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Stacia Pettersen
Executive Principal
Thames Valley School
2 Conwy Close
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Reading
Berkshire
RG30 4BZ

Dear Ms Pettersen

Urgent inspection of Thames Valley School

Following my visit with Jo Petch, His Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 8 and 9 November 2022, I write on behalf of His 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 urgent inspections. The inspection was carried out because His 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 in the school (including governance).

We do not give graded judgements on urgent 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 graded inspection, which will be carried out under section 5 of the Act and be brought forward. If we have serious concerns, we will deem the urgent inspection as a graded inspection immediately.

Evidence

We scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. We met with you and other senior leaders to explore a range of relevant issues. We toured the school, both during lesson and social times. We spoke with pupils and staff and took account of their responses to confidential questionnaires. We also spoke with representatives of the board of trustees, the schools' transformation management board and Brighter Futures for Children, and with the chief

executive officer of the National Autism Society Academies Trust, which governs the school. We reviewed a range of other documents, including school improvement planning, behaviour and safeguarding records, and other evidence about the school's leadership and management. We also considered two responses to the Ofsted Parent View online survey.

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

Safeguarding is effective
Leadership and management are effective.

Main Findings

The school was last inspected in December 2021 and judged to require improvement. Since then, there have been widespread changes to school staff, leaders and those responsible for governance. Staff and parents have found these many changes unsettling, although some note things improving recently.

You joined the school as executive principal four weeks before this inspection. You are providing the leadership team with useful extra expertise while the substantive principal is away from school. You and other school leaders have a shared and accurate view of current standards in the school and what needs to be better. Together, you are working closely with colleagues from the trust to make urgent changes where they are needed. For example, at the time of this inspection, all staff were undergoing extra training on positive behaviour management, to help strengthen the quality of their existing work with pupils.

Since January 2022, a number of new roles have been put in place across the trust. This action has given the trust greater capacity to actively support and challenge leaders about standards of education and the effectiveness of safeguarding in the school. Trustees and the trust's chief executive officer have a wealth of information about different aspects of the school, such as behaviour, attendance and special educational needs. Sometimes, there is an over-reliance on the expertise of individual school leaders to make links between different sources of information. This is making it harder for trustees and relevant trust leaders to step back, evaluate the impact of what has been done so far, and prioritise what needs to happen next to further improve the school.

Since September 2022, governance has evolved, with a transformation management board taking the role of a local governing body. Although early in its work, this group is helping to improve the rigour of school improvement planning and the pace of action being taken. Personnel at trustee level have also undergone significant change. For example, the chair and vice chair of trustees have only been in these roles for a matter of weeks. Nevertheless, they are sufficiently well informed about standards in the school because routines for reporting on standards of education and care are suitably established.

Safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Designated safeguarding leads are acutely aware that pupils' additional needs could put them at increased risk of harm. They make sure that all staff, including those who join the school for a short period of time, know how to recognise and act on any worrying behaviour. Systems for reporting concerns are rigorous and used well. As a result, leaders are able to act swiftly and tenaciously to support vulnerable pupils. Trust leaders oversee the school's safeguarding work carefully, providing useful support and challenge to the school's leadership team.

Pupils are safe at Thames Valley. Their complex learning and behavioural needs are well understood by leaders and staff. Education and therapeutic staff work closely together to address the cause of any challenging behaviour. Points of crisis are managed sensitively and appropriately. Incidents are becoming less frequent over time. Leaders know that current high levels of temporary staff in school are quite difficult for some pupils to cope with. Trustees recognise the urgency with which this issue needs to be resolved. They are taking appropriate steps to recruit and retain additional high-quality staff, but more needs to be done.

Additional support

The National Autism Society Academies Trust is investing heavily in the school. Assistant directors of education and safeguarding regularly work alongside school leaders to support the school's journey of improvement. As executive principal for the trust, you are based full time at Thames Valley while the substantive principal is away from school. Collectively, this useful extra help is enabling school leaders to steer the school successfully through a period of notable change.

Beyond the trust, you are reaching out to other relevant organisations, including the local authority, for their help. You are proactive about seeking support and guidance when safeguarding concerns arise, to reassure yourself that actions taken have been prompt and appropriate. Your active pursuit of relevant training for staff is helping to assure the quality of provision in school. You know that having a lot of temporary staff means that training has to be ongoing, so that the staff body as a whole retains its useful collective knowledge.

Priorities for further improvement

- Leaders should evaluate and refine their existing systems for checking on standards in the school, so that their overview becomes more precise, connected and systematic. This will provide governors and trustees with greater assurance that school leaders are prioritising the right things to improve outcomes for pupils.
- Those responsible for governance should take whatever steps necessary to stabilise the school's staffing arrangements so that there is greater consistency for pupils. This will help to ensure that the collective staff body has sufficient knowledge and expertise to continue keeping pupils safe and raising standards in the school.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the chief executive officer or equivalent of the NASAT multi academy trust, the regional Department for Education director and the director of children's services for Reading. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Moles
His Majesty's Inspector