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Mrs A Garratt  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Garratt

**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 20 and 21 March 2014 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you and members of your senior leadership team. I also met students and visited the following providers that your students attend:

- Black Country Wheels
- Making Learning Work, with students on placement at Illusions hairdressing and Merry Hill MOT centre.

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 currently works with a small number of trusted providers with which it has established long-term relationships. It has used other providers in the past, but makes changes through its commissioning process to ensure that students' needs and interests are met.
- The two providers that are currently commissioned offer placements to students in diverse settings. Black Country Wheels is a registered independent school which offers safe, spacious and well-appointed workshop, training and classroom facilities. Making Learning Work,

currently the main provider, arranges work placements in a wide range of local businesses, and has rigorous procedures in place to monitor the safety and suitability of these workplaces.

- The main focus of alternative provision placements is on re-engaging in education and training those students who are disaffected with school. Most placements are successful in this regard and lead to marked improvements in behaviour and attendance. The providers offer vocational or business qualifications. Students' progress towards these tends to vary according to each individual's attitudes and dispositions. Nonetheless, the providers have a particularly strong track record in ensuring that students gain places on valuable vocational courses or apprenticeships with local colleges and employers.
- The quality of the information given to the providers is exceptionally thorough and detailed. This enables the providers to have a very good understanding of the needs, backgrounds and characteristics of the students. The main provider takes a comprehensive role in monitoring the development and well-being of the students, including by contributing to multi-agency meetings in support of their progress. Child protection policies and procedures are detailed and comprehensive, shared between school and providers, and well-understood by personnel in the workplaces.
- Providers feel well supported by the school. They particularly value the effectiveness of the communication systems established with the school to deal with any matters arising, from daily attendance to behavioural issues. Businesses offering work placements also praise Making Learning Work highly for its immediate response to any concerns.
- Students' timetables sometimes change a number of times through the year. They are offered highly flexible programmes bespoke to their changing needs to keep them in education and training. The duration of their time off-site on placements can alter, and, on the days that they are in school, most of their academic learning is coordinated and delivered through the Pupil Support Unit (PSU). Students value their positive, supportive relationships with staff in the PSU. Subject departments provide PSU staff with materials to teach, and mark students' work with helpful comments. However, lack of regular teaching by specialist mathematics and English teachers at times restricts students' progress.
- Most students achieve GCSE and/or functional skills accreditation in English and mathematics. At the time of the inspection functional skills was not being offered and as a result of the inspection will now be reintroduced. The school's early entry policy ensures that many gain qualifications in English and mathematics even though behavioural, emotional or social issues may disrupt later learning. Some students, however, fall short of the progress expected of them given their prior attainment.
- Senior staff carefully monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the programme of alternative provision for each individual student by tracking and analysing indicators of their academic, personal and social development. They are helped by reports from providers which are regular and detailed; reports from the main provider offer particularly clear

records of the development of students' employability skills. However, although staff visit placements for reviews of students' progress, they do not systematically visit to check the quality of teaching and learning.

- Students have highly positive views about their alternative provision and its impact on improving their behaviour and attendance. They note in particular the beneficial effects of spending time learning useful skills in occupations that interest them, and value the opportunities to work in a more adult environment.

**Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- ensuring that students always make best progress in English and mathematics through greater access to teaching by specialist teachers, and through GCSE and functional skills qualifications that are well matched to students' abilities and needs
- developing service-level agreements with providers which set out opportunities for school staff to visit providers systematically to check the quality of teaching and/or learning
- ensuring that governors systematically question school leaders on the impact of spending on alternative provision.

Yours sincerely

**Ian Hodgkinson**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**