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Mark Shears
Headteacher
High Close School
Wiltshire Road
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Dear Mr Shears

No formal designation inspection of High Close School

Following my visit with Lucy English, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 13 December 2021, 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 me and the time you took to discuss your school.

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 about aspects of leadership and management in the school.

We do not give graded judgements on NFD inspections. However, if we find some evidence that overall standards may be declining, but where no serious concerns have been identified, then the next inspection will normally be a section 5 inspection and will be brought forward. If we have serious concerns, we will deem the NFD inspection as a section 5 inspection immediately.

Evidence

We scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements, leadership and governance. We met with you, senior leaders and groups of staff. We also had a tour of the school site and spoke to pupils. We reviewed the school's attendance figures and information about pupils' behaviour. A remote meeting was held with a member of the governing body responsible for overseeing safeguarding. An inspector spoke to two representatives of the senior management team for Barnardo's, including the regional director.

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

Safeguarding is effective.

Context

High Close is a non-maintained special school owned by Barnardo's. The school caters for up to 94 pupils aged between seven and 18 years. There are currently 78 pupils on roll, including 17 who are residential. All pupils have social, emotional and mental health needs and an education, health and care plan. Some pupils have additional needs, such as speech, language and communication needs or autistic spectrum conditions. Pupils are placed by 20 different local authorities. Most pupils have previously experienced disruption to their education.

Main Findings

You, your senior team and staff do all that you reasonably can to keep pupils safe and protected. There is no doubt that there are some pupils who are extremely vulnerable and a few have circumstances that put them at risk of harm. Because of this, effective safeguarding practice is threaded through every aspect of the school's work and is clearly everyone's top priority.

You have ensured that all leaders and staff have strong knowledge of their safeguarding duties. They know pupils and their specific circumstances well and are highly sensitive to any signs of change or different behaviours that may indicate risk of harm. You and your team possess a deep and sophisticated understanding of how pupils' behaviour may sometimes be a way of communicating that they are not safe or secure. Staff have been well trained in how to report worries, and the school's up-to-date child protection policy includes an appropriate emphasis on current and local concerns.

Pupils know that there is always an adult who will listen to them, take them seriously and act when they have a concern. Importantly, because staff understand them and are patient and non-judgemental, pupils build up trust in the school. They can see that staff have high expectations for them and take time to listen. Pupils soon learn to respect and value the systems and routines that are designed to support and help them. The school's procedures help to keep pupils' welfare in mind all the time, whether through monitoring and rewarding positive behaviour, providing security through appropriate use of CCTV cameras or checking in with pupils who may be feeling upset or worried. Residential and day pupils feel comfortable and secure in and around the well-maintained school site. They are well supervised and supported. As a result, they quickly get a sense of belonging.

Staff are persistent when pursuing concerns with other agencies that protect children. They are rightly determined to get the right support and intervention for pupils. You and the safeguarding team work productively with partners in the different placing local

authorities. Any serious safeguarding incidents are investigated and reviewed thoroughly, with lessons learned where appropriate.

Checks on adults working in the school are carried out meticulously and in line with the current guidance. If there are any allegations about staff's conduct, you respond to these promptly and involve the designated officer. You carefully review any incidents requiring 'holds' or restrictive physical intervention, making sure that pupils have time to reflect or make amends and that staff are supported.

Barnardo's, as the corporate body, has introduced a revised whistle-blowing policy to clarify staff's duties when concerns are raised about staff or leaders. However, some staff were not completely familiar with the revised policy and how to implement it.

Additional support

The school benefits from being part of the wider Barnardo's organisation. Barnardo's explicit focus on listening to children and improving their lives very much mirrors your school values. The school's governing body is committed to guarding the school's identity within the Barnardo's organisation. However, recently you and members of the governing body have felt that roles and responsibilities for overall governance are not sufficiently clear. On a small number of occasions, governors have not felt completely sure about the terms of reference when reviewing safeguarding incidents. Sometimes, you and governors have questioned whether you have all the information you need to keep on improving your care of pupils. In short, all leaders, including members of Barnardo's, want to be sure about who does what within the leadership of the organisation. To this end, you are now part of the regional Barnardo's senior management team, which has already improved communication and accountability.

Priorities for further improvement

- Leaders at all levels, including governors and those on the regional senior management team for Barnardo's, must ensure that the scheme of delegation is clearly outlined so that governors and school leaders understand their accountability, what information will be shared and how reviews of safeguarding are carried out.
- School leaders must ensure that all staff fully understand the revised whistle-blowing policy and are confident about how they can use this policy to raise concerns.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of children's services for the south-east region of Barnardo's and the director of children's services for Wokingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector