

Inspection of Northern Counties School

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

Inspection dates: 27 and 28 February 2024

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Good
Sixth-form provision	Good
Previous inspection grade	Inadequate

The headteacher of this school is Martin Lonergan. This school is part of Percy Hedley Foundation, which means other people in the foundation also have responsibility for running the school. The foundation is run by the chief executive officer, Rob McDonald, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Janet Donnelly.

What is it like to attend this school?

Northern Counties School aims to engage, enable and empower pupils. Pupils' educational experiences at this school have been transformed since the previous inspection. Leaders have considerably raised the ambition and expectations for what pupils with complex special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) can achieve. There is a strong academic focus. Pupils are now accessing qualifications that prepare them well for the future.

This school admits pupils from age three to 19 years. All pupils have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan). Pupils, including post-16 students, follow a pathway curriculum. Some pupils learn an informal curriculum. Other pupils follow a more formal curriculum that matches parts of the national curriculum. Pupils who are deaf or blind follow adapted versions of the curriculum based on their individual needs.

Pupils behave exceptionally well. They are supported by caring staff. Staff know individual pupils well. Pupils receive personalised support to progress academically and to prepare them for next steps and adulthood. The school's environment is bright and engaging. It is well resourced. There are a range of professionals in school to support pupils. These include speech and language therapists and occupational therapists.

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

Leaders have designed an ambitious pathway curriculum. Each pathway is developed to meet pupils' SEND. The curriculum follows themes. The school has established cross-curricular links that ensure pupils learn about where they live and about British heritage. Pupils learn in different areas of the school depending on their SEND. This ensures pupils receive the correct support. Lessons have a mix of age groups. Most staff explain new ideas clearly and use questioning effectively. However, some teachers do not present information clearly or check understanding consistently well.

Leaders prioritise reading and phonics. All pupils access a specialised phonics programme designed to meet their individual needs, including pupils who are deaf. All staff are well trained in its use. Reading and phonics are part of pupils' daily routines. Books are generally matched well to pupils' reading ability. Staff model phonics strategies effectively. Books are plentiful around the school. There are designated spaces for reading in and out of classrooms.

The school's environment is positive and productive. Pupils' behaviour and attitudes are exceptional. Pupils consistently have positive attitudes to their education. There is an obvious warmth and trust that underpin staff and pupils' relationships. Staff are responsive to pupils' individual needs. If pupils lose focus, staff support them effectively. Pupils feel safe and happy. They know that staff are on hand to support them if they need help. As a result, incidents of dysregulated behaviour are rare.

Leaders closely track pupils' attendance. Most pupils, including pupils who receive free school meals, attend very well.

The provision for pupils' personal development is exceptional. Pupils' talents and interests are well developed through a wide variety of activities across the school day. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural learning is woven through the curriculum. Leaders promote theatre as an important cultural experience for all pupils. Frequent theatre visits develop pupils' communication and social interaction. Workshops strengthen pupils' confidence through script writing and performance.

Pupils develop a strong understanding of the protected characteristics. School activities promote diversity and inclusion. For example, a British Sign Language signing group perform in care homes to develop intergenerational understanding. Some teachers and support staff are deaf. They act as positive role models to pupils. Pupils have a secure understanding of how to keep themselves safe in the community. They know how to be careful while using technology. Preparation for their next steps and life beyond school is a cornerstone of their school experience. Leaders ensure this is deliberately planned through all aspects of school life. Leaders promote work experience to ensure pupils build confidence and aspiration. Pupils visit careers fairs and receive guidance about next steps from trained advisers.

Staff feel trusted as professionals. Leaders ensure the positive well-being of staff. Staff receive ongoing training to improve their classroom practice. Early career teachers feel well supported. Governors have wide educational experience. They quality assure the school's work through frequent monitoring visits. Governors know that there is a need for greater consistency in teaching and learning. Trustees visit the school and check aspects of the school's work without notice. They correctly recognise the rapid improvements demonstrated in the school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Some teachers do not clearly present information and check pupils' understanding as well as they should. This means that there is variability in curriculum delivery in some subject areas. The school should ensure all teaching is of a consistently high quality across all curriculum areas.

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.

Further information

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

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	108551
Local authority	Newcastle upon Tyne
Inspection number	10310523
Type of school	Special
School category	Non-maintained special
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	78
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	17
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Janet Donnelly
CEO of the trust	Rob McDonald
Headteacher	Martin Lonergan
Website	ncs.percyhedley.org.uk
Dates of previous inspection	6 and 7 December 2023, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Northern Counties School is a special school for pupils aged between three and 19 years. No children in early years foundation stage currently attend the school.
- The school makes provision for pupils with a range of complex SEND. These include autism, deaf, visual impairment and blind, profound and multiple learning difficulties and communication and interaction. All pupils have an EHC plan.
- The school does not use any alternative education providers.
- The school measures itself against the Gatsby benchmarks to ensure pupils receive high-quality careers advice.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and

engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this inspection under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We deemed the inspection a graded (section 5) inspection under the same Act.

In accordance with section 13(4) of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.
- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, the special educational needs coordinator, curriculum leaders, teachers and support staff.
- The lead inspector met the chief executive of the Percy Hedley Foundation and members of the board of trustees. The lead inspector met with representatives of the governing body.
- The lead inspector spoke by telephone to an independent school improvement partner that works with the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: reading and communication, mathematics, and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The lead inspector observed pupils reading to a familiar adult.
- Inspectors reviewed a range of school documents, including the school's self-evaluation and development plans.
- Inspectors looked at a range of information regarding behaviour. They observed the behaviour of pupils in classrooms and at social times.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's surveys for pupils, staff and parents. This included any free-text responses to Ofsted Parent View.

Inspection team

David Mills, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Katie Spurr

His Majesty's Inspector

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