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Mr J Tucker
Headteacher
Acorn Free School
248 Calder Road
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Lincoln
Lincolnshire
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Dear Mr Tucker

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Acorn Free School

Following my visit with Derek Myers, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 11–12 February 2016, 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 quality of leadership and management. The school was informed of the inspection 15 minutes prior to inspectors arriving on site.

Evidence

Inspectors scrutinised the single central record of employment checks and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. They met with the headteacher, the inclusion manager, three governors including the Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, the attendance officer, an outreach teacher, a parent and a number of representatives from the staff team. Inspectors held telephone conversations with the Chair of the Governing Body, several parents, two senior officers from the local authority, including the local area designated officer, and senior staff from the majority of mainstream academies that commission pupils' places at the school.

Inspectors scrutinised correspondence between the school and Lincolnshire local authority, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Department for Education. Inspectors read these documents for the first time while on the school site.

Inspectors took into account information gathered from looking at the minutes of governing body meetings, attendance records, school policies, information about the content of school assemblies and school action plans. Both inspectors visited all classrooms and workshops throughout the inspection. Inspectors spoke with the majority of pupils and scrutinised a pupil questionnaire completed during the inspection.

Context

Acorn Free School was opened in September 2013. It is an alternative provision for pupils aged 11 to 16. The school is designed to support pupils who are at risk of being excluded from their mainstream school. The purpose of Acorn Free School is to return pupils to mainstream education. The length of time pupils stay at the school is determined by their progress. The school also provides a behaviour outreach service to primary and secondary schools and academies.

The school caters for pupils who have social, emotional or mental health difficulties. All pupils are defined by the school as requiring support for their special educational needs. All pupils are dual registered with their mainstream school and most pupils are White British boys. The school is registered to cater for a maximum of 48 pupils. The number of pupils on roll changes throughout the year. At the time of this inspection, 34 pupils were in attendance and five pupils were absent.

The teaching staff are a mixture of qualified teachers and instructors. The school does not currently use any other off-site provision to deliver education to its pupils.

The school was last inspected between 30 June and 1 July 2015 and was judged to be good in all areas.

Inspection findings

The inspection finds that the school's arrangements to safeguard pupils are effective. There is no cause for concern about the quality of leadership. Leaders and managers continue to take effective action to improve the school.

Since the last inspection, a new Chair of the Governing Body has been appointed. There is also a new Vice-Chair of the Governing Body and one other new governor. The governor responsible for safeguarding pupils is a designated safeguarding lead in a mainstream academy and is therefore highly trained to undertake this role. He is working effectively to ensure that the school's policy reflects local authority guidance. Governors are improving their work and ensuring that they are well informed. For example, in January 2016, two governors, including the Chair of the

Governing Body, attended an Ofsted webinar about good practice for governing bodies in special schools and pupil referral units.

Members of the governing body demonstrate an increasing understanding of their core duties and responsibilities, these being: to ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction; to hold the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils; the performance management of staff; overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure that its money is well spent. The reports provided by the headteacher to governors about pupils' progress have been reviewed. Governors have directed the headteacher to improve these reports to make them more easily understood. One governor checks the financial records of the school on a monthly basis and the vice-chair is a frequent visitor to the school in her dual role as a governor and as a police community support officer. These visits ensure that pupils are given many opportunities to understand how the law operates and how best to keep themselves safe. Governors have not published the admissions policy on the school's website, as they are required to do. Governors agreed that they will publish this as a matter of urgency.

The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, and the two other governors spoken to during the inspection, all demonstrate a desire to work in partnership with a wide range of organisations and authorities. However, relationships between the school and the local authority are strained. This has meant that there has been a lack of communication between the school and the local authority. There are signs of recent improvement. For example, during the week preceding this inspection, the Chair of the Governing Body and headteacher met with a senior representative from the local authority to discuss the work of the school. The Chair of the Governing Body and the headteacher are also due to meet the Regional Schools Commissioner in the near future. Leaders and governors acknowledge that they have learned a considerable amount from setting up their free school. This knowledge helps them to recognise the challenges they face to improve their very small school at the pace they would like, given the relatively few numbers of staff they employ. Leaders and governors accept that they need to work more effectively with a wider range of partners, including the local authority, to share ideas and good practice and further improve outcomes for pupils.

The headteacher is the school's designated safeguarding lead and he is supported by a fully trained deputy safeguarding lead. The files related to the protection of individual pupils are well organised, up to date and contain relevant information needed to keep pupils safe. Inspectors found evidence that the school works well with the pupils' mainstream schools and that it refers appropriate concerns about pupils to relevant bodies, such as Lincolnshire local authority's social care department. Inspectors also found evidence that the school appropriately raises concerns about the quality of other services to relevant bodies and this helps to keep pupils safe.

Inspectors are assured that staff have a good understanding of how to keep pupils safe and act on any concerns about pupils' safety in an appropriate manner. Inspectors asked staff how they would go about sharing any concerns they had about pupils and who they would share those concerns with. All staff spoken to during the inspection were clear that they would speak with the designated safeguarding lead or the deputy designated safeguarding lead and record their concerns on the relevant forms. Staff stated that they would challenge the safeguarding leads if they felt that their concerns had not been acted on. Training records indicate that staff have received online safety, first aid and 'Prevent' strategy training, which helps them to support pupils to stay safe. Staff were also clear about how they could refer any concerns to the governing body. The whistleblowing policy is available on the school's website along with the contact details of the Chair of the Governing Body and the whistleblowing charity, Public Concern at Work.

Inspectors' evidence confirms that pupils are looked after well at Acorn Free School, and staff do all they can to keep pupils safe. Pupils told inspectors that they feel really safe and parents are full of praise for how the school looks after their child. Some of the commissioning schools undertake their own checks with regard to pupils' safety and they are also highly satisfied with the processes in place at the school.

The school building and site are well maintained and provide a pleasant and safe environment where pupils improve their behaviour and attitudes to learning. The classrooms and workshops are clean; there is good signage and the tests associated with keeping the site safe are completed, including the testing of fire alarms and emergency lighting.

The school supports its pupils very well as recognised by parents who are overwhelmingly positive about its work. Comments such as: 'Fantastic school and the staff are really helpful; my son is doing brilliantly there...absolutely brilliant' and 'It's (the school) been an absolute miracle for us; we can see a future for him now' were typical of the responses from parents when asked about the quality of the school. The vast majority of parents recognised that school staff support their child really well. Some parents stated that the school has also supported the wider family extremely well. Most parents told inspectors that their children enjoy coming to school and this has helped them to improve their attendance and start learning again. Parents are pleased with the level of communication with the school staff. Most parents have a clear understanding about the next steps in the education of their child.

Senior staff from the schools which commission places at the school are delighted with the positive difference Acorn Free School is making for their pupils. They reported that individual pupils' attendance, behaviour and progress have improved during their time at the school. They also indicated that the communication and support from the school is of good quality. This helps all parties to make good

decisions about pupils' futures. One senior member of staff from a commissioning school said that on return to mainstream education pupils are, 'magically reformed and now better placed to learn'. Pupils are benefiting from the support offered by staff at Acorn Free School.

Staff have high expectations of pupils and pupils respond well to the boundaries staff set. Given that pupils are usually attending Acorn Free School because of their poor behaviour at their mainstream school, their behaviour is very good. Due to the high ratio of staff to pupils, staff have a good understanding about the individual needs of pupils. This knowledge allows staff to support and challenge pupils in a suitable way, which means that pupils' behaviour improves.

Arrangements for daily assemblies mean that pupils get access to regular teaching about tolerance, equality and respect. These opportunities, combined with the extremely strong relationships between staff and pupils, lead to their improving attitudes to work.

Since the last inspection, the headteacher and inclusion manager have successfully attempted to increase the leadership capacity across this small school. Staff demonstrate a healthy respect for the deputy headteacher and clearly appreciate the work she does to support them. Staff and pupils are confident in her ability to lead the school in the headteacher's absence.

External support

The school works effectively with some of the commissioning mainstream schools to share good practice and develop staff expertise. A member of staff is currently completing a teacher training placement in a mainstream school. These pieces of work support the improving quality of teaching. The deputy headteacher is undertaking the national professional qualification for senior leadership with the Inspiring Leaders teacher training partnership. This is helping to boost leadership capacity in the school by enabling the deputy headteacher to become more actively involved in the strategic leadership of the school.

Since the last inspection, the school has received several visits from representatives from the Department for Education. The focus of these visits has been on safeguarding, finance and the quality of education offered to pupils. These visits do not result in published reports to parents. During the period of time in which the visits have been made, school systems and policies have improved.

Priorities for further improvement

- Governors must publish their admissions policy.
- To further improve outcomes for pupils by working more effectively with a wide range of partners, including the local authority.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Lincolnshire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Phil Harrison
Her Majesty's Inspector