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Mr S Evans
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Dear Mr Evans

Special measures monitoring inspection of New Leaf Centre

Following my visit with Peter Humphries, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Sarah Ashley, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 27 and 28 November 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 fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in April 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 taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection only after consultation with Her Majesty's Inspectors.

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

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Take urgent steps to ensure that all pupils are taught in a safe environment by:
 - ensuring that all buildings are fit for purpose, adequately cleaned and maintained
 - updating risk assessments and safeguarding training records
 - identifying and supporting the behavioural needs of each pupil
 - arranging further training for staff on managing pupil behaviour.
- Strengthen leadership and management by:
 - resolving the inadequate governance arrangements
 - securing stability in senior leadership
 - securing permanent staffing arrangements
 - revising the curriculum at each key stage so that it meets the needs of pupils
 - making sure that the provision for disadvantaged pupils meets their needs
 - securing effective support from the local authority.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by:
 - assessing the pupils' level of attainment when they start school and matching programmes of study to the needs of each pupil
 - supplying teachers and pupils with sufficient resources
 - organising training for staff who work outside of their specialism
 - meeting the identified needs of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- Tackle poor attendance and attitudes of pupils by:
 - monitoring and addressing the incidence and nature of pupils' absence more carefully
 - devising a strategy to improve pupils' attendance, which includes rewards as well as sanctions
 - making sure that pupils and staff understand what is acceptable behaviour
 - ensuring that staff act quickly, resolutely and consistently when pupils' behaviour is unacceptable
 - strengthening the system for rewarding good behaviour.
- Check the arrangements for alternative provision more carefully so the needs of pupils are met by:
 - reviewing the quality of each placement and its relevance for each pupil,

- including removing pupils from any provision that may be operating illegally
- conducting regular checks on the quality of teaching and learning in these provisions
- evaluating the impact of alternative provision in improving pupils' attendance and progress
- supporting key stage 4 pupils in achieving recognised GCSE qualifications.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved. An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 27 to 28 November 2019

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, deputy headteacher and the designated safeguarding lead. Inspectors visited four of the off-site providers used by the pupil referral unit (PRU), where they held discussions with leaders and looked at the curriculum provision. They spoke to staff and pupils throughout the inspection, both at the off-site provision and at the main New Leaf site. The lead inspector met with the chair of the management committee, the assistant director from the local authority and the local authority's head of inclusion.

Context

Sixty-three Year 11 pupils left at the end of the summer term. Eleven Year 6 pupils left to go to mainstream settings and two to specialist provision. There are now 87 pupils on roll, of whom 41 are in Year 11. The rate of pupils being admitted to the PRU since the previous inspection has slowed slightly. Nevertheless, 16 pupils have been admitted since September and admissions for eight more are being processed.

The special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) left at the end of the summer term. The deputy headteacher has taken on this roll. The PRU's special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) team has also been expanded to include two additional assistant SENCos.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the PRU's leaders and staff have made real progress in tackling the areas for improvement. There have been particular improvements in behaviour, attendance, the curriculum at key stages 2 and 3 and the work to improve pupils' reading.

On the New Leaf site during the inspection, pupils were mainly in their lessons and focused on their learning. When pupils were out of lessons and should not have been, staff used sensible strategies to ensure that they returned to class or to another room to sort out problems and did not disturb others. This is an improvement compared to the time of the previous inspection. Leaders and staff say that this is a general improvement in the centre. At the key stage 4 providers visited, pupils were working well with staff and cooperating with each other.

Exclusions are reducing. There have been 31 pupils excluded for a fixed period this term, just over a third of the school. This is a similar number of pupils to this time last year, but far fewer pupils have been repeatedly excluded and far fewer days of education have been lost. Exclusions are therefore reducing at a good rate. Leaders

are differentiating clearly between pupils who do something they should not when in genuine distress and those who choose to do something seriously wrong. When key stage 4 providers have an incident that they think requires an exclusion, they contact the headteacher at New Leaf. The headteacher decides whether or not to authorise this and follows the formal procedures required. The use of physical intervention has dropped a great deal and is only used infrequently.

Leaders attribute the improved behaviour to higher expectations across providers and in the centre, which pupils are trying to meet. Alongside this, staff use a suitable range of strategies to support and challenge pupils. In addition, the improved curriculum is engaging pupils better. The New Leaf rewards scheme is now properly up and running. Pupils enjoy the points and the associated reward vouchers and visits.

Leaders think that there is still a way to go to improve attendance to where it needs to be, but that progress has been made. This is accurate.

The support from the local authority to improve attendance is much better than it was before. Three members of staff now support the PRU with attendance matters. PRU leaders say this is very helpful because these staff are knowledgeable about attendance processes and how to challenge and support families. The PRU has also appointed a family support worker to lead on attendance. This person takes responsibility for the day-to-day attendance processes. There is a better focus now on recognising and celebrating good attendance, which pupils are really responding to. PRU leaders and the local authority officers have developed a team approach to deciding what actions to take with each family where there are issues with attendance.

Overall attendance is 61%. While still low, this is the best it has been for a long time. Around a third of the pupils now attend between 80% and 100% of the time, which is an improvement. Many key stage 2 and key stage 3 pupils fall into this group. Gradual progress is being made with some of the very low attenders. Twelve pupils attend between 0% and 20% of the time. While this is still a concern for these individuals, this is a big improvement compared to the time of the previous inspection. Some of the lowest attenders are in key stage 2 and have very complex needs. They do not come into the centre, but instead receive home tuition from a member of staff employed by the PRU. PRU staff and leaders are working hard to ensure that these pupils are given the support they need to receive a proper education. Each of these pupils is now being assessed for an education, health and care (EHC) plan.

Those who do not attend at all or have very low attendance are referred to the education welfare officer each week. 'Safe and well' visits are then carried out. Support is offered to parents, through a series of weekly meetings, to get their children into school. Formal attendance panels have now been introduced to decide on whether legal action should be taken. Leaders have a range of examples of

where these processes have had a good impact on improving individual pupils' attendance. Actions taken include changing pupils' timetables and arranging transport to school. There is a good emphasis on finding out about what is stopping a pupil attending and systematically removing these barriers where possible.

Ten key stage 4 pupils are now on part-time timetables. This is far fewer than at the time of the previous inspection – a reduction of over two thirds. Four key stage 3 pupils are on part-time timetables, though hours are almost full time for most. Reasons are connected with medical needs and mental health issues. PRU leaders are reviewing the arrangements for each pupil frequently.

Leaders' thinking about the curriculum has moved on significantly since the previous inspection. Leaders are thinking carefully about the suitability of the curriculum for the pupils' needs. They have expanded the range of subjects that the pupils are studying. Their work is based on the national curriculum, but a new topic-based approach is proving to be successful in engaging pupils and getting them to do more work at an appropriate level. Leaders are well aware of the need to map carefully what has been learned and when, and to ensure that the learning through topics is carefully sequenced. They have made a good start on this work. They are also thinking logically about how to make sure that pupils who stay at the PRU for a while build on what they have learned and do not repeat topics.

Some good examples were seen during the inspection of how pupils are developing their knowledge. Younger pupils, for example, were able to explain what they had learned in previous lessons about weighing ingredients and how they were using this knowledge to make gingerbread biscuits. They knew about the different properties of self-raising and plain flour and why they were using plain flour for their biscuits. Older pupils drew on previous learning to explain how the sea has become polluted and to consider other types of pollution.

Leaders and staff are also enriching the curriculum at key stages 2 and 3 through a range of trips and visits. For example, some key stage 2 pupils recently visited a centre to look at huskies, linked to their learning about animals in their 'frozen planet' topic. Others have been to a bookshop, the Sea Life Centre, and to look at insects, all linked to the curriculum.

The PRU has cut back considerably on its use of external providers for key stage 3. Instead, staff have taken pupils on a range of visits, linked to motivating pupils and teaching them future options. Examples include a visit to an ambulance station, skiing in Stoke and local visits such as to the arboretum in Walsall. These off-site experiences have been successful – leaders report that pupils have been generally well behaved when they are out of school and have benefited from the experiences. This is a good indicator that the PRU's stability is developing and that staff are feeling confident to take leadership. A member of staff has arranged fortnightly football training for key stage 3 pupils, and a competitive league with other PRUs.

This is proving both popular and successful.

This term, New Leaf held a coffee morning to raise money for Macmillan. Parents, carers and local authority officers were invited. This type of event was a first for the PRU. It was well attended, and parents and carers had the opportunity to look at their children's work.

The headteacher now has a clear overview of exactly which courses key stage 4 pupils are studying and the qualifications these will lead to. This confirms that, although some pupils' curriculum is quite broad, too many are not being offered the chance to gain any meaningful qualifications. Twelve pupils are now studying for GCSEs in English and mathematics. This is more than last year, but not enough. More pupils will be taught GCSE or equivalent courses from next term, as long as suitable building or teaching room is found.

Most key stage 4 pupils have not done any work experience and have a limited understanding of what they might need in order to take the next steps. The headteacher has asked each key stage 4 provider to carry out an audit of what they currently provide in terms of careers education. Together with a specialist careers company, he is working to put a careers strategy together. They are mapping nationally recognised careers benchmarks, then planning activities to ensure that these are covered. It is intended that the discussion about careers pathways will soon be part of the induction process when pupils join the PRU. The headteacher is rightly determined that the current Year 11 will all have work experience. This is a significant step forward.

Personal, social and health education provision at the key stage 4 alternative providers is still patchy. Some providers deliver good sessions to pupils on relevant issues such as knife crime and online safety. Some use the materials that the PRU has provided. However, no one has an overview of which pupils have studied which topics.

The deputy headteacher has led training with key stage 2 and 3 staff, looking at how staff should develop pupils' reading skills across the key stages. The training placed a good emphasis on the important develop of pupils' vocabulary. All key stage 2 pupils read with a staff member every day. More books have been bought. However, there are not enough phonetically regular books for the small number of pupils who are at the early stages of reading. Key stage 3 pupils who cannot read well enough are now also having one-to-one reading sessions. Some pupils are resistant to this as they do not like to feel 'different' to other pupils. When this happens, the PRU is persisting and helping pupils in other ways until they are ready to accept individual reading sessions.

The deputy headteacher has also organised reading assessments for all Year 10 and 11 pupils. This has shown that 10 key stage 4 pupils have very low reading ages – some around six. Another 10 pupils have been found to have weak reading skills. A

new specialist member of staff has been employed for two and a half days a week to work with these pupils. This will be extended to three days a week from January and to full-time as soon as possible after that. This role is crucial in trying to make up for lost time by ensuring that these pupils can read before they leave school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher has shown strong leadership and a great deal of resilience. He has driven improvement despite the continued serious challenges presented by the inadequate building and all the key stage 4 provision being offsite. In this, he has been very well supported by senior leaders, who have made improvements in all the areas they are responsible for. Staff have been empowered to take responsibility for improving the PRU, and they have done so. An example of this is the PRU's environment, which, despite the poor building, is much better than it was. Classrooms look bright and cheerful, with suitable resources and relevant displays and learning prompts on the wall. Staff have made good improvements to the curriculum and greatly extended the experiences that pupils have.

Leaders have improved the way in which they assess pupils' needs when they join the PRU. The deputy headteacher is leading this process, using her SEND expertise well. Around a third of pupils arrive at the PRU without their previous schools having identified any special needs, yet many have evident reading and writing difficulties, or speech, communication and language difficulties. The PRU completes reading tests and other tests when the pupils arrive. Leaders summarise the information into a 'passport', which sets out the pupil's needs and the strategies that staff can use. Currently these documents are fairly basic. Leaders are aware of this and know these need further development to be more informative. The deputy headteacher has used the time from the educational psychologist sensibly to identify needs and to find strategies.

Leaders have done some good work to identify key stage 4 pupils whose special educational needs have not previously been identified. Once a pupil has started at an alternative provider, staff from the PRU go into the provision to assess the pupils' literacy difficulties. Leaders know that this assessment would be better completed before a suitable placement is decided on, and this is what they plan to do soon, as part of the admissions processes. Leaders continue to discover key stage 4 pupils who have been at the PRU who have unmet special educational needs. The PRU has, quite rightly, put a large number of pupils through for assessment for EHC plans, and continues to do so.

Leaders worked hard to make sure that all their Year 6 pupils went to a mainstream secondary school or appropriate specialist provision in September this year. New Leaf staff met with staff at the pupils' new schools and took the pupils for extra visits. They ensured that pupils went to the main transition days and supported them in other ways, as needed. The PRU is maintaining contact with the new

schools to be able to provide advice or support, as needed.

Safeguarding processes at the PRU are now well-established. The designated safeguarding lead and family support workers have had a clear impact on improving attendance for some vulnerable pupils. They have worked well with other agencies to get pupils the specialist help they need. The new safeguarding policy is tailored to the needs of the PRU's pupils. It has a good emphasis on safeguarding at alternative provision. The key stage 4 providers visited during the inspection were well aware of the importance of safeguarding and had taken the right steps. For example, there were thorough risk assessments in place for pupils doing activities on farms, motor mechanics, and construction. Careful thought had been given to the potential risks of different situations, such as being in the town centre, or two pupils working together who may not get on.

The chair of the management committee is a consistently good advocate for the PRU. She fully understands the challenges they face. She is well-supported by the members of the committee, who are also very supportive as well as challenging. She is keenly aware that the committee is too small to be sustainable. In particular, there are no mainstream secondary or primary headteachers on the committee. The chair has been working with the local authority's governor services team to try to remedy this, but so far without success.

External support

Support from the local authority has improved since the previous monitoring inspection.

A new site has been found for the PRU. It has been agreed that there will be a new building, which is a really positive move forward. However, this will take some time. In the meantime, the current building remains inadequate. An interim solution is being sought. Two possible buildings have been found, into which the PRU could move. Local authority officers report that they are determined that this will happen quickly, and that an imminent move is feasible. The local authority has supplemented the PRU's capital funding with £60,000 for necessary improvements.

There have been some improvements in the admissions processes. The local authority is now filtering admissions through the placement panel. PRU leaders are part of this panel. The placement panel also now includes social care representation. This broader perspective on what pupils need in terms of a placement is proving useful. A few pupils are now going straight to special schools or back into mainstream schools where the panel decides that the PRU is not the best place for them. The local authority is challenging schools more to fill in pre-admissions information properly. More schools are now doing this, but still not all of them. This leaves a gap in what the PRU knows about the pupils' needs when they join the PRU.

A local authority officer carried out an audit of the building, paying some attention to the way in which it affected pupils with sensory needs, though mainly focused on pupils with hearing impairments. Some recommendations may be useful. However, the audit did not take place until this term. The PRU has only just received the report.

Since the previous inspection, the local authority has changed the way in which it operates the 'team around the school'. This is a significant improvement. The head of inclusion and the headteacher meet, then the head of inclusion works with other local authority officers to try to arrange the support the PRU needs. This puts less pressure on PRU leaders and is leading to more action than was evident at the time of the previous inspection. The head of inclusion is holding other local authority officers to account and making sure that the agreed action is taken.

One full-time attendance officer and one part-time officer have been appointed by the local authority to work solely with the PRU. These staff started work in October. They have already formed a good team with the PRU's leaders and staff and together this team is having a positive impact. Crucially, the local authority is part-funding a reading teacher for key stage 4.

Some good targets have been set to improve the careers education, advice and guidance offer for pupils. The local authority is providing the headteacher with support as needed, for example in organising training for the key workers.

Given the depths of the weaknesses that the PRU's new leaders inherited, it is essential that this improved level and effectiveness of support from the local authority continues if the PRU is to succeed in the long term.