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14 June 2017

Ms Victoria Mawson
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Mawson

Short inspection of The Link School Pallion

Following my visit to the school on 7 June 2017 with Jen Cave, 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 good in February 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You and your team share an unerring vision to engage, educate and support some of Sunderland's most vulnerable pupils whether on roll at The Link School Pallion, in mainstream schools or new to Sunderland.

Since the previous inspection, the number of pupils on the school's roll has increased substantially. Since the beginning of the current academic year alone, 18 pupils have been admitted to Year 11. You and the school's management committee acknowledge that this is financially unsustainable. Accordingly, you have met with officers from Sunderland local authority to discuss the increased demand for places in the school.

Your staff provide bespoke tuition for each individual pupil following an assessment of their needs and capabilities on entry. An atmosphere of positivity and high expectations pervades the school. Pupils, as a matter of course, present their work neatly in their workbooks. Displays of pupils' work are of a high standard. Your pupils grow in confidence and self-esteem because of your work and the work of your staff.

At the previous inspection, you were asked to improve the quality of teaching, the

achievement of the hardest-to-reach pupils and the school's improvement planning.

The overwhelming majority of teachers now plan work that is at just the right level of difficulty to stretch and challenge your pupils. The staff give pupils pithy feedback on their work, in accordance with the marking and feedback policy. This closely targeted teaching, effective feedback and high quality pastoral care enables your pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, to make more rapid progress. In 2016, your school was awarded the national pupil premium award in the special schools and alternative provision schools category.

You ensure that your pupils have a wide range of skills that are attractive to employers. For example, pupils include their emergency first aid at work and their health and safety at work qualifications in their applications for Saturday jobs. As a result, many are successful in their job applications. You also ensure that pupils who have taken unsafe risks in the past are educated about how to take risks safely. This is achieved through instruction and participation in activities such as mountain biking, water sports, bushcraft and horse riding.

Leaders' evaluation of the school's effectiveness is accurate. Areas for development are identified correctly and feed directly into the school's planning for further improvement. Leaders, including members of the management committee, know when they have to check that actions have been completed and when to evaluate their impact.

Leaders acknowledge that further work is needed to improve the standard of pupils' reading. Many pupils enter the school with reading ages well below their chronological ages. They do not catch up and often require readers in their external examinations. Reading is fundamental to the success of their next stage in education, training and employment.

Over time, science has been an area of concern. Pupils have made better progress in science this year. However, teaching, learning and assessment in science are hampered by the lack of resources available for practical and investigative work.

Pupils' attendance is a continuing priority for the school. Although pupils attend your school more often than they attended their previous schools, attendance is still not high enough.

You place high priority, quite correctly, on preparing pupils for life after school. Pupils, accompanied by staff, interact with members of the local community on a daily basis. Local shopkeepers told us that most pupils behave well when visiting their stores. However, staff condone pupils smoking cigarettes during the daily opportunities to leave the school site. You recognise that this is unacceptable.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils feel safe and are safe in school. You have ensured that the school's safeguarding systems and procedures are now sound, including assessments of risk. Leaders had already commissioned an external review of the school's safeguarding arrangements at the time of this inspection.

You have ensured that staff recruitment checks are compliant with requirements. Senior staff and members of the management committee are trained in safer recruitment and child protection.

Staff record behavioural and safeguarding incidents appropriately. They work in partnership with professionals from a wide variety of external agencies to make sure that pupils' diverse needs are met and that they are safeguarded effectively. You analyse the frequency of safeguarding incidents, including those of poor behaviour, and report your analyses to the management committee. This ensures that members of the management committee are well informed about the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding arrangements and pastoral care.

Inspection findings

- You have an accurate view of the school's effectiveness. Members of the management committee and staff share your vision and passion for the school and its pupils. You acknowledge the school's areas for development and are not afraid to make difficult decisions when they are warranted.
- Most pupils make good progress at your school from their individual starting points on entry. They develop self-confidence and self-worth through your high expectations of and for them. Your staff give great attention to detail. Displays around school are of a high quality and celebrate pupils' work. Pupils' books are pristine. Graffiti is non-existent. All pupils write the date and the learning objective before every piece of work, in accordance with your school's presentation policy. This routine gets your pupils started and gives them confidence, and their written work then flows.
- Your staff carry out thorough assessments of pupils' knowledge, skills and abilities on entry to your school. They use this information well to plan bespoke and individualised learning pathways for each pupil. Pupils respond to the one-to-one and small-group support offered in your school. They make small steps of progress at first. These steps increase as their confidence grows.
- Parents support the work of the school. They report that their sons and daughters are now 'focused and motivated', 'influenced positively' and 'accepted as individuals'. They appreciate that staff go the extra mile to build strong relationships with their children. Parents also appreciate that staff give due importance to the pupils' emotional development and deliver a range of life skills alongside more academic pursuits.
- Despite the efforts of your staff, the large number of pupils admitted to the school in Year 11 do not have sufficient time to catch up with their peers. You, members of the management committee and officers from the local authority have been most concerned about the large number of admissions to Year 11

during the current academic year, as it is the last year of compulsory education for these pupils. The majority of these admissions are from secondary schools within the Sunderland local authority.

- Pupils make the strongest progress in English, including those who are disadvantaged. However, the majority of pupils are hampered by their inability to read at age-appropriate levels. The subject leaders for English have established one-to-one tuition in reading, which is having some impact. Pupils have not bought into an online reading recovery programme that the school is trialling currently.
- Over time, pupils have not made good progress in science. However, pupils are making much improved progress in science this year despite a lack of resources. The lead teacher for science has ensured that pupils have had some opportunities to work in the science laboratories at a nearby secondary school. Pupils have also benefited from STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) visitors. Notwithstanding, the resourcing of this core subject is an area that requires development.
- Pupils' attendance increases and their persistent absence decreases when they join your school because of the very effective pastoral support. Pupils, including pupils in the care of the local authority, are much more likely to attend The Link School Pallion than they were to attend their previous schools. However, as you agreed, attendance overall is still not high enough.
- Careers education, information, advice and guidance is a growing strength of your school. Pupils told us that they particularly enjoyed attending a careers fair held recently in school. The vast majority of pupils in the current Year 11 cohort have confirmed places in education, employment or training for next year.
- You are very well organised. Your self-evaluation of the school's effectiveness is strategic, honest and robust. It clearly outlines the further improvements that are required. These improvements then transfer seamlessly into the school's development planning. All leaders and managers, including members of the management committee, know when and how they are to check and evaluate the impact of the actions in the improvement plan.
- You and the assistant headteacher know each member of staff's strengths and areas for improvement. The weekly opportunities for staff development are used well to develop practice and share expertise. Appraisal systems are strong. Staff do not progress up the pay spine as a matter of course. Newly qualified teachers are supported well during the first year of their teaching careers.
- Members of the management committee challenge leaders increasingly robustly about aspects of the school's work, including safeguarding, admissions, finance, and pupils' progress. Members have taken effective action during the course of the current academic year to increase the stability of staffing by reducing the number of temporary staff. In order to improve the work of the management committee further, an external review of the committee had already been planned at the time of the inspection.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leaders place greater emphasis on the development of pupils' reading skills and abilities, to ensure that pupils' reading ages catch up with their chronological ages rapidly
- the science department is resourced appropriately, so that pupils have more regular opportunities to carry out practical investigations, evaluate results and form conclusions that are supported by accurate data
- pupils attend school more often
- staff do not condone pupils smoking when engaged in off-site activities.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the management committee, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Sunderland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Belita Scott
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, the inspectors discussed the work of the school with you, the assistant headteacher, the safeguarding team, the coordinator for special educational needs and subject leaders. Inspectors also talked to the school's improvement partner, two officers from the local authority and three members of the management committee, including the chair and the vice-chair. We examined information about pupils' progress and looked at pupils' workbooks carefully. The inspection team checked a range of documentation, including leaders' evaluation of the school's effectiveness, external evaluations of aspects of the school's work and minutes of meetings of the management committee. I considered five written responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents. The team visited classes to observe teaching, learning and assessment. They were sometimes accompanied by you or your assistant headteacher. A formal discussion was held with 11 pupils. Both inspectors talked more informally to pupils in lessons and around school. You and I also talked to pupils and shopkeepers during the morning break.