area for further research could be the development and implementation of a ‘profiling tool’ for schools and/or pupils. Comments from participants during the interviews suggest that the various school types are not simply placed along one continuum of need, with higher levels of pupil need requiring more ASC-specific provision. When asked which schools they might recommend for a child who wasn’t making progress in their own school, many SENCOs gave different options depending on whether the unmet needs were ‘academic needs’ or ‘complex ASC needs’, for example. Individual schools from the same ‘type’ also differ in a variety of ways; schools may offer particular support in certain areas, impacting on which pupils would best ‘fit’ the provision. Each pupil will also have their own individual profile of needs; their needs in individual areas may be subtle but, when taken together, may add up to a complex profile. This can make it difficult for parents to compare different schools and assess their suitability for their child.

One option to make the process of school comparison easier could be to develop a measure that would enable schools to rate the support they offer in different areas. This could be likened to a DJ’s mixing desk, with the channels representing different areas of need and the levels representing the degree of support available for each particular need. Careful consideration would need to be given as to how to accurately assess the schools in a way which could be genuinely comparable across very different settings, with several pilot studies likely to be needed. One way to encourage schools to think and report honestly about their relative strengths in different categories may be to use a ‘fixed sum’ approach as used in surveys; school staff could be asked to allocate 100 points across the different categories to represent their relative strengths. Another approach could be for professionals such as EPs to lead an objective assessment process according to particular criteria; an example profile using this approach is demonstrated in figure 5.6.4.1. Such an approach could result in a ‘star rating’ or similar for schools, which would allow easier direct comparisons. Colour coding could also be used to give a quick visual indication of how a school’s score in a particular area compares to other schools of the same type, for example using a ‘traffic light’ system with bars coloured red for ‘significantly below average’, amber for ‘average range’ and green for ‘significantly above average’.

While these approaches may work to compare support profiles in different schools of the same type it could prove difficult to meaningfully compare mainstream provisions to special or specialist provisions which are likely to genuinely offer higher levels of support across a wider range of needs; the ‘trade off’ for these
schools may be in the depth and breadth of the academic curriculum on offer and access to the curriculum, but again this would need further consideration and pilot testing in order to ensure the tool can accurately reflect what schools are able to offer.

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**Figure 5.4.6.1: Potential Local Offer ASC profile for a sample secondary school**

In addition to school profiling, it may be useful to establish a means of carrying out a detailed assessment of pupils in order to accurately identify needs before secondary school transition. Many pupils with HF ASC will not meet LA criteria for EHC assessment and, as a result, may not have had particular needs identified. This may lead to difficulties during the transition from small, structured primary schools to larger secondary schools as has been reported extensively in the literature (e.g. Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Identifying needs before such transitions would enable more appropriate support to be put into place during the transition process, hopefully minimising difficulties for the child and the risk of placement breakdown.
A comprehensive pupil assessment would ideally incorporate the areas outlined in section 5.4.1 above. Educational psychologists could play a key role in developing assessment tools in order to provide a comprehensive but manageable and accessible assessment process. Tools could potentially include aspects of existing assessments such as the Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile (Brown & Dunn, 2002), the Beck Youth Inventories (Beck, Beck, Jolly & Steer, 2005) and the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales (Sparrow, Cicchetti & Balla, 2005), alongside specifically developed observation profiles and questionnaires. Careful consideration would need to be given to ensuring the assessment tools were accessible to pupils with a range of communication, academic and emotional wellbeing needs.

![Pupil profile of ASC needs](image)

**Figure 5.6.4.2: Example pupil profiles for the four 'pen portrait' pupils**

Figure 5.6.4.2 above demonstrates one potential way of illustrating the profile of needs of a pupil with ASC. In the example the needs of the four 'pen portrait' pupils described in the results section of this thesis have been overlaid to demonstrate the variety in level of need of pupils who all fit the criteria of 'high functioning' ASC. In this example pupils' needs in eight different areas have been allocated a score from 0-10, with higher scores indicating greater need in that area.
Although the school profiling tool and pupil profiling assessment have been introduced separately, in an ideal world these would work alongside each other to further support school placement decision making. For example, parents could potentially use the results of the pupil profile assessment to search by pattern of needs for appropriate schools through the LA’s local offer. In terms of maintaining genuine parental choice such a tool should not preclude schools that did not match the profile, but could perhaps highlight schools within a certain radius that were the ‘best fit’ for the pupil’s profile of needs.

In order for the pupil and school profiling tools to work together, a 'school support profile' using the same headings as the pupil profile of needs would be beneficial. This could be provided as part of the school's Local Offer in addition to the summary ranking profile shown in figure 5.6.4.1. An example for the four schools involved in the current study is shown in figure 6.5.4.3 below; this is not based on data and is purely intended as an illustration of what a profile could look like. Such a profile could potentially be generated in collaboration with each school's link EP, or potentially one particular EP with overall responsibility for the project to enable greater consistency.

![School support profile](image)

Figure 5.6.4.3: Example school support profile for the four types of school involved in the study (purely illustrative, not based on data)

A further potential area for research could be tracking the longer-term outcomes for pupils with HF ASC. This could include monitoring the number of pupils who transfer...
between schools and the reasons for the transfer as well as other measures such as qualifications achieved and post-16 destinations. At the present time LAs do not tend to hold specific data on the number of pupils with HF ASC, making tracking outcomes difficult to achieve particularly for those pupils who do not have an EHC plan. A current gap in knowledge could begin to be addressed by exploring long-term outcomes for pupils with HF ASC attending a range of types of secondary provision, from primary to secondary transition through to post-16 destinations and potentially beyond. In conjunction with the profiling tools described above, outcomes could potentially be tracked more specifically according to particular pupil profiles, levels of school support in different areas and the similarities and discrepancies between pupil profiles of need and school profiles of support.

5.6.5 Implications for educational psychologists

As scientist-practitioners, educational psychologists are well placed to carry out research relating to educational issues. Research is one of the five core functions of educational psychologists as identified in a 2002 review of educational psychology services, along with consultation, assessment, intervention and training (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2002). In the researcher's experience, educational psychologists often have a good knowledge of a range of schools within their area and of their particular ways of working. Educational psychologists are also qualified and experienced in carrying out direct work with children and young people including carrying out a wide range of assessments. As a result of this, educational psychologists could play a pivotal role in the secondary school decision making process for pupils with HF ASC, perhaps through the type of research described in section 5.7.5. They could also play a lead role in assessing pupil needs in a wide range of areas and also in supporting schools to self-assess their offer for pupils with HF ASC.

5.7 Summary

This study has begun to address a gap in the literature regarding how good practice guidelines are implemented in practice across the range of secondary school provision available to pupils with HF ASC in one local authority. It has also provided some information about how the local authority officers, school staff and parents make decisions about which schools would be appropriate for which groups of pupils according to their particular needs. Although this was only a very small-scale case study the findings have generated various potential areas for more specific research. The findings could also be used to develop different methodologies to
enable greater amounts of data to be taken into account, for example surveys of parents and SENCOs rather than time-consuming individual interviews.

The findings of this study show that secondary schools of all types can demonstrate good practice in terms of provision for pupils with HF ASC. The differences between what is offered by different types of school are often subtle, as are the differences in pupil need in the different school types. The differences that have been identified, when considered alongside existing literature, could be used as a basis for the development of a ‘profiling tool’ enabling schools to identify and share with parents the levels of support on offer for pupils with ASC for different aspects of school life. They could also inform a ‘pupil profile’ framework, whereby a pupil’s needs across various areas of development could be assessed and clearly identified and then matched with the support on offer across different individual schools and types of provision.

All participants were in agreement that pupils with ASC need access to school-based support that can meet their needs and enable them to meet their potential as learners. All of the schools involved in this research had clear plans and supportive structures in place to enable them to meet the needs of their pupils with ASC. In the researcher’s view the priorities now should be to support schools demonstrating good practice to share their expertise with staff from other schools and to ensure that pupils with ASC have access to the schools that are best placed to meet their particular individual needs. This may not be a simple process and detailed assessment is likely to require significant time and resources, especially if it is something that is not currently done in any form. The goal would be that the medium- and long-term benefits of this initial profiling and matching process should outweigh the costs through reduced levels of placement breakdowns and improved long-term outcomes into adulthood.
REFERENCES


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http://www.mewan.net/senco/index.php?category_id=17


APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Letter of ethical approval

Ethics Education

To: Lucy Reynolds
Cc: Caroline Bond, Deborah Kubiena

Dear Lucy

Ref: PGR-R622717-A1
Project Title: Exploring perceptions of good practice in the organisation and provision of secondary education for pupils with high functioning autistic spectrum disorder

I am pleased to confirm that your ethics application has now been approved by the School Research Integrity Committee (RIC) against a pre-approved UREC template.

If anything untoward happens during your research then please ensure you make your supervisor aware who can then raise it with the RIC on your behalf.

This approval is confirmation only for the Ethical Approval application, though I note that you have received School approval for the FRA form.

Regards

Gail

Gail Dixwell | Senior Programmes Administrator
School of Environment, Education and Development | The University of Manchester | Arthur Lewis Building 2.020 | Oxford Road | Manchester M13 9PL | UK

Tel: +44(0)161 275 0317

Intranet: http://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/studentintranet/miestudenthome/integrityethics/

For information on ethical research within the University, please refer to
www.researchsupport.manchester.ac.uk/Governance/Ethics
Appendix 2: Information and consent form – LA staff

Exploring good practice in the organisation and provision of secondary education for pupils with high functioning autism spectrum conditions

Participant Information Sheet – Local Authority Employees

You are being invited to take part in a research study as part of the researcher’s Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the research?

Lucy Reynolds, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

What is the aim of the research?

Local Authorities meet the needs of children with high-functioning autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) in different ways, for example through mainstream schools, schools with enhanced or resourced provision, ASC units attached to mainstream schools, and a range of special schools. There is currently a lack of research into the effectiveness of the range of types of provision, and how this is allocated, at meeting pupils' needs.

This research will begin to address this gap by looking at what parents, school SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators) and local authority staff see as good practice in one local authority. It will specifically focus on views about the range of secondary school provision available for pupils with high functioning ASC, how this provision is organised and allocated and perceptions of the different schools. It will hopefully result in examples of perceived good practice and areas of universal need in decisions around school provision.

Why have I been chosen?

As a local authority employee working on some level with secondary-aged pupils with ASC it is likely that you will have particular views about the provision available. You are also likely to have had first-hand experience of the processes associated with deciding appropriate provision for pupils and your views on this, along with the range of provision, are very important.

Two local authority employees will be recruited to take part in the research, along with SENCOs and parents/carers.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

You would be asked to take part in an interview with the researcher, lasting approximately 1-2 hours, at a time and place to suit you. The interview would be audio-recorded; this recording would be stored securely and any identifying details would be anonymised during transcription.
You would also be asked to identify a small number of schools that you believe demonstrate good practice for pupils with high-functioning ASC. This would be discussed further during the initial interview or, if you require further information beforehand, by contacting the researcher.

**What happens to the data collected?**

The interviews will be transcribed and then analysed to look for key themes. The analysis will also incorporate views from interviews with parents and carers, special educational needs coordinators and another local authority employee to gain an overall picture of what different groups of people see as good practice and as possible areas for development within the local authority.

**How is confidentiality maintained?**

All information that is collected during this study is strictly confidential. No-one other than the researcher will listen to the audio recordings of your interviews. All recordings and transcriptions will be kept securely on an encrypted data stick. Any identifying information will be anonymised.

The local authority and individual schools will only receive feedback that has been anonymised and combined, meaning that individual participants’ views will not be able to be identified.

**What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

**Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

There will be no payment for participating in this research.

**What is the duration of the research?**

Your involvement would be one interview, lasting approximately 1-2 hours.

**Where will the research be conducted?**

The research will be conducted at a location that is convenient for you. This may be your usual office although alternative locations can be discussed if more convenient.

**Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

The research will be published in the researcher’s thesis. The outcomes may also be published in academic journals. All details will be anonymised.

**Contact for further information**

If you have any questions about this research the researcher and supervisor of the project can be contacted for further discussion on any aspect of this study.

**Lucy Reynolds** (researcher)
Address: Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK, M13 9PL.

Email: Lucy.Reynolds@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Telephone: 0161 275 3511 or 3460 (Please leave a message with Jackie Chisnall - Programme Secretary)

**Caroline Bond** (supervisor):

Address: Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK, M13 9PL.

Email: Caroline.Bond@manchester.ac.uk

Telephone: 0161 275 3511 or 3460 (Please leave a message with Jackie Chisnall - Programme Secretary).

**What if something goes wrong?**

You can contact the researcher or supervisor at any point if you would like to discuss anything or have any questions or concerns. If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with members of the research team, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Coordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Coordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL', by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093.
Exploring good practice in the organisation and provision of secondary education for pupils with high functioning autism spectrum conditions

CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes

5. I agree that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books or journals.

I agree to take part in the above project.

Name of participant ____________________ Date ___________ Signature ____________________

Name of person taking consent ____________________ Date ___________ Signature ____________________
Appendix 3: Information and consent form – SENCOs

Exploring good practice in the organisation and provision of secondary education for pupils with high functioning autism spectrum conditions

Participant Information Sheet – SENCOs

You are being invited to take part in a research study as part of the researcher’s Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the research?

Lucy Reynolds, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

What is the aim of the research?

Local Authorities meet the needs of children with high-functioning autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) in different ways, for example through mainstream schools, schools with enhanced or resourced provision, ASC units attached to mainstream schools, and a range of special schools. There is currently a lack of research into the effectiveness of the range of types of provision, and how this is allocated, at meeting pupils' needs.

This research will begin to address this gap by looking at what parents, school SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators) and local authority staff see as good practice in one local authority. It will specifically focus on views about the range of secondary school provision available for pupils with high functioning ASC, how this provision is organised and allocated and perceptions of the different schools. It will hopefully result in examples of perceived good practice and areas of universal need in decisions around school provision.

Why have I been chosen?

As the SENCO of a school that caters for secondary-aged pupils with high-functioning ASD you will have first-hand experience of how schools meet the needs of these pupils. You may also have been involved in decision-making processes regarding appropriate provision for individual pupils, for example those moving into or out of your school. Your opinions about these processes and the provision available in both your school and others within the local authority are very important.

A member of local authority staff has identified your school as one that demonstrates good practice for pupils with ASD. One school from each type of provision (e.g. mainstream, resourced provision, special) has been identified and the SENCO from each has been approached for their views.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

You would be asked to take part in an interview with the researcher, lasting approximately 1-2 hours, at a time to suit you. The interview would be audio-recorded;
this recording would be stored securely and any identifying details would be
anonymised during transcription.

You would also be asked to identify and contact two parents or carers of pupils with
high-functioning ASD who you think would be willing to share their views through an
interview. You will be provided with information sheets and consent forms for this.

What happens to the data collected?

The interviews will be transcribed and then analysed to look for key themes. The
analysis will also incorporate views from interviews with parents and carers, other
SENCOs and local authority staff to gain an overall picture of what different groups of
people see as good practice and as areas that need development within the local
authority.

How is confidentiality maintained?

All information that is collected during this study is strictly confidential. No-one other
than the researcher will listen to the audio recordings of your interviews. All recordings
and transcriptions will be kept securely on an encrypted data stick. Any identifying
information will be anonymised.

The local authority and individual schools will only receive feedback that has been
anonymised and combined, meaning that individual participants’ views will not be able
to be identified.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you
will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you
decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Will I be paid for participating in the research?

There will be no payment for participating in this research.

What is the duration of the research?

Your involvement would be one interview, lasting approximately 1-2 hours.

Where will the research be conducted?

The research will be conducted at your school at a time that is convenient for you.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The research will be published in the researcher’s thesis. The outcomes may also be
published in academic journals. All details will be anonymised.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions about this research the researcher and supervisor of the
project can be contacted for further discussion on any aspect of this study.
Lucy Reynolds (researcher)

Address: Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK, M13 9PL.

Email: Lucy.Reynolds@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Telephone: 0161 275 3511 or 3460 (Please leave a message with Jackie Chisnall - Programme Secretary)

Caroline Bond (supervisor):

Address: Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK, M13 9PL.

Email: Caroline.Bond@manchester.ac.uk

Telephone: 0161 275 3511 or 3460 (Please leave a message with Jackie Chisnall - Programme Secretary).

What if something goes wrong?

You can contact the researcher or supervisor at any point if you would like to discuss anything or have any questions or concerns. If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with members of the research team, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Coordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Coordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL', by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093.
CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes

5. I agree that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books or journals.

I agree to take part in the above project.

Name of participant ______________ Date ______________ Signature ______________

Name of person taking consent ______________ Date ______________ Signature ______________
Appendix 4: Information and consent form – Parents

Exploring good practice in the organisation and provision of secondary education for pupils with high functioning autism spectrum conditions

Participant Information Sheet – Parents

You are being invited to take part in a research study as part of the researcher’s Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the research?

Lucy Reynolds, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

What is the aim of the research?

Local Authorities meet the needs of children with high-functioning autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) in different ways, for example through mainstream schools, schools with enhanced or resourced provision, ASC units attached to mainstream schools, and a range of special schools. There is currently a lack of research into the effectiveness of the range of types of provision, and how this is allocated, at meeting pupils' needs.

This research will begin to address this gap by looking at what parents, school SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators) and local authority staff see as good practice in one local authority. It will specifically focus on views about the range of secondary school provision available for pupils with high functioning ASC, how this provision is organised and allocated and perceptions of the different schools. It will hopefully result in examples of perceived good practice and areas of universal need in decisions around school provision.

Why have I been chosen?

As a parent or carer of a child with high-functioning ASC you will have had first-hand experience of finding an appropriate secondary school for your child and the local authority processes associated with this. Your opinions about these processes and the provision available for your child are very important.

Two parents or carers of pupils with ASC have been contacted from each school visited as part of the research. You have been approached by the SENCO as they felt you would be a good candidate to take part and share your views.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

You will be asked to come into school at a convenient time for you for an interview with the researcher, lasting approximately 1-2 hours. The interview would be audio-recorded; this recording would be stored securely and any identifying details would be anonymised during transcription.
What happens to the data collected?

The interviews will be transcribed and then analysed to look for key themes. The analysis will also incorporate views from interviews with other parents and carers, special educational needs coordinators and local authority staff to gain an overall picture of what different groups of people see as good practice and as areas that need development within the local authority.

How is confidentiality maintained?

All information that is collected during this study is strictly confidential. No-one other than the researcher will listen to the audio recordings of your interviews. All recordings and transcriptions will be kept securely on an encrypted data stick. Any identifying information will be anonymised.

The local authority and individual schools will only receive feedback that has been anonymised and combined, meaning that individual participants’ views will not be able to be identified.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Will I be paid for participating in the research?

There will be no payment for participating in this research.

What is the duration of the research?

Your involvement would be one interview, lasting approximately 1-2 hours.

Where will the research be conducted?

The research will be conducted at your child’s school at a time that is convenient for you. Alternative locations may be available if meeting at the school would be particularly inconvenient; please contact the researcher if this is the case.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The research will be published in the researcher’s thesis. The outcomes may also be published in academic journals. All details will be anonymised.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions about this research the researcher and supervisor of the project can be contacted for further discussion on any aspect of this study.

Lucy Reynolds (researcher)

Address: Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK, M13 9PL.
Email: Lucy.Reynolds@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Telephone: 0161 275 3511 or 3460 (Please leave a message with Jackie Chisnall - Programme Secretary)

Caroline Bond (supervisor):

Address: Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, School of Environment, Education and Development, Ellen Wilkinson Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, UK, M13 9PL.

Email: Caroline.Bond@manchester.ac.uk

Telephone: 0161 275 3511 or 3460 (Please leave a message with Jackie Chisnall - Programme Secretary).

What if something goes wrong?

You can contact the researcher or supervisor at any point if you would like to discuss anything or have any questions or concerns. If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with members of the research team, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Coordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Coordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL', by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093.
Exploring good practice in the organisation and provision of secondary education for pupils with high functioning autism spectrum conditions

CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio -recorded

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes

5. I agree that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books or journals.

I agree to take part in the above project.

Name of participant ___________________________ Date ___________________________ Signature ___________________________

Name of person taking consent ___________________________ Date ___________________________ Signature ___________________________
Appendix 5: Interview schedules – LA officers

Local Authority officer

Based on RQ1: What is the range of provision for pupils with high functioning ASC at secondary age in one local authority and how are placement decisions made?

- How many secondary-aged pupils with ASC are there in your authority?
  - How many of these would be described as 'high functioning'?
  - Does your authority have a particular definition of 'high functioning' autism?
  - How many / what proportion of pupils with ASC / HF ASC have statements?
    ▪ When would/wouldn’t a pupil with ASC have a statement?

- How are school placements determined for:
  - Pupils with a statement
  - Pupils without a statement
    ▪ (prompt – who has an input into decisions?)

- What are the policies around disputes/requesting a change in provision for:
  - Pupils with a statement
  - Pupils without a statement
    ▪ (prompt – who has an input into decisions?)

- Can pupils/parents/professionals request a place at a specific school based on a diagnosis of ASC?

- What schools do these pupils go to?
  - What categories of school are there? E.g. mainstream, resourced provision, generic special, out-of-county
  - What are the criteria for entry? (prompt for copies of documents)
  - How are placements monitored / evaluated?

- Please could you identify one example of good practice from each of these categories of school?
  - What makes these particular schools stand out as being examples of good practice?
**Local Authority autism professional**

*Based on RQ2: How do the types of provision map on to the spectrum of needs of pupils with high functioning ASC, in policy and in practice?*

- What types of school do secondary-age pupils with HF ASC go to in your authority?
  - Can you describe the 'typical' pupil at each type of school?
  - Do the schools have any particular specialisms? (e.g. particular courses, on-site specialist staff etc)

- Who decides which school pupils with HF ASC go to?
  - If someone disagrees with this decision, what happens?

- Thinking of ASC as a spectrum of functioning, where would your authority's schools fit on to this spectrum? *(Could do this visually if interview is happening face-to-face rather than over the phone)*
  - What features of each school make it particularly appropriate for pupils with that level of functioning?

- If a pupil is struggling in a mainstream secondary school, as a result or possible result of features of ASC, what would happen for:
  - A pupil with a diagnosis and a statement
  - A pupil with a diagnosis without a statement
  - A pupil without a diagnosis with a statement
  - A pupil without a diagnosis or a statement

- Does the authority have any written policies regarding school provision, dispute resolution etc for pupils with ASC? *(if yes – ask for copies)*
  - Do any types of school or individual schools have written policies regarding criteria for admission, dispute resolution etc? *(if yes, ask for copies)*
Appendix 6: Interview schedule – SENCOs

SENCOs

Based on RQ2: How do the types of provision map on to the spectrum of needs of pupils with high functioning ASC, in policy and in practice?

- How many pupils with ASC are there at your school? What percentage of the total pupils has ASC? (If an all-through school, ask specifically about the secondary age range)

- Does your school provide any specialist services for pupils with ASC?
  - Prompt: specialist teachers, staff training, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, transition planning, work experience, qualifications, social skills

- Thinking of ASC as a spectrum of functioning, where would your school fit on to this spectrum? (Could do this visually if interview is happening face-to-face rather than over the phone)
  - What features of this school make it particularly appropriate for pupils with that level of functioning?
  - Where do you feel your school fits within a local authority-level overview of provision for pupils with ASC?
    - Where is the 'next step' up and down in terms of functioning?

- If a pupil with HF ASC at your school is struggling and you aren't sure if you're the appropriate provision, what steps would you take?
  - Would this vary depending on whether or not they have a diagnosis and/or statement?

- What do you feel your school does particularly well for pupils with HF ASC?

- In an ideal world, what would you do differently as a school for pupils with HF ASC?

- On a scale of 1-10, how well do you feel the local authority's policies and procedures for determining provision for pupils with HF ASC work?
  - How do you know it's not a (one step lower)?
  - What would it need to do to be a (one step higher)?
Appendix 7: Interview schedule – Parents

Parents

Based on RQ2: How do the types of provision map on to the spectrum of needs of pupils with high functioning ASC, in policy and in practice?

- How was your child's secondary school placement decided?
  - What do you feel worked well with this process?
  - Would you have liked anything to have been done differently?

- Do you feel the local authority's decision making process was clear and transparent?
  - Did you have a good overview of the range of provision available to your child?
  - Do you feel your opinion was taken into account?
  - Who had an input into the decision making process?

- Do you feel your child's current school is a good match for their strengths and areas of difficulty?
  - Why/why not?

- If you were unhappy about your child’s provision at any point, would you know what to do/who to talk to?

- What do you feel your child's school does particularly well for pupils with HF ASC?

- In an ideal world, what would you like the school to do differently for pupils with HF ASC?

- On a scale of 1-10, how well do you feel the local authority's policies and procedures for determining provision for pupils with HF ASC work?
  - How do you know it's not a (one step lower)?
  - What would it need to do to be a (one step higher)?
Appendix 8: Case study protocol

A. Overview of the case study

Research has shown that children and young people with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) can find mainstream secondary school life difficult, with high numbers of exclusions and other placement breakdowns including school refusal. Children with ASC may attend various types of school including mainstream, enhanced mainstream, generic special or ASC specialist schools. Not all school types are available in all areas of the country, some have specific entrance requirements and schools of the same type may be very different in terms of ethos and available support.

No research to date has looked at policies and practice related to the full range of provision in local authorities for pupils with HF ASC. This thesis will attempt to address this gap through an exploratory investigation into provision and decision making within one local authority and how this is viewed by various stakeholders.

The aims of the project are to:

- Identify the range of provision available to secondary-age young people with high-functioning autism spectrum conditions in one local authority in the UK
- Explore an example of ‘good practice’ from each of these types of provision, identifying what works from the perspective of local authority officers, the SENCO and parents
- Explore the processes that lead to particular pupils attending particular secondary schools and their efficacy, from the perspective of local authority officers, SENCOs and parents

The study will involve interviews with staff members from the local authority and the SENCOs and parents from a selection of schools of various types identified by the local authority officers as demonstrating ‘good practice’ in terms of their provision for pupils with ASC.

B. Data collection procedures

Data collection will take place at the LA offices and in various schools. Interview dates, times and locations will be arranged by phone and/or email to be mutually convenient and will be checked by phone and/or email shortly before the agreed date. All guidelines in the Fieldwork Risk Assessment will be followed.
The researcher will contact the LA officers directly following an introduction by the researcher’s supervisor. The LA officers will contact the ‘good practice’ school SENCOs to introduce the researcher who will then make direct contact to gain consent and arrange interviews. The SENCOs will approach and gain consent from parents and will arrange interviews in discussion with the researcher.

LA officers and SENCOs will be asked to arrange for a quiet room to be available for the interviews where there will be no interruptions.

Any documents will be collected by the researcher on the day of the interview or, ideally, will be emailed by participants to the researcher’s University email address.

The researcher will need to bring a Dictaphone, two sets of spare batteries, spare information and consent forms, interview schedules, and a notepad and pens to make supplemental notes if needed.

Data collection should be completed by October 2014.

Participants will be given a copy of the interview schedule in advance, either by email for the LA officers and SENCOs or in person by the SENCOs for parents. Interviews should follow this schedule; this can be flexible and additional questions may arise but all questions on the schedule should be asked. Participants will be asked whether there is anything else they would like to mention at the end of the interview.

Each interview should begin with a recap of the study, its purpose and ethical considerations e.g. establishing consent and confidentiality. Each interview should finish with an outline of next steps, e.g. that the themes will be shared with the participant for their input as part of member checking. Participants should be given sufficient time and opportunity to ask any questions they may have and to have these questions answered to their satisfaction.

C. Data collection questions

For the questions presented to individual participants please see the relevant interview schedule.

Overall questions and considerations to keep in mind during interviews:

- What background does the participant bring to the situation? (e.g. parent may also be a teacher or support worker, may also have ASC, may be an
advocate for other parents; a SENCO may also be the parent of a child with SEN, may or may not be on the senior management committee; a LA officer may be in the midst of a restructure or funding cuts)

- Explore and attempt to disentangle prior experiences to current experiences, e.g. particularly good or bad experiences in a previous school are likely to influence perceptions of the current school.
- Explore what isn’t being said as well as what is explicitly stated, whilst being mindful of ethical considerations; e.g. if a parent doesn’t report considering or looking at any other schools or school types, why is this?

**D. Guide for the case study report**

Each case (school) will begin with a summary and a ‘pupil profile’ which will not reflect any one individual child but a composite of factors discussed during the interviews. The findings will then be presented as thematic maps before a narrative discussion. A cross-case summary will compare the different schools. The LA interviews will provide a background to the context.
### Appendix 9: Data summaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school¹</th>
<th>Comprehensive community school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of pupils on roll¹</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range¹</td>
<td>11-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils eligible for free school meals¹</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs including English and maths in 2014¹</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Most recent Ofsted outcome:²

- Overall result: Good
- Achievement of pupils: Good
- Quality of teaching: Good
- Behaviour and safety of pupils: Good
- Leadership and management: Good

#### Parent view results:³

- ‘My child is happy at this school’: 96%
- ‘My child makes good progress at this school’: 82%
- ‘My child is taught well at this school’: 86%
- % of parents who would recommend the school to other parents: 90%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school¹</th>
<th>Comprehensive academy – converter mainstream</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of pupils on roll¹</td>
<td>584</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age range¹</td>
<td>11-18</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of pupils eligible for free school meals¹</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs including English and maths in 2014¹</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Most recent Ofsted outcome:**²

- Overall result: Good
- Achievement of pupils: Good
- Quality of teaching: Good
- Behaviour and safety of pupils: Good
- Leadership and management: Outstanding

**Parent view results:**³

- ‘My child is happy at this school’: 92%
- ‘My child makes good progress at this school’: 90%
- ‘My child is taught well at this school’: 70%
- % of parents who would recommend the school to other parents: 84%

² Information taken from the school’s most recent published Ofsted inspection as of 28.02.2015, available via [http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/](http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/)
³ Information taken from Ofsted’s Parent View data as of 28.02.2015, available via [https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/](https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Community special school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of pupils on roll</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>2-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils eligible for free school meals</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs including English and maths in 2014</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Most recent Ofsted outcome:**
- Overall result: Good
- Achievement of pupils: Good
- Quality of teaching: Good
- Behaviour and safety of pupils: Good
- Leadership and management: Good

**Parent view results:**
- ‘My child is happy at this school’: 100%
- ‘My child makes good progress at this school’: 91%
- ‘My child is taught well at this school’: 89%
- % of parents who would recommend the school to other parents: 97%

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2 Information taken from the school’s most recent published Ofsted inspection as of 28.02.2015, available via [http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/](http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/)
3 Information taken from Ofsted’s Parent View data as of 28.02.2015, available via [https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/](https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Free school – special</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of pupils on roll</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>11-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils eligible for free school meals</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs including English and maths in 2014</td>
<td>Data not available (too few pupils in cohort)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Most recent Ofsted outcome:**
- Overall result: Good
- Achievement of pupils: Good
- Quality of teaching: Good
- Behaviour and safety of pupils: Good
- Leadership and management: Good

**Parent view results:**
- ‘My child is happy at this school’: Data not available (insufficient responses)
- ‘My child makes good progress at this school’: Data not available (insufficient responses)
- ‘My child is taught well at this school’: Data not available (insufficient responses)
- % of parents who would recommend the school to other parents: Data not available (insufficient responses)

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2 Information taken from the school’s most recent published Ofsted inspection as of 28.02.2015, available via [http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/](http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/)
3 Information taken from Ofsted’s Parent View data as of 28.02.2015, available via [https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/](https://parentview.ofsted.gov.uk/)
Appendix 10: Screenshots of the thematic analysis process

1. Familiarity with the data: transcription and re-reading

P: Yeah, I do, because they give him a lot of encouragement, they’ve got a stamp system here, so he very much likes collecting his stamps on his business card, and having points from the teachers here, he loves his little planner, and he likes organising his week and he gets his stamps which then lead to certificates for effort and for the work he’s doing, he’s very very proud of that so it’s always a big incentive, it’s a massive encouragement.

R: And you feel that they support the areas he struggles with?

P: Yeah they’ve moved where he sits in class, er, the headmaster’s been very proactive with a few issues to do with the teasing and bullying matters, and everything’s just going fine.

R: Great, sounds like a really good experience.

P: Yeah, and he’s really growing up, it’s amazing here, just to see how he is, and he’s got certain subjects he’s particularly good at and things, and he’s hoping to do that for the future.

R: If you were unhappy about the school at any point, or about what he was able to get in school, would you know what to do and who to talk to?

P: Yes, because the headmaster is also the SENCO and I see him quite often anyway because I’m regularly at the school, and er no everything seems to be absolutely fine, they’re even going to give

2. Generating initial codes

![Screenshot of initial coding process](image1.png)

![Screenshot of initial coding process](image2.png)
3. Searching for themes

4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes

6. Producing the report

Please see chapter four: results.