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Stacey Hunter
Interim Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hunter

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

Following my visit with Siân Thornton, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 5–6 February 2020, 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 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

Maxine McDonald-Taylor

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 fourth monitoring inspection on 5 to 6 February 2020

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents including the single central record (SCR) and records of staff training, and met with the acting headteacher and school leaders. I met with a primary and secondary pupil. Inspectors talked with pupils around the school, including in lessons. I met with two members of the IEB, including the chair, together with the chair of the multi-academy trust. Inspectors discussed the school's improvement with teachers and teaching assistants and with a representative from the local authority. At their request, inspectors met with three members of a multi-academy trust which is considering future sponsorship of the school. I also spoke on the telephone with the local authority designated officer.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit in December 2019, there have been a number of changes to staffing. The headteacher has been absent since the end of November 2019. The current interim acting headteacher was promoted to this role from her previous interim deputy headteacher post, with effect from 1 January 2020. The acting headteacher at the last visit has returned to their role as deputy headteacher and head of the primary phase. A consultant headteacher, who was previously at another school in the trust, joined the senior leadership team two days before this monitoring visit. The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) is currently absent, with the safeguarding team, who are also senior leaders, covering this role. One of the school's deputy headteachers who was absent at the last visit has now returned part time. A senior leader who was responsible for behaviour, attendance and alternative provision has recently left. Currently, there are vacancies for science and design and technology teachers, and for the special educational needs coordinator. A number of other vacant posts for support staff continue to be covered through contracted or agency staff.

Following the academy trust's earlier decision to end its sponsorship of the school, discussions about an alternative sponsor have progressed slowly. Representatives of a trust identified as a potential new sponsor have visited the school on a number of occasions. Inspectors were given to understand that leaders are also considering other options.

Two new members of the IEB, including a new chair, were appointed two days before this monitoring visit. The person taking the position of chair was suggested by the local authority to remove conflicts of interest in the trust. As a result, the chief executive officer of the trust and chair of the board of trustees no longer hold positions on the IEB.

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

A lack of urgency regarding safeguarding, behaviour and attendance issues, identified at the last monitoring visit, leaves significant risks to pupils' safety still in place.

At the time of this monitoring visit, no formally appointed DSL was in post to cover the absence of the formally designated post-holder. While suitably trained senior leaders are covering the day-to-day tasks involved, there is no single named person with overall responsibility for the oversight of safeguarding and the management of any formal referrals or processes. The trust has not ensured that the named DSL role is secure or communicated the cover arrangements to the school's community.

Senior leaders have devised a safeguarding action plan to improve safeguarding across the school. The local authority has significant concerns about safeguarding practice in the school and is supporting leaders to implement this plan. However, at the time of the monitoring visit in February, actions planned to be completed by the end of January remained incomplete and had not been formally reviewed by leaders, including governors. Leaders have updated the school's safeguarding policy, which now reflects the latest statutory guidance.

Leaders have still not taken effective action to ensure that all staff are suitably trained, and in a timely way. Leaders are hampered in their checks on staff training by continuing unresolved issues with training records. Separate electronic and filed training records do not correlate. Neither do individual and team training records. In some instances, leaders have recently tasked staff to complete specific training, but not overseen the completion of the required module. In most cases, staff continue to self-direct their own training, with reference to the school's menu of relevant online courses. This has led to continuing inconsistency in the range and frequency of staff safeguarding training. Furthermore, weaknesses in core safeguarding training and induction have led to some staff underestimating the scope of training required for their role. As a result, some have completed only a limited range of safeguarding training, overlooking modules on the signs of different kinds of abuse, which are relevant to all school staff. During the inspection, the consultant headteacher took action to compile a single record of staff training. Although it was not possible to check the accuracy of this record fully before inspectors left, the record did indicate that all staff had, at least, attended the necessary annual update about core safeguarding requirements.

Inspectors found the SCR included some administrative errors. These were appropriately addressed before the end of the monitoring visit, but indicated a lack of effective training, support and oversight for staff working in this area.

Risk assessments for pupils attending off-site visits remain unfit for purpose. Insufficient attention is paid to the distinctive needs and risks of individual pupils

and circumstances. Sensibly, though belated, a senior leader has identified the need to develop a risk assessment relevant to the work of the school's home tutors. This is in hand.

There is a lack of urgency in dealing with the significant group of secondary absentees identified at the last monitoring visit. These pupils are still not receiving their entitlement to full-time provision. While they receive elements of alternative provision, including home tuition, these pupils remain largely unaccounted for, for most of the week. The approach being taken to remedy this situation lacks urgency. A longer-term 'developmental' approach, focused on the school's use of alternative provision, is underway, rather than urgent attempts to resolve individual circumstances. Moreover, the value of this work is severely limited, as it is not founded on any analysis of the causes of these absences. This is because reliable records are not available about the circumstances which led to pupils' non-attendance.

Since the last monitoring visit, some parents are choosing to keep their child off school until an alternative placement can be found. This is as a result of serious concerns expressed by a neighbouring placing local authority that carried out its own safeguarding visit.

The secondary curriculum remains too narrow. The lack of specialist teachers due to staff vacancies means that pupils do not have access to a suitable set of experiences. For example, pupils are unable to study design and technology. Leaders' improvement plans do not yet include a sufficient focus on improving the quality of education provided to pupils.

On a day-to-day basis, leaders are promoting a positive response to pupils' challenging behaviour, seeking a reduction in physical interventions, which were becoming overused. However, the school's behaviour policy remains unfit for purpose. The policy still provides incomplete guidance about the escalation of behaviour management strategies, including to the point of exclusion. Furthermore, the school's chosen approach to de-escalation and physical intervention is not outlined within the policy. A continuing lack of appropriate training for staff means that pupils continue to experience inconsistencies in staff responses to any challenging behaviour. While leaders are beginning to analyse trends and patterns in pupils' behaviour, they are not using this information effectively to make suitable plans and adjustments for individual pupils. As a result, recorded incidents of challenging and sometimes dangerous behaviour remain high. Also, leaders are still not analysing trends in exclusion or pupils' general attendance. They therefore continue to lack the information needed to make improvements in these areas.

Since the last monitoring visit, leaders have begun to improve administrative systems relating to the management of concerns about individual pupils. Clearer records of concerns and contact are beginning to be filed more appropriately, including a clearer overview for each pupil. This is supporting leaders to deal with

referrals to external agencies such as social care in a more timely and reliable way. Leaders understand that this aspect of their work must continue to improve rapidly, to ensure effective oversight of referrals and their outcomes.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Staff absence has shown some reduction since the last visit, but overall remains significantly high. Staff report continuing anxiety about the school's future, affecting their well-being and effectiveness at work. Staff are pleased to have met representatives of a potential new sponsoring trust, but remain uncertain about their situation. This, together with continuing staff vacancies and a reliance on interim agency and contracted staff, is creating an ever-increasing workload for leaders.

Senior leadership developments since the start of the spring term are designed to increase capacity. However, senior leaders have not been appointed with clear expectations about specific urgent improvements they are expected to achieve, and by when. Furthermore, the trust's scheme of delegation for the school was made available to senior and consultant leaders for the first time during this monitoring visit, after being requested from the chair of the trust by inspectors. The interim acting headteacher was therefore unaware, for the first month of her appointment, of her precise responsibilities within this framework. Furthermore, being unaware of the interim headteacher's precise role, the consultant headteacher was not fully equipped, promptly on appointment, to support the interim headteacher. Additionally, when the scheme of delegation was provided on request during the inspection, it was incomplete due to an administrative error. The document omitted reference to the headteacher's role in recruiting teaching staff.

Leaders' plans for improvement remain unfit for purpose. Previous plans and progress reviews for the autumn term were not available to current leaders for some time. When these records were found recently, leaders questioned the validity of some of the positive reviews recorded. Senior leaders are therefore currently embarking on drafting new improvement plans, without the benefit of any valid previous internal evaluation of progress. At the time of the monitoring visit, the drafting of these new plans was in the earliest stages. The earliest drafts had not yet been discussed by the interim acting headteacher and consultant headteacher.

Staff expressed to inspectors their deep appreciation of changes to the professional ethos of the school being brought about by the leadership of the interim acting headteacher. A recent initiative is providing the opportunity for staff to meet and work together once a week. As a result, staff are beginning to communicate more effectively about pupils' needs and provision. This is leading to improvements in the understanding of staff about pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs and how best to manage these on a daily basis. However, while staff highly value these Monday meetings, these are not yet systematically organised, recorded or reviewed. Inspectors noted a generally calm and purposeful atmosphere around the school,

with notably positive relationships between adults and between adults and children. Inspectors observed the ready resolution of an incident, without conflict. However, inspectors were also aware of the continuing absence from the school of a significant proportion of secondary-age pupils.

The two new members of the IEB bring relevant expertise and experience to the team. These helpful changes to governance resolve conflicts previously identified. Nevertheless, governors' and trust oversight has remained weak, particularly in the induction of senior staff and the timely review of improvement actions.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Staff work hard and care about pupils' well-being. Relationships between pupils and many of the staff are positive and strong.
- The ethos and atmosphere of the school have recently improved. Pupils and staff feel more positive about being at the school.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The insecure future of the provision is resulting in anxiety and uncertainty for all.
- Turbulence in senior leadership, staff vacancies and a high level of staff absence create pressure at all levels of staffing and provision. Daily demands to compensate for vacancies or support short-term colleagues mean substantive staff and leaders struggle to ensure that routine tasks are carried out effectively.
- Leaders' actions to improve the school, including those of governors, are still not demonstrating real impact. Leaders' work, including that of governors, is still not led, supported and overseen by effective planning and review.
- Significant safeguarding weaknesses remain.

External support

The school is receiving focused support from the local authority as a result of the serious safeguarding issues identified. This support is in the form of a team of three officers from the council, who have conducted a review and are now supporting leaders to make the much-needed improvements. The support is in its earliest stages of implementation.