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Mr S Robinson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Robinson

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 16 and 17 December 2014 to look at the academy's use of alternative provision. During the visit I met with you, senior leaders, and members of the progress and inclusion teams. I also met students during visits to the following providers that your students attend:

- Education in Angling
- Recycle
- Heeley City Farm
- Whirlow Farm

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 alternative provision programme is very well managed within a tightly organised local authority quality assurance framework.
- Birley commissions all of its alternative provision placements for the small number of students involved through the local authority's comprehensive commissioning service. The local authority sets demanding standards for providers that wish to join its approved list. It carries out regular and

thorough checks on compliance with those standards, including on safety and safeguarding. Its team of visiting tutors also monitor the quality of teaching at all providers and, where this is less than good, revisits to check on improvement. The local authority shares the outcomes of its monitoring of providers transparently through a secure website with its schools to help inform their commissioning decisions.

- Provision is selected and adapted carefully to match students' personal needs, as part of a monitoring a review process based on weekly meetings of the college's pastoral and inclusion team. Alternative provision is always considered as an option for students in Key Stage 4, though only where provision offered within the college is judged to not wholly meet the sometimes complex needs of the students. For those with poor behaviour or attendance records, the programme is carefully tailored to promote their reengagement in education by finding a vocational area of interest or more suitable style of learning. For some autistic students in the integrated resource base, provision is successfully used to develop life skills and skills of working with others, alongside their academic programme at the college.
- The college engages in innovative programmes with the local authority to address the specific needs of particularly vulnerable students. As part of a city-wide initiative to support students newly arrived in Year 11 from overseas (mainly from Eastern Europe), those students allocated to the college attend specially-tailored alternative provision in training providers, including for functional skills and GCSE programmes in English and mathematics.
- The providers visited offer students rich work-based experiences in specialist vocational settings. Most of these settings also have well-appointed classroom and study facilities on site; these enable students to spend dedicated time in building well-organised portfolios of work towards useful vocational accreditation. The level of study is generally well-matched to students' academic abilities, and offer well-planned opportunities to develop and apply students' literacy and numeracy skills. The settings afford a high priority to health and safety, and are subject to regular and rigorous checks by the local authority contract management team.
- The local authority sets clear expectations that schools should make available to providers comprehensive written information on students' academic levels and personal, social and emotional characteristics. Providers unanimously agree that Birley meets these expectations and goes beyond these with supplementary details. In addition, providers value the regular and ongoing verbal dialogue with key college staff about students' changing circumstances. The college progress manager and alternative provision key worker visit regularly and are instantly available to deal with concerns.

- A key strength of the programme is the regular training and development that the local authority gives to providers and schools, including in child protection and safeguarding. This training and support has ensured a high degree of consistency and quality of practice, for example in induction and safeguarding procedures, course planning and training delivery, across all providers.
- College staff carefully monitor students' engagement in their programmes and adapt provision accordingly. A new approach has been taken during the current academic year to the teaching of English and mathematics to those with a background of poor engagement. During their time in the college students are now taught individually or in small groups, mainly by a higher-level teaching assistant with oversight from senior members of the English and mathematics departments. Students praise this approach for its individual attention and for taking them away from classroom settings where their behaviour would sometimes deteriorate. As a consequence, their progress is measurably improving and in some cases markedly so.
- For last year's GCSE cohort, achievement in English and mathematics was poor, with only one student out of six gaining GCSEs in both subjects (although two were new arrivals to the country). College leaders have responded effectively to these weak results by reorganising teaching of these subjects and by tracking academic outcomes for alternative provision students as a group.
- Alternative provision placements have brought about very significant improvements in the behaviour, attendance and personal development of the majority of students. The very marked improvements in the attendance of some students have contributed to the halving of persistent absence rates in the college during the current term, albeit from high levels. The provision is particularly effective in securing progression to vocational training programmes in further education, and to apprenticeships. The college progress manager continues to track and support students as they move into training routes beyond school. As a consequence, almost all sustain destinations in education, employment or training.
- The success of alternative provision placements is monitored in considerable detail. Students have learning plans which specify clear 'intended outcomes' against which progress is reviewed in detailed reports. These intended outcomes, however, largely focus on personal development outcomes rather than academic outcomes. Tracking of personal development outcomes such as behaviour and attendance is clear and comprehensive. In addition, the college receives termly reports from providers which offer a more detailed picture of the development of students' employability skills, which from this term have been included in college reports to parents.

- Students have highly positive views of the impact of alternative provision. In particular, some students articulated very clearly their aspirations for careers in occupations such as farming or bicycle mechanics linked to their placements. Importantly, they also recognised the importance of doing well in English and mathematics in order to reach these aspirations, and said this had contributed to their much improved attendance, behaviour and attitudes to learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that academic progress targets are systematically incorporated into the learning plans for students following alternative provision, to improve GCSE achievement in English and mathematics
- drawing together information on the outcomes of alternative provision into clear evaluative reports for the governing body, to enable governors to systematically monitor the value for money of the programmes.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector