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Mr T Bennett
Headteacher
Windlestone School
Chilton
Ferryhill
County Durham
DL17 0HP

Dear Mr Bennett

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Windlestone School

Following my visit with Bernard Campbell, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 14 and 15 October 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements, and the behaviour and welfare of pupils at the school. The inspection also focused on relevant aspects of the quality of leadership and management at the school.

Evidence

Inspectors met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, teachers and support staff, the Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative of the local authority. Meetings were also held with groups of students, and inspectors spoke informally with students on all three of the school's sites. Inspectors telephoned a sample of parents to gather their views. The single central record, documentation relating to child protection arrangements, records of attendance and behavioural incidents as well as the school's arrangements for following up absence and incidents were scrutinised. Minutes of governors' meetings, school policies and development plans, health and safety checks and risk assessments were reviewed. Reports relating to attendance, behaviour and welfare were examined. Inspectors investigated the school's work to support students in learning how to stay safe. Samples of students' work in books and folders were examined.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school's safeguarding arrangements meet requirements.

Context

Windlestone School is a residential special school for students aged 11 to 16 years who have social, emotional and mental health needs. All students have statements of special educational need or education, health and care plans. Currently, 74 students are on roll, of whom 20 reside in accommodation on the school site from Monday to Thursday. The school's residential provision was inspected by a social care inspector at the same time as this inspection and the findings are published separately by Ofsted. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals remains above the national average. Students are mostly White British and they join the school from mainstream and special schools in Durham and the surrounding area. The school includes provision for Key Stage 4 students who are excluded or at risk of exclusion. This takes place at personalised alternative curriculum centres. These are situated on two smaller sites: one in Durham, a distance of eight miles from the main site, and the other at Ferryhill, a distance of one mile.

Since the last inspection in October 2012, students admitted to the school have had higher levels of need and the proportion of students who have more complex behavioural and emotional needs has increased. Staff turnover has been low, especially in the residential provision. Five staff left the school in summer 2015 and were replaced by four teachers and one support assistant in September 2015. Across all sites five staff were absent at the time of the inspection. A new Chair of the Governing Body was appointed in February 2015.

Main findings

Together with the Chair of Governors, you demonstrate an appropriate understanding of how to keep students safe and place a high priority on their safety and well-being. The Chair of Governors now leads, monitors and evaluates safeguarding thoroughly as part of his role to keep the quality of the school's work under close scrutiny. Recent reviews and consultation have shaped new child protection, health and safety, behaviour, and attendance arrangements. Governors acknowledge that they didn't keep policies fully up to date in the past. Firm action is now being taken to ensure that policies and procedures are up to date, and a programme to check the impact that all school policies and practices are having has begun. Policies are clear about procedures, roles and responsibilities. Training sessions to induct new staff and governors, and a rolling programme of refresher training, ensure that all staff receive regular updates on their responsibilities. Attendance at these sessions is monitored to ensure that all staff are appropriately trained.

Checks are conducted to ensure that the suitability of adults to work with children and school recruitment procedures reflects current guidance. References are collected and retained, and checks to verify identity are thorough. You ensure that questions about safeguarding are included in interviews and that panels include governors or staff who have a good understanding of the most recent legislation and guidance on keeping students safe.

When concerns arise relating to child protection or safety, they are referred to other agencies through clear procedures to protect a child or young person. Records are held securely. Swift action to inform the local authority designated officer is taken where necessary. Meticulous recording and checking that the outcomes of referrals lead to actions to benefit students are a very strong feature at the Durham site. However, you do not ensure that recording and checking to this high standard is consistent, by all coordinators, across all of the school's sites.

You have taken the initiative to improve security on the school's sites in response to the higher levels of risk presented by major changes in the complexity of students' needs. The number of students who abscond during the day increased significantly in the last year. Action to limit opportunities for leaving the school has been taken by improving the security of doors and windows. There are early signs that this is reducing the frequency of absconding. Further action is needed to improve the security of site boundaries.

The trend of a consistently small number of incidents involving physical restraint and reasonable force are a testament to such measures being used as a last resort. However, it is clear that the need to use such measures has increased in the last year due to major changes in the complexity of students' needs. This is particularly so since the start of term. The school's policy for physical restraint is implemented consistently, and the recording of incidents is detailed and meets legal requirements.

The level of exclusions reduced in the last two years, but the school recognises a need to reduce this further. Exclusions are higher when new students arrive at the school who bring a high level of challenge. Consequently, overall rates of behavioural incidents across the school show little change from month to month. For the majority of students, behaviour improves quickly and is generally sustained. School systems for tracking behaviour have been strengthened recently. Closer attention is needed to monitor patterns in the behaviour and attendance of different groups of students. Attendance is below the national average and the school has yet to reduce the high rates of persistent absence highlighted in the previous Ofsted report.

Students' behaviour at break, lunchtime and on entry and departure from the school is calm and orderly. Students say that staff are now more visible in many areas around the school, and there is more for them to do, which promotes better behaviour. Good relationships and behaviour in classrooms help to support learning, and lessons generally proceed well. When incidents do occur, they are managed swiftly and effectively. Tutors ring parents every week to report on their children's

work, attitudes and progress. Parents appreciate the efforts staff, particularly residential staff, are making for their children. However, some parents would like more contact following periods of behavioural difficulties in school. They would also like information about the options available to support their children to make and sustain the transition to college, work placement or employment when they leave school.

Students understand what to do if bullying occurs, through consistent messages they receive from adults in the school. Students say the school is helping them to stay safe. Appropriate emphasis is given to students gaining an understanding of risks associated with the use of social media. They are learning how to keep themselves safe and what it means to be responsible users of technology. Programmes to stop smoking and abusing drugs are helping some students to feel in control. Some students feel that the help they receive in controlling anger and risky behaviour is helping them to learn. They have a good grasp of the school's behaviour systems and explain the rewards and consequences well. Students generally are polite and accept their responsibility to manage their own behaviour, although not always successfully. Several students came across as mature and self-aware young people who are developing well.

Dealing with the higher level of challenge and the needs of a small minority of students remains an area for development. Leaders and governors have a purpose and clear vision for the school. School plans recognise the need for therapy, counselling and additional strategies to better support the behaviour and welfare needs of a minority of students. However, actions and timescales to achieve this are not sufficiently detailed or rigorous enough to enable plans to be confidently and swiftly implemented. Governors do not always receive updates and information to enable them to identify the steps being taken or the impact those steps are having on improvements.

External support

Work with the local authority and other agencies to provide 'a team around the school' to support students and their families has been slow to develop, although officers clearly recognise that the school is dealing with students who have higher levels of social and mental health needs than ever before. Focused challenge and support have been hampered by poor communication between the various local authority designated officers, school improvement professionals and inclusion officers involved with the school. There are signs that this is beginning to change and greater awareness of the need to access counselling and therapy services to support students is beginning to be recognised. A close check is being kept on the high level of behavioural incidents by the local authority. Analysis of this information is reported regularly to the governing body to inform their decision-making.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that a consistent process for child protection referrals takes place across the school and that records and checks are timely, leading to actions that benefit students.
- Take decisive action to sustain the reduction in the rates of persistent absence and absconding, and systematically report progress to governors to inform their decision-making. Take urgent action to improve the security of the site further.
- Ensure that governors are provided with detailed updates and options in order to adapt provision to meet the social and mental health needs for vulnerable, high-risk students.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services for Durham local authority, to the Secretary of State for Education and the Chair of the Governing Body. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Gina White
Her Majesty's Inspector