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20 October 2014

Ms Alexis Widdowson  
Headteacher  
Berwick Academy  
Adams Drive  
Berwick-upon-Tweed  
Northumberland  
TD15 2JF

Dear Ms Widdowson

**Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Berwick Academy, Northumberland**

Following my visit to your academy on 18 November 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in October 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The academy should take further action to:

- review, revise and streamline the academy's improvement planning and strategies ensuring that:
  - the number of key priorities and actions identified are realistic and achievable
  - targets and success criteria focus sharply on intended outcomes for students
- ensure that the recently introduced assessment and tracking systems are accurate and reliable and the information generated is used effectively to inform planning, refine targets, and to monitor, evaluate and summarise student performance.

## **Evidence**

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, the head of mathematics, the Chair of the Governing Body and two other governors, and a group of students from Year 9 to Year 13. I held telephone discussions with the Director of Education and Skills for Northumberland and the academy's improvement partner. I reviewed a range of documentation including the academy's improvement plans, academy leaders' reports to the governing body, and the most recent information about student progress and achievement and lesson observation records. In addition, I conducted a learning walk with the deputy headteacher that included a number of short visits to English, mathematics, science, history, child development and food technology lessons and the recently established inclusion unit - the Eden Centre.

## **Context**

Since the previous monitoring inspection in December 2013, the academy has experienced high levels of staff absence due to illness. Several members of staff left the academy during the course of the year. An extensive recruitment and restructuring process has been undertaken resulting in the appointment of an assistant headteacher with responsibility for pastoral support, a deputy headteacher who joined the academy at the start of the summer term 2014 and several teachers who joined the academy in September 2014. Two middle leaders have been seconded to the leadership team. An area of the academy has been refurbished to create an inclusion unit - the Eden Centre - under the leadership of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator who has been in post since the beginning of the current academic year.

## **Main findings**

In order to establish the circumstances necessary to bring about sustained improvement, the headteacher and governors have tackled staffing difficulties and leadership capacity issues well and with determination. As a result, an appropriate leadership and staffing structure has been established, increasing the capacity to drive forward improvement initiatives more rapidly over the longer term. Students report that they are now experiencing fewer interruptions to their learning and are beginning to make better progress because staffing is more stable in most faculties. Recent lesson observations confirm that the quality of teaching is improving and the proportion that is good or better is increasing. Students' behaviour and attendance also continues to show slow but steady improvement.

Despite the positive signs of improvement seen in several areas of the academy's work during this monitoring inspection, there has been insufficient time for leaders' actions to have significant impact on improving the achievement of students. Unvalidated data for the 2013-14 academic year, indicates a significant decline in the proportion of students obtaining five or more good GCSEs grades including English and mathematics at the end of Year 11, when compared to the previous year. Inspection evidence indicates that not

enough students are making as much progress as they should in a number of subjects and too much variation remains in attainment between different groups of students and across subjects. Systems to track students' attainment have recently been overhauled in order to monitor student performance more accurately and to identify where students are underachieving and put in place appropriate and timely support. However, it is too early to tell how accurate and reliable these systems are or whether they will make an effective contribution to the academy's drive for improvement and raising achievement.

A range of plans and strategies have been developed since the previous section 5 inspection in October 2013. These now require revision to ensure they accurately take account of the academy's current circumstances, include clear and measurable success criteria linked to student outcomes and are focused sharply on a manageable number of key priorities.

Governors have an accurate understanding of what is needed to bring about improvement. They continue to use their considerable skills and expertise to good effect in order to support and challenge school leaders and engage with other education providers.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

### **External support**

The academy is actively engaging with other schools in the Berwick partnership. Governors have initiated discussions with other governing bodies about the shape of education provision in the local area, and the academy is supporting an accelerated reading programme for those feeder middle schools who wish to participate.

Relationships between the academy and the local authority have improved significantly. The local authority is challenging and supporting the academy more effectively than was previously the case. The headteacher and governing body have responded well to their recent conversations with local authority personnel and demonstrate a clear intent to work with the local authority and other partners to bring about improvement as swiftly as possible. Academy leaders are currently in the process of contacting a number of potential partners that the local authority has suggested may be well positioned to provide support for specific improvement initiatives. A new improvement partner has recently begun working with the academy.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and as below.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Ripley  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

The letter should be copied to the following:

- Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
- Local authority - including where the school is an academy
- Contractor providing support services on behalf of the local authority - where appropriate
- The Education Funding Agency (EFA) if the school has a sixth form
- < Diocese - for voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools
- The person or body responsible for appointing foundation governors if the school has a foundation
- DfE - Academies Advisers Unit [ [colin.diamond@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:colin.diamond@education.gsi.gov.uk)] - for academies