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10 March 2015

Mrs B Martin
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Martin

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 and 25 February 2015 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you and colleagues responsible for this aspect of the school's work, including the senior deputy headteacher responsible for curriculum, the assistant headteacher for alternative provision and special needs and the director of learning for English language development and Vision to Vocation. I also met students in school and at their placements and visited the following providers that your students attend:

- Sheffield Sharks
- Sheaf Training
- PET-X
- Endeavour
- Youth Association South Yorkshire (YASY)
- GTA Mechanics

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 makes effective use of alternative provision to meet the increasingly diverse needs of a rapidly changing population in the area. Leaders have carefully selected a variety of providers for different groups of students, depending on their needs. Provision ranges from targeted support for rapid development of English language skills for new arrivals to the country, to accessing additional vocational qualifications that engage students' interest and help them to prepare for the next stage of their lives.
- The vast majority of alternative provision used by the school is commissioned through the local authority, which has a comprehensive list of providers that are contracted against stringent criteria. The local authority's Alternative Provision Team (APT) monitors all providers carefully throughout the year ensuring health and safety and safeguarding procedures are checked regularly, as well as the quality of teaching. In addition, school leaders have developed and established their own monitoring systems which providers understand and value. These are employed meticulously with all providers, whether commissioned through the local authority or directly by the school.
- The school has established an effective team which ensures that every student accessing alternative provision is tracked from initial identification of need, to placement and progress, through to the next stage of their education. Next steps for the school are to ensure that the impact of alternative provision on students' progress when in school is measured in a variety of ways.
- Only providers who offer clear and appropriate progression are used by the school. Although this does not always lead to accreditation, where this is the case, particularly for younger students who are focusing on improving self-esteem and behaviour, progression is measured against the criteria agreed with the provider and evidenced through the schools records of behaviour. Nevertheless, the vast majority of alternative provision does provide appropriate accreditation and many of these students continue their studies post 16, including by accessing apprenticeships.
- There are agreed procedures for reporting students' absence with all providers. These are adhered to rigorously and absences are followed up quickly by the school. However, leaders are aware that for some students, attendance is not yet good enough.
- Without exception, providers report that students from Fir Vale are well prepared for their placements. This is because they are involved in the process of selecting and agreeing provision. Students are also given the opportunity to visit and/or 'try out' a placement before a final decision is made. In some cases this had led to changes being made.
- The local authority's referral system ensures that providers are given appropriate information about students, so that they can plan for their needs. In addition, the Fir Vale School team provide very regular and effective support through frequent visits to students on their placements on a weekly basis and regular meetings with providers to

discuss issues. Consequently, all the providers visited felt they were supported very well by the school.

- Although vocational placements are for one day a week, for a smaller number of students placements can vary from one to four days and a very small number of Year 11 students attend alternative provision for five days a week. In these cases, students are early English language users who have only very recently joined the school and the major focus for them is to develop their language skills so that they are able to access further education. All take appropriate accredited qualifications and their progress is monitored regularly through visits made by school staff and termly reports.
- The local authority and the school require that all providers report each term on the progress students are making with their behaviour, attendance and achievement. Although these reports provide a good overview of what students are achieving, currently the information about academic progress is not always in a format that matches well with the way in which the school tracks the progress of other students in the school.
- Alternative provision is incorporated well into students' timetables for those who attend part time alternative provision. All these students study English, mathematics and science and have the choice of two additional subjects from a broad range of options. The school has comprehensive agreements in place with providers for those students who are in full time alternative provision, which specify what is to be studied and the expected outcomes. As noted above, regular visits to providers and discussions with students ensure that the school is rapidly aware of any problems that arise, so that these are dealt with quickly.
- Almost all Key Stage 4 students currently attending alternative provision are studying for GCSEs in English and mathematics in school. Where this is not the case, students are studying for ESOL qualifications which are appropriate to their needs. The school monitors their progress as a discrete group and compares this to the progress of other students. However, for the few students in this group who entered the school in Year 7, it would be useful for the school to compare Key Stage 4 progress in English and mathematics with past progress in Key Stage 3, in order to measure this aspect of the impact of alternative provision. In addition, although the school monitors a range of indicators, including behaviour and attitudes to learning, they do not yet use this information as effectively as they might to measure impact of alternative provision on in-school performance.
- All the students I spoke to were enthusiastic about their placements. They were very appreciative of the opportunities provided by the school, including those who were attending provision with a view to improving their behaviour and engagement. One such student explained that he was learning strategies to help him manage his behaviour and that this was helping him in school because he now understood that he needed to treat others with respect to earn respect. As a result he was happier in school than he had been in the past.

Other students agreed that the opportunity to attend alternative provision motivated them to achieve better in school. Most understood that their placements were intended to help them move on to the next stage of their education and some were able to articulate this clearly.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- continuing the drive to improve the attendance of students accessing alternative provision
- ensuring that information from providers about students' achievement is frequent enough and in a format that enables the school to monitor their progress in as much detail as for other students in the school
- ensuring that tracking of progress shows the impact of alternative provision on achievement in school, particularly in English and mathematics, and on other relevant aspects such as attendance, behaviour and attitudes to learning
- ensuring that arrangements for students on transitional programmes to support them to re-engage with school are clearly recorded as such and include a specific timeline for conclusion.

Yours sincerely

Mel Ford
Her Majesty's Inspector