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Mr M Graham
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Graham

Ofsted 2013 14 survey inspection programme: schools' use of alternative provision

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 15 and 16 July 2013 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher, staff with responsibility for the hair and beauty courses, and groups of students. I also visited the following providers that your students attend: Lancashire Training Services Ltd; Equestrian Centre at Downeyfield Farm; and Furniture Matters.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

This letter briefly summarises our discussion at the end of the visit.

Strengths of this aspect of the school's work

- The school has a strong commitment to providing accredited vocational courses that match students' needs and aspirations. These are popular with students: a significant proportion of Key Stage 4 students choose at least one vocational course from the broad selection offered. In order to ensure that these are of a high enough quality and affordable, almost all vocational provision is offered on site in bespoke facilities such as the beauty salon. Off-site arrangements are made with three providers whose specialist facilities and courses extend the range of opportunities available to students. The school has no immediate plans to reduce the vocational courses offered to students in the light of changes to the recognition given to them in national reporting of schools' performance.

- In order to ensure that students can benefit from opportunities offered off-site, the school is flexible in its approach to providers. In one instance, the school has successfully developed and manages a course which is delivered by the provider. Arrangements for ensuring the health, safety and safeguarding of students are suitable and also tailored to providers' circumstances.
- Early in their school careers, the school identifies students who are at risk of becoming unemployed post-16. They are guided into appropriate vocational courses, and sometimes work placements, to help them gain useful experience, skills and accreditation. Success rates for the motor vehicle maintenance course and the short computer build course indicate that students are placed appropriately. Taster and assessment sessions prior to the start of the courses, help both the students and the providers evaluate their suitability for the courses. However, similar arrangements have not been made for students interested in the horse-care course.
- In the main, providers are content to receive a limited amount of information from the school about students' abilities and behaviour. They feel it is important to allow students to start with a clean slate and take responsibility for their conduct and the impression they create. One provider offers places to students on the basis of its own assessment process. A newer provider would benefit from more information in future.
- There are clear lines of communication between providers and the school, for instance on students' attendance. Providers are confident of a rapid response from the school should an issue arise. They value being able to communicate consistently with the same member of staff, who holds operational responsibility for the off-site vocational courses.
- With the exception of a recently available short course, vocational courses, whether delivered in school or off site, are built into the Key Stage 4 timetable. Students on off-site courses do not miss lessons in other subjects in order to attend and study the core subjects as a discrete group. They join the remainder of their year group for other subjects and are able to participate fully in school life.
- Students attending off-site provision follow GCSE courses in English and mathematics. In science, some are entered for GCSE while others complete BTEC qualifications. In 2012, all but one of these students gained five GCSE passes at grades A*-C. Rates of progress were highest in science, in some cases exceeding the nationally expected rate, where the style of qualification is best suited to their preferred learning styles. Students made least progress in English. Students may, but do not have to, gain a qualification in information and communication technology (ICT). All vocational courses are accredited. All students in the current Year 11 have plans for education, training or employment from September this year.

- The school monitors the performance and personal development of students following vocational courses, on or off site, as part of its usual tracking systems. Students' progress on off-site courses is tracked at the same points as their progress on all other courses, five times each year. One provider sends assessment information to the school. The other course is assessed and managed in-house. Arrangements have just been put in place to evaluate discretely outcomes for those who attend off-site courses. The impact of such provision on students' behaviour and attendance has not been analysed in detail.
- All students spoken to were positive about the vocational courses they are following, and particularly about learning in practical ways. Although not all intend to follow careers linked to these courses, they value the skills they are gaining and recognise that these are improving their employability. For some, the off-site courses have opened up training and career routes which they were unaware of and would not otherwise have been able to access. Students appreciate being treated as employees in a work place environment and say this makes them behave more maturely.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- providing a taster session for students prior to the start of the horse-care course, in order to prevent a high drop-out rate
- ensuring that providers receive the information they need about students' abilities and behaviour at the beginning of the course
- making appropriate arrangements for students to catch up with work they have missed should the school take up further places on the 10 day computer-build course
- considering the introduction of a qualification in ICT to improve students' employability
- analysing the impact of off-site provision on students' personal development.

Yours sincerely

Jane Austin
Her Majesty's Inspector