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Mr S Griffiths
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Griffiths

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 25 and 26 February 2014 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you, the assistant headteacher who is in charge of alternative provision, the local authority's Social Inclusion Manager and the head of the Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) Service. I also met students and visited the following providers that your students attend: Northumberland Pupil Referral Unit, Learn Fit, Northumberland College and Skills 4 You.

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

- Partnership working between your staff and the local authority is excellent. The local authority's arrangements for vetting and selecting potential providers are rigorous and thorough. They include a detailed check of the providers' skills and expertise, the suitability of premises and the providers' knowledge of safeguarding and of health and safety. All of the premises visited during this inspection were well maintained, fit for purpose and of good quality.
- You offer two types of alternative provision: packages tailored to the needs of individuals who are at risk of permanent exclusion and vocational options that enrich the curriculum for a small group of students in order to

maintain their interest and motivation. The assistant headteacher's in-depth knowledge and understanding of the circumstances and aspirations of every student ensures that the individual packages are closely matched to need.

- Ensuring that students continue in education is paramount, and so they follow vocational options that they choose and that interest them. All of the providers offer accredited courses, some at GCSE or equivalent. Every course undertaken by the students leads to some form of accreditation. Students also study English and mathematics and other courses designed to enhance their basic skills, personal and social development, self-esteem and their understanding of the requirements of the workplace.
- The providers understand clearly what they are expected to achieve with each student. They are given detailed information about students' academic and behavioural needs in the 'passport' that is written about each student. The passport includes three key objectives for the placement. Providers have their own policies for protecting children and keeping them safe as well as the local authority's policies and procedures. Providers spoke highly of the additional training, for example for safeguarding and first aid, that the local authority providers for them.
- Providers said they had good support from your school. Should they have a concern, they said that your staff always respond quickly to phone calls and make visits straight away if requested.
- The curriculum is tailored to individual needs but the prime aim is to keep students engaged in education. Some of the students who attend alternative provision full time have timetables that are heavily weighted towards the topics that interest them and do not offer the breadth of subjects they would experience in mainstream. This is appropriate for this group of students. For almost all students, attending alternative provision leads to better attendance and a reduction in fixed-term exclusions.
- All students attending alternative provision are able to achieve English and mathematics qualifications. Last year, 15 out of 17 students gained GCSE passes in both English and mathematics; five of them gained grade C or above. The remaining two students gained entry level qualifications. However, currently, not all students are studying English and mathematics at a level that matches their prior attainment at the age of eleven.
- The school's data show that the majority of students currently in Year 11 are on track to make at least the progress expected nationally in both English and mathematics.
- Last year, 14 of the students who left Year 11 went on to jobs or further study related to the courses they had been following. This year, two students have already been successful in securing apprenticeships when they complete Year 11. It was clear from my discussions with you and your staff that alternative provision is seen not only as a means of keeping students engaged with education, but as a way of extending the choices they have once they leave school. Students are offered impartial advice and guidance as to their next steps.

- Providers are required to report on students' progress in their placements at least every six weeks and some do this more frequently. They complete a pro-forma that makes sure that academic progress and progress with personal and social development is recorded and reported.
- The reports from providers are supplemented by visits to provision once each term. At these visits the progress of individual students is discussed. Both you and local authority staff monitor the quality of provision; providers are expected to maintain the standards that they met when they were approved and their status as an approved provider is reviewed annually. However, visits to providers do not routinely include observations of the students at their placement or discussions with individual students about their experiences.
- All of the students that I spoke to expressed positive views of their experiences on placement. Some were able to say how the placement had helped them to develop a more mature attitude towards education and to think about what they want to do next. Some of the providers also seek feedback from students on their experiences.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- undertaking visits to providers when they are in session both to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning at first hand, and to seek feedback from students on their placement
- ensuring that all students who attend alternative providers full time, including higher-attaining students, have the opportunity to study English and mathematics at a level appropriate for their prior attainment
- presenting an evaluative summary of the impact of alternative provision to the governing body once a year, so that they can see the impact of the school's spending on alternative provision on students' academic achievements and their personal development.

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill
Her Majesty's Inspector