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Ms Jane Dambach  
Acting Headteacher  
Horton Lodge Community Special School  
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Leek  
Staffordshire  
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Dear Ms Dambach

### **Short inspection of Horton Lodge Community Special School**

Following my visit to the school on 11 October 2017 with Deb Jenkins, HMI, 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 have provided strong leadership since taking up the post of acting headteacher over two years ago. Under your leadership, you have continued to build on the school's strengths and further developed the quality of teaching and learning. Horton Lodge is a caring and motivating place of learning where staff take every opportunity to teach pupils new skills while at the same time continually developing their independence and confidence. Staff and pupils alike adopt a 'can do' approach to everything they do. When pupils encounter a hurdle to learning, staff nurture, encourage and support, enabling pupils to achieve regardless of the complexity of their needs.

Teachers work hard to ensure that all staff involved with each pupil have an explicit understanding of their specific needs and targets. Teachers consider these needs carefully when planning activities. Individual learning plans for pupils are displayed on classrooms walls and pupils have 'all about me' passports on their chairs with information about how they communicate and how they can be helped. Other staff complement the work of teachers and provide a wide range of highly effective care and support. This enables pupils to make good progress in their personal, physical and academic development.

Leaders' plans for improvement focus on the right priorities and serve the school well in bringing about further positive change. Assessment has been a key focus recently, although you acknowledge that there is still more to do to ensure that high-quality assessment practice is firmly embedded across the school. Although governors support the school well, their monitoring activities are not always aligned closely with the priorities in the school's development plan.

Leaders' and teachers' commitment to, and passion for, helping all pupils succeed in their endeavours is tangible. There is a buzz of excitement in every classroom, where pupils show real enjoyment in their learning. Staff sensitively encourage pupils to gain independence in physical movement and develop their skills of self-organisation. Teachers place an appropriate emphasis on extending pupils' communication skills. Staff are consistent in their use of Makaton signing support for pupils and use musical cues to help pupils understand a change of activity. This helps pupils to take control of their learning and increase the range of their purposeful interactions with others.

Pupils speak positively about school. They told inspectors that they enjoy a range of subjects including art, mathematics and swimming. Pupils are kind to each other and get along together. They behave extremely well and have positive attitudes to learning because teachers identify and celebrate each child's individual qualities. The annual 'Oscars award ceremony' is just one example of the way you build pupils' self-esteem and help them to recognise their strengths and achievements.

You have ensured that parents are kept well informed about their children's progress. Teachers maintain a frequent dialogue with parents about their children's successes in school. Similarly, parents share with teachers what their children have achieved beyond school. When parents spoke to inspectors, they were united in their praise for the school and highlighted the close relationship that exists between home and school, and the individual care and attention teachers give to their children. For example, parents talked about school becoming 'part of their family' and how each child is treated as 'unique'.

You have addressed the areas for improvement that were identified at the last inspection well. Conductive education (CE) is now a strength of the school as a result of the determined efforts of the CE coordinator. CE is woven into the routines of the school day and is an integral part of the curriculum. As a result of effective teaching, pupils are able to transfer skills from 'task series' to everyday challenges, for example getting round obstacles successfully. The CE approach is helping pupils to make their movements more functional. You recognise that there is further work to do to improve mathematics throughout school and have already begun to incorporate mathematics into CE.

Since the last inspection, the federation with Springfield has disbanded, although links with Leek Educational Partnership have been maintained. Also, the Talentum Learning Trust has been working closely and effectively with the school, providing some additional leadership support. The governing body is currently considering the future leadership arrangements for the school. Uncertainty is caused because as yet

there are no firm plans in place for a permanent headteacher beyond April 2018.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Designated senior leaders for safeguarding have ensured that there is a clear understanding that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. You have provided a range of safeguarding training for staff so they can fulfil their responsibilities effectively. Staff knowledge of safeguarding is kept fresh through regular updates.

Staff are vigilant. They report, without delay, any concerns they have that might indicate a child may be at risk of harm. Leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Leaders and governors adopt safer recruitment practices to reduce the risk of unsuitable adults working with children.

Pupils are taught how to stay safe and how to express their feelings if there is something wrong. For example, those with limited communication know how to use their Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display (PODD) communication books to talk about and share their feelings. You have ensured that there are robust systems of care and assistance to support pupils with medical needs. Individual care plans are in place and reasonable adjustments are made which enable pupils to fully participate in school life safely.

### **Inspection findings**

- Leaders have revised and improved the way they assess pupils, making systems more fit for purpose. The new approach to assessment recognises the very small steps of progress made by some pupils. This is helping pupils, particularly those with profound and multiple learning difficulties, to make better progress because teachers use the assessment information to plan activities which are more finely tuned to meet their individual needs.
- Leaders have been thoughtful in their decision-making about assessment, although the revised assessment arrangements are still in the relatively early stages of development. There has not yet been any external moderation of teachers' judgements to ensure consistency, although this is planned for.
- Leaders are not consistently using and interpreting pupils' assessment information well enough to identify which pupils are making accelerated progress. This means that judgements about outcomes that leaders draw from their analysis of assessment information can sometimes appear slightly more favourable than in reality.
- Leaders use a broad range of evidence, including observations of learning and pupils' work, to inform their self-evaluation and determine school improvement priorities. Leaders' action plans are fit for purpose. Governors are rightly focused on securing permanent leadership arrangements for the school.
- Pupils' attendance remains below the national average figure for special schools despite leaders' tenacious efforts to improve it. A high number of pupils have significant medical needs which affect the school's overall attendance. Leaders

work very closely with families and other agencies to support good attendance. As a result of the determined efforts of leaders, the attendance of some pupils who are persistently absent is beginning to improve.

- Leaders accurately used pupils' assessment information and outcomes from observations of teaching to identify mathematics as an area for improvement. The mathematics subject leader has a clear vision and effective plan for the development of the subject so mathematics teaching improves further. The introduction of new mathematics resources and a focus on mathematical language through staff training is proving beneficial. However, leaders recognise that there needs to be greater consistency across classes in relation to the use of practical resources to support pupils' mathematical development.
- In mathematics, teachers provide engaging sessions for the youngest pupils to help them learn about number through fun activities. For example, pupils improved their counting skills through singing the song 'Five little ducks' while playing with pretend ducks in the water tray. However, some older pupils, notably the most able, say that their mathematics work is too easy. Inspectors found that there was an insufficient level of challenge in the mathematics work of the most able pupils.
- Governors are passionate about the school and the unique experiences, care and support it offers pupils. They visit the school regularly and have a good understanding of what happens in school on a daily basis. Over the last two years, there have been changes to the way the governing body operates which has brought about a renewed focus on its strategic functions. However, governors do not yet systematically plan to monitor aspects of the school development plan to determine how successful leaders are in addressing school improvement priorities.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- urgent action is taken to secure permanent leadership arrangements so the school's ongoing progress can be maintained
- governors link their monitoring and evaluation activities more closely to the school improvement plan
- the mathematics curriculum is developed across the school and provides an appropriate level of challenge for the most able pupils
- new assessment systems are embedded and leaders interpret assessment information with greater precision to draw accurate conclusions about pupils' outcomes.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Staffordshire. This letter will

be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tim Hill

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, we held discussions with you about the school's self-evaluation, pupils' assessment and current priorities. One inspector spoke to staff about safeguarding. I held a meeting with two governors. I joined you in a brief visit to lessons where we observed learning. The other inspector observed in all classes, spoke to pupils about their work and looked at their books. The inspector also spent time with the leader for mathematics.

We evaluated a wide range of documents, including the school's improvement plan, assessment information, governors' documentation and records about keeping pupils safe. The views of parents were considered through the 15 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire. I also spoke to a group of parents at the start of the school day.