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Ms Amanda Clugston  
Interim Principal  
St Mary's School and Sixth Form College  
Wrestwood Road  
Bexhill-on-Sea  
TN40 2LU

Dear Ms Clugston

### **Special measures monitoring inspection of St Mary's School and Sixth Form College**

Following my visit to your school on 3 and 4 November 2015, 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 gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 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.**

The school may only appoint a newly qualified teacher before the next monitoring inspection by prior agreement with Her Majesty's Inspector.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for East Sussex.

Yours sincerely

Lesley Farmer

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## Annex

### The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in November 2014

- Ensure that all posts for the key staff responsible for leading the safeguarding systems are filled.
- Improve the quality of teaching so that all groups of pupils make good progress and achieve well by ensuring that:
  - teachers have high expectations of the pupils they teach and provide consistently high levels of challenge for all pupils regardless of learning needs, but particularly the more able
  - pupils receive work that builds on their previous attainment, notably in English and mathematics
  - any gaps in pupils' knowledge are addressed, especially in their written work
  - teachers use assessment effectively to set targets for pupils' achievement and provide pupils with feedback that helps them improve their work.
- Improve leadership and management at all levels to secure at least good outcomes for pupils by ensuring that:
  - all staff rigorously follow the school's policies for keeping pupils safe
  - making sure that risk assessments for pupils, whose circumstances make them vulnerable, are kept up to date and that record-keeping is of high quality and shared with key staff
  - establishing an effective system for monitoring staff performance and holding them to account
  - establishing formal middle leadership roles, making sure all middle leaders have the skills needed to lead their areas of responsibility well and that they are held to account effectively
  - making sure that the curriculum supports effective learning and achievement and prepares pupils well for their next stage in education, training or employment
  - ensuring leadership of the sixth form is effective and accountable.
- 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 school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

The school must meet the following national minimum standards for residential special schools.

- Where necessary, a child has a clear individual health and welfare plan or similar record, containing relevant health and welfare information provided by parents/carers and recording significant health and welfare needs and issues. This record should be agreed by parents/carers and include:
  - records of developmental checks
  - health monitoring required by staff
  - intimate care or bodily functions requiring staff help
  - the involvement of a child's parents/carers or significant others in health and welfare issues (NMS 3.12).

The school ensures that:

- Arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school, and such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State (NMS 11).
- A written record is kept of major sanctions and the use of any physical intervention. Records may include the information in Appendix 2 (use of physical restraint). The record is made within 24 hours of the sanction being applied and is legible. Children are encouraged to have their views recorded in the records. The school regularly reviews any instances of the use of physical intervention restraint and examines trends or issues to enable staff to reflect and learn in a way that will inform future practice (NMS 12.6).
- The records specified in Appendix 2 are maintained and monitored by the school and action taken as appropriate (NMS 13.3).
- All adults visiting residential accommodation (for example, visitors, outside delivery and maintenance personnel) are kept under sufficient staff supervision to prevent them gaining substantial unsupervised access to children or their accommodation (NMS 14.4).
- All staff have access to support and advice for their role. They also have regular supervision and formal annual appraisal of their performance (NMS 19.6).
- The school produces a written placement plan, agreed as far as is practicable with the child, the child's parents/carers and any placing authority for the child, unless the information is held elsewhere such as in the child's statement of special educational needs. The placement plan identifies the needs of that child that the school should meet and specifies how the school will care for the child and promote their welfare on a day-to-day basis. Where significant changes are made to the placement plan, there is appropriate consultation. Where applicable, the plan is consistent with the care plan of the placing authority for any child placed by a local authority. The placement plan is regularly reviewed and amended as necessary to reflect significant changes in the child's needs or progress in his or her development. Where feasible, children in the school are aware of the content of their placement plans, and confirm that the school is providing care for them that is consistent with the plans (NMS 21.1).

- Residential staff are provided with formal training in autistic spectrum disorder.
- The internal audit system for medication is improved, in particular for emergency medication and homely remedies.
- All residential pupils' independence plans reflect their individual abilities and incorporate their views.

## **Report on the third monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 November 2015**

### **Evidence**

During this inspection, I observed the school's work and scrutinised leaders' self-evaluation and other documentation, including the single central register of staff employed. I met with the interim Principal, a group of pupils, the Chair of Trustees and Governors, the vice-chair of trustees and two additional governors. I also met with two groups of staff, including members of the teaching support staff. I met separately with the head of education and the leaders of literacy and numeracy, with whom I conducted joint observations of pupils' learning and discussed pupils' most recent assessment information. I spoke on the telephone with several parents and met with members of the interim management board. The interim Principal also accompanied me on a joint observation. I observed learning and teaching and looked at examples of pupils' work across a range of subjects and key stages, including in the sixth form.

This monitoring inspection focused on aspects of the educational provision judged inadequate at the previous section 5 inspection. At the time of this visit, a full inspection of the residential provision conducted in May 2015 had been published. In particular, the following three aspects of leadership and management, reported in the second monitoring inspection conducted in June 2015, have been revisited:

- how leaders respond to parental concerns and formal complaints
- leaders' approach to rebuilding the trust and confidence of the wide majority of the parent body
- leaders' approach to building a vision for the school that both empowers remaining staff to be able to offer solutions and inspires their full trust and confidence in the senior leadership and governance of the school.

This inspection has also focused on teaching, learning and assessment and personal development, behaviour and welfare.

## **Context**

Since the monitoring inspection in June 2015, significant changes to the leadership and management of the school have taken place, including the departure of the Principal in July 2015. An interim Principal was appointed in July 2015. She has since established an interim management board (IMB) consisting of three interim senior leaders. The role of the IMB is to oversee the removal of the school from special measures and provide ongoing support for a new Principal when an appointment has been secured.

## **Quality of teaching, learning and assessment**

Teaching is improving securely. As a result, pupils are making better gains in their learning. Since the previous monitoring inspection, further progress has been made in ensuring the accuracy of the school's baseline assessment of pupils on entry to St Mary's. All pupils have been fully re-assessed. A new software system is up and running and available to staff, with up-to-date assessment information for pupils in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. Teachers are using the information to inform their lesson-planning. The software will very shortly be fully operational for teachers of younger pupils. During this inspection, parents reported that the quality of feedback about their child's progress has improved. Teachers now show a better awareness of the needs of the pupils in their groups, including disadvantaged pupils. Multi-disciplinary training sessions have been initiated to promote dialogue and joint planning for pupils' progression. This joint planning was evident in each of the lessons visited during this inspection. Equally, teachers are now factoring pupils' education and healthcare plan targets into their lesson plans. As a result, individual pupils' academic and wider needs are now being recognised and more effectively addressed through teaching.

Joint observations conducted with the leaders of literacy and numeracy respectively attest to these leaders' strong capacity to accurately identify the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and outline for teachers the next steps in improving the quality of pupils' learning. Teachers report that the regular programme of monitoring and feedback has helped them greatly to recognise that much more can be done to improve pupils' progress and, very importantly, understand how to go about it.

Despite these improvements, parents' feedback, scrutiny of pupils' work and current assessment information confirm that the level of challenge in learning is not yet consistently high enough across all subjects or key stages. Leaders recognise this and have introduced booster sessions in mathematics and an accelerated reader scheme to narrow the gap in some pupils' achievement. Both strategies are already yielding good gains in pupils' current achievement, but are yet to impact fully on the legacy of underachievement over time, particularly in the sixth form. Nevertheless, teachers, teaching assistants and therapists have raised their game successfully.

They have engaged fully with the training provided and show a strong determination and commitment to continually improve.

### **Personal development, behaviour and welfare**

Pupils present as polite and supportive at all times. In particular, they demonstrate an unswerving preparedness for learning which is not yet rewarded consistently enough by tasks or activities in lessons that provide a sufficient degree of challenge. Nevertheless, they have noted changes since September that they have welcomed. For example, sixth-form pupils appreciate greatly the changes that have been introduced to the timetabling arrangements of subjects, for which they had lobbied and presented a petition. During discussions, pupils of all ages demonstrate a mature understanding of the importance of equality of opportunity, especially concerning the ways in which adults and young people with disabilities or special educational needs can be the subject of discrimination or prejudice. They value greatly the ways in which adults within the school support and prepare them for the next steps in their education and training by raising their awareness and understanding of such matters. Without exception, they assert that leaders, teachers and other adults keep them safe. In particular, pupils' good behaviour, attendance rates and obvious support for each other are striking features of what St Mary's gets right. Lunchtimes and breaktimes provide excellent examples of the uplifting community spirit that has been built in the school, where good achievements can be celebrated and social time enjoyed by pupils and staff alike.

### **Effectiveness of leadership and management**

Since the previous monitoring inspection, governors have taken urgent and necessary action to secure a fully effective and more rapid trajectory for the removal of special measures. The Principal, who took the decision to leave in July 2015, has been successfully replaced, with immediate effect. A very experienced interim Principal has not only set up the IMB but also quickly and effectively reorganised the working arrangements of the existing heads of service. Consequently, the heads of education, business, care and therapy now work together under one umbrella within a senior leadership group reporting directly to the IMB. Despite the short timescale, the new arrangements are already bearing fruit. The action plans for the removal of special measures have been sensibly revised and these and the necessary groundwork for a sustainable future for St Mary's have both been discussed openly with staff. Very importantly, staff now feel able to contribute to the improvement plans. Substantive staff now present as 'buoyed up' and optimistic; they report that the new senior leaders are both accessible and supportive, albeit no one underestimates the level of challenge that lies ahead.

Judicious systems to help teachers to teach effectively and pupils learn more rapidly have been established quickly and to good effect. For example, the new term kicked off with a series of training sessions for all staff, followed by further input for targeted individuals from a range of consultant headteachers. This programme, designed to build the expertise and skills of staff on an individual basis, is set to continue throughout the year. Staff response has been positive; they welcome the challenge and the support. This is because they want the school to succeed and they want to be part of the solution. It was also noticeable that, throughout this inspection, pupils presented unfailingly as ready to learn, keen to participate and willing to challenge themselves where the opportunity arose.

Parents with whom Her Majesty's Inspector spoke voiced growing levels of satisfaction with the new direction of travel. Some parents noted that information received since September about their son's or daughter's progress is much more helpful and rigorous. However, a few also commented that there is still more to be done to ensure a consistently good enough level of challenge for individual pupils. Her Majesty's inspector agrees. Nevertheless, common themes included improvements in the amount and the manner of communication with parents. Parents have noted and welcomed this shift in emphasis; they see open and transparent communications as essential to helping them rebuild the lost confidence and trust in the school's leaders which some of them have experienced in the past.

From a very early point, the interim Principal and other IMB members have set out to demonstrate their willingness to listen to and act upon parents' concerns. For example, a parent survey conducted at the end of September, which yielded double the number of responses to previous surveys, evidenced significantly increased levels of confidence in the leadership of the school from the parents who responded. Furthermore, since July, the number of informal and formal parental complaints has considerably reduced. The IMB members have also wisely supported governors in an immediate review of the complaints policy which was, for some parents, a point of contention in the past. The new policy is now operational and it aligns correctly with the legislative requirements for non-maintained special schools.

Although considerable ground has been gained through the injection of new and effective senior leadership, further reorganisation is ongoing within the governing body to ensure similarly high levels of confidence in the governance of the school. With this in mind, governors have not shied away from the need to look inwards and self-evaluate. Recognising the legacy of past mistakes, some very longstanding and dedicated governors have acted responsibly and wisely by stepping down to allow for new blood and a different approach. New governors have been recruited and to good effect, as noted in the heightened levels of challenge at a recent governing body meeting with members of the senior leadership group. Heads of service commented that they had not been challenged similarly in the past. Members of the IMB are working closely with governing body members to support them in recruiting



additional new governors with the necessary skills to move the school forward to a sustainable future.

In particular, governors recognise that the appointment of a permanent Principal of excellent calibre is an urgent necessity, particularly in the light of recent turbulence. Having initiated a first attempt at recruitment which did not yield success, at the time of this inspection visit governors were planning a second recruitment campaign. It is worth noting that staff and parents alike expressed a strongly held view that the appointment of the 'right' candidate for St Mary's is too important to get wrong. They also acknowledge that temporary leadership arrangements are ordinarily far from ideal. Nevertheless, staff and parents are clear that the IMB's leadership is building trust and confidence effectively through common-sense approaches which are understood and endorsed by all. Governors and IMB members are very aware that the future of St Mary's relies on their ability to provide for the sustainability and permanence that local authorities and parents rightly seek. They are therefore giving full and careful consideration to strengthening further the leadership arrangements during the intervening period of recruitment and appointment of substantive senior leaders to the school.

### **External support**

Since the appointment of the interim Principal, governors and the IMB members have sought to strengthen their links with other special-school providers, particularly those within the local vicinity. At the time of this inspection, several training sessions led by headteachers of schools judged good or outstanding at their last Ofsted inspection had taken place. Arrangements for teachers' joint moderation of pupils' work are being sought, with external moderation currently supplied through a school improvement consultant. Governors and IMB members have solidly committed to ensure the accuracy of teachers' assessments. Equally, there is a strong desire to provide opportunities for staff at all levels to learn from best practice elsewhere. Links with East Sussex local authority are in evidence; the local authority sends an officer to the IMB meetings.