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Sonia Lockett
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Dear Miss Lockett

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Stafford Pupil Referral Unit At the Stables (The Hollies)

Following my visit to your school on 22 January 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in July 2018. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, I held meetings with you, a member of the school's management committee, the attendance officer, other school staff, and a group of pupils. I held telephone conversations with the chair of the management committee and a commissioner from the local authority. I evaluated the local authority's statement of action and the school's improvement plans. I visited all classes during the morning to observe pupils working. I reviewed a wide range of documentation, including the school's single central record of recruitment checks, behaviour logs, school policies, leaders' action plans, attendance registers, the school's admission register, management committee minutes and safeguarding documents.

The inspection focused mainly on pupils' attendance, safeguarding and behaviour because these are the most urgent priorities that the school needs to address.

Context

Several management committee members resigned at the end of the summer term 2018, including the chair and vice chair. A new chair of the management committee took up post in September 2018. In addition to the chair, three new members have also joined since the start of the new academic year. You have appointed two new middle leader posts from within the existing staff team.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Leaders and the management committee have not responded quickly enough to several of the areas for improvement that were identified at the last inspection. Leaders' long delay in beginning to implement much needed change has meant that too many pupils still do not have their needs fully met and safeguarding remains ineffective. Nevertheless, more recently, you have drawn on the support from colleagues from other schools, and the pace of change has begun to quicken. Now the school is starting to move in the right direction.

You created a post-Ofsted action plan in light of the findings from the last inspection. While the plan makes reference to most of the areas for improvement, it lacks precision and does not clearly state what the intended outcomes are likely to be for pupils if the planned actions are implemented. This makes it difficult for leaders and the management committee to measure how effective the school has been in addressing weaknesses. In addition, leaders' ability to resolve pressing issues identified at the last inspection and move forward was hampered during the autumn term by staff absence, changes to the management committee and late-in-the-day limited support from the local authority. The school is also challenged by a reduction in its budget.

At the beginning of the autumn term 2018, leaders made a hasty, ill-advised decision to immediately return all pupils on part-time timetables to The Hollies on a full-time basis. However, with no carefully planned reintegration of pupils, the effect of this sudden change was detrimental both to staff and to pupils. Consequently, during the first three months of the autumn term, pupils' behaviour deteriorated rapidly. At this time, school records showed that serious damage to property, assaults on members of staff and pupils – some requiring police intervention – and significant disruption to pupils' learning were commonplace. This coincided with a sharp rise in fixed-term exclusions. A local authority officer conducted a safeguarding audit during this period and did not identify any major concerns.

Despite the issue of the building's limited space being raised at the last inspection, the school's roll continues to increase. The building is not fit for purpose, given the increasing number of pupils with complex behavioural needs. It is generally in a poor state of repair because of intentional damage to property caused by pupils. Furthermore, pupils do not have access to a playground or field where they can run

about and let off steam. You and the local authority are currently in discussion about using an additional building, but this negotiation is taking too long. In the meantime, pupils and staff are left vulnerable and at greater risk of a serious incident occurring on the premises.

Recently, leaders have successfully reduced the number of pupils on part-time timetables by making greater use of alternative providers. This has enabled leaders to increase the number of pupils offered a full-time education, while at the same time attempting to manage the issue of restricted space. Leaders carry out rigorous checks to ensure that these providers are appropriate and can meet the learning needs of the pupils placed with them. Unfortunately, one of the alternative providers has not proved suitable and this has resulted in the provider asking most pupils to leave. These pupils are currently on part-time timetables while leaders try to find an alternative placement.

You have tightened procedures around the use of part-time timetables, with the aim of keeping their use to a minimum. However, you acknowledge that insufficient safeguarding checks mean that a few pupils on part-time timetables are still potentially left at risk. After this was brought to your attention during the inspection, you immediately began to make further changes to the way you monitor pupils who are not present in school or at alternative provision. The additional checks planned will assist in keeping pupils safe from harm.

Liaison with local secondary schools in relation to pupils who are dual registered is underdeveloped. Almost all dual registered pupils undertake all of their education at The Hollies – they almost never attend, or are invited to attend, their home school. It was encouraging to hear the local authority talk about tackling the 'non-inclusive behaviour of some Staffordshire schools'. Hopefully, this will encourage headteachers of home schools to work more closely with you and take a greater share of the responsibility for effectively meeting each pupil's personal and academic needs.

Pupils' attendance has improved since the last inspection, although it remains low when compared with the national average. Leaders have taken some positive steps to monitor pupils' attendance more closely and act faster when a pupil fails to arrive at school. Leaders complete the electronic register correctly and use the appropriate codes to record absence. However, there is still a reliance on the alternative provider or home school to contact The Hollies to record a pupil who is absent. The Hollies does not routinely call to check that a pupil has arrived safely. This allows for an unnecessary margin of error, and the risk that a pupil thought to be in a school, or an alternative setting, is not.

Leaders now have more accurate information about pupils' attendance and use this to highlight those pupils whose levels of absence are a concern. Leaders adopt a range of suitable strategies to encourage pupils to attend regularly. These range from rewards, such as allowing pupils to move to the front of the dining queue, to

issuing fixed penalty notices to parents and carers who fail to ensure that their child attends school regularly. While overall attendance is higher this term in comparison to the same time last academic year, a significant minority of pupils have attendance that remains stubbornly low. Leaders do not yet use attendance information well enough to prioritise the most vulnerable pupils and determine an effective programme of support to improve their attendance.

The management committee has been slow to respond to the previous inspection findings. This is, in part, due to changes in the composition of the committee. At present, the management committee does not demonstrate a secure grasp of all the school's issues. Meetings of the committee are sparse; for example, the first full – and only – management committee meeting of the autumn term was in December 2018. There have been no meetings since then. This means that time drifts without members making adequate checks on leaders' work. This is exacerbated by a lack of commitment from a few members, indicating some fragility in terms of leadership capacity.

Planned improvements to the provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) have stalled due to staff absence. In the interim, you have taken temporary responsibility for this area, although you have had limited capacity to undertake the necessary work. You are currently working towards a solution so the needs of pupils with SEND can be met more effectively in the future.

Despite several setbacks and a sluggish start to implementing the action plan, developments in some areas are now gaining pace. Leaders introduced a new behaviour management policy in December and trained staff to ensure that they adopt a consistent approach to its implementation. Leaders collect a wealth of information about behaviour incidents and use this to inform pupils' behaviour plans. This is now beginning to have a positive impact and pupils' behaviour is starting to improve. Similarly, leaders have a clear vision for improving pupils' skills in reading and have already purchased a range of new resources. Middle leaders have delivered training to staff on the teaching of reading. It is too early to evaluate the effect of this work.

The support provided by the local authority has been minimal. While the local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose, it is having little impact. Up until very recently, leaders had received almost no guidance or advice to help the school move forwards. Of late, the local authority has signposted you to experienced leaders of multi-academy trusts. You and other leaders have attended some initial meetings and begun to establish positive links with leaders from these schools. The staff team support each other well and show commitment to working with external partners to bring about school improvement.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is not fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the management committee, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Staffordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tim Hill
Her Majesty's Inspector