

# The Links Alternative Provision Academy

1 Hixberry Lane, St Albans, AL4 0TZ

**Inspection dates** 30 April–1 May 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
	This inspection:	<b>Inadequate</b>	<b>4</b>
Achievement of pupils		Inadequate	4
Quality of teaching		Inadequate	4
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Inadequate	4
Leadership and management		Inadequate	4

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is a school that requires special measures.

- The academy does not safeguard students adequately because it frequently sends them home without following exclusion procedures and without being confident that parents know that they have been sent home. Attendance registers are not always up to date.
- Students fail to make the progress and reach the standards that they should in English, mathematics and science. Too few take qualifications in these subjects at the end of Year 11.
- Weak readers do not make enough progress because reading is not taught well and students do not have enough opportunity to practise their reading.
- Teaching is inadequate because it is poorly planned. Too many lessons do not motivate students or make them more independent.
- Students' behaviour does not improve adequately. Behaviour management strategies are not used consistently and are not sufficiently effective. Attendance is too low.
- Leaders do not have an accurate picture of the academy's performance and have failed to make effective improvements. Important information about students' achievements and behaviour is inaccurate.
- The new governing body does not yet have a good understanding of how well students are doing or the quality of teaching.
- Leaders' management of teaching does not improve the quality of teaching and students' learning.

### The school has the following strengths

- Students at Key Stage 3 successfully reintegrate into their mainstream schools.
- Some students gain valuable vocational experience and skills to help them decide what to do after leaving the academy.

## Information about this inspection

- This was a no-notice inspection; the academy was informed of the inspection shortly before the arrival of the inspectors.
- Eleven lessons were observed and two learning walks (short visits to a number of lessons to gain an initial overview) were carried out. Students' learning and progress were also evaluated by looking at their work and through case studies.
- Discussions took place with the headteacher, deputy headteacher and other members of the senior leadership team, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, teachers and support staff. There was also discussion with two members of the local authority.
- Students' views were gained from individual discussions and from the academy's own survey.
- The views of parents and carers were obtained from the academy's own survey and from additional correspondence provided by the academy. There were no responses to Parent View (an online survey of their views).
- A wide range of documents was scrutinised, including the academy's information about students' achievement and behaviour, its self-evaluation and its monitoring of teaching.

## Inspection team

Charlie Henry, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Janet Thompson

Her Majesty's Inspector

## Full report

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

### Information about this school

- The Links Alternative Provision Academy converted to an academy with its own governing body in February 2013. Prior to this time it was known as the Links Education Support Centre, a pupil referral unit responsible to the local authority through a management committee. This is the first inspection since becoming an academy. The predecessor provision was last inspected by Ofsted in November 2011 and was judged to be outstanding.
- The academy has two sites. The main site provides education for pupils at Key Stage 4 who are excluded or at risk of exclusion from mainstream schools in the St Alban's area. The academy's second site at Woolam Crescent provides ten-week, part-time programmes for students at Key Stage 3 who are dually registered with mainstream schools. The academy also provides outreach support to secondary schools in the locality.
- The range of vocational experience for some students at Key Stage 4 is extended by the use of alternative provision. The providers used are the Wheels Project, High Herts Horse Riding, 4AM for Arts and Music and local sports facilities.
- Students have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties; a few have autistic spectrum disorders or other diagnosed needs. A small proportion of students have statements of special educational need.
- An average proportion of students is eligible for free school meals; very few students are looked after by the local authority. The academy receives pupil premium funding (additional funding for those at risk of underachievement) for these students.
- Most students are boys. An average proportion of students is from minority ethnic backgrounds; very few speak English as an additional language.

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve safeguarding by:
  - ensuring attendance registers are accurate and up-to-date
  - following exclusion procedures correctly when it is decided that a student should not be on the academy's site
  - making sure that, as far as is reasonable and as quickly as possible, parents know when their child is not at the academy
  - monitoring frequently when students have home-based study.
- Improve the quality of teaching, accelerate progress and raise attainment, especially in English, mathematics and science, by:
  - making sure that lesson planning is thorough and based on accurate assessments of each student's skills, knowledge and understanding
  - providing interesting activities that motivate and challenge students to do well

- increasing students' independence by not providing support too soon or helping them with things that they can do for themselves
- increasing the number of students taking relevant qualifications at the end of Year 11
- ensuring that home-based learning is only used where, and for as long as, necessary to meet a student's needs and that its effectiveness is monitored rigorously.

■ Raise reading standards by:

- making sure that there is daily teaching of reading based on a thorough understanding of the students' skills and a firm knowledge of effective teaching methods
- providing frequent opportunities to practise reading in lessons.

■ Improve students' behaviour and their attendance by:

- ensuring that the management of behaviour is consistent in all lessons
- making sure information about behaviour incidents is accurately recorded
- using the information about behaviour incidents to evaluate improvement strategies so as to identify effective approaches and improve aspects that are unsuccessful
- providing further training for staff to improve the effectiveness of behaviour management strategies
- maintaining a very firm stance on the importance of full-time attendance, and rigorously and immediately following up whenever this is not achieved.

■ Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:

- ensuring that all information about students' attendance, progress, attainment and behaviour is up to date and accurate
- evaluating rigorously the effectiveness of the provision and using this understanding to improve students' behaviour and increase their progress so that they reach the standards that they are capable of given their starting points
- making sure that leaders' evaluation of the quality of teaching takes into account students' achievements and progress in improving their behaviour.

■ Improve governance by:

- ensuring governors use a full, detailed and accurate picture of students' performance and the quality of the provision to hold the academy to account for how well they prepare students for when they leave
  - using performance management of staff, including the headteacher, to improve the quality of teaching and students' outcomes.
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## Inspection judgements

### The achievement of pupils is inadequate

- Students make inadequate progress in English, mathematics and science and do not reach the standards they are capable of given their starting points. Too few students take qualifications in these subjects at the end of Year 11.
- Students who are weak readers make inadequate progress. This is due to too little direct teaching of this important subject and insufficient opportunity to practise reading during lessons.
- Weaknesses in learning in lessons observed during the inspection and from scrutiny of students' work are consistent with the inadequate progress they make over time. While there has been some recent improvement in the quality of learning in English lessons, this has not yet been demonstrated in improvements in students' longer-term progress.
- While all students who left last year went into further education, training or employment, their underachievement in English, mathematics and science limits their opportunities for progression onto higher-level further education courses.
- Students do not have equal opportunity to achieve well. Significant differences in success in subjects links strongly to variations in the quality of teaching, especially the low expectations of what students can achieve. The academy has been effective in supporting students from a Traveller or Gypsy/Romany background, maintaining their attendance and supporting their transition towards further education. Students from other ethnic backgrounds, those who speak English as an additional language, and who have different disabilities and special educational needs are equally underachieving. There are too few eligible students to evaluate the impact of the pupil premium.
- The majority of parents who responded to the academy's most recent survey were of the opinion that their children are making good progress. However, some parents did not think progress was good enough. This inspection found that students are not making the progress they should.
- Students rightly place high value on vocational subjects at Key Stage 4, including through the use of off-site provision. They are most successful in these areas of the curriculum, including construction, and hair and beauty. Students gain valuable experience and qualifications that provide pathways to entry into further education, apprenticeships and employment.
- There is also increasingly successful achievement for those who choose to study for awards in information and communication technology (ICT) and physical education.

### The quality of teaching is inadequate

- Too much teaching is inadequate or requires improvement.
- Planning is weak. Teachers do not have the accurate understanding of students' levels of attainment that they need to set suitably challenging work. Sometimes, this results in lessons that are too difficult since the student does not have the necessary underpinning understanding, knowledge and skills. In other lessons, the work is too easy and fails to challenge and interest. Even when the lesson is adequately planned, its focus can wander as distractions onto other topics take over. Learning is inadequate in all of the lessons seen like this. There is a stark

difference in students' behaviour in a poorly thought-through lesson compared with one that is well-planned and interesting.

- Too often students' poor behaviour is not challenged, including swearing, leaning back on chairs and placing feet on the table while listening to the teacher. Too often, lengthy explanations by the teacher at the start of a lesson leave students waiting for a long time and their behaviour deteriorates before they are actually involved in an activity.
- Teachers and teaching assistants are too quick to provide help, often because the work that has been set is not at the correct level, or they provide resources, such as a pencil or a rubber, that the students could easily get for themselves. As a consequence, students do not become as independent as they should and are not prepared well for when they leave.
- Where subject knowledge is strong, as observed in some English lessons and in vocational areas, then on-going assessment of students' learning is used very effectively to direct the pace of the lesson. At these times, students are motivated and make good progress; they behave sensibly and maturely. They have confidence in their teachers and try things that otherwise they would not attempt, for example, reading aloud their latest piece of writing. In a construction lesson, the teacher carefully assessed the students' knowledge as he introduced a new topic on electricity. The students learned how to use cutting tools safely, including why the correct methods are both safer and more effective than ones that they may have used previously.

### **The behaviour and safety of pupils are inadequate**

- Students show poor attitudes to learning and frequent low-level disruptive behaviour in many lessons. This poor behaviour is exacerbated by weaknesses in teaching.
  - There are also significant numbers of incidents of more serious behaviour, including refusal to comply with requests to work, and verbal and physical aggression. The number of these incidents is not rigorously recorded. There is no convincing evidence to show improvements are made over time by those students who are identified as having particular behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties.
  - Students are often sent home when their behaviour is poor. The extent of this approach to managing behaviour is not fully known due to the lack of rigour in transferring information from a handwritten day log to the academy's computer-based records. In addition, there are occasions when staff condone students' wishes to go home when they choose to during the school day. These practices are simply unacceptable.
  - Furthermore, these occasions present a significant safeguarding concern for the students' wellbeing when they are not at the academy. Although attempts are made to contact parents when their child leaves the academy, this may simply be by leaving a text message on a mobile phone. The academy does not have assurance that the parents are aware that their child has left the site.
  - Attendance levels are too low overall. A few students show significant increases in their attendance when they join the academy.
  - Students at Key Stage 3 who attend the Woolam Crescent site for a ten-week part-time programme successfully improve their behaviour and attitude to learning so that they return successfully to full-time placements in their mainstream schools.
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- Students said that they usually feel safe at the academy. This was also their view expressed in a recent survey carried out by the academy. Students also told inspectors there is not a significant level of bullying.

### **The leadership and management are inadequate**

- Leaders do not have an accurate picture of the academy's weaknesses regarding students' achievements. They did not sufficiently understand that many students failed to make adequate progress in awards at the end of Key Stage 4 given their starting points, especially in English and mathematics. Leaders also failed to take into account that many students did not take any qualifications in English, mathematics and science.
- While leaders identified that the levels of unacceptable behaviour were too high and introduced a new strategy in January 2013, they have a false impression that this had brought about some improvement. Analysis of the data upon which this conclusion was made was inaccurate; also the data was incomplete, since not all incidents were transferred from handwritten to computerised records. Inaccurate information about the high occurrence of students being sent home added to this misleading understanding.
- Although the headteacher's analysis of the quality of lessons jointly observed with inspectors was accurate, the academy's own picture of the quality of teaching over time is, in most subject areas, unrealistically positive given the low levels of achievement and frequent occurrence of poor behaviour and absence. There has not been an effective strategy to improve the quality of teaching.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced for most students and contains important core subjects and opportunities for vocational education and training. Improvements have been made to increase courses leading to qualifications in ICT and physical education. The academy is correct in its decision to review its community-based provision, since there is too little evidence of its effectiveness in raising achievements. The curriculum for part-time students at Key Stage 3 successfully supports their return to their mainstream schools. There is insufficient emphasis on improving reading where this is needed and too many students do not take qualifications at the end of Year 11.
- Some students' work is supported by home-based study using online resources, however this work is not monitored sufficiently to ensure that it is effective and that students' safeguarding is assured when they are not studying on the academy site. Alternative provision is monitored effectively since students are accompanied by academy staff.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is not well met. There is insufficient importance placed on the need to attend the academy full-time, to behave appropriately and to achieve as well as possible. There are valuable cultural development opportunities, for example, the residential visit to the Isle of Wight and the work undertaken on Shakespeare's plays.
- Schools who place students at the academy are pleased with the support it provides for those who otherwise might have been excluded. They are also pleased with the effectiveness of the outreach work undertaken by academy staff within their own schools.
- There were no responses to Parent View, however information from the academy's own survey and from other correspondence provided to inspectors by the academy shows that parents value

its work. Some, however, do not think that their children make enough progress.

- Given the students' poor achievements and the lack of improvement in their behaviour, the inadequate understanding of the academy's weaknesses and the lack of effective action to address areas of concern, the leaders and managers do not show the capacity to bring about further improvement.

■ **The governance of the school:**

- The local authority and management committee, prior to the provision's conversion to an academy in February 2013, did not adequately monitor students' achievement, their behaviour and the quality of teaching in the predecessor school. They were not alerted to significant concerns.
  - The performance management of the headteacher and other staff has been ineffective. It has not taken into account the poor performance and low attendance by students and the weaknesses within teaching. The academy cannot demonstrate that pupil premium is used effectively to raise standards.
  - The new governing body does not yet have a good understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. This has been exacerbated by the absence of the headteacher due to illness for a significant period of time in the spring term, as well as the inaccuracy of important information about students' progress, their behaviour and the quality of teaching.
  - There are significant safeguarding concerns. Students are frequently sent home when their behaviour is unacceptable without following required procedures for fixed-term exclusion. Registers are not always accurate and up to date, especially as students leave the academy during the school day. This presents an unacceptable risk should there be an emergency at the academy. Furthermore, although attempts are made to contact parents if a student leaves the academy before their timetabled leaving time, staff do not know if parents have received this information. It is not acceptable to have a policy for some students that relies on leaving a mobile phone text message. This does not give assurance that parents are aware that their child has left the academy. Home-based learning is not rigorously monitored to ensure that students are safeguarded. Statutory responsibilities are met regarding staff recruitment checks and child protection training.
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## What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	139197
<b>Local authority</b>	N/A
<b>Inspection number</b>	421661

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

<b>Type of school</b>	Academy converter
<b>School category</b>	Pupil referral unit
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–16
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	51
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Maire Lynch
<b>Headteacher</b>	Tracey Healy
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Telephone number</b>	01727 836150
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