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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



20 June 2017

Mrs Julie Yarwood
Executive Principal
Wolstanton High Academy
Milehouse Lane
Newcastle
Staffordshire
ST5 9JU

Dear Mrs Yarwood

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Wolstanton High Academy

Following my visit with Marie McMahon, Ofsted Inspector, and Graeme Rudland, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 6–7 June 2017, 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, aspects of the effectiveness of leadership and management (including governance) and the behaviour and welfare of pupils at the school.

Evidence

Inspectors scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements, and met with the executive principal, the head of school, senior leaders, three groups of staff, four groups of pupils, the chief executive of the Shaw Education Trust and two members of the academy council including its chair.

Inspectors observed learning and behaviour during brief visits to lessons. They observed pupils at morning break and lunchtime and as they moved around the school. Inspectors spoke with many pupils about their learning and their attitudes to, and opinions about, school. Several documents were scrutinised including the

school's rapid action plan, minutes of academy council meetings, and the school's records about pupils' behaviour and attendance. Inspectors considered 11 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and a recent survey of parents' views carried out by leaders.

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

Safeguarding is effective.

Context

This is an average-sized secondary school. Almost all pupils are from White British backgrounds and the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is below average. The school has an average proportion of disadvantaged pupils. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is average. The school does not meet the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' progress. The school became a sponsor-led academy in September 2015. It is part of the Shaw Education Trust (SET).

The executive principal and head of school joined the school in February 2017. A deputy headteacher joined the school in April 2017. Several members of staff have left the school this year and more are due to leave at the end of the academic year. Leaders have successfully recruited to all posts and the school is set to be fully staffed in September 2017.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding has a high profile across the school and all staff understand that keeping pupils safe is their top priority. The leadership of this area is thoughtful and meticulous. Members of staff have been well trained and are regularly reminded and updated about the school's systems and aspects of safeguarding of which they should be aware. Consequently, members of staff confidently refer any concern they have about a pupil, secure in the knowledge that leaders will deal with their concern quickly and appropriately.

Well-organised, secure systems and records give leaders a comprehensive overview of concerns relating to any pupil. They appropriately make referrals to outside agencies and follow these up if they are dissatisfied with the response they receive.

Policies and procedures are detailed and fit for purpose. Procedures to ensure that staff are recruited safely are understood and used well. The school's academy council, supported by the SET, regularly checks that safeguarding meets statutory requirements. For example, the designated safeguarding academy council member was recently involved in a review of safeguarding and presented a report to the full academy council.

Almost all pupils whom inspectors spoke to said that they feel safe in school. They told inspectors that bullying is rare and most said that they have confidence in staff to deal with any bullying or other problem that might arise.

A very small number of parents expressed concerns about pupils' safety via Parent View. Inspectors found no evidence to support these concerns.

Behaviour and welfare

Most pupils behave well in lessons. They are keen to do well and they work hard. This is particularly the case where teachers have established clear expectations and routines that pupils know they should follow. In a minority of lessons, some pupils misbehave. Typically, low-level disruption is evident where the teacher has not established clear expectations and routines. When this is the case, pupils chat while the teacher is talking, or shout out answers rather than waiting to be asked. Inspectors observed no serious disruption of lessons and pupils told them that such incidents are now rare.

Most pupils behave well at social times and as they move around the school. They are polite, friendly and well mannered. The behaviour of a minority of pupils is boisterous and silly at lunchtimes. This is exacerbated by the school's limited indoor space for pupils, especially in poor weather. Leaders are currently addressing this by imposing a split lunchtime. The length of lunchtime is also set to be reduced to 30 minutes in September 2017.

Staff believe that behaviour has improved recently. They are especially positive about the support that senior leaders provide in managing behaviour. They are equally positive about recent changes to the school's pastoral system with a move from mixed-year tutor groups to single-year tutor groups. Most, but not all, pupils whom inspectors spoke to were also positive about the recent changes.

Leaders' reinforcement of high expectations of pupils' behaviour initially led to a small number of permanent exclusions to address serious disruptive behaviour. Over recent months, higher expectations and more consistent use of school systems have seen a sharp reduction in serious disruptive behaviour and a reduction in low-level disruption in lessons. Improving behaviour is leading to a reduction in the school's use of fixed-term exclusion.

Attendance is currently broadly in line with the national average for secondary schools, as it was last year. However, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils was low in 2016 and it remains low this year. Leaders' efforts to address this issue have yet to yield improvement.

Leadership and management

Decisive action from the SET, the school's sponsor, in recent months has seen the school improve rapidly. Senior leaders know the school well, including its strengths and weaknesses. Their 'rapid action plan', introduced in February 2017, is clear, concise and well targeted at the school's key weaknesses. Impact is evident in several areas, most notably in improved pupil behaviour and the positive climate for learning evident in most classrooms.

Members of staff recognise the improvements being made in the school and morale is good. They have confidence in the school's senior leaders and they value the support that they are given. Several members of staff commented positively on the quality of communication and consultation by senior leaders. They said that this has reduced anxiety and uncertainty at a time when leaders are introducing several changes. Additionally, staff told inspectors that they value the training that the SET has provided for them.

The school's academy council is currently an advisory body. The school's governance functions are provided by the SET's board of trustees and its chief executive. This arrangement is proving effective in bringing about rapid improvement. The school's academy council is developing with the aim of taking on more delegated responsibility in due course. Members of the academy council recognise that they currently do not possess the capacity to hold leaders to account for the school's performance.

Outcomes in 2016 were disappointing, with the school failing to meet the government's current floor standards. The achievement of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities was particularly low. This was one factor that contributed to the SET's decision to intervene strongly in the school. Better teaching and behaviour is seeing current pupils' progress improve. Leaders anticipate better GCSE outcomes in 2017.

Increasingly effective use of pupil premium funding, alongside a whole-school focus on disadvantaged pupils, is seeing these pupils' progress improve. However, the rate of improvement remains variable across subjects and year groups. Very new leadership of special educational needs is also beginning to result in some improvement in this area.

External support

The SET has provided a considerable amount of support to the school in recent months and this is the reason that the school is improving.

The executive principal and head of school, both provided by the SET and supported and challenged by the SET's chief executive, form a formidable team that is bringing about rapid improvement.

The SET provides additional leadership support for senior and middle leaders through training and one-to-one coaching as appropriate. Consequently, the school is well led and subject leaders are growing in confidence and effectiveness.

The SET's directors of mathematics and science provide considerable support for these departments. As a result, leadership has been strengthened, teaching is improving and the curriculum is better suited to pupils' needs. Lighter-touch support for English and modern foreign languages has also seen improvements in these subjects.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the attendance and accelerate the progress of disadvantaged pupils.
- Reduce the prevalence of low-level disruption in lessons.
- Embed the new leadership of special educational needs.
- Strengthen the academy council's capacity to hold leaders to account for the school's performance.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the SET's board, the chair of the academy council, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Staffordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector