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Tania Sargent
Deputy Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Sargent

No formal designation inspection of Mount Tamar School

Following my inspection with Matthew Barnes, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) and Stephen Lee HMI, of your school on 17 and 18 March 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for no formal designation (NFD) inspections. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector wished to determine the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements at the school, as concerns had been raised with Ofsted, and the effectiveness of leadership and management (including governance).

We do not give graded judgements on these inspections. Under normal circumstances, if we find some evidence that overall standards may be declining, but no serious concerns have been identified, then the next inspection of the school is likely to be a section 5 inspection and be brought forward. If we identify significant concerns, normally we will deem the inspection as being completed under section 5 of the Act.

During the inspection of your school, serious concerns were identified. These related to the culture of safeguarding and the effectiveness of leadership and management. However, due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic and the suspension of routine inspections, we have not treated this inspection as a section 5 inspection. The safeguarding concerns identified have been reported to the designated officer. The school will be prioritised for a further inspection as soon as possible.

Having considered all the evidence, and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 on the school, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Safeguarding is not effective

Leaders and those responsible for governance should take further action to:

- rapidly establish a robust system of safeguarding which is understood and consistently followed by all staff
- secure and develop the leadership capacity of the school in order to quickly tackle the necessary improvements
- develop a process for recording the use of physical restraint that is fit for purpose and contributes to managing pupils' behaviour more effectively.

Context

- Recently, a new assistant headteacher in charge of behaviour was appointed in 2020. There are vacancies on the governing body. The headteacher was not present during the inspection.
- All pupils who attend this school have an education, health and care plan. Mount Tamar is a residential special school for pupils with complex needs, including autism spectrum disorder, and severe emotional, social and mental health difficulties. At the time of the inspection, there were no pupils living in the residence due to COVID-19 restrictions.
- Approximately 50% of pupils were educated on site while the school was closed to most pupils during the spring term 2021. Currently, virtually all pupils are receiving an education on site.

Main findings

- Leaders and governors' arrangements for the safeguarding of pupils at Mount Tamar School are dysfunctional. There is an extremely weak culture of safeguarding, both in terms of policy and practice. Consequently, pupils and staff are unsafe.
- Safeguarding procedures are weak. Policies and procedures are unclear and unhelpful. Staff are confused as to the precise actions they should take in the event of a safeguarding concern. Too many staff do not know who the named designated safeguarding lead is at the school. Staff are also unaware of when or how to contact the designated officer. This confusion and lack of knowledge means that staff do not know how to minimise risk and keep pupils, and themselves, safe.
- Safeguarding records are poor. Systems for reporting safeguarding concerns are not clear. Records lack detail and cannot always be located. As a result, leaders do not know if the right action has been taken at the right time to keep pupils safe.

- Staff and governors do not have the safeguarding training required. They do not demonstrate an understanding of the safeguarding requirements needed to protect these vulnerable pupils from all possible risks. Leaders lack clarity as to what training staff have received in all aspects of safeguarding.
- The behaviour of pupils has deteriorated rapidly, and the proportion of pupils excluded from the school is high. Such poor behaviour puts pupils and staff increasingly at risk. Verbal abuse of staff is common, and at times staff are subject to physical assault.
- The inappropriate use of restraint is a serious concern. Pupils shared their view with us that restraint is used as a punishment and some pupils believe that it is used to hurt them deliberately.
- The restraint policy is inadequate and, if aspects of the policy were actually implemented properly, it is potentially dangerous. Recording of the use of restraint is poor. For example, the timings and nature of the physical holds are not well recorded. Leaders do not analyse in sufficient detail the reason behind a restraint taking place. Therefore, leaders and governors are not able to determine what caused the escalation in a pupil's behaviour which lead to them having to be restrained. Too often, neither pupils nor staff are safe when restraint is used.
- Pupils told us that they do not feel confident that there is an adult in school with whom they can share their concerns. The pupils who attend this school have significant vulnerabilities and complex needs. Staff and pupils describe how there is little, if any, therapeutic provision in the school. This lack of support for pupils leaves them highly vulnerable and at risk of harm.
- Leaders are failing to tackle the school's serious safeguarding shortcomings. Morale was described by staff as being at 'rock bottom'. Staff are not confident that they can meet the wide range of pupils' needs. Staff and pupils are unsure of safeguarding expectations which leads to a climate of fear and anxiety.
- Governors do not ensure or assure themselves that pupils and staff are safe in the school. While the single central register meets statutory requirements, governors do not check how effectively leaders are keeping pupils safe in the day-to-day work of the school.
- Leadership throughout the school, including governance, is poor. Leaders and governors do not provide the support required to develop a culture where pupils and staff are kept safe. They do not check or monitor the quality of safeguarding effectively. Consequently, significant deficiencies remain and there are no plans to tackle such issues with the urgency required.
- Support from the local authority has not resulted in any improvement in the safeguarding of pupils and staff at the school.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted on site due to concerns about safeguarding and leadership and management.

We scrutinised the single central register and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. We met with the deputy headteacher, other senior leaders, pupils, staff and representatives of those responsible for governance. We held telephone conversations with a representative of the local authority and the designated officer .

We also viewed minutes of governing body meetings and pupils' attendance and behaviour records, including restraint logs.

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

Yours sincerely

Jen Southall
Her Majesty's Inspector