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Mr R Halford
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Dear Mr Halford

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 1 October 2013 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with the deputy headteacher, the strategic and centre managers of the Western Skills Centre and groups of students in Years 10 and 11. I also held discussions with deputy headteachers of two of the schools that are partners in the Western Skills Centre. I visited the Western Skills Centre and examined a range of documentation.

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

- Some years ago, you and senior leaders at Hawkley Hall High School were dissatisfied with the quality of alternative provision and took steps to improve the situation. Where possible, they decided to provide vocational training in school and this is currently the case for a number of courses including floristry. However, they recognised that this solution was not possible for some vocational areas.
- In 2005, Hawkley Hall High School and four local secondary schools joined forces to set up an off-site facility for training in construction trades. Together they established their own company which opened the Western Skills Centre in 2006. Annually, the five partner schools finance the centre

by funding 24 places each for students in Years 10 and 11. When not all of these are required, spare capacity is made available to other schools and the pupil referral unit.

- The company put in place procedures and training to ensure that safeguarding requirements and health and safety regulations are met. These are systematically checked at regular intervals. The centre provides training in joinery, bricklaying, painting and decorating using industry-standard tools and materials. The centre benefits from strong links with manufacturers in the region and the resulting donations of materials. This, and visits to a wide range of projects, broaden students' experience of the industry.
- The school offers some students for whom it is appropriate the opportunity to follow vocational courses in Key Stage 4 and gain accreditation other than through GCSE or BTEC qualifications. Aspirations are high with the 'best chance of best grade' as a central criterion. All students who attend the construction centre now complete Level 2 courses. Retention rates are very high: only one student has dropped out of the course since the centre opened in 2006.
- When sending students, schools complete a standard form so that centre staff have sufficient information about students' academic performance, their health and personal development at the outset. Links with schools are close, with staff visiting weekly to support students. The centre carries out regular assessments of students' progress and tailors reports to each school's varying requirements. The centre offers a parents' evening on site each year.
- Since the construction course forms one day a week of students' timetables from the beginning of Year 10, they are able to follow a balanced curriculum which includes physical education and personal development. All are entered for GCSEs in English and mathematics, BTEC in science, and follow three other GCSE courses.
- Since the centre opened there has been a rise in the level of students' attainment. In 2013 all the students gained a Level 2 qualification: the majority achieved the diploma. Almost all gained GCSEs in English and mathematics and 87% gained at least five GCSEs at grade C or above. On average, the accreditation students gained in construction was two grades above that predicted on the basis of their prior attainment. All the students have moved on to courses or apprenticeships linked to their qualification in construction.
- Quality assurance operates at two main levels. The centre's strategic manager quality assures the provision for the five schools which makes up the company. This covers all aspects of the centre's operation including the quality of teaching and learning. Reporting on this gives pointers of development but does not always focus sharply on ways to improve learning. There are sensible plans to introduce a checklist for learning

walks which can be completed by school staff on their visits. This has the potential to build up a picture of stronger and weaker areas over time.

- At a whole school level, students' progress on this course is tracked alongside their performance in subjects taught in school. Quality assurance of the construction course falls within a regular system of faculty reviews, in this instance the technologies faculty, by both heads of faculty and senior leaders. Faculty staff meet with governors to discuss reviews.
- Students spoken to were very positive about the course. They like learning through watching a skill demonstrated and then trying it for themselves. They understand the reasons for safety rules and appreciate the experience they are gaining of the world of work. For example, they recognise that if they are late it is reasonable to be asked to make up the time later in the day.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that monitoring focuses sharply on ways to improve learning
- introducing a learning walk checklist for use by school staff in order to build up a picture of strengths and areas for development.

Yours sincerely

Jane Austin
Her Majesty's Inspector