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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Crispian Woolford
Talbot House Trust, Newcastle upon Tyne
Hexham Road
Walbottle
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE15 8HW

Dear Mr Woolford

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Talbot House Trust, Newcastle Upon Tyne

Following my visit to your school on 5 May 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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 school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and trustees are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- hasten the pace of improvement to ensure that actions in the post-Ofsted action plan are having desired impact on improving the quality of teaching, leadership and management, pupils' progress, achievements and behaviour.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, teachers and two representatives of the governing body who are also trustees, to discuss the actions taken since the monitoring visit of June 2015. The post-Ofsted action plan, school attendance and exclusion data, headteachers' reports to the governing body and records of behaviour incidents were reviewed as well as documentation relating to the safeguarding of pupils. The headteacher accompanied the inspector on a learning walk that involved three lessons.

Context

Since the monitoring visit in June 2015, four members of staff have left this small school. This includes the deputy headteacher. The headteacher took up his post in September 2015. A new special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) was recruited but left shortly after being appointed. A number of staff have been in position for a year or less. There is currently no mathematics coordinator but a new mathematics teacher is shortly to join the school.

Main findings

Significant staff turbulence since the monitoring visit has hindered the pace of improvement. The new headteacher has had considerable work to do in developing or amending systems to monitor the work of the school more robustly and developing additional actions to move the school forward. This includes improving the way that teachers assess pupils' progress and the way the headteacher holds staff to account for the impact of their work through improved performance management arrangements.

The headteacher, supported well by the local authority's school improvement partner, quickly improved the rigour of lesson observations, scrutiny of pupils' books and checking the accuracy of assessments of pupil's progress in lessons. The headteacher's feedback to teachers identifies what is working well and what needs to improve further. However, improvements are recent and there is occasionally too much focus on what is happening in lessons and not enough on the difference teaching is making to pupils' learning and progress over time. Nevertheless, the headteacher now has a clear view of the quality of teaching and knows that it is still too variable to ensure that all pupils make good progress in their learning. He is also aware that the behaviour of some pupils and staff's ability to manage that behaviour is having a detrimental impact in some lessons. The headteacher has already provided training for teachers designed to improve their skills in behaviour management and more is planned.

Following a recommendation from Her Majesty's Inspector at the first monitoring inspection in June, the post-Ofsted action plan now links closely to the areas for improvement identified in the inspection report in March. The plan is also reviewed regularly and findings reported to governors and trustees. However, the recommendation to have measurable targets against which governors can check the impact of actions is still missing. Until very recently, headteacher's reports to governors and trustees did not identify specifically enough the progress the school is making towards the identified improvement actions. The head of care's regular reports on attendance and exclusion are too descriptive and are not evaluative. They are written in a way that makes it hard for governors to be able to see whether these aspects are improving over time. Information on incidents of serious misbehaviour and the use of restraint are reported regularly within the reports, but again in a format that is hard to check over time. Reports do not identify the

severity of the restraint strategies used, so governors cannot know whether these were low-level incidents or ones that needed more direct action from adults. Individual records of incidents indicate that most are of a low level. Not all staff complete these records fully.

Leadership capacity is hindered by staff turbulence and the lack of an in-school leadership team. The headteacher is new to headship and is developing in his role. He has been challenged by the significant work that he found was still left to do when he arrived. There is no one to share the burden with because there are no other senior leaders within the teaching staff.

Inconsistencies in the quality of teaching, teachers' use of assessment and in teachers' ability to manage the complex behaviour of pupils is also slowing the pace of improvement. Nevertheless, actions taken since the monitoring visit are starting to make some difference, particularly in key stage 2, an area of concern at the last inspection. The quality of teaching here is stronger and the management of pupils' behaviour is more effective. This is ensuring that pupils are making better progress in their learning. There is still much more to do to make sure that the many teaching assistants are deployed more efficiently and effectively and to make sure they do not 'do the work' for the pupils. In one lesson, for example, there were four adults and three pupils. Teachers' use of marking and written feedback to pupils on their work is becoming more in line with the school's policy although, again, there are still inconsistencies in the policy's application across the school. Actions taken to improve reading are making a positive difference, however, and there is a strong focus on ensuring that pupils read every day. The impact of this work can be seen in the improvements in pupils' reading ages that are checked regularly and reported to governors.

The headteacher and previous acting headteacher have taken a range of actions to broaden and improve the quality of the curriculum. Two specialist teachers have been appointed. However, there is still some way to go to ensure that there is a cohesive and suitably broad inviting curriculum across the school. Absence rates, particularly persistent absence, and fixed-period exclusions, although reducing, are still well above those found in special schools nationally. In 2015 the persistent absence rate was 50%; currently this has reduced to 35%.

Governance is improving; a committee structure is in place and committees are now carrying out their various roles regularly. Governors have a much clearer understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and about what needs to happen to bring about improvement. Recent minutes from governing body meetings show that governors are challenging leaders and demanding more detailed information about the school's work and its impact. This includes the need to provide much clearer information on pupils' progress, behaviour, attendance and rates of exclusion.

External support

The school has received valuable support from the headteacher and staff of Fellgate Primary School. Teachers have been able to visit the specialist unit in the school and learn from the good practice there. This is making a difference to the quality of teaching in the lower school. Fellgate's headteacher's skills are also being well utilised through her appointment to the governing body. The headteacher has been supported well by the local authority's school improvement partner that trustees have procured. This has helped to build the headteacher's skills in monitoring teaching, reviewing pupils' books and checking progress of pupils more accurately.

I am copying this letter to the executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Newcastle upon Tyne. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector