

Inspection of Northern Counties School

Tankerville Terrace, Jesmond, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Tyne and Wear NE2 3BB

Inspection dates: 10 and 11 May 2022

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Inadequate

Behaviour and attitudes

Inadequate

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Sixth-form provision

Inadequate

Previous inspection grade

Good

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils' experiences at the school vary. Some parents and carers praise the school's work. Others are concerned about teaching and the way in which staff manage pupils' behaviour.

Over the past year, some pupils, including post-16 students, have shown heightened anxiety. This is in part because the staff working with them do not know pupils' individual needs well enough. Some staff do not know how to support pupils when they are in crisis. This has led to an increase in aggressive behaviour in some classes.

Leaders regularly request that a significant minority of pupils remain at home because there are not enough staff to meet their needs. Many of these pupils find this erratic attendance pattern hard to manage. It disrupts their routines. The remote education provided by the school does not meet the needs of most pupils. Many struggle to learn when at home.

Staff really care about the pupils and are keen to do their best for them. Pupils benefit from therapies that are woven into activities throughout the day. Pupils are taught about respect. Unkindness between pupils in school is extremely rare.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders are not ambitious enough for the pupils in the school, including post-16 students. Curriculum plans show that pupils should be taught some subject-related knowledge and skills. However, the taught curriculum does not enable pupils to gain the curriculum content outlined in these plans. This is because pupils, including post-16 students, undertake too many low-level tasks, such as colouring in pictures. These tasks do not enable pupils to build up knowledge and skills over time.

The remote curriculum for those pupils required to learn from home on a regular basis is weak. It is not well planned and sequenced. In subject areas such as English and mathematics, online resources for remote learning do not meet the needs of most pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), especially those with autism spectrum disorder. Remote education for pupils with complex physical needs is better than it is for other groups of pupils.

Teaching approaches and activities designed to help pupils learn are not always suitable for pupils with SEND. Staff do not have the skills or knowledge needed to support pupils with SEND to remember the content taught. Pupils and post-16 students undertake standalone activities that do not link well enough to what has gone before. Sometimes, teaching staff use resources that are not suitable, for example, ones that contain too much information for pupils to read and understand. In addition, teachers do not use information from their assessment of pupils' work to identify any gaps in knowledge and skills that pupils may have.

Leaders have not ensured that approaches to the teaching of phonics are effective. Phonics is stronger in the classes for deaf pupils than in departments for pupils with autism spectrum disorder. In these classes, approaches to teaching phonics are not suitable. For example, teachers do not focus enough on matching sounds to letter shapes. Teachers are in the process of introducing a new phonics scheme. Although this is a step in the right direction, the scheme has not been fully implemented. Senior leaders have not placed enough emphasis on putting this important development in place.

Some staff have not received the essential training that they need to implement the school's behaviour policies. Shortfalls in staffing have meant that staff are deployed to work with pupils they do not know. Both of these issues have meant that staff do not always manage pupils' behaviour well. This has led to an increase in staff injuries. Some staff expressed concern about the way behaviour is managed in school.

When in school, pupils take part in a wide range of additional opportunities, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Pupils also go on trips to interesting places. The personal development programme taught in school enables pupils, including post-16 students, to prepare for most aspects of adulthood. It includes effective independent careers advice, which enables the school to meet the requirements of the Baker Clause, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships. However, the remote curriculum does not enable most pupils to gain the knowledge they need to contribute positively to school life.

There are weaknesses in leaders', directors' and governors' oversight of the school's work. Senior leaders and trust directors have not collated insights from their monitoring to gain an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Governors and trustees do not have enough insight into the effect that staffing issues are having on pupils and other staff. This includes some staff having additional workload. Governors and trustees have not insisted that leaders and directors do more to mitigate the negative impact of the staffing situation.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.

Procedures for keeping pupils safe on site are not always adhered to. For example, inspectors were able to gain entrance into the main school building without having any identity checks.

The checks made on pupils when they are learning from home are not recorded systematically enough, nor in sufficient detail. Leaders have not consistently checked that these pupils are safe. Leaders do not ensure that pupils learning from home who are subject to safeguarding concerns receive additional welfare checks.

Some staff do not have sufficient expertise in meeting pupils' behavioural needs, including managing sexualised behaviours. This has placed staff and pupils at risk.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders have not placed enough emphasis on ensuring the safety and well-being of pupils who are required to learn at home. They have not ensured that safeguarding and welfare checks are systematic and recorded in detail. Leaders must strengthen their procedures for making sure that pupils are safe when learning remotely. In particular, they should make sure that pupils identified as having particular safeguarding issues receive additional checks.
- Safeguarding procedures and systems around the site are not tight enough. This places pupils at risk. Leaders should ensure that procedures for visitors entering the site are consistently implemented. They should also make sure that the site is safe for all pupils.
- Leaders have not ensured that staff have the training required to support pupils who display complex behaviours, including sexualised and aggressive behaviours. Leaders must make sure that staff have the training they require to meet the behavioural needs of the pupils in their care. Leaders must revise their approaches to working with pupils who display sexualised behaviour, placing greater emphasis on the safeguarding risks posed by this behaviour.
- The curriculum, including the remote curriculum, is not ambitious enough for pupils. Pupils, including post-16 students, spend too much time on disconnected activities. Leaders and teachers must improve the design and implementation of the curriculum. They must make sure that learning activities build on pupils' prior knowledge. Leaders and teachers must also ensure that teaching enables pupils with complex additional needs to gain new knowledge and to apply it in different contexts. This includes developing the knowledge and skills pupils need to make a positive contribution to school life.
- Current approaches to teaching phonics vary too much between different groups, with some approaches being ineffective. Although new, more suitable approaches are in the pipeline, these have not yet been implemented. Leaders must ensure that planned improvements in phonics are fully implemented as soon as possible, including any training that staff require. They must monitor the impact of these to ensure that they work well across all departments.
- Teachers do not always use the information they gather from assessing pupils' work to identify gaps pupils may have and what content they need to revisit. Leaders and teachers need to develop approaches to assessment so that it enables them to identify exactly what pupils need to learn and remember.
- Leaders and trust directors are not using the information they gather from monitoring activities to gain a deep insight into the school's strengths and weaknesses. As a result, they are unclear about the quality of education on offer for pupils. Leaders and directors must use the information they gather to make

accurate evaluations of the quality of the provision and its impact on pupils' day-to-day experiences.

- Governors and trustees have not placed enough emphasis on making sure that there is a stable staff body with the training needed to meet pupils' needs. In addition, they have not challenged leaders and directors to mitigate the negative impact that staffing issues are having on pupils, and on staff workload. Governors and trustees must ensure staffing is stable. They must insist that leaders, including directors, prioritise mitigating the negative impact of any ongoing staffing issues.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you are the school and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	108551
Local authority	Newcastle upon Tyne
Inspection number	10228342
Type of school	Special
School category	Non-maintained special school
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	97
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	12
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trustees	David Arthur
Headteacher	Jo Allen
Website	www.ncs.percyhedley.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	28 and 29 March 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Northern Counties School is a special school. It is part of The Percy Hedley Foundation, which is a registered charity providing a range of services to children, young people and adults with SEND.
- All pupils at Northern Counties School have education, health and care (EHC) plans. The school has five departments. One is for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, two are for pupils with autism spectrum disorder (Hillcrest and Armstrong), and one department is for deaf pupils. Some pupils have a combination of these needs.
- The current chief executive officer of The Percy Hedley Foundation was appointed in April 2022.
- There are a small number of post-16 students in the school. There is no separate sixth-form provision and post-16 students are educated with key stage 4 pupils.

- The school does not use alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

In accordance with section 44(1) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

- This was the first routine inspection the school had received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders, and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Meetings were held separately with the headteacher and senior leaders. Inspectors met with members of staff, including support staff individually and in pairs and also taxi drivers who take pupils to and from school. They spoke with a small number of parents in person and on the telephone.
- Inspectors held meetings with a director and the chief executive officer from The Percy Hedley Foundation. They also met with the chair of the local governing body, the governor responsible for safeguarding and a trustee.
- Inspectors also met with the assistant director of education at Newcastle City Council, local authority commissioners, a safeguarding consultant from an independent company and a consultant employed by the school as a school improvement partner.
- Inspectors spoke separately with a group of boys and a group of girls. They also spoke informally with pupils.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in reading (including early reading), mathematics, creative subjects, and language and communication. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors reviewed documentation relating to the school's curriculum, along with the school's own self-evaluation and its development plans. Inspectors also sampled EHC plans for four pupils, as well as internal plans detailing the individual support that these pupils require.
- Inspectors reviewed the comments made by parents on Ofsted Parent View and 47 responses to the staff survey. Inspectors reviewed emails they had received from a small number of parents.
- The single central record was checked. Two meetings were held with the designated safeguarding lead. An inspector also reviewed records of safeguarding training, concerns and referrals.

Inspection team

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