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Mrs Andrea English
Executive Headteacher
The Oaks Secondary School
Rock Road
Spennymoor
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Dear Mrs English,

Short inspection of The Oaks Secondary School

Following my visit to the school on 27 February 2018 with Zoe Westley, 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 April 2013.

This school continues to be outstanding.

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

The Oaks Secondary School continues to be an outstanding special school as a result of your strong and dedicated leadership. Under your leadership, senior leaders and governors are resolute that the school should continue to develop and improve. Leaders are successful in their aim of enabling each pupil to achieve strong outcomes and to move successfully to post-school education, employment or training.

Leaders have developed a clear rationale for the school's curriculum. This is based on each pupil achieving the best possible academic, social and emotional outcomes and being well-prepared for life after school. Leaders are determined that pupils' achievements should be recognised and, as a result, the curriculum includes a wide range of accredited courses for all pupils at key stage 4 and post 16. Leaders, including governors, understand that an increasing number of pupils who have complex needs, and those who have autism spectrum disorder, will attend the school. Therefore, leaders have regularly reviewed and developed the curriculum to ensure that it meets the needs of all learners. However, it is acknowledged this work will need to continue as the pupils complete their courses. The curriculum is enriched through numerous educational visits, after-school clubs, residential visits and dance, drama and cultural activities. To support their move to post-school education, employment and training, pupils learn enterprise skills, take part in work experience and work-related learning and develop their key skills in English, mathematics and communication. To help pupils decide about what to do when

they leave school, leaders are developing the range of careers education, information, advice and guidance.

You and senior leaders have successfully developed a culture of continuous improvement. The barriers to pupils' learning are seen as challenges to be overcome. Leaders are not complacent or satisfied with the school's current success. They search enthusiastically for answers to problems. One governor described the school as continuing to develop through a process of research and enquiry. As a result of this approach, the school's detailed self-evaluation has identified development priorities that will continue to improve the outcomes for all pupils. For example, leaders understand that more pupils who have complex mental health needs are attending the school. Therefore, leaders have reviewed the support provided. As a result, the best possible support for these pupils is being developed; however, it is acknowledged that this support must continue to be reviewed.

Effective teaching and the personalisation of the curriculum supports pupils' progress extremely well. Leaders have developed different curriculum pathways which are closely matched to the different starting points of pupils. Some pupils follow a secondary model of the curriculum working with different teachers, each with a subject specialism. Other pupils, who need more consistent support, or who follow a sensory curriculum, are taught by the same teacher and support staff for most of their lessons. Leaders keep these arrangements under regular review to ensure that the needs of each pupil are effectively met.

Teachers have strong subject knowledge and understand the needs of pupils very well. They use this knowledge to plan lessons that meet the needs of pupils who have different starting points. Lessons have clear learning outcomes and, for the most able pupils, are linked to the examination or course syllabus. This was particularly evident in an English lesson where, as part of an entry-level English course, Year 11 pupils were planning a telephone call to arrange a visit to a theme park. The teacher used questions effectively to check pupils' understanding and knowledge and to develop their ideas. Follow-up activities were closely linked to pupils' different starting points and, as a result, pupils engaged enthusiastically in the lesson, made good progress and were confident that they knew what to discuss in the telephone call. Teaching assistants are used effectively to support individuals and groups of pupils, promoting pupils' learning and independence.

Leaders have developed detailed and effective systems to measure pupils' progress based on their different starting points. Leaders have a clear understanding of what progress means for pupils who have different starting points. Pupils' progress is recorded regularly and rigorously analysed to identify differences in attainment between different groups of pupils, such as those who receive pupil premium funding. The result of this analysis is that pupils are supported well and make progress. These outcomes are scrutinised and moderated in school and with other special schools. In the context of changes to the assessment of progress for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN), the head of school is leading a local authority initiative to develop a common assessment system for special schools.

Pupils' behaviour is strong. They are respectful when moving around the school between lessons and help one another in class. Pupils understand the clear reward systems to encourage positive behaviour, and the sanctions to manage poor behaviour. Pupils can self-refer to the school's behaviour support unit where they can discuss their behaviour with a member of staff. A Year 7 pupil spoke about how staff had helped him improve his behaviour and how he valued using the school's behaviour support unit.

Pupils spoke positively about attending school. They communicate confidently, and most are able to express their views clearly. Some pupils use symbols and alternative communication systems to make their views known. Pupils reflect and evaluate their achievements. A Year 11 pupil described his progress in mathematics and that he had decided to re-sit his GCSE examination to improve his grade. Pupils are encouraged to develop their independence skills, for example using equipment in practical lessons; when using the school cafeteria; or learning to travel independently. Members of the school council are confident and challenge leaders to improve the school. They understand the school rules and how staff keep them safe. For example, pupils understand and respect the rule about not using a mobile phone in school.

The federated governing body is shared with Evergreen Primary School, the local primary special school. Governors consider that the federation has enabled The Oaks Secondary School to develop through your leadership of both schools, and by the effective sharing of staff expertise. As a result of the federation, governors understand that there is an increasing number of pupils who have complex needs at the primary school, and that The Oaks Secondary School should develop to meet pupils' needs as they transfer to the school. Because of this close working arrangement, leaders have established effective transition arrangements to support pupils as they move school. The effectiveness of these transition programmes is highly valued by pupils, staff, parents and carers.

Governors are very ambitious for the school and work effectively with senior leaders and the local authority. Governors are proud of the school and value the work of you and your senior leaders. They visit school regularly to meet staff and pupils and review subject action plans. Governors are well informed about the school's performance and receive regular reports from senior leaders. Governors attend regular training and have carried out an audit of their skills. As a result, governors have ensured that they have a wide range of skills and new governors have been appointed to enhance the work of the governing body.

The local authority values highly your work and that of school leaders and the governing body. As a result, the local authority has used the skills of senior leaders and governors to support other special schools and to lead local authority initiatives. For example, you mentor other headteachers, the head of school is leading the development of the local authority's assessment tracking system for children who have SEN and governors have supported other governing bodies.

Staff reported that they are happy and proud to work at The Oaks Secondary School. They said that the school has continued to develop since the last inspection, that there are high expectations of pupils and that pupils' behaviour is well managed. Staff reported that the school is well led and managed, that they are well supported by senior leaders and that professional development is used to challenge and support staff. Staff said that they are treated with respect and that leaders are interested in their well-being.

Parents and carers value highly the school and the leadership provided by the executive headteacher and senior staff. Parents said that they are listened to and that their views are taken into account. All the parents who completed the Ofsted online survey, Parent View, reported that their child is safe, well looked after and that staff effectively manage pupils' behaviour. All parents who completed the survey would recommend the school to another parent.

Parents reported that their child is eager to attend school and that the school has made a positive difference to their child's behaviour, learning, social and emotional development, independence and development of life skills. Parents commented on the caring ethos, the range of activities, including after-school clubs, residential visits, the friendly staff, and the regular home-school communication, all of which they value highly. Parents value the transition programme when their child starts school and the support for their child as they move to post-school education, employment or training.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have created a strong and effective safeguarding culture where pupils' safety and well-being have a high priority. Pupils said they feel safe and are confident that they can share any concerns with an adult. This is as a result of the strong relationships between pupils and staff. Pupils are taught how to stay safe online and this information is shared with parents. Policies and procedures are robust and are reviewed regularly. Staff and governors are very knowledgeable as a result of regular safeguarding training, the strong leadership of the designated safeguarding lead and the effective support from governors.

Inspection findings

- You are a dedicated leader who has high aspirations for all the pupils who attend The Oaks Secondary School. You have created a strong leadership team who work very effectively with you, and the dedicated governing body, to ensure that the school continues to grow and develop.
- Leaders have created a strong safeguarding culture. The designated safeguarding lead provides strong leadership and is well supported by the safeguarding governor. There is effective multi-agency working. As a result, pupils feel safe. Pupils' behaviour is a strength.
- Leaders have kept the school curriculum and assessment systems under regular review to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of pupils who have a wide

range of needs. As the result of a well-designed curriculum, knowledgeable staff and effective teaching, pupils achieve strong outcomes.

- Leaders believe that every pupil is entitled to have their achievements accredited. There is a wide range of accredited courses which meet the needs of pupils who have different abilities and interests. Pupils are well prepared when they leave school.
- Parents value highly the work of the school and the support provided by staff and senior leaders.
- The local authority values highly the school and has used senior leaders and governors to support other schools and to drive local authority initiatives.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- in the context of the changing needs of pupils, the curriculum and accreditation of learning for all pupils at key stage 4 and post-16 continues to be developed
- the school's support for pupils who have mental health needs continues to be developed.

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

Yours sincerely

George Gilmore
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, the head of school and members of the senior leadership team. Meetings were also held separately with five parents, and four governors. I spoke to the local authority's education development partner. Inspectors visited lessons with school leaders and scrutinised pupils' work. An inspector spoke with a group of pupils from the school council and an inspector heard six pupils read. We spoke with pupils in class and at lunchtime. Inspectors scrutinised school documents, including information about pupils' achievement, the school's self-evaluation, the school improvement plan, behaviour and attendance records, information about safeguarding and the records of governing body meetings. Inspectors took account of 32 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, as well as 29 staff responses to Ofsted's staff survey.