

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234  
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Ms Sara Lalis  
Headteacher  
Dacorum Education Support Centre  
Washington Avenue  
Grovehill  
Hemel Hempstead  
Hertfordshire  
HP2 6NG

Dear Ms Lalis

### **Short inspection of Dacorum Education Support Centre**

Following my visit to the school on 14 September 2016 with Sharon Wilson, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be outstanding in January 2013 and the Ofsted alternative provision survey visit in June 2014.

### **This school continues to be outstanding.**

Dacorum Education Support Centre (DESC) is a vibrant and welcoming environment where pupils and staff work harmoniously to achieve excellent outcomes for young people. Your pupils talk about their experiences and achievements with confidence and pride. Your team change the life chances of some of the most vulnerable young people in the Dacorum Partnership of schools.

All staff have created an environment where a safe culture and ethos of respect is apparent as soon as you enter the building. Trust is at the centre of the relationships that your staff and pupils develop. Staff trust the pupils in their care, and pupils respond very positively to these expectations. Pupils appreciate the full access they have to all parts of the centre, including the high-quality and well-maintained counselling, therapy and social rooms. Pupils also appreciate that their own art work, pottery, tables, chairs, stands and photos make up the fixtures and fittings of the building and highlight their many accomplishments.

Your senior leaders, staff and governors are skilled and knowledgeable. All are determined to ensure that provision is well planned and closely matched to the needs and aspirations of pupils. They also take into account any barriers to learning which have developed through young people's previous educational experiences,

which have often been unsuccessful. You and your team work adeptly to create bespoke support which is focused on enabling pupils to succeed. As a result of the programmes provided in your outreach key stage 3 and key stage 4 centres, many pupils successfully reintegrate back into their schools. Those who remain with you for longer and those who join you in Year 10 or 11 achieve a broad range of qualifications, including English and mathematics. They often make rapid progress from the point at which they start with you. Pupils speak highly of the support they receive from their teachers to acquire their academic and vocational qualifications, most notably in English, mathematics, drama, technology and physical education.

You and your team are constantly reflecting on how to improve how well pupils are supported. You work extensively with the Dacorum schools and many other agencies to identify how you can develop practice further. You have addressed the areas for improvement highlighted in your survey report by Ofsted in 2014. Improvement is most notable in the work you have undertaken to ensure personalised and high-quality alternative provision for your pupils. You are rightly cautious and careful in the choices you make about alternative providers, work experience and next-step destinations. You understand the possible pitfalls that your pupils face if their next-step transition is not managed effectively. Each placement or opportunity afforded to these young people is incredibly personalised to their needs and interests. As a result of your thorough quality assurance of these providers, your excellent understanding of your pupils as individuals and your good-quality transition support, your pupils attend, enjoy and achieve extremely well through their experiences.

Another area highlighted in Ofsted's survey visit in 2014 was to review ways to track pupils' personal development more formally. You have used this as an opportunity to introduce a clear points tracking system which supports pupils to manage their own behaviour and to take responsibility for their learning and for meeting the targets they are set. This process is based on a simple scoring system which pupils understand and respond to well. They were able to explain to inspectors how the system works and its impact on them.

Parents agree that the school 'knows how to get the best from their children'. They are very appreciative of the support that your leaders and staff give to the whole family. They say that the needs of other family members, including siblings, are taken into account in all aspects of the school's work. Parents feel that DESC never shuts its doors to them.

Dacorum Education Support Centre provides an outstanding education for its pupils, despite facing some challenging obstacles. It is significantly oversubscribed at key points in the year, and does not receive funding for a substantial number of its pupils. Equally, the key stage 4 centre does not currently have access to a playing field area. This makes it difficult to undertake elements of the curriculum provision without having to spend significant amounts of time and money to transport pupils to a local field and sports facilities. Despite this, with the able support of a skilled senior team, dedicated staff and a well-informed governing body, you continue to move your provision forward to give the best opportunities to some of the most vulnerable young people in Dacorum.

## **Safeguarding is effective.**

Pupils say that Dacorum Education Support Centre is a place where it is safe to be different. Your staff put the pupils and their needs at the centre of all their work. Pupils told inspectors that DESC staff work hard to keep them safe and to teach them about managing their own safety in school, in the wider community and online. Pupils also say that there is little bullying in the school but that, if they had any concerns, they would feel confident to report them and that staff would act quickly to ensure that difficulties were managed. Pupils feel listened to and say that staff 'get them'. They trust staff to know how to help them. The curriculum also enables pupils to learn about how to stay safe. Pupils described how they manage their social network access to ensure that they only communicate with people they know.

The work of your staff in ensuring that the single central record of staff appointments is kept up to date and the rigour of the recruitment process is exemplary. These elements of your safeguarding procedures are not only compliant but very thorough. Staff training has been consistently proactive in ensuring that staff are vigilant and that they actively report any concerns they have about pupils. Where your team receive concerns, they deal with them promptly. They are tenacious in their follow-up and work with a range of external agencies to ensure that pupils get the right help. Referrals to outside agencies are proportionate, timely and well managed.

However, you have rightly acknowledged that while pupils are safe, owing to the excellent work of your staff and leaders, some of your policies do not reflect the high-quality work that actually goes on in the school. This is an area that you have identified for further development.

## **Inspection findings**

- The school's self-assessment is detailed and accurate. It reflects well the strengths achieved and highlights the areas which leaders and staff wish to improve further. Governors are well informed through their frequent and rigorous checks on the work of the school. As a result, they have an accurate view of the strengths in teaching and in pupils' outcomes. Local headteachers also rightly hold DESC to account for outcomes and meet with you regularly to check on the progress that their pupils make. This gives pupils the best chance of returning positively to their old school alongside their peers.
- Pupils make consistently strong progress from their various starting points. Leaders use detailed background information, coupled with assessment information, to ensure that they thoroughly benchmark pupils' starting points and create a curriculum which meets pupils' needs, aspirations and ability. This ensures that no time is wasted, no matter what pupils' barriers to learning are.

- You are highly successful in getting many pupils back into mainstream schools. Most pupils who work with you in key stage 3 are only in DESC for a temporary period of time. The thorough benchmarking and analysis of pupils' needs on entry to DESC means that many are supported well to reintegrate into mainstream schools and succeed there.
- The small number of pupils who remain with you into key stage 4, particularly the most able, make remarkable progress from their starting points. Pupils achieve a broad range of qualifications, including GCSEs, BTECs, functional skills and Princes Trust awards. Where pupils arrive mid-way through the year in Years 10 and 11, qualifications that match the pupils' previous schooling experience and interests are made accessible. Last year, many achieved a raft of good qualifications in a broad range of subjects. The curriculum pathways offered enable the most able pupils to move on to academic routes and achieve qualifications that allow them to access level 3 BTECs and A levels. One pupil returning to sixth form at her previous secondary school spoke of her pride in her achievements.
- The quality of information, advice and guidance for pupils is individualised and of high quality, which is leading to them moving on to highly appropriate post-16 destinations. Excellent impartial careers advice has enabled almost all pupils to find appropriate next-stage education or training in a range of different career paths. These include level 1 and 2 courses, apprenticeships, national heritage programmes, college courses and much more. You are rightly proud of your pupils' achievements and you keep in touch with them to ensure that they continue to succeed. Many of your past pupils are now successfully working in careers, further training or university.
- Pupils are well supported to develop their self-awareness and social skills. This contributes well to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development as well as their academic development. Targets for individual pupils are sharply focused on the right aspects for development, be these academic or personal, and reflect well the aspirational outcomes that leaders and staff have for all pupils. As a result pupils feel valued as individuals and are proud of their successes. Calm and respectful communication between staff and pupils is at the centre of this work and everyone at DESC adheres to this expectation. However, staff could be even more skilled in some of their analysis of behaviour and personal development strategies, to enable them to be even more effective in assessing pupils' progress in these areas.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- policies and procedures accurately reflect the excellent work that goes on in the centres
- their analysis of pupils' behaviour and personal development is better used by staff to inform practice and ensure that they can be even more effective in assessing pupils' progress from their starting points.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Hertfordshire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mary Rayner  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, inspectors spoke with the headteacher, deputy headteacher and other representatives from the leadership team and teaching staff. They also spoke with a range of pupils, including a pupil who left this summer. They met with members of the management committee, local headteachers, an integration leader from a local school, and a call was made to a representative from the local authority. Inspectors observed pupils in classrooms, at breaktime and as they moved around the school. Pupils' work and records of learning were also reviewed. Recent progress information was discussed, and safeguarding documentation and other records scrutinised. Inspectors also reviewed responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, and spoke to parents. Inspectors reviewed the work on both DESC sites and made a visit to an alternative provider.