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Mrs Beverley Gates
Headteacher
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Gipsy Lane
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Dear Mrs Gates

**Special measures monitoring inspection of Northern House School
(Wokingham) Special Academy**

Following my visit to your school on 10 and 11 July 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in October 2018. The full list of the areas for improvement that were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

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

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim executive board (IEB), the chair of the board of trustees, the chief executive officer of Northern House School Academy Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's

services for Wokingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Farr
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in October 2018.

- Take immediate action to safeguard pupils by ensuring that:
 - staff are equipped to address pupils’ unsafe and challenging behaviours effectively
 - pupils are adequately supervised at all times
 - all pupils attend school often.
- Improve pupils’ behaviour so that it is good by ensuring that:
 - the behaviour policy is fit for purpose, sets out high expectations and clear sanctions, and is applied consistently across the school
 - rates of exclusion reduce so that they are reasonable and proportionate.
- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - the multi-academy trust and governors hold senior leaders to account rigorously
 - leaders, governors and the multi-academy trust share clear priorities and take effective action to improve the school without delay
 - leaders monitor pupils’ achievement across the school effectively to address underachievement
 - leaders implement and monitor the impact of planned changes to the curriculum and timetable.
- Improve teaching, learning and assessment so that pupils’ outcomes are good by ensuring that:
 - staff have consistently high expectations for pupils’ achievement and attitudes to learning
 - tasks are suitably demanding and interesting for pupils
 - teaching assistants support pupils’ learning effectively
 - teachers make use of effective questions and checks on pupils’ learning during lessons to adjust and increase the impact of their teaching.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 10 July 2019 to 11 July 2019

Evidence

During this monitoring inspection, lessons in all age groups were visited jointly with one of the school's deputy headteachers. I met with you and other staff with significant responsibilities, including two of the school's deputy headteachers and the school's behaviour lead. In addition, I met with the chair of Northern House School Academy Trust, who is also the chair of the IEB. I scrutinised the school's documents, including the school's improvement plan, minutes of governor and trustee meetings, and records relating to safeguarding. The single central record was checked.

Context

Since my last visit in March 2019, several new members of staff have joined, including: a personal assistant to the headteacher; a teacher with responsibility for Year 6 and Year 7 transition; and an administrator. One of the school's deputy headteachers with responsibility for the secondary provision and teaching and learning remains absent. Consequently, the school's interim deputy headteacher's post has been extended. The science teacher and school's designated safeguarding lead are also absent.

At the end of the summer term, some staff will leave, including: one of the school's special educational needs coordinators, who has responsibility for secondary-aged pupils; the English and humanities teacher; the physical education coordinator; and the site manager. Several new staff have been appointed and will join in September 2019, including: a primary teacher; a site and safety manager, a physical education teacher; an English and humanities teacher; and three teaching assistants.

Northern House Academy Trust has decided to end its sponsorship of the school. Trustees are working with the regional schools commissioner to find an alternative solution. Negotiations are in the early stages, and no firm plans are in place. Leaders are also exploring the possibility of re-introducing residential provision for primary-aged pupils. This proposed amendment to the school's registration status is also at an early stage.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The section 5 inspection identified several aspects of leadership and management, including at both trustee and local governance level, that required attention. However, too little has been achieved, and leadership capacity remains underdeveloped. Although you and your teachers are working hard, you are not receiving enough support from trustees or governors. Furthermore, following the trust's announcement that it will withdraw its sponsorship, uncertainty prevails over

the school's long-term future. Trustees are now working with external partners to find an alternative sponsor and cease their support of this school. Consequently, trustees' core business has shifted towards consideration of the school's long-term future, rather than prioritising the urgent improvement needed now. This is an uncertain time for leaders, staff and parents.

The quality of governance has not strengthened since my last visit. The review of governance, recommended at the last full inspection, and stressed again at my last visit, has still not taken place. Some audits have been completed, but actions are not followed up. Nevertheless, several governors participated in a governor workshop, which provided a useful insight into what is required. As a result, the chair of governors constructed a detailed action plan, highlighting many different aspects of the school's provision that require attention. However, governors' progress towards meeting these aims has been too slow. Work is yet to get underway in key areas highlighted by governors as needing improvement, such as communicating more regularly with parents and carers. Governors' progress towards securing improvement is too slow.

Trustees and governors are still getting to grips with their statutory responsibilities. For example, they have not ensured that the school's website complies with current regulations. The chair of the IEB, who also acts as the chair of trustees, has also taken on the role of safeguarding governor. This is because there are too few members to share the load. He is aware of potential conflicting interests through holding such significant roles and is frustrated at the lack of additional support through which to create a more independent and useful structure. The chair of the IEB has tried resolutely to seek solutions, including trying to recruit additional support. However, governance arrangements still remain far too stretched and too reliant on the best endeavours of one or two individuals. Some governor statutory responsibilities remain unfulfilled, including ensuring that key information relating to governance is available on the website.

There has been some improvement to other priorities since my previous monitoring visit. You have adapted and modified the school improvement plan, making it more succinct and streamlined. This is helpful, as you have refocused the staff on the most pressing school priorities. They feel that you bring a helpful steer, and all are clear on your high expectations. However, governors and trustees are yet to make full use of the school improvement plan. Their monitoring of progress towards achieving your aims is underdeveloped. Nevertheless, you continue to work diligently to empower others within the school and distribute leadership responsibilities more widely. Others, such as one of the deputy headteachers, who is leading on improving pupils' attendance, are now beginning to take greater ownership of key priorities.

Some staffing issues remain unresolved, and more staff are leaving at the end of term. The trust has not managed some of these aspects well enough and this has slowed the school's rate of improvement. Trustees' support of the school is limited

and they are not keeping sharp enough oversight of the school's effectiveness.

Some aspects of the school's safeguarding procedures are beginning to strengthen steadily. There is now a clearer system for making referrals to the designated safeguarding lead. Staff now refer concerns more routinely, providing the necessary detail. Record-keeping is now more comprehensive and systematic than in the past. Thresholds of concern are applied more consistently and, when appropriate, concerns are escalated to wider agencies, including social care. However, more work is needed to follow up referrals and ensure that pupils' chronologies capture all important conversations in enough detail. The school's single central record contains all the necessary information. During the inspection, some minor administrative errors were addressed. Sometimes the member of staff who oversees this aspect receives unnecessary requests from the trust, such as to redo some of staff recruitment checks. Nevertheless, the administrator who oversees this aspect is becoming more knowledgeable about what is required.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching remains highly variable. Teaching staff are trying hard to implement new methods, but with mixed success. This is particularly the case with the management of pupils' behaviour. Although staff know to call for assistance if pupils' behaviour becomes challenging, some staff do not call for help when necessary. Similarly, in lessons, teachers do not act quickly enough on cues that indicate pupils are becoming unsettled and disengaged. During my visit, the deputy headteacher had to intervene on several occasions to stabilise disruptive situations and restore calm.

Some staff, particularly in the secondary department, do not routinely make adaptations in line with pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans. This means that pupils' social and emotional needs are not catered for strongly enough. Since my last visit, you have ensured that staff are more aware of the reasonable adjustments required, by introducing a written record for all pupils. However, some staff do not adhere closely enough to this guidance. When there are not appropriate modifications in place, pupils sometimes interrupt, call out, and struggle to retain focus on the task in hand. Some staff are still struggling to manage pupils' outbursts and, consequently, situations can escalate unnecessarily. This is because pupils' social and emotional needs are not met well enough.

The roles and responsibilities of support staff are now much clearer. You have reorganised teaching assistants into different groups, including learning, pastoral and behaviour teams. However, the impact of additional adults on both pupils' learning and behaviour is mixed. Sometimes adults are not deployed to maximum effect. At times, for instance, adults patrol the outside area, even though there are no pupils to support or oversee. In lessons, practice is equally variable. Sometimes, adults provide helpful support, engaging pupils in discussion about their learning. At other times, adults do not promote pupils' independence strongly enough, and this

limits pupils' learning experiences and their capacity to achieve well.

The quality of teaching and learning is strengthening in the primary department. This is because pupils' needs are catered for more strongly and some are developing strategies to manage their emotions more effectively than in the past. Staff plan activities that hold appeal, and pupils are supported increasingly well to give of their best.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' behaviour is still unsafe at times. There are occasions when adults do not implement the school's procedures, and therefore do not trigger additional support from the school's behaviour team when needed. You regularly revisit the school's approach and restate your expectations to all staff. However, when situations arise, pupils leave learning sessions and adults struggle to contain or manage pupils' behaviour successfully. Equally, sometimes adults are too slow to intervene when pupils' behaviour becomes unsafe. Some adults lack vigilance and do not spot unsafe behaviour quickly enough. Senior staff are still required regularly to assist and bring pupils' behaviour under control.

The monitoring of pupils' attendance has vastly improved. Now there is a much clearer and systematic approach, and this is a very positive change for the better. As a result, when pupils' attendance dips, leaders initiate support more promptly, including working much more closely with families. In many examples, pupils' attendance is beginning to improve. When this is not the case, leaders are now prepared to take further action. However, you know that persistent absence remains high and, although improving, attendance is still low.

Leaders are much more assured that pupils who attend off-site providers are safe. Leaders' use of such provision is also much more tightly aligned to pupils' EHC plan targets. A whole-school review of the usefulness of such provisions means that the number of pupils who attend such arrangements has dramatically reduced. Many are successfully re-engaging with schooling on site and engaging in an education that better meets their needs.

In some subjects, where teaching remains weakest or staff absence is an issue, pupils are reluctant to settle, and lessons do not start promptly as a result. Pupils leave their classrooms, and adults are then required to ensure that pupils are in the right place at the right time. Such situations are further hindered by some adults' lack of clarity about which pupils should be in attendance during particular sessions. At times like these, leaders offer helpful support, resettling pupils and getting pupils' learning back on track. Nevertheless, transition between sessions remains a particularly challenging time, particularly in the secondary department. Staff remain dependent on assistance from senior leaders to defuse situations.

You have reviewed the school's exclusion policy. This now follows statutory

guidance, and exclusions are conducted within the parameters set out in statute. You are tracking this aspect more closely, and report thoroughly to members of the IEB through your comprehensive headteacher reports. Although exclusions appear to be reducing, the number of incidents requiring physical intervention has increased. The number of serious incidents remains high. Sometimes, the school's work is further hampered by the trust acting too slowly to address matters such as fixing damaged parts of the building. For example, after accidental damage to the school's electronic gates, pupils were able to leave the site too easily because repairs were not completed urgently. As a result, there are still times when pupils' safety is compromised.

Outcomes for pupils

You have implemented a more robust process of reporting information about pupils' progress to parents. The quality of information is more comprehensive and gives parents a clearer view of how well their children are progressing against a range of indicators, including attainment, attendance and behaviour. Your tracking shows that pupils' progress is beginning to strengthen in mathematics and English. However, in science, where staffing absence persists, pupils' progress remains limited.

Changes to the curriculum, particularly at key stage 4, have enabled pupils to study a wider range of subjects, including some that lead to qualifications. Your most recent analysis of pupils' progress indicates that pupils in Year 11 are on track to achieve a broader range of qualifications at the end of this year compared to last year. You have also ensured that pupils move to suitable long-term destinations, with most taking up college places.

Some staff are still lacking confidence and expertise at de-escalating situations when pupils feel anxious. High levels of staff absence persist, and temporary staff are less able to manage pupils' social and emotional needs. This has a negative impact on pupils' learning. Too often, lessons are disrupted, and other pupils are distracted from focusing on the learning task in hand. This limits pupils' progress.

External support

Trustees have not arranged additional help, and external support for the school is still not forthcoming. Although the chair of trustees has made attempts to seek outside support for governance, such as looking for experts to bolster IEB membership, such efforts have been unsuccessful. School leaders are still working under their own steam to orchestrate improvement.

Nevertheless, you have ensured that placing authorities are now more involved with the work of the school. You have proactively sought, and succeeded in building, much stronger relationships with nine different local authorities. As a result, stronger partnerships are emerging and the number of pupils on roll is gradually

increasing.