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Ms J Aplin
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Dear Ms Aplin

Special measures monitoring inspection of The West Somerset College

Following my visit with Stephen Lee, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Gillian Carter, Ofsted Inspector, to your college on 9–10 March 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you, staff, governors and pupils gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the college's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the college became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in October 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

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

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence, I recommend that the college can appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the regional schools commissioner, the chair of the Bridgwater College Trust, the chair of the local governing body, the executive headteacher, the director of children's services for Somerset and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in October 2014.

- Quickly eradicate all inadequate teaching and increase the amount of good teaching by ensuring that teachers:
 - raise their expectations of what students are able to achieve
 - use information on students' achievement and individual needs to plan learning activities that enable them to make good progress
 - provide students with consistently high-quality feedback and marking that informs them of how well they have done and the next steps they need to take to improve their learning
 - make sure that students act upon feedback and marking so that they can demonstrate that they know how to improve their learning
 - work alongside the most effective teachers in the school to learn from their practice.
- Raise achievement across the college, particularly in English, mathematics and the sixth form, by ensuring that:
 - the most able students are suitably challenged
 - students' individual needs are well known, particularly those who may be disabled, have special educational needs or are eligible for pupil premium funding, to provide them with highly effective support
 - the transition process from Year 8 into Year 9 is strengthened, particularly around understanding students' levels of achievement, so that they are able to commence learning immediately and not waste valuable learning time
 - extra support sessions are rigorously monitored to make sure that students are making faster progress than they would without the extra support
 - high-quality GCSE English and mathematics teaching is provided in the sixth form so that those who do not have a good grade in these subjects are able to achieve one.
- Eradicate the poor behaviour which impedes students' learning.
- Raise students' attendance levels to be at least in line with the national average.
- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - training senior and middle leaders to monitor and evaluate robustly the impact of initiatives that they have implemented
 - ensuring that teachers understand and make good use of information on students' individual educational, social and emotional needs

- specifying how and when leaders will check the progress made towards meeting important targets
- fully implementing the statutory sixth form study programmes
- ensuring that governors hold leaders to account for the performance of the college.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the college's use of the pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 9–10 March 2016

The focus of this visit was to evaluate the impact of the improvements noted at the time of the third visit in November 2015 and the actions taken subsequently on sustained improvements in the achievement, attendance and behaviour of pupils in Years 9 to 11 and learners in the sixth form.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the current acting headteacher, the executive headteacher, other senior leaders, the subject leaders for English, mathematics and science, two groups of pupils, and the chair and other members of the local governing body.

An open meeting was held with members of the teaching staff. The lead inspector had many informal discussions with pupils, sixth-form learners and teachers around the college.

Inspectors visited lessons, mostly together with college senior leaders, in a wide range of subjects and in all year groups, including in the sixth form. In lessons, they looked at pupils' and learners' work and talked with them about it.

While there were no additional responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, the views of parents expressed in letters and emails were taken into account.

Context

This college for pupils aged between 13 and 19 has been through a period of significant change and uncertainty since the first monitoring visit in December 2014.

The college formally became part of the Bridgwater College Trust, a multi-academy trust, on 1 February 2016. This process took much longer than expected. At that point, the college's status changed from a converter academy to a sponsored academy. The arrangements for the governance of the college changed. Overall responsibility now lies with the Bridgwater College Trust board. A local governing body has responsibility for most aspects of the college's work, other than currently for finance. The trust is currently consulting on changes to senior leadership, staffing and the curriculum arising from the need to significantly reduce the college's budget.

The college is supported by the executive headteacher and other senior staff from the Bridgwater College Academy and the trust. The former college principal resigned at the end of April 2015, and an acting principal, from Bridgwater College Academy, led the college during the summer term. The current acting headteacher will lead the college until a new headteacher takes up post in September 2016. The college is also supported by the Taunton Teaching Alliance.

The other changes noted at the time of the third monitoring visit in November 2015 are still in place.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils' work in English in Years 9 to 11 is mostly of good quality and shows that they have made good progress since the start of the academic year. This is the result of strong subject leadership and mostly good teaching. The previous gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, those supported by additional funding, and others has closed. Currently, girls' achievement is much higher than that of boys, as girls do particularly well. While boys' achievement has improved, their work is often less well presented than that of girls and often some work is incomplete or missing. They do not respond as well to teachers' feedback on their work. The subject leader, and senior leaders, are fully aware of this and are putting in place actions to deal with it. When boys are motivated to write, such as in vocational subjects, they produce good-quality specialist and extended writing.

Pupils' achievement in mathematics continues to rise as a result of significant improvements in the quality of teaching this year and strong subject leadership. The current work of Year 11 pupils shows that the proportion on track to make expected progress has picked up significantly from where many pupils were at the end of Year 10. In mathematics, boys do slightly better than girls. The subject leader has accurately identified a group of girls in the middle-ability classes who need to make more progress. The work of disadvantaged pupils, including the small number with high prior attainment, shows that they are not achieving as well as others. Again, the subject leader has identified the individual pupils who need support and who currently do not attend the 'booster classes' – he is 'on their case'.

Just under half the pupils in Year 11, mainly those with higher prior attainment, follow courses leading to GCSE in the separate sciences of biology, chemistry and physics. All the other pupils follow a double GCSE programme in core and additional science. Science teachers are adept at preparing pupils in the separate sciences very well for examinations. As a result, they do well. However, the quality of their work, and conversations with them, show a lack of pace and challenge leading to a superficial understanding of key scientific ideas. This does not fully prepare those who want to continue with science post-16 well enough. As a result of poor teaching, far too few of those pupils following the core and additional science programme are making enough progress. Additional teaching has been put in place to address this for pupils currently in Year 11, but the overall quality of teaching in science requires improvement. The subject leader, with support from science leaders from other schools and the Taunton Teaching Alliance, is working on this, but the pace of improvement is currently slow.

Pupils' work is of a high quality in some other subjects: for example, as seen in art, music, German and in vocational subjects in Years 9 to 11. However, despite a better overall picture than that seen in November, the quality is still too inconsistent across subjects and within subjects. A small amount of pupils' work is still not yet good enough. Subject and senior leaders have an accurate evaluation of where teaching is good or better and where it needs to improve. A refocusing of support and training for teachers is targeted well on the areas of greatest need.

In the vocational subjects in Years 10 and 11, pupils are highly motivated, produce work of a good quality and make good progress. This provision is very well suited to the needs of these pupils and prepares them well for progression on to post-16 courses. A wide range of pupils opt for these courses. Many do so because the course meets their ambitions and plans for the future whereas others choose these courses because they provide 'something different' and add breadth to their learning. These courses often provide excellent opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy and numeracy skills in a context they see as relevant and interesting.

The letter following the previous monitoring visit noted strengths in the quality of leadership and the provision for those pupils who had special educational needs or disability. This continued strong leadership has resulted in better attendance and further improvements in the achievement of these pupils, building on what was seen in November. Expectations are high and pupils are responding well. Currently, a number of these pupils opt for the vocational courses in Years 10 and 11 that allow them to develop their confidence and skills as well as make good progress.

At this time, the sixth form is fragile. As noted in November, the sixth form has been badly affected by the large number of potential Year 12 learners who chose to go elsewhere and not return to this college. Many Year 12 classes are very small, although retention since the start of the year has improved. The numbers projected to join the sixth form from the current Year 11 are much stronger. However, only sustained improvements in the quality of teaching, combined with restoring pupils' confidence that the college can provide them with a curriculum that meets their needs well, will result in these pupils joining the college sixth form.

Vocational courses in the sixth form continue to be successful. As in Years 10 and 11, learners on these courses are highly motivated, work hard and do well. They are very well prepared for their next steps with many seeking apprenticeships or moving to higher-level courses. A significant number of these learners did not achieve at least a grade C GCSE in English, mathematics or both. They are provided with timetabled specialist teaching and make very good progress towards improving their GCSE grades.

Poor attendance continues to limit the progress of some learners in the sixth form, despite the much improved arrangements for registering learners and ensuring that they work in the college throughout the day. There are much tighter arrangements for tracking learners' progress so that sixth-form leaders can intervene swiftly to tackle underachievement. However, too few teachers take full account of the information they have on individual learners, such as their different starting points and current rates of progress, when planning work for them. Work to ensure that learners develop their wider employability skills is well underway. Pre-16 careers guidance has been improved to ensure that more learners are on the most suitable 16 to 19 study programme for them. Discussions with Year 13 learners show that they are prepared well for making decisions about higher education.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Overall, the quality of teaching has continued to improve. Progress has been made in all the aspects identified in the letter following the visit in November. The impact of this can be seen in better-quality work in pupils' books and folders, better progress and higher achievement. However, inconsistencies in the quality of teaching, while reduced, still remain.

The staff training approach adopted when leaders from the Bridgwater Academy Trust started to work with the college has improved the quality of teaching. However, the acting headteacher has rightly identified the need to improve the quality of planning for learning. This directly addresses the remaining weaker features in teaching, including in the sixth form, such as the:

- lack of clarity in the learning expected
- use made of the longer lessons to ensure a better pace of learning and more challenge for pupils
- account taken of pupils' current progress when teachers plan their learning
- careful planning of questioning to check, probe and deepen learning
- setting homework and independent study that reinforces and extends learning
- checks made to ensure that the feedback to pupils leads to improvements or more secure or deeper understanding.

Leaders have further reduced the use of supply cover for teachers' absence, although this still hinders the learning of some pupils. This is carefully monitored so that additional support can be provided.

Encouragingly, there is more good teaching in the college across a wide range of subjects and year groups. This range of good practice enables college leaders to exemplify what good teaching looks like for those teachers who need support to improve.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The college is an increasingly pleasant place to learn. Pupils' behaviour continues to improve. The atmosphere is calm and well ordered throughout the day. Pupils are polite and respectful, know how to behave safely and keep themselves safe. They are very easy to talk to. Pupils were keen to tell inspectors about the positive side of the college. Those in Year 9 continue to be pleased with their experience so far. At the start of the day, after break and lunchtime, and at lesson changeovers, pupils move promptly to lessons and arrive ready to learn. Learners in the sixth form use the study areas well and the atmosphere is much more purposeful than on previous visits. Learners are mature, articulate and discuss the improvements in the college, and the need for more, in a well-informed and caring manner.

Pupils' behaviour in lessons is generally good. Records of all behaviour incidents show a clearly improving pattern. However, while many pupils do not misbehave, they show little enthusiasm for their learning. As before, this is a response to teaching that does not gain their interest. While there is a sensible and well-understood behaviour policy, weaker teachers move up the scale of responses far too quickly. A small group, mainly boys, particularly in Year 10, exploit these weaknesses in teaching and disrupt the learning of others. When teaching is better, pupils readily respond and involve themselves in the lessons well. Pupils told inspectors that some teachers allow a too relaxed pace in lessons, filling the longer time now available with work that used to be done in less time.

Pupils' attendance overall and for all groups has improved, including in the sixth form. However, it is still not good enough, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. Too many pupils are still persistently absent. Senior leaders are fully aware of the need to continue to improve pupils' attendance and deal with the group who are absent too often.

Inspectors found no safeguarding or safety concerns during the visit. The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Training for staff on safeguarding and child protection is well led and dedicated time is allocated each year to update this. The college has effectively implemented its responsibilities within its 'Prevent' duties to tackle extremist views and ideas.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

While college leaders are taking effective action, it was judged that the improvements made at this time did not lead to the removal of special measures. The fifth and final monitoring visit will therefore take place. However, despite the distractions resulting from the changes and turbulence in the college, leaders, led well by the acting headteacher, have made the college a better place to teach and learn. They have built on the improvements noted at the November visit so that these are more deeply embedded. As a result, the quality of teaching and pupils' and

sixth-form learners' achievement have improved. Leaders know what is working more effectively and what still needs to be done. While progress up to now has been gradual, the confirmation of the place of the college within the Bridgwater College Trust, and the support that brings, should help the acting headteacher secure the more rapid progress required. Good foundations have been laid.

The new local governing body has an excellent breadth of expertise and is well equipped to provide the balance of support and challenge needed. Members already have an impressive depth of understanding of the current position. They know the current and expected achievement of specific groups of pupils and learners. Members are in no doubt about the further improvements required.

Leaders' monitoring of the quality of teaching and pupils' and sixth-form learners' progress is sharper. Support for pupils is now planned more systematically. Teachers not performing well enough have well-focused individual support plans.

Having considered all the evidence, I recommend that the college can appoint newly qualified teachers (NQTs). However, this is dependent on the college, or the trust, ensuring high quality overall and subject-specific support. I have asked the acting headteacher or the executive headteacher to check with me if an NQT appointment is being considered.

By the time of the fifth monitoring visit, to enable special measures to be removed, the college and trust leaders should ensure that:

- the weaknesses in teaching in science have been resolved so that the achievement of pupils on the core and additional science courses is much improved for those in Year 11 with clear evidence of more deeply embedded improvements in Years 9 and 10
- the improvements seen in mathematics have led to further reductions in the gaps in achievement between girls and boys and disadvantaged pupils and others, including the most-able pupils
- boys' achievement in English has improved to be closer to that of girls'
- the inconsistency in the quality of pupils' work across a wide range of subjects has been reduced to show that the overall quality of teaching has improved further
- attendance has improved further and persistent absence reduced, particularly for disadvantaged pupils
- the behaviour of the small group of pupils who currently disrupt the learning of others has been much improved
- the sixth-form curriculum meets the needs of learners well, including the planned curriculum for those joining in September 2016.

External support

The improvements that have been secured have been strongly influenced by the support the college has received from key senior leaders from the Bridgwater College Trust and Academy and through the Taunton Teaching Alliance. The trust has also brokered support from other schools when required.