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Mr J Inman
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Inman

Ofsted 2014 15 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 12 and 15 September 2014 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you, an assistant headteacher, four raising achievement coordinators and a teaching assistant. I also met students and visited the following providers that your students attend: The Princes Trust Fairbridge Programme, Salfordonline Learning Broughton Hub and Kip McGrath Education Centre Walkden.

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

■ Buile Hill Visual Arts College is effective in identifying students who have additional learning needs and are in need of a bespoke approach to their learning. Leaders use their knowledge of individual students well to commission appropriate and safe alternative provision. The alternative provision commissioned by the school is matched effectively to the social, emotional and behavioural needs of students. As a result the school's own data show that the majority of students gain appropriate qualifications either while on placement or once back in school. While the school collects data about the academic and personal progress of all students, leaders do not yet analyse the impact of alternative provision in enough detail to fully judge its impact.

- You make effective use of your links with leaders of other local secondary schools and with the local authority to identify suitable alternative provision for students. These links are also used on an informal basis to share information about the quality of providers used by all schools within the authority.

- The local authority maintains a range of provision within the borough as a means of supporting schools to meet the wide variety of individual learning needs of students. For example, pupil referral units and a school for students with social, emotional and behavioural needs along with a number of smaller hubs, enable students to take part in alternative provision on a short or long term, part-time or full-time basis. While most of these providers are registered as schools, school leaders need to ensure that all alternative provision used meet statutory requirements for registration, as explained during the visit.

- The local authority virtual headteacher, along with the virtual school team, identifies alternative provision which is suitable for attendance by looked after children. One such provider visited during the inspection was situated in newly refurbished premises and is part of an international franchise business which provides private tuition to pupils and students. The student spoken with felt that she had made progress both academically and personally since joining the provider. Her attendance at the required sessions was 100 % and courses being followed included English, mathematics and science at GCSE level. However, the provider has not been required to enter into a contract or written agreement which identifies minimum expectations in terms of safeguarding, the quality of teaching or recording and reporting. School leaders therefore must ensure that there is an effective process in place by which they can monitor and evaluate the overall quality of all alternative provisions.

- I visited a sample of three providers in total, in order to gain a view of the quality of the premises being used for alternative provision. The accommodation seen ranged from a classroom-based facility, through rooms set up for group work and therapy sessions to an open plan, adult learning style environment. In two examples the premises were in the process of being upgraded or refurbished to a high standard. The third example was part of a recently built community hub and provided a very high standard of accommodation. The school places students with each of the providers visited as a means of meeting their individual needs. As a result of the careful consideration by leaders, the accommodation seen was well matched to the individual needs of students and consequently it was contributing effectively to their progress.

- Where providers are part of the local authority the quality of information given by the school about the individual needs of students is sufficient to allow providers to begin working with the students quickly. In the examples discussed, information, for example about child protection issues, is given by the school in writing and verbally and in some cases both. Basic information about the student is shared verbally either at school, when the provider makes an initial visit, or, in some cases, at a pre-placement visit by a leader from the school. School leaders should establish a formal process of information sharing in order to ensure that

each provider has sufficient detail about the individual needs of students. It would be beneficial also for leaders to provide specific training for all providers, for example around the schools child protection or safeguarding policy, in order that providers are clear about the school's expectations.

- All the providers spoken with felt that they were well supported by the school. Each provider had a named contact at the school and was confident that any issues would be dealt with quickly and appropriately by the school. Not all providers were clear about the school's own procedures with regards safeguarding and the reporting of child protection issues.

- The school's main reason for using alternative provision is to enable students to maintain their placements at Buile Hill. Consequently, most placements are either short term or part-time or both and subsequently disruption to a student's normal timetable is minimised. An individualised approach to the catch-up of work is employed following negotiation with the appropriate teachers. The students spoken with said that this helped them to keep up with their peers. However, leaders must ensure that the work set for students, especially the more able, by all providers is both appropriately challenging and is linked sufficiently to the schools own curriculum. Leaders need to be clear that the academic progress of students is not compromised by attendance at alternative provision.

- The school's own data show that those students attending alternative provision, especially on a short-term basis, achieve well overall. Of the 33 Year 11 students who attended alternative provision last year 29 attained GCSE English at grade C or above while 18 attained GCSE mathematics at grade C or above. The school's analysis of its data indicates that the majority of students currently on roll at the school, who have attended or are currently attending alternative provision, are making good progress in terms of their personal development. For example of the nine who have been referred to alternative provision due to their social, emotional and behavioural needs, seven have improved their behaviour.

- The vast majority of placements lead to non-vocational qualifications although two students currently on roll at the school have either started or are about to start BTEC courses with alternative providers. Where placements aim to maintain or improve the academic progress of students, students follow English and mathematics to GCSE level. In placements which aim to develop personal skills such as self-esteem and confidence, more general qualifications such as the British Heart Foundation basic certificate in heart start are followed. These qualifications are being used effectively to develop the personal and social skills of students. The school does not analyse its data sufficiently to judge the impact of gaining these qualifications on students' next steps.

- I spoke with six students either in school or during visits to the alternative provision. The students felt that they had been involved in the decision making process about their placement. Although some students felt they had little choice in which placement they attended, all said that they were clear about and agreed with the reasons for attending. All the students felt that their placement had helped them make progress with their individual issue.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- introducing a robust system to monitor the overall quality of alternative provision including the scrutiny of safeguarding and child protection policy and procedures, the observation of teaching and the evaluation of recording and reporting procedures

- establishing an appropriate training programme so that all providers are aware of the schools policy and expectations, for example in terms of child protection and safeguarding, the safe recruitment of staff, the reporting and recording of attendance and behaviour management

- setting up a robust tracking system so that leaders can analyse fully the impact of alternative provision on students' academic and personal and social progress

- ensuring that all alternative providers used by the school meet statutory registration requirements.

My concerns about the registration status of one of the providers you are using have been reported to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Drew Crawshaw
Her Majesty's Inspector