

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Between **September** and **December 2010**, inspectors visited 23 schools and academies and 16 pupil referral units to explore their use of 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>

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. This survey considers what makes alternative provision successful and examines some of the current issues associated with its use.

## 2. 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.

<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.

- 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.

### 3. 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.

**The full report can be viewed/downloaded at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/100233>**