Pupil referral units

Contents

What are pupil referral units (PRUs)?

Although most pupils receive education in a school (mainstream or special), there are a range of circumstances in which suitable education has to be provided outside school. In such circumstance, pupils may be admitted to a pupil referral unit (PRU).

PRUs are legally both a type of school and provider of education otherwise than at school. PRUs' relatively small size, rapidly changing roll and the type of pupils they teach mean that they are not subject to all the legislative requirements that apply to mainstream and special schools.

The role and composition of PRUs vary across local education authorities (LEAs). In some instances, these can be single establishments catering for one particular phase/age of pupils and/or one specific type of educational need or difficulty. In other instances they can include a range of provision on many sites across a wide geographical area. The more complex type of PRU is increasingly the norm.

Pupil referral units have usually been confined to the maintained sector but a number of independent PRUs have been established over recent years, usually in response to particular or unusual local circumstances.

Pupils who can be referred to a PRU include:
- pupils excluded from school on a permanent or fixed-term basis (more than 15 days)
- pregnant schoolgirls and schoolgirl mothers
- anxious and vulnerable pupils
- school refusers, phobics and young carers
- pupils unable to attend school for medical reasons
- any pupils moving into the LEA (casual admissions) who are unable to find a school place because of insufficiency of school places within the LEA
- children who, because of entering public care or moving placement, require a change of school place and are unable to gain access to a school place
- asylum seekers and refugees who have no school place
- pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN) whose placements are not yet agreed, and pupils awaiting assessment of SEN.

The key differences between PRUs and schools are that:
1. PRUs have a management committee not a governing body; this can include a significant LEA representation
2. a large number of pupils may be subject to dual registration, both in the PRU and in their local school
3. there are differences in the level and qualifications of the staffing and the relative duties of LEAs and teachers in charge

4. the PRU's curriculum need not be the full National Curriculum
5. there is a different level of requirements regarding premises

Before inspecting a PRU, all team members should familiarise themselves with the most recent relevant guidance documents.

Currently these are:
- *Guidance for LEAs: PRUs and alternative provision,* DfES 2004
- *Commissioning alternative provision: the role of the LEA,* DfES 2004
- *Designing a personalised curriculum for alternative provision,* QCA 2004
- *The education of pupils with medical needs* (HMI 1713), Ofsted 2003.

The documents above give further details of all the current legislative requirements applicable to PRUs.

Practical considerations when inspecting PRUs

Getting started

Look for key indicators, especially from the SEF and the PRU's last inspection reports.

On a practical level, these should include:
- **the number and age range of pupils** – numbers of pupils attending over the past year are as important, if not more important, than those on the current roll
- **the number of sites and their approximate geographical proximity** – these may have changed dramatically since the last inspection and will affect how and if a judgement can be made on improvement since the last inspection, as well as affecting the deployment of the team
- **the timings and number of sessions for all pupils and for particular groups** – this information is a vital element affecting both possible team deployment and the day/s chosen for the inspection
- **the nature of the needs represented** – in some instances this may require inspectors with particular specialisms being included in/leading the team.

When identifying issues for the inspection focus, the range of quality indicators demonstrated in the unit's self-evaluation form (SEF) will not be significantly different to those applying in all schools. However, the measures used for demonstrating the achievement of pupils may be different, and will depend on the levels of need and the nature of the difficulties represented, as well as the amount of time typically spent in the unit.

Particularly significant questions to ask when examining a PRU SEF are:
- Are the purpose and role of the provision clearly articulated and exemplified, especially when a preventative service is also part of the PRU?
- Are the PRU's curriculum and 'suitable education' arrangements set out clearly?
- Has a convincing and appropriate framework been drawn up for judging the success of its particular circumstances – in improving behaviour, attendance and attainment etc?
- Are the admission and re-integration protocols consistent with the PRU's purpose and role?
- How much is shown about the costs of the provision? (LEAs can devolve funding to PRUs in different ways depending on their range and context.) The key question to ask is: do the costs, whatever they are, seem reasonable for the difference the PRU is making to the achievements of the pupils concerned?
- Who are the key partners and how effective are relationships?

These triggers, where they are significant, may become a focus of pre-inspection issues, should be noted in the PIB and will contribute to the team's early debate with the senior management team at the initial meeting.

Any additional services which are part of the PRU, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), **will not be inspected directly**, but inspectors will want to talk to stakeholders and key partners about the impact of these services on pupils' learning and well-being.

Team deployment

There is no preferred model of deployment. Even in complex PRUs on many sites, the team is likely to be small and inspectors will share responsibility for gathering evidence. As part of the inspection, a unit's success in promoting **ECM** outcomes should also be teased out when gathering evidence about the quality of different aspects of the provision (see separate **ECM** guidance).

Setting up the inspection

The lead inspector's initial phone call to the unit may include the following discussion points, where appropriate.
- What are the unit manager's key areas of responsibility?
- In the case of complex PRUs, tease out the lines of managerial responsibility and clarify the key personnel required for discussion and their availability for interview during the period of the inspection.
- Preliminary agreement on the range of evidence needed and possible inspection trails to follow. This will be confirmed or amended at the initial meeting.

Following up the inspection trails

The following points should be kept in mind when following up the inspection trails.

- A clear focus which is relevant to the context of the different parts of complex units needs to be established at the outset of the inspection.
- Discussion with stakeholders and key partners; it is helpful to try and arrange these interviews at the start of the inspection.
- Consideration of the views of pupils will be particularly helpful in informing inspection judgements, especially regarding the relative strengths and weaknesses of the different parts of complex PRUs. However, care should be exercised during discussions with vulnerable pupils, for example those with medical needs.

Weighting judgements about different parts of a complex PRU and any additional services

Consideration must be given to the quality and impact of the different parts of the provision and any additional services provided. When considering overall effectiveness, care must be taken to weight the judgements fairly. For example, judgements about overall effectiveness must not be dictated solely by the outcomes of the education provided for a few of the unit's current pupils located on one site. The following points should be kept in mind when this composite judgement is made.

- Weighting must be context specific; it must take account of the core objectives of the unit's work. For instance, in a school the core work is clearly the pupils' education. In a PRU, the core work **can include** specific improvements in the pupils' attitudes, behaviour and/or attendance.
- In judging leadership and management, weighting should only encompass the unit manager's and the management committee's direct responsibilities i.e. the areas of work for which the management committee provide strategic direction and where line-management falls to the unit manager. Although individual members of the management committee may be officers of the LEA, care should be taken in drawing a distinction between the duties of the committee and the responsibilities of the LEA.

Reporting considerations

Reporting requirements are the same for PRUs as they are for all schools. However, in the case of complex PRUs, consideration may need to be given as to whether the usual report format should be adapted to reflect the context of the particular provision. A single overall report, for example, may not give sufficient information on the relative strengths or weaknesses of provision on different sites or for separate groups of pupils. In such cases, reports may be altered to include specific judgements and/or comments on the respective strengths of each site.