

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231  
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Mrs Sue Brammall  
Acting Headteacher  
Northern House School (Wokingham) Special Academy  
Gipsy Lane  
Wokingham  
Berkshire  
RG40 2HR

Dear Mrs Brammall

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

Following my visit to your school on 10 and 11 December 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 third 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.

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 third monitoring inspection on 10 to 11 December 2019**

### **Evidence**

During this monitoring inspection, lessons in all age groups were visited jointly with you. I met with you and other staff with significant responsibilities, including the interim deputy headteacher and the assistant headteacher. I met with the chair of Northern House School Academy Trust, who is also the acting chair of the IEB. I also met with the chief executive officer of Northern House School Academy Trust. Discussions were held with teaching and non-teaching staff. 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 and recent recruitment files sampled.

### **Context**

Since my last visit in July 2019, there have been a number of changes to staffing, including at leadership level. The headteacher has been absent since the end of November 2019. The school's deputy headteacher, who is also the head of primary, the school's primary special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) and a designated safeguarding lead (DSL), has stepped up to the role of acting headteacher. A new interim deputy headteacher has joined in the last two weeks. One of the school's deputy headteachers with responsibility for the secondary provision and teaching and learning is absent. The interim deputy headteacher left, as planned, in October 2019. A senior leader with responsibility for behaviour, attendance and alternative provision, who is also a deputy designated safeguarding lead, is absent. One of the school's assistant headteachers relinquished their leadership responsibilities at the end of November 2019 and returned to a teaching role.

At the end of the summer term some staff left, including: the English and humanities teacher; the physical education (PE) coordinator; the secondary SENCo and the site manager. This term a science teacher and teaching assistant have left. The headteacher, prior to her absence, was covering the teaching of science in the secondary department. The secondary science curriculum is currently being delivered by the PE teacher and a teaching assistant. Other subjects such as food technology and humanities are taught by non-specialist staff in the secondary phase. This term some new staff have joined, including: a primary teacher; a site and safety manager, a PE teacher; an English and humanities teacher; and two teaching assistants.

As I reported last time, Northern House School Academy Trust has decided to end its sponsorship of the school. Negotiations to find an alternative sponsor have not progressed. There are no firm plans in place. Two new members have recently joined the IEB and two have left. The chief executive officer of the trust and chair of the board of trustees continue to hold positions on the IEB.

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

There is consensus that there have been too few improvements since the last monitoring visit. With no long-term sponsorship plans secured, exceptionally high staff absence and a reduced staff complement, including at leadership level, all concur that the school is not a safe place to be. Safeguarding practices remain too fragile and are placing pupils at unnecessary risk. Furthermore, due to staffing difficulties and a lack of expertise, leaders' oversight of this aspect has significantly declined since my last visit.

Since the section 5 inspection, leaders have tried to set up appropriate systems to record concerns about pupils. The school's DSLs have been encouraged to maintain orderly pupil chronologies. However, these initial improvements have not been sustained. Records are incomplete and not filed appropriately. Furthermore, leaders' actions to address concerns are not always timely. When serious concerns about a pupil's well-being are reported, leaders do not automatically nor promptly refer to the appropriate agencies, including children's social care. Pupils are at risk of harm because thresholds of concern are not applied methodically. During my visit, current leaders understood the seriousness of this and made follow-up calls to relevant agencies in one example. Leaders urgently need to assure themselves that other pupils who may be in vulnerable circumstances are receiving the help and support that they may need.

Staff training relating to safeguarding is haphazard. Leaders' records are confusing. There is no mechanism in place for ensuring that staff who start mid-term complete training relating to safeguarding. Some new staff have not had sufficient training to recognise the indicators that can give rise to concerns about pupils' welfare. Those that have received training do not always retain important information. This is because there is an over reliance on independent e-learning, rather than face-to-face discussions about the issues that affect pupils who attend this school. This means that staff knowledge and expertise is sketchy and local risks are not fully understood.

Safer recruitment processes are still not well established. There is a lack of understanding as to which recruitment checks are appropriate to which roles. Some checks are carried out after employment commences. Although risk assessments are in place for individual staff, these are too trusting and not implemented thoroughly enough. Leaders struggle to oversee such arrangements as everyone is under too much pressure. School staff who oversee the school's single central record do not always receive everything they need from trust personnel. For instance, references are gathered after employment commences. New staff do not have clear job descriptions in place. Safer recruitment guidelines are not adhered to closely enough and this adds an additional layer of unnecessary potential risk to pupils.

The condition of the school building is still posing challenges for staff. One area is zoned off because of unsafe electrical sockets. During my visit, the electronic gates were not in working order. Furthermore, secondary-aged pupils are restricted from leaving classrooms freely. This is because staff are implementing the school policy of locking classroom doors when sessions are active. One pupil described the school as 'like a prison'. Although door locks would automatically release should the fire alarm activate, in other circumstances without the teacher's key fob pupils would be unable to leave the room independently.

The school's safeguarding policy has not been revised to reflect the latest statutory guidance. Not all staff have read the latest guidance and therefore have insufficient awareness of issues like serious violence and upskirting. Trust officers have recently scrutinised the school's safeguarding procedures and found significant weaknesses. Trustees are concerned about the school's safeguarding arrangements and the decline in recent times.

Staff are working in untenable conditions. There are too few staff to meet pupils' needs safely. For instance, when pupils report feeling unwell, there is no clear system in place. During the inspection, pupils who were unwell were left unattended. This is because there are not enough staff to do what is needed.

The number of pupils who attend the school is different to the published number on roll. During the inspection approximately 50% of pupils were present. Sampling activities during my visit illustrated that some pupils, including those who are vulnerable to additional risks such as county lines, were not accounted for. Approximately one fifth of pupils do not attend the school at all. Of these, many are not provided with a full-time alternative offer. Leaders have not sought assurance that the providers have checked that adults are suitable to work with children. There is no clear rationale for why pupils attend such provisions as these opportunities are not aligned to pupils' education, health and care plan needs. In some instances, leaders are knowingly authorising pupils' absence because there is no education offer in place. Those responsible have not ensured that a full-time offer of education is in place for all pupils.

Staff are still not making reasonable adjustments, particularly for pupils' social and emotional needs. Although pupils' individual plans now identify appropriate targets, strategies are not well aligned to help pupils meet these. Furthermore, when some strategies are appropriate staff do not implement them. This means that when pupils display behaviours such as anxiety, staff do not know how to manage these situations effectively.

Work to establish an appropriate key stage 3 and key stage 4 curriculum has halted. The curriculum in the secondary department is now too narrow. Some subjects are not taught because of unfilled vacancies and a lack of staff expertise.

Leaders are not yet analysing patterns and trends in pupils' behaviour and

attendance. Together, during the inspection, we were able to ascertain that pupils' rate of persistent absence is too high. Too few pupils attend regularly and some hardly attend at all. Leaders are not keeping tabs on this aspect strongly enough. Pupils' attendance remains low and persistent absence too high.

Leaders are not following exclusion guidance transparently or appropriately. Sometimes the decision to exclude is rescinded without appeals hearings or parental involvement. Leaders are not fulfilling their statutory duties in this regard.

Trustees had hoped that a sponsor would have been identified by now. However, initial interest from a potential sponsor appears to have dried up. There are no plans in place and all are uncertain about what to do next. The long-term future of the school remains a concern for staff. They do not feel well informed and are anxious about what the future holds.

### **The effectiveness of leadership and management**

The capacity of leaders to initiate improvement and keep pupils safe is at breaking point. Two senior leaders with responsibilities for safeguarding, behaviour, attendance and alternative provision are absent. Some roles including the SENCo remain vacant. This is a challenging time as the long-term future of the school remains uncertain, and the school is operating without a full complement of staff.

Staff are trying their best but working conditions are pressurised and challenging. The rate of staff absence is exceptionally high. Staff say that it is now the norm to pick up duties of others who are absent. Some describe their workload as unmanageable although all are routinely 'mucking in' to keep the school going. Staff appreciate the efforts of the acting headteacher in her first seven days since taking charge. They say that she frequently enquires about their well-being and that this is reassuring. Nevertheless, the pressure on staff, including those in senior positions, is overwhelming at times.

The school improvement plan was set for last academic year. Leaders and staff are unable to access the current improvement plan. Because of the pressure on staff and leaders, alongside the high rates of staff absence, all have become solely focused on the day-to-day running of the school.

This is a very uncertain time. The rebrokering of the school to a different trust, following Northern House School Academy Trust's announcement of the withdrawal of its sponsorship, is taking too long. Although a potential new sponsor was identified in July 2019, recently interest in forging a partnership has waned. Staff, trustees and senior leaders are unclear what the future holds. In addition, capacity to set a tone of improvement is notably restricted. All are clear how stressful and demoralising the current status quo is. Trustees describe a time of uncertainty, where staff lack motivation, recruitment is restricted and the 'best we can do is patch and mend'.

Trustees and governors have continued to scrutinise the school's work. Their own work has identified concerning issues including the school's approach to safeguarding. Those responsible are concerned about the effectiveness of the school's safeguarding arrangements. Governors are trying hard to support the school. However, some planned activities simply cannot take place because, as the chair describes, noting the pressures on staff, some staff are 'simply snowed under'.

### **Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:**

- Staff care about the pupils and want the school to improve. Many are working exceptionally hard to support pupils daily.

### **Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:**

- The rebrokering process is taking too long. There are no firm plans in place. All are uncertain about the future of the school. Staff morale is low.
- Staff vacancies are unfilled. Many staff are absent, temporary or underqualified for the positions they hold. There is a lack of expertise. Staff are struggling to meet pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs.
- Some senior leaders are absent. Those that have taken charge are grappling to cover all aspects of their roles.
- Although leaders have established a school improvement plan for this academic year it is not accessible to current staff. All are solely focused on operational matters rather than improving the school.

### **External support**

The school is not receiving additional support. Trustees had hoped that interest from a potential sponsor would bolster support for leaders. However, this has not materialised, and staff continue to work in isolation.