

## Report summary

# Alternative provision

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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. 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.

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. 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 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.

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