

# Finding a way back

**Vivien Janes**, ContinYou Regional Development Manager, and a former head of a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), says that extended services should be a cornerstone of alternative provision: they are a proven way of motivating disengaged pupils, and can provide a route back to mainstream education.

**A**s extended and community focused services are embedded in mainstream schools and early years settings, the number of pupils requiring alternative provision should, hopefully, be reduced. A focus on early intervention at primary or pre-primary level ought to go a long way towards identifying and addressing the risk factors that lead to children's poor behaviour or their disengagement with school.

However, if children or young people reach the point where their behaviour is extreme enough to warrant exclusion, it's critical to ensure they still have every chance to make a success of their lives — whether this is by re-entering mainstream education following a period of turbulence, or by gaining

access to quality alternative provision. Similarly, if young people require alternative provision as young parents or because they refuse to go to school, they should still be able to gain a first-

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rate education. If young people are admitted to a PRU, it is essential that the experience is seen as a 'stepping stone' to further opportunities and not the 'end of the road'.

Nevertheless, because many of the young people who find themselves in a PRU have had a negative experience of school, teachers and others need to think creatively if they are to provide a stimulating and sustainable experience. Out-of-school-hours learning; personalised learning; learning outside the classroom; these are the cornerstones of extended and community focused services, and proven means to get disengaged learners back on track.

And, although providing a range of different activities in a PRU can be a challenge, not least because there is often a lack of resources, making links with other schools and service providers such as the youth service, supplementary schools and voluntary and community organisations will keep children and young people engaged in learning and involved in the local community.

## Viv's tips

**Developing extended services in a PRU sometimes requires a slightly different approach, but the justification for doing so is no different from any other setting: it's to improve the lives of children and young people.**

### Pupils

Personalised learning programmes greatly benefit students who have a variety of needs. Try and develop an individualised programme, taught within the context of a safe community, which offers a range of options for participation.

When developing study support/oshl activities delivered by partners and in locations other than the PRU itself, experience has shown that pupils need more than a 'signpost': extra support, such as encouragement to overcome issues of self-confidence, or something as simple as giving them a lift to the venue!

Activities should take place in a location where the young people feel comfortable and one they can find easily.

### Parents

As in any school, developing positive relationships with parents is crucial to the success of students. Regular and clear communication with parents at all times is a must; for example, through letters, phone calls, meetings, newsletters. Involve parents in decision-making where possible.

Offering sessions that focus on issues facing their children/charges may attract parents/carers; for example, a drugs education workshop. But be mindful of how you present information to parent/carer support group. Parents won't want to feel they or their child are being stigmatised.

### Partnerships

Teachers need to be more than just good, they need to be excellent facilitators of learning. They need to be able to develop positive, mutually respectful relationships with the young people, to form a partnership with them — and a range of working styles can help. For example, a youth worker's style of working can complement the approach and purpose of a teacher.

PRUs are likely to be working closely with the youth service, primary care trust and CAMHS; use these links to their full advantage. For example, PRU managers may be able to organise advice sessions on sexual health. In other health-related work, managers may be able to develop close working relationships with sports professionals, such as those associated with the Playing for Success programmes.

There is little sense in improving PRUs in isolation from improvement strategies elsewhere in the education system; they should be seen as an integral part of local area provision. Partnerships with other schools and outside agencies have the potential for symbiotic learning — for example, PRUs already have considerable experience in working as part of multi-agency teams, something which some mainstream schools may still be coming to terms with.

Partnership working can be a challenge in rural areas where PRUs can be very small and resources stretched (see ETC online) for advice on setting up extended services in rural areas.

Private companies, charities and voluntary community organisations can have a major role to play in offering a broader curriculum.





## Case study: Cumbria's Gillford Centre

Peter Ward, extended services and children's centre development worker in Carlisle found it difficult to involve other local schools in the activities he was setting up for Pupil Referral Units. That was, until he approached James Rennie, a school for children with special educational needs, with a proposal for an inter-school football match: 'The staff at James Rennie were delighted... they said their pupils rarely get the opportunity to play children from mainstream schools.'

The match led to a re-match; and, perhaps because the two events passed off without incident, this ultimately led to an inter-school tournament, this time involving other local schools. And, other more profound outcomes came from the James Rennie fixture:

'A bit later, we took our kids bowling for a treat,' Peter explains. 'While we were in there a group of adults with learning disabilities came in. It was very rewarding for me personally to see that the children who'd played football against James Rennie made no remarks, no sniggering, no anything. The children who hadn't had experience of playing James Rennie, they made a few comments, but the others chastised them; they brought them back saying "You can't be saying things like that about people."'

In a separate activity, children from the Gillford Centre receive football coaching at Carlisle United, through a private provider; the centre also runs after-school sessions at a

local snooker club and Carlisle Villa Boxing Club. Some of the clubs initially asked for a member of staff to be present, but the opportunity to take part in activities in a social setting showed that any 'policing' was actually unnecessary. For example, Peter received nothing but good reports of the way that the Gillford group had behaved in the snooker club: 'The owner said they were a joy to have. They're so polite, they're manners are great when they come to the bar to ask for cues... I'm really proud of them for doing that.'

The small, but significant connections that Peter is creating are, he thinks, a potential bridgehead for ongoing work: 'I go to development days where there are headteachers there, and I always talk about the work that's going on in the PRU. And I see people's faces, especially when I say we've played James Rennie at football without any incidents, with good behaviour. I see the heads kind of smile and they'll raise an eyebrow. So I hope we can build on that.'

The extended services at the Gillford PRU are now embedded, with after-school activities on four days a week. Although statutory funding isn't necessarily secure, Peter has insured against this by bringing in funding from other sources: Tesco, Neighbourhood Forums, local housing associations, the Hadfield Trust, Cumbria Community foundation and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership.

## Case study: Step Ahead in Swansea

The Step Ahead Centre has places for twenty one pupils. Pupils study the same coursework modules as their peers because the aim is to re-integrate them into mainstream school. The centre takes advantage of as many opportunities as it can to make sure it keeps a close connection with the local and wider community. Deputy Head Patrick Toogood sees the centre's community focused work as an essential part of the life of the school: 'From a young person's point of view, benefits are clearly going to include a positive change in attitude towards their school, from being "where I go to school" to "where I can be involved in a variety of opportunities"... and to see adults from the community using the facilities will also build a greater confidence in what will be available on leaving mainstream education, such as out-of-school learning opportunities.'

Sustainable development is a key aspect across the curriculum. The centre also encourages recycling by being involved with the 'Yellow Woods Challenge', and promotes recycling on site.

**community focused work ... an essential part of the life of the school**

An awareness of the 'world of work' is enhanced in several ways. The centre has close links with Careers Wales West, which helps with organising mock interviews, mentoring (including e-mentoring), interview techniques and 'world of work' talks. Mentors with a variety of work backgrounds come in once a month to talk to individual pupils.

The centre has strong links with the local colleges and transition for Year 11 pupils is again sensitively managed with visits arranged throughout the pupils' final year to give young people confidence to continue with their post-16 education in a much larger establishment than they have been used to in Step Ahead.

### Policies and resources

ContinYou's *Briefing guide for pupil referral unit managers* outlines how to develop study support as part of alternative provision. Download via: [www.tinyurl.com/6rv28n](http://www.tinyurl.com/6rv28n).

[www.prb.org.uk](http://www.prb.org.uk) – Policy Research Bureau website for an evaluation of the On Track programme in England and Wales, which piloted different approaches to targeted intervention for 4 to 12 year olds at risk of offending or antisocial behaviour. Becta guidance on setting up ICT support for alternative provision: [www.tinyurl.com/6e7muz](http://www.tinyurl.com/6e7muz)

The Nation Organisation for Pupil Referral Units' offers resources and advice at [www.prus.org.uk](http://www.prus.org.uk).

*Back on Track* is the government in England's White Paper setting out how to 'modernise' (that is, improve) alternative provision for young people.

[www.tinyurl.com/6776pe](http://www.tinyurl.com/6776pe) will direct you to the download page on the DCSF site.