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Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ward

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 2 and 3 June 2015 to look at the school's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you, the deputy headteachers, the head of business studies and economics who coordinates alternative provision, the academic leader for Year 10 and the work-related learning manager. I also met students in Years 10 and 11 and visited the following providers that your students attend: Dearne Valley Personal Development Centre; Leslie Frances; Serenity; and Swinton Lock.

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 has long-standing knowledge of, and links with, a good range of local providers. These connections arise in part from previous partnership working with several local secondary schools and from local authority systems to support opportunities for 14-19 year olds. Although these partnerships and systems are no longer in place formally, at times the school continues to benefit from sharing information informally through these routes.

■ In seeking new providers for students wishing to gain experience in the digital sector, the school has made effective use of the local authority's

enterprise service. School staff are confident in their expertise to set up service level agreements with new providers.

- Systems for safeguarding students off-site are in place. Providers visited have conducted the appropriate checks on staff, have clear safeguarding procedures in place and ensure that staff training is refreshed regularly. Providers are vigilant about access to their premises. The school checks the health and safety risk assessments completed by providers, adding to these for areas such as travel to and from the various training centres.

- All the provision visited was safe, suitable for the activities offered and, in some instances, of high quality. Where applicable, vocational facilities and equipment are of a professional standard. Working with providers, the school ensures that students have the appropriate personal protective equipment, for instance work boots and overalls.

- The school maintains very positive working relationships with providers. All students have the opportunity for a taster session before making their choice of off-site course, helping to ensure that they can get off to a secure start. Providers are confident of a swift response from the school should they have any concerns or queries. They value the regular visits from school staff.

- Although differently balanced for each student, increasing engagement with learning and better behaviour and attendance figure prominently in the rationale for offering students the opportunity to attend alternative provision. The school has several curriculum models that include off-site vocational provision. For some students this involves a day each week at a college or training provider. Others are off-site for two or three days per week, following a range of vocational courses supported by work-experience. For a small number of students whose circumstances mean they are vulnerable, the school arranges individual provision focused on their personal development and re-engagement with learning.

- The various models form an integral part of the timetable so that students do not miss work when they are off-site. Those who are off-site for longer periods each week belong to discrete tutor and teaching groups. Students spoken to said they valued the additional support available in these small groups.

- The school shares an appropriate range of information with providers about students' social skills, including their behaviour, before placements begin. Most providers have referral forms for this purpose which the school completes assiduously. However, where providers do not have referral forms there is a greater reliance on sharing information, including any concerning safeguarding individuals, verbally.

- Alternative provision students follow GCSE courses in English language, English literature and mathematics, as well as either GCSE or BTEC

courses in science, in school. All alternative provision courses lead to a qualification or accreditation. Although not all of these qualifications now contribute towards measures of the school's performance reported in the league tables, the headteacher and senior leaders judge that the benefits to students are their paramount concern. A similar rationale underpins the decision to reinstitute early entries at the end of Year 10 to GCSE mathematics for a number of students most likely to benefit from opportunities to improve their performance in Year 11.

- In 2014, all alternative provision students gained a GCSE in English and all but one did so in mathematics. Although not all these students made the nationally expected rate of progress from the beginning of Year 7, the majority made at least expected progress in Key Stage 4 once they had started alternative provision. Half made more than expected progress in English and one third made accelerated progress in mathematics. A similar proportion of current Year 11 students have made more than expected progress in English whereas the picture is more positive in mathematics, with about two thirds of students making better than expected progress.

- All the qualifications or accreditation gained by students at alternative provision can be built on post 16. The school's tracking shows that in the last two years 63% of students have continued in their alternative provision area of study. The highest continuation rate, 80%, was in construction. Over several years there has been a marked decline in the proportion of students who do not move on to education, employment or training. In 2014, all alternative provision students had post-16 destinations which they have sustained. In the view of senior leaders, alternative provision has made a significant contribution to the decrease in students who are not placed post 16.

- Senior leaders monitor the strategic impact of alternative provision through measures such as the number of students without post 16 places and the overall rate of progress of students once they access alternative provision. The impact on individual students is recorded half-termly as part of the school's tracking system. Sometimes this information is gathered informally through conversations since providers report termly in writing in a variety of formats. Although students' levels of motivation are recorded for their work in school, this is not the case for their off-site work. Since, engagement in learning is part of the aim of alternative provision, this is a missed opportunity.

- Staff make frequent visits to providers and systematically monitor the quality of provision each half term. Any action points are shared with providers. The school has ceased to use providers where monitoring has raised concerns that have not been dealt with satisfactorily.

- Students spoken to were positive about the opportunities they have through alternative provision and would recommend this to younger students. They enjoy learning new skills away from school and rising to the challenge of behaving more maturely in an adult environment. One

student captured the view of all when commenting that alternative provision was 'an eye-opener' about the world of work. All said that the discipline required made just as many demands on them as they experienced in school.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- recording a motivation score for alternative provision as part of the half-termly tracking of students' performance, to bring it in line with what is assessed and recorded in school

- making sure that providers who do not have their own referral forms receive the information they need about students in writing

- considering the development of a standard reporting format for alternative provision so that the information the school requires to track students' progress is captured systematically.

Yours sincerely

Jane Austin
Her Majesty's Inspector