

# Alternative provision

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This survey evaluates the use of off-site alternative provision by a small sample of schools and pupil referral units. Schools and pupil referral units can use a range of alternative provision to try to prevent students from being excluded, or to re-engage students in their education. The survey considers what makes alternative provision successful and examines some of the current issues associated with its use.

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## Executive summary

The aim of this survey was to analyse the elements of successful alternative provision. Alternative provision has been defined as education outside school, arranged by local authorities or schools.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this survey, alternative provision was defined as something in which a young person participates as part of their regular timetable, away from the site of the school or the pupil referral unit and not led by school staff. Schools can use such provision to try to prevent exclusions, or to re-engage students in their education. Pupil referral units are themselves a form of alternative provision, but many students who are on the roll of a pupil referral unit also attend additional forms of alternative provision off site. This survey includes within its scope both secondary schools (including academies) and pupil referral units as commissioners or users of a range of the alternative placements.<sup>2</sup>

Between September and December 2010, inspectors visited 23 schools and academies and 16 pupil referral units to explore their use of alternative provision. The schools and units were located in both urban and rural areas, varied in size and composition, and were only included in the survey if they were providing alternative provision to more than one student in Key Stage 4.<sup>3</sup> At their previous Ofsted inspection none had been found inadequate. The survey visit was followed up with visits to 61 alternative provision placements that were being attended by students from the schools or units surveyed. The students' placements were varied and included practical courses in motor mechanics or hairdressing, work placements in shops and old people's homes, and experiences in music studios and on farms. The students surveyed spent between half a day and five days out of school each week attending such provision.

Alternative provision is a largely uninspected and unregulated sector. Beyond pupil referral units and other full-time provision, there is no requirement for the majority of alternative providers to register with any official body and no consistent arrangements to evaluate their quality. Of the 61 providers visited for the survey, only 17 were subject to any inspection regime. Even this was not always a direct inspection of the placement attended by the students; sometimes only the provider's headquarters was inspected. In some cases students do not gain accredited qualifications during their placement, so results are often not available as a measure of quality either.

Despite this lack of regulation and accountability, some students spend a significant proportion of their week away from their school or unit attending an alternative provision. It can be the case that the school's or unit's staff visit infrequently or not

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<sup>1</sup> [www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/inclusionandlearnersupport/a0010414/what-is-alternative-provision](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/inclusionandlearnersupport/a0010414/what-is-alternative-provision)

<sup>2</sup> 'Schools' will be used throughout the report to refer to schools and academies. Where used, 'units' refers to pupil referral units.

<sup>3</sup> Fifteen other schools and units were contacted but did not meet the survey's criteria so were not included.

at all. In this survey 11 of the providers had never received a visit from a member of staff from the school or unit. Across the 39 schools and units surveyed, over 10% of students in Years 9–11 were attending alternative provision away from the site of their school or unit for at least part of each week. Occasionally, students were placed with an alternative provider full time and played no part in school life.

Alternative provision can be set up by the public, voluntary, and private sectors. Some local authorities hold a database of provision which they have selected and which they believe to be of suitable quality for their schools and pupil referral units to use. However, this does not exist in all areas. Only nine of the 23 schools and units surveyed had access to such a system. Others either worked in partnership with other local schools to find providers, or found providers for themselves. There was not a consistently effective approach to assuring the quality and usefulness of the alternative provision.

At its best, alternative provision was selected carefully by schools and units, was used well to support learners as part of their whole curriculum, and was valued by the students. Such placements helped to re-engage students in learning. Where communication was good, the school or unit shared relevant information with the provider and agreed what information the provider would collect to show a student's progress. The school or unit then used this information well to celebrate success or intervene when things were not going well. Staff in these schools and units visited students at their provision regularly. Students' timetables at school were planned carefully so that they did not miss key lessons when they were out at their placement, or at least they were given good-quality additional teaching to keep up. In these conditions, students were usually motivated by their placement and started to see the point of their work in school; many gained appropriate qualifications.

However, this was not always the case. Some of the schools and pupil referral units visited, saw alternative provision as very separate from their own work and as a 'last resort' for a challenging student. These schools and units were less effective at fitting placements into the rest of their students' timetables, and made poor arrangements for them to catch up with work they had missed from their core subjects. In too many cases there was no transfer of written information about the students' needs from the schools to the providers. Where communication between schools and alternative providers was weak, the providers lacked the information that they needed to work effectively with the student, and the schools did not know enough about their student's progress. For the student, this meant that there was sometimes little coherence between their time at the placement and their time back at school. Opportunities were missed to capitalise on the new skills, confidence, and sometimes the qualifications, they were gaining.

## Key findings

- In the schools and units surveyed, more boys than girls attended alternative provision. Over 69% of the students had special educational needs. Around a third had been excluded from the school or unit on a fixed-term basis at some point in their school career. Some Year 9 students attended alternative provision,

particularly those from pupil referral units, but the majority were in Years 10 and 11.

- The quality of the alternative provision being used was variable. There were examples of students being taught in poor-quality accommodation. Schools and units were ill-informed about the need for providers to register with the Department for Education if they were providing full-time education.
- The schools and units visited often found it difficult to evaluate the overall impact of alternative provision because, in addition to not monitoring progress well, they did not define clear success criteria at the outset. Where schools and units had established a clear purpose for their use of alternative provision and collected a range of data, they were able to evaluate success more robustly.
- The process of finding and commissioning alternative provision varied widely among the schools and units visited. Local authorities played a coordinating role for only nine of the 39 schools and units. The others either worked in partnership with nearby schools or units to find the provision, or found it for themselves.
- Twenty-six of the schools and units visited sought some form of advice from their local authority, Education Business Partnership or Connexions when they were setting up alternative placements. For example, they received legal advice, advice about safeguarding, or practical support in drawing up service level agreements.
- The schools and units surveyed made little use of the Department for Education's database of alternative provision. One reason given for this was that the provisions listed were not quality assured. However, eleven of the 39 schools and units did not know of its existence.
- Forty-one of the 61 alternative providers surveyed reported that someone from the school or the unit had visited the provision prior to the student starting. At its best there was face-to-face contact between the student, their parent and the provider, giving each confidence in the process, but this was not common practice. Occasionally, the provider formally interviewed the student before they began their placement.
- Once the student had begun their placement, the frequency of visits from the school or unit was variable. Eleven of the providers had never received a visit from the school or unit responsible for making the placement. Another 13 were visited less than once every six months. Only 11 were visited weekly.
- The majority of alternative provision placements, arranged by the schools and units surveyed, offered some form of accreditation. There was a vast array of accreditation on offer. The majority of the accreditation was offered at Entry Level or Level 1 which was appropriate to the needs of some of the students but limiting for others. Some accreditation was not nationally recognised and was highly specific to the placement. Overall, inspectors found that having a clear rationale for the placement, and the careful selection of the placement to meet the student's identified needs, was more important than whether or not they offered accreditation.
- Around two thirds of the schools and units surveyed tailored their students' timetables around their alternative provision. In the other third, students had to

miss other lessons in order to attend provision off site. They were usually supported to catch up, but nevertheless this was sometimes a problem for students who found academic study difficult in the first place.

- The information about the students that some of the schools and units gave to the providers was weak. Nine of the 39 schools and units surveyed gave only oral information about their students' needs. Whether written or oral, the information often did not include details of special educational needs, or literacy and numeracy levels, which sometimes led to students being asked to do tasks of which they were not capable or which were unsuitable.
- All the schools and units visited monitored their students' attendance at the alternative provision via email, telephone, or in a few cases a visit to the provider. There were clear expectations that the provider should routinely check and report on attendance. Behaviour and attitudes were not routinely monitored, despite many students having some behavioural difficulties.
- Few schools and units systematically monitored their students' progress in the specific skills being learnt at the alternative provision or the impact on their personal development. Even where progress was regularly tracked by the provider, this was often not used by the school to supplement its regular progress tracking.
- Although evaluation was generally weak, most of the schools and units could give examples of students, sometimes in considerable numbers, who had attended alternative provision and gone on to education, employment or training having previously been on the verge of permanent exclusion or disengaging altogether.
- The students spoken to generally viewed their placements positively. In particular, they valued being treated in a more adult manner. Students were often able to identify that their attendance at the placements had helped their motivation generally and that they were now doing better at school.

## Recommendations

The Department for Education (DfE) should:

- consider requiring all alternative providers to register with the DfE if their provision is attended by students of statutory school age for the equivalent of one or more days per week
- consider the appropriate framework for quality assurance of registered alternative provision, taking into account the elements of successful practice identified in this report
- work with Ofsted to design a proportionate approach to inspection for such providers
- provide all academies and free schools with information about alternative provision in their area.

Ofsted should:

- consider how best to evaluate, during section 5 and section 8 inspections, the appropriateness of alternative provision placements and the progress made by all students who attend alternative provision.

Local authorities should:

- produce a database of alternative provision within the local area, and support partnerships of schools and units to ensure a coordinated approach to commissioning
- in the absence of national quality assurance mechanisms, work with local schools to share information on the quality of alternative provision
- ensure that all alternative provision used by local authority pupil referral units is of a suitable quality and is registered by the DfE if necessary.

Schools, including academies, and pupil referral units should:

- give careful consideration to the desired outcomes of the alternative provision they use, and select the provision accordingly
- consider how the organisation of the curriculum ensures that students attending alternative provision do not fall behind
- ensure that the quality of what is provided by the alternative provision placement is never less than could be provided at school
- ensure that they, or a leader within a partnership, have assessed the quality and suitability of all the providers they are using
- give appropriate written information about their students to providers, including about any special educational needs, literacy and numeracy skills and social and behavioural skills
- visit the students at their provision regularly and sufficiently frequently to ensure their well-being and progress
- agree with providers in advance how students' progress will be tracked and their achievements recorded
- use this information to evaluate the progress made by students and the suitability of placements.

## Defining alternative provision

1. Alternative provision has been defined as 'Education outside of school...arranged by LAs [local authorities] or schools... It can range from pupil referral units and further education colleges to voluntary or private sector projects'.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) estimated that of those students receiving alternative provision, about one-third were being educated in pupil referral units, including some as an early intervention measure while remaining on their mainstream school roll. The remainder attended settings in the private and voluntary sectors.<sup>5</sup> At that time the Department estimated that around 135,000 students of school age received alternative provision during a school year; around 70,000 at any one time. *The Importance of Teaching: the Schools White Paper 2010*, noted that this survey was being carried out, and stated that:

'In the light of [Ofsted's] findings we will consider how best to ensure high-quality provision. It may be that a quality mark for alternative provision will be effective or that tighter regulation may be needed'<sup>6</sup>

2. Alternative provision can be run by private companies, the voluntary sector and public sector organisations, as well as by colleges, independent schools and pupil referral units. For example, public services, including the fire brigade and sports centres, provide opportunities for students. In some areas, sports clubs, such as West Bromwich Albion Football Club, provide support particularly when there are already well-established community educational links. All these types of provision were used by the schools and pupil referral units visited for this survey, although the private sector was the most prevalent. Of the 61 providers visited, 40 placements were with private sector organisations. The survey included provision that was commissioned by individual schools and units, partnerships of schools, and local authorities.
3. Pupil referral units are themselves a form of alternative provision, but what is seldom mentioned in guidance or definitions is that many students who are on the roll of a pupil referral unit also attend additional forms of alternative provision off site. This survey evaluated both secondary schools' (including academies) and pupil referral units' use of off-site alternative provision.
4. For the purpose of this survey, alternative provision was defined as something in which a young person participates as part of their regular timetable, away from the site of the school or the pupil referral unit and not led by school staff.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/inclusionandlearnersupport/a0010414/what-is-alternative-provision](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/inclusionandlearnersupport/a0010414/what-is-alternative-provision)

<sup>5</sup> *Commissioning alternative provision – guidance for local authorities and schools*, DCSF-00758-2008; [www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008).

<sup>6</sup> Para 3.36, *The Importance of Teaching - The Schools White Paper 2010*, DFE; [www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/CM%207980](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/CM%207980)

The survey focused on young people in Years 9–11, as this is the age group for whom most alternative provision of this nature is arranged. It focused specifically on provision for students who had behavioural difficulties, attendance difficulties, or were otherwise disengaged and were therefore vulnerable to underachieving. The scope of this survey did not, however, include college provision which took place as part of the standard 14–19 offer for large groups of students.

## Using alternative provision

### Four illustrations

5. Schools can use alternative provision to try to prevent exclusions, or to re-engage students in their education. Schools and pupil referral units can use alternative provision for individuals or for groups, on a short- or long-term basis, and from half-a-day a week to full time. The following case studies give some examples of what alternative provision looked like in the schools and pupil referral units surveyed.

Three boys were in the first term of Year 10 at a mainstream secondary school. They had begun their GCSE courses fairly well, but did not find formal learning particularly easy and the school decided they needed something additional to encourage and motivate them. They enrolled them on a six-week motor mechanics course, run at a trade skills centre by the nearby pupil referral unit, for one afternoon a week.

A Year 11 girl had had behavioural difficulties when she was lower down the school, and her attendance had been poor. Since the start of Year 10 she had been attending a work placement at a nursery for young children for one day a week. She was one of 22 students in her year group who had a weekly work placement.

A Year 10 girl had been permanently excluded from her mainstream secondary school and was now attending a pupil referral unit. She spent three days a week at the unit where she studied for GCSEs and other qualifications and two days off site at alternative placements. One of these was work related, learning to care for small animals, and the other was at a music studio where she learnt DJ and mixing skills.

A Year 11 boy had not attended his mainstream school for a number of weeks, and previously had been close to permanent exclusion. The school placed him full time with a private alternative provider which offered a version of a mainstream school curriculum, in a smaller setting.

## The numbers involved

6. Schools and units were only included in the survey if they were arranging alternative provision for more than one student in Key Stage 4. Fifteen schools and units were contacted but did not meet the survey's criteria so were not included. Across the 39 schools and pupil referral units surveyed:
  - a total of 1,343 students in Years 9–11 were attending alternative provision away from the site of their school or unit for at least part of each week at the time of the survey. The schools and units indicated that these numbers were likely to increase by the end of the academic year
  - in 2009/10 in the same schools and units, 1,657 students attended alternative provision during the year
  - seven per cent of the students on roll in Years 9–11 in the schools visited attended some alternative provision, and 50% of the students at the pupil referral units.
7. The numbers of students taking part in alternative provision off site for all or some of their week varied greatly from one school or unit to the next. At one secondary school with 950 places, for example, only three students were taking part in alternative provision and these were all attending the provision full time. In contrast, a school with 1,100 students had 68 students attending alternative provision part-time. An 80-place pupil referral unit had 47 students on part-time placements.

## The students involved

8. The 23 schools classified almost half of the 756 students who were attending alternative provision as having special educational needs, of whom 25 had a statement of special educational needs. Two hundred and fifteen students - of the 1,343 from both schools and pupil referral units - had received fixed-term exclusions at some point during their time at the school or unit. Both the schools and the units said that a high proportion of the students had literacy and numeracy difficulties. There were many more boys than girls attending alternative provision from the pupil referral units, representing their overall population. In the schools, although there were more boys than girls, there was not a large difference.

## Reasons for using alternative provision

9. The schools and pupil referral units visited mainly used alternative provision for one or more of the following reasons:
  - as part of a continuum of support for challenging or vulnerable students, the main aim of which was to secure examination success and a suitable destination at the end of Year 11; one student reflected the views of many others when she said 'going to my placement gives me space in my head to do my other subjects'

- to counter disaffection, which might take the form of poor attendance and/or behaviour, by capturing students' interests and helping them, as one headteacher put it, 'to see the point of English and maths'
- to extend types of experiences and styles of learning offered; one headteacher, echoing the views of many, was clear that 'the needs of disaffected students lie within a curriculum that does not require them to be in a classroom all week'
- to minimise the impact of some students on the majority; one senior leader summarised this by saying: 'sending some out on alternative provision is really for the benefit of the rest'
- 'the end of the line' – an action that schools and units took when students were in danger of permanent exclusion and they did not see a way that they could cater for them in school.

In the case of two pupil referral units visited, all the provision for Key Stage 4 students was off site.

10. There are also secondary schools and pupil referral units that do not use off-site alternative provision at all. This may be because they do not see it as necessary, valuable or suitable; because of a lack of availability in their local area; for cost reasons; or for a mixture of these. As described earlier, a number of the potential schools and units selected for this survey did not use any off-site alternative provision and therefore were not visited. However, several noted that they had used alternative provision in the past and had stopped due to concerns about quality. They were now developing in-house alternatives, sometimes through partnerships with other schools.

## **The elements of successful alternative provision**

11. The survey evidence showed that there was no perfect package of alternative provision; different arrangements and different types and amounts of provision were successful for different settings and students. However, there were some common elements of practice in the successful provision. These related to the place of the provision in a student's curriculum; arranging the provision; quality assuring it; and the outcomes which could be gained. The section below extrapolates the elements of best practice that were seen during the survey.

### **The right place in a student's curriculum**

12. At its best, alternative provision is timely, well-planned and not a 'last resort' or a bolt on.
  - Students remain a full part of the school at all times and at no time are 'out of sight, out of mind'.
  - The provision is a planned part of a personalised pathway, ideally from the start of Year 10.

- It has clearly defined intentions which relate to personal and academic outcomes.
- The provision complements, not replicating or replacing, the school's own curriculum.
- Attending the alternative provision placement does not involve 'missing' lessons but is part of a timetable constructed around the group or individuals.
- If lessons are missed,, arrangements are made for good-quality additional tuition and there is no reliance on students to 'catch up' without being taught.
- The school or unit provides pastoral support to ensure that students are not isolated when at placements and can seek advice back at school when needed.
- If the provision is accredited, the school or college is clear about the purpose of the accreditation. The accreditation is not tokenistic; it is valued by the school, recognised by future employers or colleges, and complements rather than replicates the accreditation being gained in school.
- If the provision is not accredited, the school enables students to gain sufficient qualifications during their time in school.

### **Successful finding, commissioning and selecting**

13. The care which schools and pupil referral units put into sourcing, selecting and commissioning alternative provision, and the support mechanisms available to them to do so, are key elements of the process. The best practice contains the following elements.
- The local authority or partnerships of schools have identified a selection of provision to meet a range of needs.
  - Providers have to meet a set of clearly defined minimum standards. These include safeguarding, health and safety, quality of accommodation, value for money, hours offered and procedures for communication with the school or unit.
  - Even where there are coordinated processes for sourcing and commissioning the provision, the school or unit visits the provider in advance of a placement and assesses the suitability for the student to see if it will meet their individual needs.
  - The provision is selected taking into account the balance of the student's curriculum, their personal and social needs, the accreditation offered, and the opportunities for progression.
  - The quality of what is provided is never less than could be provided or would be accepted at school – including accommodation, communication, tracking of progress and safeguarding.

- The student is involved in the process and visits the provider in advance.
- Learning and progress – academic, vocational and/or personal – are the clear focus of the placement.
- The school or unit gives the provider clear, jargon free, relevant information about the student's needs from the outset. This includes information about special educational needs, especially literacy skills, the student's strengths, and their behaviour.
- The provider tells the school or unit if they need to know anything else and do not try to replicate the information through testing or assessment.
- The provider tells the school or unit what the student is aiming for and can reasonably be expected to learn through the placement.

## **Rigorous quality assurance**

14. Where alternative provision is successful, the school or unit keeps firm 'ownership' of students who attend it and ensures that the placement meets the student's needs at all times. Rigorous quality assurance is a crucial part of this.
  - The student knows that the school or unit is interested in their provision and will intervene and support them if there are any problems.
  - The school or unit has a key link member of staff who liaises with the placement provider and takes an ongoing interest in the student's progress.
  - Staff from the school or unit routinely visit the provider, at agreed intervals, to monitor the quality of the provision. They are also responsive if there are problems at any point.
  - At the same time, the school respects the fact that the provision may look different from 'school' and does not interfere unnecessarily.
  - The provider records the student's personal, academic and placement-specific progress as agreed with the school or unit. The student is involved in self-evaluation.
  - The school or unit takes note of this information and includes it in their routine tracking of the student's overall progress.
  - The school or unit triangulates this with data such as overall attendance, behaviour and progress to evaluate the impact of the provision on the outcomes for the student.
  - If a student is not making adequate progress, the school or unit finds out why and responds accordingly, offering support or challenge to the student or the provider concerned, and if necessary, changing the placement.

## Positive outcomes

15. The actual outcomes of attending alternative provision differ from student to student. However, there were some common elements to outcomes of the successful provision.
- The students' enjoyment of their placement leads to good attendance at the placement.
  - Students who were previously disaffected start to see the purpose of some of their other lessons in school and, consequently, behaviour improves.
  - As students learn new skills, often those which their peers do not have, they become more confident.
  - These factors affect their motivation, which in turn has a positive impact on their attendance at school.
  - Students gain appropriate accreditation from their placement, which contributes to their qualifications at the end of Year 11, and/or their improved motivation and confidence contribute to achieving the qualifications they are working for in school.
  - Students make positive choices about the next steps at the end of Year 11. They choose a college course, or gain an apprenticeship or job, sometimes based on their experiences at their placement.

## Finding and commissioning alternative provision

16. The methods used by the schools and units for finding and arranging the provision for their students varied from being very centralised and formalised through the local authority, to very individualised arrangements using only their own contacts. Between these two extremes, some schools and units worked in partnership with others to find and set up their provision.
17. Where local authorities held a central database of alternative provision, the schools and units tended to use this as the main source of information about the provision on offer in the area. Nine schools and units used their local authority's central database of alternative provision as their only source for finding placements for their students. Several senior leaders commented that they liked the relative security of knowing that the authority had checked and approved the health and safety elements of the provision. One school was in an local authority that had no central database, but instead a series of lists were produced by the local authority of provision available and sources of funding. While this did give the school some information, it was disjointed so did not give them a clear overview.
18. The other 29 schools and units surveyed reported that their local authorities did not have a central database or equivalent. Despite pupil referral units being the responsibility of the local authority, the authorities did not always have a central role, or indeed any role, in helping the units to find and commission

alternative provision. Two of the pupil referral units found provision independently of the local authority and of any other unit or school. The quality of the different placements that they commissioned was very variable. In contrast, another two pupil referral units were themselves responsible for commissioning alternative provision for the schools in the local authority. One unit commented that the local authority had allowed them to be 'creative and entrepreneurial' in doing so.

All alternative provision placements in one local authority area were made through a wing of the pupil referral unit set up especially for this purpose, and comprised an approved group of providers. The system offered 40 full-time placements for Year 11 students to mainstream schools in the area, with 10 more full-time placements offered through the secondary behaviour panel throughout the year. An additional 150 part-time placements for Year 10 and 11 students were offered to all mainstream and special schools. This had developed into a well run system with the current set of approved providers having gone through a strict tendering process in 2009. The contracts were for an agreed number of places and agreed costs, with the arrangement guaranteed to last for one academic year with further places to be negotiated for the next two academic years.

The expectations were clear; all providers were required to offer accreditation and an appropriate learning environment, something that most of them had not done through the previous arrangement. Courses had to accommodate accreditation during long or short stays so that reintegration to full-time mainstream education, if appropriate, was not compromised. All referrals came through the pupil referral unit as the gatekeeper and coordinator for the package and formed part of a personalised programme for each student. The referral process started with what the individual student was interested in and how the alternative placement would fit in with their academic timetable; 'core' provision was always the priority. The system was flexible enough to allow for referrals at any time during the year.

19. Ten of the schools and units in local authorities without a central database worked in partnership with other schools and units to find and to commission all, or the majority of, their provision. Five other schools and two pupil referral units were self-sufficient, mainly using quite a small range of providers such as the local college, but also using other systems, structures and contacts. For example, two schools that mainly used work placements relied largely on their own work experience coordinator, using their personal contacts, to find suitable long-term placements for students. Nine schools and pupil referral units used a mixture of routes, including liaising with the local authority and working in partnership with others, to find and select their providers.

At one high school, commissioning alternative provision was done through several routes and included, though did not solely rely on, the involvement of the local authority. Places with the main providers, such as Activ8, a

youth work organisation, were arranged through the Local Inclusion Panel, which consisted of heads and deputies of schools in the area, plus a local authority officer and the head of the pupil referral unit. The pupil referral unit had a key role in sourcing and commissioning this type of provision for the schools in the partnership. In response to demand, it had also developed its own alternative provision centre, at which the schools were offered a number of places each term. Finally, the school found other, more individualised provision through its own contacts.

20. Typically, the schools and units had not used the DfE's database of alternative providers to find placements, and 11 did not know of its existence. Two that had used it commented on what they felt to be its limited usefulness; one because of the disclaimer about quality and one because 'the providers give the impression that they have provision all over the country which turns out not to be the case – they are simply prepared to set up anywhere in theory for the right price'.

### The criteria for selection

21. In selecting the provision, the schools and units visited considered the students' interests, the availability of provision in the area, its location, the quality of the provision, the accreditation it could offer, and the cost. For most, all these factors were considered to some extent. As one school put it, 'what we are aiming for is to meet the needs and interests of the students within a cost-effective framework, with suitable accreditation'. Another noted the need to balance the consideration of the students' interests with other important criteria:

'although the selection is based on our students' interests, and we are committed to a personalised timetable, their interests are balanced with a range of practical considerations: cost and value for money is high on our agenda for commissioning'.

22. One pupil referral unit was particularly clear about what it considered when selecting a provider: cost, commitment, attendance, curriculum and accreditation. As a result of these clear criteria, placements were carefully commissioned and met an individual student's needs well.

Although the placement was to some extent based on the student's interests, and there was a strong commitment to a personalised timetable, this was balanced with a range of practical considerations.

- Cost – value for money was high on the unit's agenda for commissioning – there was a clear hourly cost range that they were prepared to pay.
- The student's contribution to transport – the unit was very mindful of potentially high transport costs and aimed to put the money into high-quality courses rather than transport, so as part of selecting the

placement there was a negotiation with the student (and their family) to share the transport arrangements.

- The student's commitment – the unit was very frank with the students and their families about this and the expectation that they would value the investment being put in and 'do their bit', having opted for a specific course or activity. This was discussed from the outset with the student. For some, selection was made following taster days so that the student was more aware of what the courses entailed, which had a positive impact on the student 'staying the course'. For some students, the alternative provider's days would be longer than the unit's days and they had to commit to that too.
- Attendance – the student had to demonstrate their attendance at their core curriculum lessons to be eligible for placement.
- Curriculum – courses were often (but not exclusively) used for Year 10 and Year 11 as a way of extending curricular options for Key Stage 4.
- Accreditation alongside engagement – providers had to be 'smart with accreditation'; generally the unit would only consider courses that offered Foundation Learning Tier Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications because these were seen as the best pre-requisite to then go on to the next level at college. Similarly, there was a preference for those who offered the continuum and progression between levels so that all abilities could access them. This reduced failure because different levels could be awarded for the same course. They were not looking for accreditation at low levels or that which they saw as 'tokenism'.

23. The availability of alternative provision was seen as limited by 10 of the schools and units. This depended partly on actual availability in areas, but also on what the schools were looking for and expected. For example one school, which did not report any difficulties with availability, was looking only for extended work placements which it did not expect to be accredited. It had built up contacts for these over many years and the placements were readily available. Another school, which used only a training provider, reported that there were 'no other providers' in the local area; this indicated less about the actual provision available and more about the constraints that the school placed on what 'alternative provision' could consist of. The outcome of a lack of availability, or a perceived lack, was that the provision was not always matched well enough to the needs of the students, nor was it always of good quality.
24. Occasionally, the criteria for selection appeared to be more about removing a student from the school or the pupil referral unit full time than anything in particular that the placement might offer. It was difficult to see the defensible rationale for two of the placements used by pupil referral units. These were sending students to provision which was in effect another small pupil referral unit-type setting, teaching a similar curriculum, yet in worse accommodation and with less qualified staff.

25. Geography was seen as a factor by the schools and units visited for three reasons.
- The practicality of students getting to and from the provision in a reasonable time in order to maximise the time spent at the placement. This was a particular consideration in more remote areas where public transport was not easily available.
  - Related to the above, the cost of transport if public transport was not available.
  - The reluctance of some students to travel outside their familiar 'comfort zone'. For example, one school in a conurbation noted that transport availability was not an issue in the area, but that students were reluctant to go 'over the border' into the neighbouring city. In one urban area, some young people stated that they did not feel safe travelling to certain postcodes, sometimes related to the students' particular vulnerability, but in other cases associated with issues of gang culture.
26. Six of the schools and units visited considered potential progression to the next step as a key factor in selecting a placement; both a next step to stay in or re-engage in school and a next step to education, employment or training. However, only two of the pupil referral units (and none of the schools) were particularly mindful of the local employment market when selecting placements for students. At one, while its students may have wanted to take a particular course, based on their interests, if this was unlikely to lead to employment in the local area, the unit would not support it and steered students towards skills that were needed more in the local economy. For this reason, courses aimed at the local public sector care industry were not encouraged, although students knew that they could pursue these for post-16 study if they wished. The other unit had identified an oversupply in public services, but was collaborating with the local college to train students for the bakery trade, where there was local demand.

## The place of accreditation

27. The majority of alternative provision placements, arranged by the schools and pupil referral units surveyed, offered some form of accreditation. Thirty-five of the 61 placements visited were accrediting students' work and several others planned to do so once students had learnt some basic skills specific to the placement, such as motor mechanics. Overall, inspectors found that having a clear rationale for the placement, and the careful selection of the placement to meet the student's identified needs, was more important than whether or not they offered accreditation.
28. Eleven schools and units placed a high priority on the placement being able to provide accreditation at the appropriate level. One academy noted that it was particularly important that the placement could complement, and not replicate, what the school could offer, hence placements which focused on qualifications

such as in information and communication technology (ICT), English or mathematics, were not chosen. For the remaining 28 schools and units, their approaches to the use of accreditation from alternative placements can be summarised as follows.

- Most placements they use involve the students in working towards accredited qualifications but this is not the driving force. For example, as one pupil referral unit noted, 'sometimes accreditation is secondary to the social aspects and opportunities'. Equally, one secondary school was very clear that the provision, although sometimes accredited, was selected because it met the school's stated aims of re-engaging the students in learning so that they could finish school and be successful. The headteacher was clear that:

'Providing students with accreditation is our job, and the job of the alternative provision is helping the students to re-engage in school and to give them some interest, variety and motivation.'

- No accreditation takes place through the placements and the key focus is to keep the students engaged. However, the schools in this group all used work placements only and saw these as a focused step towards a career, job, training, or the next step of education.
29. There was a vast array of accreditation on offer; well over 100 different titles were mentioned to inspectors by the schools, units and alternative providers visited. Accreditation could be broadly divided into that which focused on:
- academic subjects – for example GCSE English and mathematics at Entry Level or Level 1; these were the least common
  - specific trade or vocational skills – for example the most common were: City and Guilds or BTEC qualifications in hairdressing or construction; NVQ in childcare or vehicle maintenance<sup>7</sup>
  - personal development – for example, Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN), Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE) and Key Skills (working with others)
  - leisure – for example, gym awards, boat handling or angling certificates.
30. The majority of the accreditation was offered at Entry Level or Level 1 which was appropriate to the needs of some of the students, especially when learning a new skill, but limiting for others. Some accreditation was not nationally recognised and was highly specific to the placement. This was particularly the case for accreditation focused on leisure. As such, the accreditation was of questionable value if it was a main reason for the placement. However, where it was a way to provide the student with a clear record of the skills he or she had

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<sup>7</sup> See Annex A for details of accreditation.

learnt, with the school or unit taking responsibility for a wide range of accreditation on site, this approach had some validity.

31. One school emphasised the importance of matching the accreditation to the capabilities of the student:

‘We would definitely not use a placement offering accreditation for a lesser level than the student is capable of – this would do a disservice to the student. If engagement is the main purpose, then we would rather have a placement without accreditation rather than compromising to a lower level.’

In contrast, another explained: ‘We often use Level 1 courses as a motivator with some of our least confident or more disaffected students. This then leads to the next, more challenging course either in school or off site.’

32. Occasionally, the schools and units worked with the providers to record aspects of the students’ learning so that this could contribute towards qualifications in school. For example, one school worked with a trade skills centre, where students spent one afternoon a week for six weeks, to record the skills gained and use this record towards the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE) accreditation which they were completing in school. This approach, however, was not common. Some opportunities were missed to accredit some valuable skills that were being learnt, or to put that learning towards qualifications in school, particularly for the students who were attending work placements.

## Setting up the placements

33. Eleven of the schools (including two of the academies) and 10 pupil referral units sought and received advice from the local authority when they were setting up placements. For example, they received legal advice, advice about safeguarding, or practical support in drawing up service level agreements. Schools and units generally found it easiest to set up the placements when local authorities had a database of provision which they had already judged to be of sufficient quality and met suitable safety and safeguarding standards. The safeguarding requirements for such placements are not the same as for schools. For example, legislation does not contain any statutory duty which requires a school to obtain a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check on an adult who works with a student on work experience, although CRB checks are recommended in certain circumstances.<sup>8</sup>
34. One senior leader explained that the local authority had high expectations in this respect: ‘we are not able to use others that are not on the local authority’s list because in the past some employers have “jumped on the bandwagon” and

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<sup>8</sup> *Safeguarding young people on work-related learning including work experience*, (DCSF-00371-2010), DCSF, 2010; <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/AllPublicationsNoRsg/Page7/DCSF-00371-2010>

fallen short of safeguarding requirements'. One of the academies visited had chosen to work closely with the local authority, always using approved providers because it was felt that this was likely to lead to better quality. Five other schools used the support of other agencies connected in different ways to the local authority, such as education business partnerships or Connexions, or information provided by the authority, to help them to set up service level agreements and to ensure that health and safety requirements were met. The best practice led to the placement being carefully and critically scrutinised before the final arrangements were made for the student to attend.

One pupil referral unit's considerations included the provider's public liability insurance, general health and safety procedures, safeguarding, roles and responsibilities, arrangements for students with special educational needs, minibus arrangements and licences for outdoor and adventurous activities. If the unit's leaders were not satisfied with any of these aspects, a service level agreement was not reached and the provider not used.

35. However, local authorities having their own checking procedures was not always a guarantee of correct procedures being followed, or of quality. One local authority had followed its own procedures and had service level agreements in place, but had nevertheless placed a group of students, who were on roll at one of the pupil referral units visited, full time with a provider that was not registered with the DfE as an independent school when it should have done so by virtue of making such full-time provision. One unregistered alternative provider visited also had students on roll full time from schools and pupil referral units in the local authority. The then DCSF guidance on commissioning alternative provision stated that: 'Commissioners must ensure that private providers are registered with the DCSF as independent schools, where it is appropriate. Local authorities and schools should not offer contracts to any provider which should actually be registered as an independent school but is not registered as such'.<sup>9</sup> Discussions with schools, units and providers revealed that this requirement was not widely known or understood, even by schools and units that were commissioning provision themselves.
36. Thirteen of the schools and units visited did not seek advice from the local authority when setting up alternative provision placements, and did not always use service level agreements. Two said that the local authority's processes had, when they had used them in the past, been prohibitively slow. Surprisingly, those not involving the local authority included three pupil referral units (all such units are themselves local authority provision). The headteacher of one pupil referral unit had drawn up service level agreements himself, having found that none were in place prior to his appointment. He had discussed this with a

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<sup>9</sup> *Commissioning alternative provision – guidance for local authorities and schools*, DCSF-00758-2008, 2008; [www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008).

local authority officer but had not received legal advice. Another pupil referral unit carried out its own risk assessments and passed them through the management committee for approval. This unit felt that some of its providers did not want to be on the local authority's list 'because they don't want to be swamped by applicants'. A visit to one of the unit's providers found that the proprietor had received little information about the students and that some aspects of health and safety procedures were not robust.

37. Twenty-five of the 39 schools and units surveyed reported that they visited the providers that they used prior to finalising the placement. The others sometimes visited during the placement but this was not systematic and not part of the initial quality-assurance process.

## Sharing information

38. Despite some apparently careful planning of the placements, the information given to the providers by the schools and the pupil referral units, and the subsequent contact between them, was too frequently a weakness. The schools and the units surveyed all felt that they gave the providers appropriate information. However, only 30 of them passed information about the students' particular needs on in a written form; nine gave information in an oral form only, either by telephone or during an initial visit. While the information provided orally may have been extensive, it was accessible only to the person to whom it was told, not others who might work with the student, and was more open to misinterpretation than written information.
39. All the schools and the units visited believed that they gave the providers an appropriate quality and quantity of information about the students they were placing. Forty-two of the 61 providers surveyed received basic information from the school or the unit prior to the student beginning the placement. This tended to contain details about any health considerations, and general information about behaviour although, in a number of cases, providers did not know if students had any behavioural difficulties at school. However, these providers commonly commented that they did not have enough information about the students' basic skills, particularly literacy and numeracy skills, and felt this to be a disadvantage in supporting the students and giving them appropriate tasks. This could also put the student and the provider in an awkward situation: one provider gave the example of asking a student to read a story to young children, then discovering that her reading was weak and she was very shy when reading aloud. Two providers exemplified their concerns, which were shared by others.

Some general information was received by one provider on a form from the school so that they knew about any medical or child protection issues, but stated, 'we don't ask questions and we trust everyone until we are persuaded differently'. Her view was that the bus driver often had the best information about the students. The provider believed that her role was to improve social skills, but she did not have clear information about

individual targets or about current levels of personal development or attainment to help her to achieve this aim.

Another provider commented: 'The information provided is not good enough. There is a service level agreement which is designed to generate information, but this does not happen. We do the induction and we risk-assess but we do so without any real information from the pupil referral unit. We obviously need to safeguard others so information on background/incidents would be invaluable. It would also help us to assess the suitability of our offer.'

40. Nineteen of the providers visited received more comprehensive information about the students' attainment and learning needs, including any special educational needs.

The school provided a written referral form including contact details, information about medication, special educational needs, students' strengths, reasons for referral (for example, not relating to adults or finding work a challenge), and parental permission. Students signed a contract provided by the centre setting out expectations of behaviour. The provider found this information very useful in matching the work to students' needs, and supporting them to achieve well.

41. Nine of the providers said that they assessed the students themselves. This made sense when it related to the specific skills which the student was about to learn, for example hairdressing, motor mechanics or construction, but seemed unnecessary when it related to basic literacy and numeracy skills, as information could easily be provided by the school. In some cases, providers felt that the schools' information was not easy to understand due to the use of jargon and lack of plain language.
42. Three of the providers made the point that they preferred not to 'know too much' about the students and their backgrounds before they began. While they acknowledged that some basic information was necessary, they saw their provision as somewhere that the student could 'start with a clean sheet'.
43. Forty-one of the 61 providers surveyed reported that someone from the school or the unit had visited the provision prior to the student starting. At its best, there was face-to-face contact between the student, their parent and the provider, giving each confidence in the process, but this was not common practice.

The school staff visited the provider without the student, first to talk about how the student might fit into what was on offer, in relation to their needs and issues. Then the student visited twice, once when other students were there and then for an individual discussion (sometimes including baseline assessments). Most came with parents or carers and finer details were explained and expectations established. The provider felt that

slowing the admissions process down contributed to successful placements where the student could settle quickly, because they 'had done it properly'.

The student completed an application form and was interviewed prior to the placement being offered. Following a taster day, he was interviewed again to ensure that the placement matched his interests and aspirations. The school made the final recommendation based on whether or not they thought the student would benefit from the placement. The school provided a student profile which included any special needs and strategies for helping the student. The provider used this to tailor the work to the student's needs. In this student's case, additional structure was provided for each task.

When the trade skills centre was first set up, protocols were drawn up for engagement with schools. There was flexibility in the way that schools used the centre, to some extent, tailored to suit their needs, but with clear principles. These included schools involving students' parents; each student attending an initial interview at the centre; schools providing the required pre-course information; and weekly communication from the centre to schools about students' progress. The preparation for the courses was a strength of this provision. The centre manager interviewed all students before they started and emphasised that although the atmosphere might be informal, cooperation and good behaviour were essential. He stressed that expectations were high, and that the students made the choice to attend – but by doing so they were committing to high standards of behaviour and positive attitudes. Poor behaviour was seldom an issue. The partnerships which had been developed between the centre and the schools were an essential part of its success.

## The cost of placements

44. The providers used by the schools and pupil referral units visited charged from £20 a day to £123 a day. The exception to this was the work placements, for which there was no charge. These had sometimes been set up by parents or were an extension of schools' work-experience provision, building upon good relationships with employers. The most common charge for a placement was £50 a day. However, there was no standard length to 'a day' so the hours offered for this cost varied.
45. The charges were usually more when students were studying for a vocational qualification. The cost tended to be lower when students were working with a body which had a strong community interest, for example working with the charity Nacro or 'Young and Safe' which was set up to tackle knife crime in Southwark.
46. The schools visited spent from between approximately £5,000 and £86,000 each year on alternative provision. The amount spent by the pupil referral units

depended to a large extent on their function. The largest amount spent was £1,055,666 for provision for 206 students, which reflected the unit's commissioning role for all the schools in the area as well as for its own students. Occasionally, the senior leaders of the schools and units were unable to give inspectors a clear breakdown of the costs involved in alternative provision.

47. The schools and units did not always include the less obvious costs of transport and staffing in their evaluation of value for money, yet these could be considerable. One school, for example, estimated that travel costs amounted to about £3,600 a year, on top of the cost of placements. Pupil referral units were more likely than schools to send a member of staff to the placement with the students – one estimated that this cost them over £20,000 a year.
48. Cost was an area of concern for some of the schools and pupil referral units. Likewise, it concerned some providers. Examples were found of providers with only one student on site not being aware that they could charge the school, although others had chosen not to, believing that it was part of their support for the local community. Smaller providers frequently talked about the issue of sustainability. Without knowing how many places schools would buy each year, planning for the future was difficult. One area had overcome this issue through developing a centralised system of purchasing places.

Because the pupil referral unit, on behalf of the partnership, purchased a certain number of places for the year, the provider had financial security and could plan accordingly. Equally, the secondary schools knew the exact financial commitment. The unit then made the decision about who to send to which placement. The risk for the unit was that they got the number of places wrong and were saddled with a financial commitment for the year and possibly with a placement that did not meet students' needs. However, for the first year of this arrangement they broke even with costs and the number of places, and the range of providers, met the needs of those referred.

## The place of alternative provision in a student's curriculum

### The range of placements

49. The number of placements used by the schools and pupil referral units in the survey ranged from a school which was using just one provider to another which was using 17. The number of different placements used did not relate solely to the number of students taking part in alternative provision; it also related to the extent to which the schools and units selected different provision for different students or had a core of providers they had selected to use. For example, one pupil referral unit used six different providers for 11 students; a school used six providers for just six students; whereas another used eight providers for 121 students during the course of a year. The providers

themselves varied in size from very large national organisations to small-scale provision set up by individuals.

50. The types of alternative provision used by the schools and pupil referral units varied widely but could be broadly classified as:
- individual work-related placements. These consisted of extended work experience for one day a week, based on the students' interests, such as building, retail, childcare, care of the elderly, hairdressing. They were generally not accredited
  - placements focused on learning a specific work-related or trade skill, such as construction, plumbing, electrical, hairdressing, beauty or land-based work. These were generally structured, accredited courses, with part of the time spent on theory and part on practice
  - 'personal development' placements, focused on the development of aspects such as self-esteem, confidence, self-management and teamwork, as well as specific elements such as alcohol awareness and the prevention of knife crime. These sometimes took the form of a time-limited course, for example for half a term, and often had a strong outdoor element
  - music- and arts-related placements such as digital media projects and learning composition and disc-jockey skills in a music studio
  - placements with a therapeutic element such as woodturning and hedge laying; riding and caring for horses; grooming or caring for small animals
  - placements which provided a complete full-time alternative to attending a school or pupil referral unit. These generally provided a fairly standard curriculum in small groups, with some additional focus on personal development and sometimes on vocational skills
  - college placements to take specific courses, which were sometimes 'taster' packages which included various subjects.
51. The pupil referral units, in particular, sometimes combined different types of placements, with or without some provision on the school or unit's site. For example, a student might attend one placement for two days, a second for two days and a third for a day; or two different placements for a day each and three days on site.

### **Fitting with the rest of the timetable**

52. In two of the schools visited, any student taking part in alternative provision did so full time, while remaining on the roll of the school. In one school this involved 12 students and in another, three. These schools saw the use of alternative provision as a 'last resort'. However, whereas one saw it as the way in which students would complete Year 11, the other saw it as an opportunity for students to 'turn themselves around' and then be reintegrated to school. A third school had used this method in the past and still had two Year 11 students completing such placements, but was phasing the practice out in favour of

more proactive work starting lower down the school. The headteacher commented that, 'if we make provision which is full time or close we lose contact with the students and then this will almost certainly fail'.

53. Two of the pupil referral units also used off-site provision full time. In one case, this was for all of its Key Stage 4 students because the unit's site provided insufficient accommodation for the number of students on roll. This was not, therefore, really an 'alternative' but comprised the whole of their provision. This raised issues about the balance and continuity of the students' education.
54. For the other schools and units surveyed, practice was divided between 21 which tailored the timetables around the students who were taking part in alternative provision, and 14 where students had to miss other lessons in order to attend provision off site. Unsurprisingly given their nature, the first group included 10 of the 16 pupil referral units visited, but eleven out of the 23 secondary schools visited also adopted this method of organisation.

A pupil referral unit offered each Key Stage 4 student 'academic courses' for half of the week and a range of alternative providers offered vocational courses for the other half of the week. This was arranged in year groups, with Year 10 on site for one half of the week and Year 11 for the other.

A school organised the alternative provision placements alongside its option blocks. This worked well because the 'alternative' became the 'option' and so none of the core curriculum was missed. This was not the case a few years ago and the organisation of the timetable had been developed to ensure equality of opportunity for those taking part in off-site alternative provision.

55. Whether this model was achieved, partly depended on whether the school or unit started its planning with the alternative provision or with its own timetable. If they saw the 'alternative' as part of the whole curriculum package for a student, then the school or unit tended to use providers which could offer something useful on the days they wanted to use it. If provision became too individualised, it could become too complicated to do that. One headteacher of a pupil referral unit explained: 'One requirement of our providers is that they offer the same course on different days. This means that students can have personalised programmes without missing anything and no work needs to be made up.'
56. Inspectors saw models where tailoring the provision around the students led to a coherent timetable and curriculum, good-quality support and positive outcomes. However, in other cases, this approach was less effective because the students became isolated, the teaching they received was not of sufficient quality, or the approach lacked flexibility, as illustrated below.

One school grouped all its students who were thought to need alternative provision together into one class at the start of Key Stage 4. They then

followed a specific curriculum which was designed around their needs. Students on this pathway were taught for all their lessons in discrete groups hence timetabling and missed lessons were not an issue. However, there were no opportunities for students to share experiences readily with other students and once the course began at the start of Key Stage 4 there was no real flexibility for students to move out of this group.

Another school also kept its 'alternative provision students' as a separate group throughout the week. When students were not attending alternative provision placements they were taught in the support unit, where the quality of teaching was variable and was often not taught by subject specialists. Combined with their limited number of days in school, this made it difficult for them to achieve as well as they could in the core GCSE subjects.

A third school had previously given their alternative provision group a separate timetable but found it was having a negative impact; they became identified as a separate group in the school, which added to, rather than ameliorated, their disaffection. Students were now taught with their peers; they received support from the student support centre to help them catch up on work missed when out on placements and to receive additional help with basic numeracy and literacy where needed. Both students and staff felt that, although it could present challenges, overall this was a better arrangement.

57. Where students had to miss regular lessons in order to attend their alternative placements, schools and units generally thought carefully about how to minimise the effect.

One school had found it too challenging to fit the alternative provision with the rest of the curriculum but had started to run a two-week timetable so that students did not always miss the same lesson. 'Catch up' time was provided for English, mathematics and science and students had a 'catch up buddy' to take notes for them in the lessons they missed.

At another school, one of the strands of an extensive support programme was a base staffed by two teaching assistants. This was dedicated to supporting students with coursework, whatever the reason for them needing it. Those who needed to catch up with coursework because of their alternative provision placements would spend some time there. The staff liaised with teachers so that all activities were properly coordinated.

58. Occasionally, although the students were given time during the week to catch up with missed work, it was up to them to seek out the teacher for the work missed and they did not receive any additional teaching to support them. Given that many of the students already found formal learning difficult, this had the potential to negate the benefits of their alternative provision and to allow them to fall behind.

## Quality assurance

### Regulation and inspection

59. There are few requirements for providers of alternative education to register with the DfE or any other body. Consequently, many are unregulated and uninspected. Some local authorities have their own procedures to check the safety and suitability of the provision on offer. However, as previously described, not all local authorities have such quality assurance procedures or are even aware of all the providers being used by the schools and pupil referral units in their local area. A provider has to be registered as an independent school if it:

‘provides full-time education for five or more students of compulsory school age or one or more such students with a statement of special educational needs or who is looked after (within the meaning of Section 22 of the Children Act 1989) and is not a school maintained by a local authority or a non-maintained special school.’<sup>10</sup>

This is reiterated in the commissioning guidance.<sup>11</sup> However, neither document defines what is meant by full time.

60. Only 17 of the 61 alternative providers visited were subject to formal, external inspection as detailed below. However, where a provider which was inspected catered for other groups in addition to 14–16-year-olds, the quality of this aspect was seldom evaluated or reported on specifically. In three cases, the provision was inspected nationally but the centres visited for the survey had not been inspected separately. The other 44 providers were not subject to any regulation or inspection. Details of the 17 who had been inspected were as follows.

- Two providers had been inspected by the former Adult Learning Inspectorate. There was no specific mention of the provision for 14–16-year-olds in the reports.
- One provider had been inspected by the Department of Work and Pensions in 2005. Again, there was no specific mention of 14–16-year-olds.
- The headquarters of four providers had been inspected by Ofsted, the former Adult Learning Inspectorate or the Department of Work and Pensions, but the specific centres attended by the students in the survey had not been visited.

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<sup>10</sup> *Registration of independent schools; information pack*: paragraph 37, Department for Education, 2010; [www.education.gov.uk/b009053/registration-of-independent-schools](http://www.education.gov.uk/b009053/registration-of-independent-schools).

<sup>11</sup> *Commissioning alternative provision – guidance for local authorities and schools*, DCSF-00758-2008; [www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008).

- One provision visited was part of a further education college. The college is inspected by Ofsted but there is no specific evaluation of the 14–16 element of the college's work in the inspection reports.
- The three childcare placements visited were inspected by Ofsted under the Childcare Act.<sup>12</sup> However, the function of these inspections is to evaluate the quality of the provision for the young children, not the provision for the young people placed there for work experience as alternative provision.
- Three providers were registered and inspected as independent schools.<sup>13</sup>
- Two providers were inspected by Ofsted under section 5.<sup>14</sup> In one report, the vocational centre attached to a maintained special school was commented on specifically. The second – a trade skills centre attached to a pupil referral unit – had been set up since the last inspection.
- One provider was inspected by Ofsted as an independent learning provider.

## Monitoring, assessment and evaluation

### Visits to the providers

61. The commissioning guidance from the then DCSF states:

‘The local authority or school (whichever places a child with an alternative provision provider) remains accountable for the suitability of the provision and has certain responsibilities relating to students that cannot be transferred to external providers. It is vital that placements are monitored carefully to ensure that each individual student’s needs are being met by the placement, that the provider is complying with their contract and providing a good quality of provision overall, and that the provision continues to provide value for money.’<sup>15</sup>

62. Nevertheless, not all the schools or pupil referral units visited their students at their placements. Of the 61 providers surveyed, 11 had not been visited by the school or unit at all. The other 50 providers received visits from school or unit staff as follows.

- Pre-placement visit only – two providers.
- Infrequent visits (six-monthly or less) – nine.
- Between monthly and termly – 26.

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<sup>12</sup> Carried out by Ofsted under Sections 49 and 50 of the Childcare Act 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Carried out by Ofsted under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

<sup>15</sup> *Commissioning Alternative Provision – Guidance for Local Authorities and Schools*: DCSF-00758-2008, paragraph 8; [www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008).

- Weekly visits or staff attending placement with students – 11.
  - Will visit if there is an issue – two.
63. The providers that were not visited generally felt that the school would attend if there was a problem. However, these figures indicate that a high number of schools and units were not seeing their students in-situ regularly and not able to assess their progress and welfare through any direct observation. The status of the person making the visit varied widely and depended on the purpose of the visit. Where this was to assess the quality of the placement or the students' progress, it tended to be a senior member of staff, whereas when it was to provide support (largely the case for the weekly visits), it was a teaching assistant or mentor. In two cases, schools were working in partnerships and the weekly visits were carried out by a coordinator for alternative provision in the area, with the schools themselves visiting infrequently. There were occasional examples of the visits taking place outside the working day, to talk about the student but not to see them learning.
64. The students being visited weekly by staff from their own school or unit, were mainly those from pupil referral units. Occasionally, this was seen by providers and students as intrusive. One provider, for example, appreciated the unit's support and interest, but would have liked to have been 'left to get on with it a bit more' and to build his own relationships with the students. Equally, while some students were very appreciative of the support they received, others were less so. In one case, the member of staff who had come to visit was one with whom the students did not get on well in school. Another group of students who attended college were adamant that they 'wouldn't want anyone from school to visit – it's separate'.

### **Day-to-day monitoring**

65. Attendance and behaviour were the elements that schools and units were most likely to monitor on a day-to-day basis. Where students' progress in learning new skills was assessed, this tended to be over a longer period of time. All the schools and units visited monitored their students' attendance at the alternative provision via email, telephone contact or in the case of a few, a visit to the provider; there were clear expectations that the provider should routinely check and report on attendance. Four providers used a more sophisticated electronic approach which had been provided by the local authority; for example, in one case the system automatically alerted the school within 30 minutes of the student's non-attendance at the placement. Although attendance was monitored, there were considerable differences in the rigour with which this was done and the speed with which action was taken if students did not arrive. The schools and units sometimes expressed concern that the providers were not always as vigilant as they would wish. Punctuality was sometimes, though not always, included in the monitoring and recording of attendance.
66. Surprisingly, given the needs of many of the students attending the alternative provision, behaviour and attitudes were not routinely monitored by many

schools or units. This aspect was most likely to be monitored where a member of staff visited the student regularly at the placement. Students from one pupil referral unit, for example, received a weekly visit at their placements from a learning mentor, who picked up individual concerns and acted as the interface between the placement and the unit. Progress, including against behaviour and attendance targets, was checked during these visits. One school had a similar system, where a member of staff visited the student and recorded, at the end of the visit, their attendance, punctuality, work rate, and overall attitude.

67. Where regular visits did not take place and the school or unit did not require regular information about behaviour, providers had occasionally taken the initiative to record this anyway. One provider, for example, had developed a simple sheet that was used in each session to record the answers to a series of questions about students' attitudes to their learning:

- did the student settle to the task immediately?
- did they follow instructions?
- did they work safely?
- did they show enthusiasm and interest?
- did they show aptitude for the work?
- did they work well with others?
- did they behave appropriately?
- were they prompt returning from breaks?

68. Generally, however, behaviour and attitudes were a focus only where there were concerns. This meant that there were missed opportunities to capture success, given that many of the providers visited reported that the students were making very good progress with their behaviour, attitudes and confidence, and often their conduct was exemplary.

### **Assessment of progress**

69. The majority of the schools and pupil referral units surveyed placed at least some emphasis on the role of alternative provision in improving the likelihood of the students gaining appropriate academic qualifications – either directly through the placement, or as an indirect result of improved attendance and attitudes at school. However, the academic progress being made at the placement, or the acquisition of placement-specific skills, was seldom monitored systematically by the school.

70. Where the schools and pupil referral units sent staff to visit the students at their placements, they tended to see this as the way to gather information about the students' progress. Yet unless this was underpinned by an agreed and rigorous system of gathering information, it was seldom effective. The less frequent visits were often made by teaching assistants who did not have an overview of

the students' progress in school, or by staff who did not know the students particularly well and the staff were not guided to gather specific information. Where the visits were more regular, monthly or more, they tended to be more focused on progress.

71. Even where progress was regularly tracked by the provider, this was generally not used by the school to supplement its regular progress tracking. Generally, it was only at the end of the school year, after examinations had been taken, that the school or unit knew whether progress had been made during the year at the placement. There were examples of the placements' accreditation of the students' learning, which could 'count' in terms of points scores, being missed by the schools.
72. Where no accreditation was involved, for example, for those students on extended work placements, the tracking of progress was particularly weak, yet students were sometimes making significant progress, as illustrated below.

The team leader described a student's progress as 'quite massive'. 'When she first came to the nursery, she was very quiet and very shy and would sometimes sit by herself and not with any of the children. She was paired with a mentor who helped her to join the activities with the children. Over time, she started to observe the other staff and with guidance from the leader, started to work with the children. She was particularly good with a boy who was 'almost an elective mute' when he was at the nursery.'

The student now worked well with groups and individuals, was much more confident, and used her initiative. She had learnt about child development and language development. She had recently taken responsibility for showing another student what to do. The leader said that because of what the student had achieved, she often 'forgets how young she is'. The school does not visit. The student was very good at following procedures, for example, to phone in if she was ill (though her attendance record was excellent, as was punctuality). However, the school did not request this kind of information from the nursery. The student had a log book to complete but this had not been kept up-to-date; this was not surprising as it did not seem to be part of an ongoing feedback process for the student. There was a space to get comments from the placement but there was no evidence of this being followed up by the school and the placement was not aware of the book's existence.

A provider had a performance meeting with a student every six weeks in line with full-time workers. During this meeting, the progress made by the student was evaluated against targets and future targets were then set. The student found this very useful and encouraging but the school was not aware of this process and hence did not make any use of the information.

73. One provider stood out through its determination to ensure that the progress made by the students during their placements was fully recognised by their schools.

One provider that worked with a number of different schools at any one time, set great store by continuous assessment of the students' personal development and the skills they were learning by attending the placement. The centre manager believed that it was essential that the school knew what the students were learning so that they could follow this up and celebrate students' successes. At the end of each session, with the help of the instructors, students assessed their performance and progress against four criteria: timekeeping; interaction with others; behaviour; and understanding of the subject. Their peers added their views to the discussion.

Students recorded their self-assessment on a simple form. Instructors added a comment and this was emailed immediately to the school. If there were any concerns about behaviour, the centre manager followed this up with a telephone call to their named contact at the school. At the end of the course, students received a certificate detailing the skills they had studied and learnt, and a full course report.

74. Conversely, there was sometimes tension between providers and schools when the school wanted information but the provider's assessment processes were not robust. In one case, the level of communication between the school and the provider was unsatisfactory and this adversely affected the quality of the monitoring. The school commented that 'reports have been very basic and have not been specific to individuals or related to the assessment criteria'. Occasionally, there was a clash between the degree of informality of some of the providers, which tended to be appreciated by the students, and the more formal monitoring which was required by the school or unit.
75. One pupil referral unit, which organised the alternative provision for all the schools in the area, pre-empted any potential difficulties by making contractual obligations very clear from the outset, including the progress information that would be provided. The coordinator of the alternative provision used elements of the contract to hold providers to account on her quality assurance visits. The unit also used an independent professional to observe lessons as part of the quality assurance process.
76. At its best, monitoring the students' progress was a key part of the partnership work between the school and the provider. At one school, this was extended to the provider bringing the tracking and achievement information to parents' evenings so that parents could see the whole picture of the student's progress and not just what was being achieved in school.

## Evaluation of impact

77. Overall, evaluation of the impact of the alternative provision on the personal and academic outcomes for the students was underdeveloped. In part, this was either because insufficient data were gathered by the schools, as illustrated above, or because they did not disaggregate it sufficiently from other assessment information to be able to make a judgement. Often, though, it was because rigorous evaluation of this aspect of the schools' work was not seen as necessary or had not been considered. In some schools and units, the outcomes for individuals were frequently discussed by staff, and provision altered accordingly, but the various evidence of impact had not been brought together.

For the survey visit, one school produced a spreadsheet that showed information about their students' behaviour, attendance and academic progress, which clearly indicated some impressive improvements since they had started attending the alternative provision. The school's day-to-day record keeping was evidently thorough but the wealth of information that they held was not routinely analysed in a systematic way to explore the interrelationships between behaviour, attendance, the alternative provision and progress towards success in examinations. The school was clear that it would consider doing this in the future as having done so for the visit, they were able to see patterns in a way that they had not before, and could see the benefit.

78. Of greater concern, weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation sometimes meant that schools and units failed to notice when the placement was not working, or worse, was unsuitable from the outset. In one case, the school felt that the placement was positive and was keeping the student engaged. During the survey visit, however, the provider questioned the suitability of the placement. The provider felt that a more vocational and hands-on experience would enable the student to make better progress, but this had not been acted upon despite what they felt was some secure evidence.
79. Another group of students was seen attending a part-time placement in a building that was poorly maintained and dark, with broken furniture and stacks of old equipment; this was clearly not conducive to study. The furniture mostly consisted of settees and stools at a kitchen bar. Staff were caring and dedicated to working in the community and desperate for the students to do well, but the setting was not a suitable learning environment. A third provider visited was also operating in cramped, cold and generally unsuitable accommodation.
80. Because evaluation of impact was relatively weak, value for money was difficult to assess, a particular issue in instances where the costs were high. One local authority had, through the pupil referral unit, placed nine of its students full time at a placement that cost over £7,000 per head, but the tracking of their

progress was minimal. Despite the full-time placements, the reports from the provider to the unit were vague and lacked details about progress.

81. In the examples below, evaluation of the key elements of the alternative provision was brought together in a simple but effective way which enabled the school or unit to assess the impact of the provision on the students' overall achievement, to demonstrate the students' progress to them and to their parents, and to make any changes needed to improve the provision.

At a pupil referral unit, attendance and punctuality at placements were evaluated each half-term on the basis of the monitoring information; this informed the unit's progress reports for parents and carers. The reports showed good improvements in students' attendance. Similarly, personal and social progress, and progress in skills specific to the placement, were monitored each half-term and recorded in the progress reports. Overall evaluation showed that attendance had improved; students saw the relevance of their work in core subjects and were keen to attain qualifications, and their confidence had improved.

One school developed a model to bring together all its assessment information about their students who were attending alternative provision, and who were also receiving a range of other support from the school. The assessment matrix allowed students engaged in alternative provision to consider, and eventually monitor, a range of social, educational, motivational and health-related factors. Their initial self-assessment was represented graphically and indicated positives as well as general, or more specific critical concerns. The particular strength of the approach was in the process which enabled the tutor and student to secure a good, if critical, relationship and create a dialogue. The simple matrix was revisited during the year at various points.

Adaptations had been made to the approach over its four years of operation and trends and patterns had emerged. For example, assessing social issues outside of school identified where family relationships and circumstances were having an impact on positive participation. In such circumstances, additional family support was arranged. The matrix also indicated occasions where young people had slipped into unhealthy behaviour and in doing so created the opportunity for open and honest discussion. More positively, it was boosting students' confidence by identifying those areas where they had made good progress over the year.

In one school, there was a detailed system for monitoring and evaluating the students' progress in developing specific work skills. They were proud of their self-assessment booklets which were signed off by their 'employers' and submitted for external verification towards accreditation. The records included personal and social skills, such as organisation and effective communication. The range of assessment included interviews,

eye-witness statements and photographs taken in the placements. The students particularly valued the fact that one member of staff had the overview of their progress and knew them well. The teacher provided lots of positive feedback for the students and their families, which the students found very motivating.

## The outcomes of alternative provision

82. Evaluating the outcomes of alternative provision can be more difficult than evaluating the outcomes of school or unit provision. The reasons for the provision are often very individualised; students may join a provision part way through an academic year or Key Stage and stay for a relatively short period of time; and not all of the courses or experiences are accredited. In order to gain some answers about the success or otherwise of alternative provision in each setting, this survey looked at schools' own methods of evaluating their alternative provision. As the survey focused specifically on provision for students who had behavioural difficulties, attendance difficulties, or were otherwise disengaged and were therefore vulnerable to underachieving, inspectors took particular note of schools' evidence on improvements in students' behaviour, attendance, academic outcomes across the curriculum, and academic and personal key skills<sup>16</sup>. When inspectors visited students at their placements, they considered the development of placement-specific skills as well the key skills already mentioned.
83. Evaluating the outcomes of the alternative provision was frequently made difficult by many schools' and units' lack of clear success criteria at the outset, therefore a lack of definition of what 'progress', and ultimately 'success', would look like for the students in personal, social or academic terms. Where schools and units did have a clear rationale for the use of alternative provision, they were able to demonstrate success more robustly.

The aims of one school's alternative provision programme were to:

- increase students' engagement with education, thereby enabling them to gain at least five GCSEs
- motivate them to continue with their education or training post-school, or to enter employment.

Connexions services were closely involved with the programme. The school's tracking data showed that these aims had been met very successfully. Having gained their GCSEs, even one year later all the cohort that left in 2009 were still employed or in education or training, including three in the school's sixth form. Those that left school in 2010 had all started courses or work.

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<sup>16</sup> 'Academic' key skills: literacy, numeracy and ICT. 'Personal' key skills: of working with others, improving their own learning and problem-solving.

While other schools and provision had not analysed this aspect so comprehensively, most could give (sometimes many) examples of students who had attended alternative provision and gone on to education, employment or training having previously been on the verge of permanent exclusion or dropping out of education altogether.

84. The survey considered the outcomes for all the students in the school or unit who were attending alternative provision, and the progress being made by those whom inspectors visited at their placements. In 13 of the 39 schools and units surveyed, over three quarters of all those attending alternative provision had improved their school attendance since starting their placements. In another 13, between a quarter and three-quarters had made improvements. The other 13 schools and units did not have sufficient evidence to evaluate whether attendance had improved.
85. The schools' and units' evidence indicated that improvements in behaviour and attitudes to learning since starting their placements were as follows:<sup>17</sup>
- in 18 of the 39 schools and units, over 75% of students had improved their behaviour and attitudes to learning
  - in 12 schools and units, between 25% and 75% had made improvements
  - nine schools and units did not have enough evidence to evaluate this aspect.
86. Inspectors also looked at the schools' evidence of the students' progress in the 'academic' key skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT, the 'personal' key skills of working with others, improving their own learning and problem-solving, and placement-specific skills.<sup>18</sup> Twenty-one schools and units visited had no evaluation of students' placement-specific skills. Seven had evidence to show that the majority of their students were making at least satisfactory progress with this aspect. For the other aspects:

Literacy, numeracy and ICT:

- in 14 of the 39 schools and units, over 75% of students had made at least satisfactory progress with these skills since starting their placements
- in 12 of the 39 schools and units, between 25% and 75% had made improvements, mostly more than 50%

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<sup>17</sup> Schools assessed this in different ways, but commonly used indicators such as improvements in students' attendance; decreases in behavioural incidents in school; decreases in detentions, removal from lessons and exclusions; increases in merits, certificates or other rewards; and the opinions of staff, peers and parents.

<sup>18</sup> The schools which could give information on these elements used their regular assessment and tracking systems to do so and sometimes had additional information about this group of students.

- thirteen schools and units did not have enough evidence to evaluate this aspect.

Personal key skills:

- in 13 of the 39 schools and units, over 75% of students had made at least satisfactory progress with these skills since starting their placements
- in seven schools and units, between 25% and 75% had made improvements, mostly more than 50%
- nineteen schools and units did not have enough evidence to evaluate this aspect.

87. Fifty-five students were visited by inspectors at their placements as part of the survey.<sup>19</sup> The schools' or units' information, combined with information from the placements, showed that 15 of the students had made at least some progress in all the areas mentioned above since starting the placement: the 'personal' key skills (working with others, improving own learning and performance, problem-solving); the 'academic' key skills (literacy, numeracy and ICT); attendance, behaviour and placement-specific skills. Another 17 had made progress in at least three of these aspects. However, in 21 cases there was insufficient evidence to evaluate the students' progress. Most of these students were aware of the purpose of the placement and reasonably aware of what progress they were making both in terms of specific skills and in preparation for the world of work.
88. Students' views of their placements were largely positive. Many mentioned their enjoyment of the largely practical work they were doing. They often valued their relationships with the providers' staff; feeling that they were being treated with respect while at the provision was a common theme. Several students indicated that their placement had expanded their horizons. For example, a student who was working in a retirement home noted how much she had learnt about the needs of older people, and the importance of ensuring that the way in which they were treated preserved their dignity.
89. Students frequently identified that they behaved better at the placement than at the school or unit. For example, one student commented: 'no one ever misbehaves here because it's a grown up atmosphere'. Where the placements had been particularly well matched to the students' interests, the content of the course or placement was often the first thing that the student mentioned. One student who was studying fashion design, for example, described it as 'amazing' and another reflected that her cookery placement was 'so much harder than I thought it would be but so great'. Occasionally, when students

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<sup>19</sup> The intention was to visit a student in each of the 61 placements but six were absent on the days of the survey visits.

were attending alternative provision for most of the week, they felt somewhat isolated.

90. The schools' and units' case study evidence coupled with discussions with students, parents and providers indicated that, at its best, the alternative provision was having a positive impact on the personal and academic outcomes for the students, and helping them to plan the next steps for their education or employment.

### **Managing behaviour in the 'real world'**

Four students attended work placements on a weekly basis. All had had behavioural difficulties in school, and improving their interactions with others, as well as their confidence, was a key aim of the placement. As one student put it, 'learning to be an adult and having to cope with people was the hardest bit, but it was the bit that's helped me most at school'.

She described the situations she encountered when serving in a shop; people frequently asked 'silly questions' and 'if someone was that daft in school I'd be pretty rude to them but I've learnt how to smile and answer politely'. This skill, they all agreed, was invaluable and knowing that they could achieve this in the 'real world' was enabling them to control their behaviour in school. As a result, school was becoming a more pleasant place to be. This self-evaluation was backed up by the school's data – in recent months, none of the students had been excluded, detentions were becoming rare, and attendance had improved.

### **'A sprat to catch a mackerel'**

Discussions with parents revealed their perspectives of how alternative provision had helped their children.

The mother of a boy in Year 11, who attended a college course and a trade skills workshop, said that she thought: 'it's a great idea. Taking him out of school to do these courses has made a real difference. Every time he went to the placements, he came home in a fantastic mood'. She described how he had a photo taken of his final project (a brick-built arch) and came straight home to frame it. His attitude to school had really changed; he was now doing his homework and was 'much better' at home. He had just gained two Grade Bs at GCSE at the start of the year, which in turn had made a difference to his motivation.

A Year 11 girl in the same school attended college for a day a week. In Year 10 she took a series of taster courses in hairdressing, nursery nursing and gardening. She had now chosen a childcare course for this year. Her mother described this as 'a sprat to catch a mackerel – it makes her go to school so she can go to college'. This was also how the school viewed it; the primary aim was re-engagement. Her mother said that she would have 'had a real struggle to get her to stay in school without this

provision. It's made her see the point of doing her English and maths and the other GCSEs, and it's given her more of an idea of what she wants to do'.

### **Creating 'headspace'**

A sixth form student, now studying for A levels, reflected on the benefits she had gained from a short time of alternative provision during Year 9. She was an academically able student, but was experiencing significant disruption and distress in her home circumstances, which was severely affecting her behaviour at school. The school gave her a range of support, but behaviour in class was still disruptive, undermining both her progress and that of others. In particular, she reacted very badly to any pressure. Permanent exclusion was looking distinctly likely. The school offered her the chance to take a motor mechanic course, just for one afternoon a week, and she said that this was just what she needed:

'It just gave me some time to forget about all the work I had to do and all the other stuff going on. The instructor explained things and then stood back, which most teachers don't do.'

Encouragingly, she could still explain all the practical skills that she learnt on the course. At the end of Year 11, she gained 12 GCSEs at grades A\* to C.

### **Preventing complete disengagement**

A student attended a pupil referral unit, having been permanently excluded from mainstream school. He had severe behavioural difficulties which often resulted in aggressive outbursts. His personal circumstances were very turbulent and he often became very distressed. Once a week he attended a workshop on a farm which specialised in 'green woodwork', where he was making good progress in wood-working skills. More importantly, he was making good progress with his personal skills and behaviour. He listened to instructions. He was developing a sense of the safe use of tools. He was using and applying basic skills, particularly in mathematics. He controlled his behaviour when at the placement; there have been no incidents of the destructive behaviour that were common at the centre.

The student was able to demonstrate his skills to others. He was coping with a level of frustration and as staff from the centre were learning new skills alongside him, they could discuss the strategies they used to cope with frustration when their own work was not going well. He was making significant progress in preparation for work, the rhythm of work, speaking with respect for others, and being resilient in the face of setbacks. His attendance for this part of his provision was excellent. He was proud of

his work, which was in itself a new experience. Gradually, these new personal skills were beginning to filter into his conduct at the unit, where he was starting to be calmer and to learn more successfully.

### **Finding a future**

A Year 11 boy was excluded from his mainstream school part way through Year 10 following a long history of general disaffection and aggressive behaviour. The pupil referral unit that he then began to attend had arranged a work placement in a garage for a day a week, complemented by a two half-days at a specialist project studying for a Level 1 BTEC in mechanics. He really loved going to the project. He always wanted to be a mechanic and this experience was just right for him. He enjoyed the atmosphere and 'having a laugh' with the instructors who treated him 'like an adult'. This and being treated with respect, both here and in the unit, were very important to him. The tutors let him work independently but were always there to offer help if needed and they also were interested in his future. His work at the project and his work placement had been so successful that the garage offered him an apprenticeship for the next year. This gave him the motivation that he needed to try really hard to complete his compulsory education successfully.

91. The other outcome of alternative provision is the impact that it may have on the other students in the school. In one school, the alternative provision was unashamedly aimed at those students who had 'a disproportionate impact on the needs of other students to learn uninterruptedly'. By using this approach, a few schools argued that staff in school were freed up to support those who were in school full time. In evaluating the outcomes and the success, therefore, schools with this perspective took into account the overall results for Year 11 as well as those for the students attending the alternative placements.

## **Innovative working**

92. Examples of innovative work designed to provide good-quality alternative provision were seen in schools, pupil referral units, providers and local authorities. Several are illustrated earlier in this report. Others are given below.

### **Partnership working for consistency and quality**

Two neighbouring areas – a city and a shire authority – benefited from a local authority-driven collaboration which managed off-site initiatives and could be bought into by schools, colleges and training providers. Its functions included: acting as a 'clearing house' for work experience and work-related learning; seeking out and commissioning new alternative providers; overseeing an area-wide quality mark and promoting access to higher education through the 'Aimhigher' scheme. Institutions negotiated an annual agreement for the collaboration. The collaborative approach taken across the area, provided schools that offered alternative provision

support in health and safety, safeguarding compliance and access to a rich source of 13–19 vocational provision. Part of the contract included the online collaborative learning manager (CLM) tool which provided schools with an instant record of attendance on courses, particularly useful when students were travelling independently to courses. CLM also acted as a shared record of students' progress and noted behaviour issues and incidents if they arose.

In another authority, partnership working led to alternative provision being seen as part of a wider set of strategies to help students at risk of disengagement from education. All the area's secondary schools, including the academies, were in one of three behaviour and attendance partnerships. Through these, the schools had agreed a five-level model which formed a continuum of provision. Alternative Educational Provision was part of this model that included curriculum and teaching provision in schools. Students' needs were agreed on the basis of this model and the level of resources was allocated accordingly. This system provided a moderation of resources across the local authority, supported by a lead local authority officer. The local authority kept a central list of approved alternative providers which helped to ensure that there was a minimum standard of provision. As part of the commissioning process, providers were required to complete five days' training each year. This was organised by the local authority and included child protection and opportunities for providers to meet each other and to discuss common issues.

### **Improving quality through support and challenge**

A pupil referral unit that organised alternative provision both for itself and for the secondary schools in the local authority was initially 'horrified' to learn how little providers knew about responsibilities and good practice regarding safeguarding, behaviour management and health and safety. To tackle this issue, they set up an annual programme of training. This was now in its second year. It had a good response from providers and the quality of the provision had improved. Some topics were always on the programme and others were added at the providers' suggestion. Course evaluations and quality assurance visits were also used to inform further training needs.

The unit reported that providers particularly liked the behaviour management training. The previous year, there were 13 sessions that providers paid to attend including:

- child protection Level 1
- drug awareness
- understanding and working with children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

- children's responses to trauma
- children's responses to endings
- Traveller education
- internet safety awareness, child exploitation, online protection agency
- delivering Open College Network qualifications
- improving the quality of reporting on students' progress.

### **Meeting a local need**

The alternative provision centre evolved from some small-scale vocational work begun on the site of a pupil referral unit. The head engaged two local builders to run some brickwork sessions with some of the students. This was a great success. At the same time, a motor mechanic was running courses on school sites. The head of the unit saw potential for this work to be much bigger and more ambitious. Having spoken with the staff about the principle, he sourced a site, costed the plan, and took this to the District Inclusion Partnership. This consisted of seven local secondary schools that were given a budget by the local authority with the aim of minimising exclusions and being inclusive. The centre was costed at £50,000 a year, and for this each school was given an allocation of places over the year. This was agreed and the centre began.

Protocols were drawn up for the schools' engagement. There was flexibility in the way the schools used the centre – it was to some extent tailored to suit their needs – but the principles were clear. They included the school involving students' parents; each student attending an initial interview at the centre; the school providing the required pre-course information; and weekly communication from the centre to the school about students' progress. The courses could be accredited through different routes, of which the schools were aware: BTEC, National Open College Network (NOCN), Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN), British Safety Council (Entry Level). The work from some courses was also used by three schools towards COPE Level 1. The centre is about to become an accredited centre for NOCN.

### **Complementary, not alternative**

At this school, the aim of alternative provision was to maintain engagement and extend the curriculum while maintaining equality of opportunity. The school therefore arranged the provision so that lessons were not missed when off site and focused on GCSEs so that all students, including those who attended alternative provision, could progress to college post-school. On the face of it, there was no 'alternative' provision, just a universal options menu for Year 10. However, underlying this was a set of courses which had been identified and developed especially for the students who were disaffected. Those appeared within the options package and were given as high a profile in the glossy brochure as other options, but students were carefully guided towards them.

The impact of this was that students who were taking those programmes had equality of opportunity within the options process. Just like students taking other courses, the rest of their curriculum was ring-fenced because the 'alternative' was done in options time. These students' guided choices therefore had the same status as everyone else's, which meant that they viewed them favourably. Academic integrity was maintained because accreditations were based on GCSE equivalence as were all vocational options. The identification and development of the courses for this group were designed with next steps in mind so that progression to college was expected, and if students started a Level 1 course they could progress to Level 2 as appropriate.

### **Developing alternatives 'in house'**

One school had developed its own 'alternative' provision, close to the school, but away from its main site. It comprised five small workshops, a hair and beauty salon, a motor bike mechanics workshop, ICT suite, a kitchen and catering facility, an outside allotment and a small animal enclosure. It was now virtually the sole 'alternative' provider for the school, attended by students who were in danger of permanent exclusion and those who were generally disaffected. It had begun to attract students from other schools.

The centre had been able to attract an eclectic range of funding sources: charitable, community, learning and skills, and commercial. Local businesses contributed in kind – for example, a local motorbike dealer provided support and a baker provided fresh dough free of charge for the catering class. Local businesses offered mentors. The staff were encouraged to take an outward facing attitude and had created community groups and external classes in their vocational areas as an extension to their core work with the students – much of this was during evenings, weekends and holidays. These had a family and social focus, for example staff ran courses to enable students and fathers to learn to cook together.

## **Notes**

Inspectors visited 23 secondary schools, including four academies, and 16 pupil referral units across England. The schools and units were located in both urban and rural areas and varied in size and composition. Schools and units were telephoned in advance of the planned visit and were only visited if they were providing alternative provision to students in Key Stage 4 at risk of becoming disengaged. Fifteen schools and units were telephoned but not visited because they did not meet the criteria for the survey.

Inspectors held discussions with school and unit leaders about their use of alternative provision away from the site of the school or unit. Some local authority officers also offered to have discussions with inspectors. Inspectors scrutinised a

range of data and documents about the provision and outcomes for the students. Inspectors then selected between one and four students from each school and unit to visit at their placements and visited 61 alternative provision placements.

Inspectors saw 55 students at their placement: the intention was to visit and hold discussions with a student at each of the 61 placements, but six students were absent on the days of the survey visits. The placements were run by public, voluntary and private sector organisations. Placements included farms, music studios, motor mechanic workshops, shops, nurseries for young children, catering organisations and hairdressers. Inspectors talked to the providers about the placements, their relationships with the schools and units, and the progress being made by the students. They talked to the students about their experiences and looked at the work they were doing.

## **Further information**

### **Ofsted publications**

*Pupil referral units: establishing successful pupil referral units in schools and local authorities* (070019), Ofsted, 2007; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070019](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070019).

## **Annex A**

### **Information about accreditation**

ASDAN; [www.asdan.org.uk](http://www.asdan.org.uk).

BTEC; [www.edexcel.com/quals/BTEC](http://www.edexcel.com/quals/BTEC).

City and Guilds; [www.cityandguilds.com](http://www.cityandguilds.com).

### **Commissioning alternative provision**

*Commissioning alternative provision – guidance for local authorities and schools*, DCSF-00758-2008, 2008;  
[www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00758-2008).

### **Registration as an independent school**

*Registration of independent schools information pack*, DfE, 2010;  
[www.education.gov.uk/b009053/registration-of-independent-schools](http://www.education.gov.uk/b009053/registration-of-independent-schools).

## Annex B: providers visited for this survey

### Academy

Bradford Academy  
 Dixons City Academy  
 George Salter Collegiate Academy  
 The Samworth Enterprise Academy

### Local area

Bradford  
 Bradford  
 Sandwell  
 Leicester

### Secondary schools

Addington High School  
 Babington Community Technology College  
 Balby Carr Community Sports and Science College  
 Barnwood Park Arts College  
 Belmont School Community Arts College  
 Belper School  
 Farmor's School  
 Hylands School  
 King Edward VII School and Melton Learning Hub -  
 Specialist Training School and Technology College  
 Netherthorpe School  
 Norwood School  
 Paget High School, Business and Enterprise College  
 Portchester School  
 Robertsbridge Community College  
 Shelley College - A Specialist Centre for Science  
 St Bartholomew's School  
 St Michael's CofE High School  
 The Willink School  
 Wrotham School

### Local area

Croydon  
 Leicester  
 Doncaster  
 Gloucestershire  
 Durham  
 Derbyshire  
 Gloucestershire  
 Essex  
 Leicestershire  
 Derbyshire  
 Lambeth  
 Staffordshire  
 Bournemouth  
 East Sussex  
 Kirklees  
 West Berkshire  
 Sandwell  
 West Berkshire  
 Kent

### Pupil referral units

Chaselea PRU  
 Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Pupil Referral Services  
 College Central  
 Francis Barber Pupil Referral Unit  
 Haybrook College PRU

### Local area

Staffordshire  
 Gloucestershire  
 East Sussex  
 Wandsworth  
 Slough

**Pupil referral units**

Park Campus  
Quayside Education Centre  
Southwark Inclusive Learning Service KS3, KS4 & Sils+  
The Compass  
The Gateway Centre  
The Kingsmead School  
The Limes College  
The Study Centre  
The Wycombe Grange Pupil Referral Unit  
West Quadrant Children's Support Centre, Harlow  
Springwell Centre Pupil Referral Unit, Barnsley

**Local area**

Lambeth  
Hampshire  
Southwark  
Dorset  
Doncaster  
Derby  
Sutton  
Ealing  
Buckinghamshire  
Essex  
South Yorkshire