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Dear Mr Foster

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 24 February 2015 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you, a deputy headteacher and an assistant headteacher. I also met students and visited the following providers that your students attend: Mojo Trust; TLG Bolton.

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 is effective in seeking out alternative provision which supports well the academic, personal and social development of students. The proportion of students who are identified as those who would benefit from attending alternative provision is low. The number of students who attend alternative provision has reduced significantly in the past year because leaders have introduced a rigorous referral system.

■ The school makes good use of its links with other schools in the Bolton South cluster group. Leaders share valuable information about potential providers for example, relating to safety, with other schools and combine this with information gathered on their own on-site visits. Consequently, leaders can be confident that students placed at alternative provisions are safe and well cared for.

- Leaders use a robust process to match the specific needs of students, whose behaviour hinders their progress in school, to an alternative provision. Leaders give careful consideration to the personal needs of each student. The school's own data, along with the views of students, show that this measured approach is successful in supporting students to remain engaged with education and also to make progress both academically and socially. The school's records show that current students attend well, they are settled in their placement and many have already achieved Level 1 vocational qualifications.

- Leaders have put in place a timetable which minimises effectively the impact of attending alternative provision on a student's core subjects. Students in Year 10 attend alternative provision as an option subject, while those in Year 11 are given intensive specialist support in English and mathematics as part of a 'Foundation Learners' group. The school's own data show that the majority of the 13 students who attend alternative provision this year are making expected or better than expected progress in English and mathematics. 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 judge its impact fully.

- Both of the provisions I visited provided safe accommodation suitable to the type of working environment and purpose of the placement. In the vocational placement visited, students are able to gain valuable hands-on experience in real life work settings for example, in construction, motor vehicle maintenance or hair and beauty. In the non-vocational setting visited, accommodation is of a high standard, students are taught in a classroom with good access to information technology, quiet rooms are available for students to work in and there is a separate area for group work. This marked contrast in the types of environment supports leaders' efforts to match the specific needs of students with suitable alternative provision well.

- All of the students I spoke to said that attending alternative provision is helping them to improve their behaviour and learning back in school. Leaders' analysis of behaviour records supports this view on improved behaviour. The students said that being out of school helped them concentrate more on their learning when in school, but above all it gave them a focus for their future after school.

- The quality of the information and training given to the providers and the extent to which this supports them in supporting the students is patchy. Both providers spoken to felt that the information they receive about students who start alternative provision at the beginning of the year is adequate. This basic information allows providers to plan activities which are well matched to the specific needs of students. However, when students join alternative provision at other times, information about the students does not contain enough detail from which providers can plan effectively to support each student. Leaders are aware of this concern and

have worked closely with one provider to bolster the referral process by introducing a more informative student information form. Although it is too early to judge the impact of this action, leaders' collaboration with providers as a means of improving alternative provision is a strength of the school.

- Both providers I spoke to feel that they are supported well by the school. The school has provided specific contact names and these people react quickly and appropriately to any concerns raised by the providers. Not all providers were clear about the school's own procedures with regards safeguarding and the reporting of child protection issues. However, one provider had received training on the safeguarding of students from school leaders. As a result all staff working with this provider were aware of both the generic and specific safeguarding issues facing students from Harper Green School. This is an example of strong practice and leaders are aware that it should be replicated with all providers they commission.

- Leaders place a suitable emphasis on students achieving basic academic skills and qualifications at a level appropriate to their ability. Students' timetables are designed to ensure they follow both English and mathematics to GCSE level either in school or with their alternative provider. Out of the 37 Year 11 students which attended alternative provision last year, 21 of them attained a pass grade in both English and mathematics. While none of these students attained five A*- C grades at GCSE level, leaders' analysis of the school's own data shows that these students made reasonable progress overall, based on their starting points.

- The vast majority of placements lead to nationally recognised vocational qualifications for example, in hair and beauty, construction and motor vehicle maintenance. Two of the three Year 10 students I spoke to had already completed a Level 1 qualification in motor vehicle maintenance and had begun work on Level 2 units. These students said that they wanted to use their qualifications in order to enter college at a higher level than they would expect if based only on their academic performance. Out of the 37 Year 11 students which attended alternative provision last year, the large majority gained vocational qualifications at an appropriate level. All but three of these students remained in education, employment or training after leaving school, with the majority following pathways linked to their qualifications. This is effective use of the qualifications gained through alternative provision placement and represents appropriate progress.

- Leaders are aware that they need to sharpen their monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the quality and their use of alternative provision. Examples of good practice already in place include leaders' frequent visits to some providers, talking with students about their experiences and checking students' files of evidence. However, this practice is not applied robustly at all times and with all providers and does not include checking the quality of teaching experienced by students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that systems are in place to enable leaders to monitor, evaluate and report on the quality and impact of alternative provision with the same rigour as that expected with academic subjects in school

- strengthening students' individual learning plans so that it is clear what good and better progress will look like for each student who attends alternative provision

- using information about the academic, personal and social progress of individual students to evaluate and report on the overall impact of alternative provision for this group of students

- building on the good relationships held with providers in order to share ideas and improve practice for example, ensuring providers have the information they need to draft effective support plans prior to students attending the provision.

Yours sincerely

Drew Crawshaw
Her Majesty's Inspector