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Martin Lonergan
Interim Headteacher
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Dear Mr Lonergan

Special measures monitoring inspection of Northern Counties School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection of your school that took place on 23 and 24 November 2022, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in May 2022.

During the inspection, James Duncan, His Majesty's Inspector, and I discussed with you and other senior leaders, the acting chief executive officer (CEO) of The Percy Hedley Foundation, other staff, trustees and governors the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also considered leaders actions to improve site security, examined safeguarding systems, held a telephone conversation with the local authority designated officer, visited lessons, held meetings with other staff, observed start and end-of-day activities, met a range of pupils, both informally and formally, spoke to some parents and completed a document scrutiny. Inspectors reviewed the comments made by parents on Ofsted Parent View and responses to the staff survey. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Northern Counties School remains inadequate and requires special measures. Leaders have made insufficient progress to improve the school.

I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

The school should take further action to:

- review the leadership model in the school to ensure that leaders have capacity to fulfil their individual responsibilities effectively
- review the leadership arrangements of both senior and subject leaders to address deficiencies in the curriculum
- ensure that the governing body has the skills and attributes to support and challenge the school in its improvement
- ensure that all pupils have an equitable and ambitious curriculum offer leading to, when appropriate, accreditation for older pupils
- undertake a full review of activities within the Hillcrest building to ensure it offers a safe and welcoming environment for all pupils.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Leadership of Northern Counties School remains fragile. There is significant instability in the school's leadership structure. Trustees have appointed you as interim headteacher. There are currently several vacancies in the local governing body, including chair and vice chair positions. As a temporary measure, a member of the board of trustees has been nominated as interim chair of the governing body. The board of trustees has appointed an acting CEO who supports the school. Leaders assert that many staff in significant roles have changed since the last inspection. They acknowledge that the school's leadership remains turbulent.

Since the last inspection, you have appointed an interim curriculum leader and the curriculum is in a transitional period. There is currently a mixture of old and new curriculums being taught, and there remains a lack of clear subject leader oversight. Core subjects, English and mathematics, do not have subject-specialist leadership to connect learning activities that build on pupils' prior knowledge. These subjects are led by staff with other whole-school responsibilities. Too often, individual teachers are left to decide what to teach. Not enough progress has been made to improve the curriculum on offer since the previous inspection.

Similarly, not enough has been done since the previous inspection to improve the achievement of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Not enough focus has been placed on meeting the needs of pupils by developing their knowledge, skills and abilities to apply what they know and can do with increasing fluency and independence. For example, subject accreditation remains limited. Provision is currently not equitable. Qualifications are accessible only to certain groups of pupils. Entries for qualifications are very small, often for one pupil. For example, there is no certainty around the qualification offer for a number of deaf pupils in key stage 4.

You have made some progress in relation to improving early reading and phonics. You are relaunching whole-school phonics in the new year. Leaders' plans to enhance early

reading and phonics are in the final stages of development. You have plans to timetable phonics teaching in discrete lessons. Staff training is ongoing, although phonics assessment systems are not currently embedded. Pupils that need support with their reading engage with the phonics tuition well. However, some pupils have not learned to apply those phonics skills to support reading elsewhere.

You have improved the effectiveness of safeguarding procedures and systems around the school site. You have installed gated access and fencing and tightened the systems to admit visitors to the site. The reception area has been reconfigured to ensure that visitors cannot gain entrance to the main school building. Pupils are no longer routinely taught at home. However, there remains a lack of clarity around the checks on contractors accessing the site. Contractor checks are undertaken off site by facilities staff at The Percy Hedley Foundation. A lack of rigour around information-sharing between the school and facilities staff means that school leaders cannot know with certainty which contractors are suitable to access the site during the school day.

Inspectors noted that the environment in the Hillcrest building continued to be particularly poor. For example, at one point during the inspection, within this building, a cupboard containing cleaning products was open, despite signs stating that it should be locked. At other times, stacks of dirty dinner plates and trays were left for long periods of time. A member of staff's flask containing a hot drink was in the vicinity of a very vulnerable pupil. Files and folders were stacked on top of filing cabinets. Furthermore, pupils were seen, unusually often, sat with staff in corridors rather than in classrooms.

During the inspection, inspectors became aware of adult-living services on the school site. This facility is adjacent to the main school entrance and accessible, by a lift in the school's reception, to a second floor living area. Inspectors were told that those adults living in the provision leave site before pupils start school and return to site after pupils finish school each day. Inspectors observed no activity to and from the provision during school hours. Leaders and trustees acknowledged inspectors safeguarding concerns about this on-site arrangement.

Inspectors noted that you continue to keep detailed records of individual behaviour incidents as and when they occur. However, during an incident of unexpected behaviour that occurred during the inspection, staff failed to consider the needs and dignity of other pupils present.

Governance of the school continues to be weak. The effectiveness of governance is significantly limited by vacancies in the governing body. This includes a permanent chairperson. A member of the board of trustees is currently interim chair of the governing body. At the moment, you and your leaders do not receive adequate challenge from governors. Governors remain too accepting of leader's assertions about the progress of school improvements. As a result, governors, trustees and the acting CEO have an overly optimistic and inaccurate view of the school. Despite leaders' adequate planning to address these deficiencies, insufficient progress has been made.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chief executive officer of The Percy Hedley Foundation, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Newcastle upon Tyne. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

David Mills
His Majesty's Inspector