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Helen Farnell
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Farnell

No formal designation inspection of Polden Bower School

Following my visit with Susan Aykin, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 6 and 7 April 2022, 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 the effectiveness of leadership and management at 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 and met with the executive headteacher, senior and middle leaders, staff, groups of pupils, a parent, members of the governing body, a representative of the local authority, the school improvement partner and the local authority designated officer. We visited classrooms on both sites and observed pupils at work and at play.

We scrutinised a range of documents, including audits, plans, and parent and pupil surveys. We also considered data and information related to attendance and behaviour.

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

Safeguarding is effective

Context

Polden Bower School is the amalgamation of Elmwood and Penrose Schools. It is in new buildings on the outskirts of Bridgwater. Primary-age pupils moved to the new site in May 2021, and secondary-age pupils in September 2021. Sixth-form students are currently educated at the Centre for Independence, on the old Penrose site, a few miles away. There are 171 pupils on roll. All the pupils have education, health and care (EHC) plans. The school caters for a wide range of complex needs including communication and interaction, cognition and learning and sensory and/or physical needs. Polden Bower is federated with Avalon School, Street and is in a formal working partnership with The Bridge School, Sedgemoor. The executive headteacher has overall responsibility and oversees the strategic direction of the three schools. Polden Bower has two heads of school.

Recruitment and retention of staff has been challenging recently. Some experienced staff chose not to move to the new site. Recruitment is difficult due to local employment factors. The school remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as all pupils are potentially vulnerable. Recently, as COVID-19 cases have increased locally, the school has been significantly impacted by staff absence.

Main Findings

- Governors, leaders and staff are highly ambitious for pupils. They want to do their best for them. They are determined that all pupils, whatever their needs or disabilities, will feel safe and thrive.
- Safeguarding procedures are effective. Policies and procedures are clear. Staff are clear what they must do if they are concerned about pupils' welfare. Staff are confident to use the electronic systems to record their concerns. Leaders act on concerns in a timely and effective manner.
- Staff and governors have the safeguarding training required. Annual updates are supplemented by additional training that is tailored to national, local and school priorities.
- Leaders and staff ensure that the site is safe. There are robust procedures to ensure that only appropriate adults can gain access to the school and that pupils do not leave unaccompanied. Staff are aware of the priorities of keeping pupils safe as well as developing their independence. They use door fobs to gain access to certain areas in the school when this is necessary.

- There are clear systems in place to check and improve the attendance of pupils. Absence is quickly picked up and telephone calls made to parents. Staff are alert to the many reasons that a child might not attend school. They work with families to remove barriers so that attendance becomes more regular. Staff are very aware of the potential safeguarding risks of pupils' non-attendance.
- Leaders and governors monitor behaviour carefully. Staff are trained in appropriate methods of de-escalation and positive behaviour management. Incidents are carefully recorded. Staff recognise that a pupil's behaviour is frequently a form of communication, perhaps of distress or feeling unsafe. Trends and patterns are analysed. Actions are taken quickly to understand the reasons for changes in behaviour.
- Leaders check to ensure that the staff employed at the school are suitable to work with pupils. The single central record is up to date.
- There are strong relationships between staff and pupils. There is good supervision. There is a calm and harmonious atmosphere in the school. When pupils have difficulties managing their behaviour, knowledgeable staff examine whether there may be unmet needs, particularly related to communication or sensory needs. Staff use different techniques and interventions. They work in partnership with therapists and other professionals to support pupils. There is clear evidence that this approach is successful in helping pupils with complex needs engage in their learning.
- Leaders place a high priority on listening to parents' views. They have recently completed a parent survey. This shows a high level of satisfaction with many aspects of the school. Where there are suggested improvements, leaders take these seriously and actions are put in place. Leaders are ambitious to use the new facilities of the building, including the in-house café, to make the school a welcoming place for parents and families. Governors meet parents if they have concerns and work hard to resolve any difficulties.
- Leaders listen carefully to pupils' opinions. The junior leadership team meets with governors and leaders. They are involved in the recruitment of staff and helped design the recent pupil survey. This showed that pupils felt safe and were happy, but concerned about bullying. Staff have taken this very seriously. They have worked with pupils to help them understand bullying better and make sure that pupils know that any bullying behaviour will be dealt with.
- The personal, social and health education curriculum ensures that pupils can learn about, for example, keeping safe and healthy relationships. Staff adapt content according to the needs of the pupils and the issues that arise. The curriculum supports pupils to develop independence, resilience and understanding.
- Leaders and governors recognise that on a few occasions recently actions taken did not meet the standards expected and this resulted in complaints. They took immediate steps to understand what might have gone wrong and commissioned external reviews to identify areas for improvement. They took remedial action quickly to improve the management and the oversight of safeguarding and the

sharing of information. These actions mean that the safeguarding of pupils has been further strengthened.

- The safeguarding team has improved its work. There is a greater, more open and coordinated response to individual cases that are discussed weekly. Even so, criteria, for example of current risk, are not always clear. Actions are not always precise enough to be monitored effectively, but this is improving. Staff training and recruitment checks are all up to date, but the team is ambitious to ensure that the monitoring of these areas is even more systematic and rigorous.
- The school has been through a challenging time recently. COVID-19 has impacted on staff, pupils and their families. The school has moved to a new site. It is now a much bigger school, needing new systems and processes. Staff have left or have been absent due to ill health. There have been bereavements at the school. Members of staff have taken new leadership roles. These factors have impacted on the morale of staff. Some staff feel that communication is not effective in the school and they are not always supported to do their work. Leaders are aware of this. They have met staff individually to help them understand concerns.
- Leaders have taken appropriate steps to cover absence and so ensure pupils are supervised and are safe. Counselling and mental health support is in place if staff need it. However, as roles and responsibilities are not always clear, staff do not always know how to seek help and some do not feel listened to. Too much responsibility remains with certain individuals.

Additional support

- Leaders and staff work closely with a range of different agencies to support pupils and their families. There are open and respectful partnerships in place. The school welcomes the feedback of other professionals to reflect, and improve their work. Recent developments have strengthened the strategic relationships between the partnership of schools, Somerset social care and Somerset education department. This has led to a greater understanding of the work of the different agencies and strengthened operational work further.
- When appropriate, leaders work closely with the local authority designated officer and the education department's safeguarding team. Leaders seek expert advice and act on recommendations.

Priorities for further improvement

- Continue to strengthen the systematic monitoring and evaluation of safeguarding through developing the work of the safeguarding team further.
- Ensure that the roles and responsibilities of leaders are clear and all staff are clear how to express any concerns so that they can be heard and addressed.

- Continue to help staff work in a challenging environment and adjust to change so that morale improves.

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

Yours sincerely

Stephen McShane
Her Majesty's Inspector