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Mrs C Bell
Headteacher
Furrowfield School
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Dear Mrs Bell

IMPLEMENTATION OF FURROWFIELD SCHOOL'S ACTION PLAN

Following my visit to your school on 13 and 14 July 2005, I write to confirm the findings and to notify you of the outcomes.

As you know, the inspection was part of a policy involving a broader series of visits by HMI and Additional Inspectors to check on the development and improvement of schools where the section 10 inspection indicated that the school had serious weaknesses. You will recall that the focus of the inspection was to assess: the quality of the action plan; the pupils' achievement and the standards attained; their personal development; the quality of provision; the leadership and management of the school; and the progress that has been made in implementing the action plan and removing the causes of the serious weaknesses.

During the visit I inspected seven lessons or part lessons; attended a registration period and an assembly; scrutinised a wide range of documentation provided by the school; and held discussions with you and nominated staff on the areas for improvement identified in the section 10 inspection. I also examined a range of pupils' work and spoke informally with other staff and pupils.

On the basis of the evidence gathered during the visit, I made the following observations to you, the deputy headteacher, the chair and vice-chair of governors and a representative of the LEA.

The school was inspected in January 2005 and was found to have serious weaknesses in the writing aspect of English, in mathematics, information and communication technology (ICT) and physical education. Thirteen per cent of the

teaching was unsatisfactory. There were weaknesses in the leadership of subjects and governance was unsatisfactory. Two main contributory factors to the causes of the weaknesses existed: significant change in the staffing, including senior staff, and the difficulty in recruiting specialist teachers for this secondary special residential school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. A new headteacher and chair of governors began their work in November 2004. The residential provision was not inspected during this visit; this was inspected by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) recently and received a relatively favourable report.

The pupils made satisfactory or better progress in five of the seven lessons observed. In two lessons they made good progress. This was because of the teachers' good knowledge of their subjects, the way the work was well matched to the pupils' needs and abilities and the positive way it built on what they had learned previously. By contrast, in two lessons the pupils' progress was inadequate. It was unsatisfactory in one and poor in another. The pupils learned little because the tasks were not challenging enough and they carried out activities, such as copying text from the board in science or completing worksheets in history, which did little to aid their progress. Work took little account of what they had learned before.

In all of the seven lessons the pupils' attitudes to their work were satisfactory or better and in five these were good. There was occasional silliness in one lesson by a few pupils who took advantage of the fact that the teacher had positioned them in the room where they could not be seen. The pupils were generally managed well in lessons and their behaviour during the visit was good. At the end of the lessons and breaks the pupils' movements were highly supervised and pupils were 'regimented'. While this ensured that the pupils travelled sensibly along corridors, it slowed the time taken to get to lessons and it did little to improve their personal responsibility. In addition, the pupils do not have their own personal timetables in order to identify which lessons they should go to, and for them to plan their homework. Over the course of the year there have been a large number of exclusions. This has in part been a response to the firmness with which the new headteacher's regime for improving behaviour has been implemented; the number of exclusions is now reducing. However, the school does not have a sufficiently staged approach to dealing with serious misdemeanours and internal systems for dealing with the most difficult pupils who are at risk of exclusion are largely informal. Figures for 2004 showed that attendance was above that typically found in similar types of special schools. The 2005 statistics are slightly below that figure due to a small number of persistent absentees. The school is doing all that is possible to improve this situation and has a strong partnership with the education welfare service. Procedures for recording and following up absences are satisfactory.

The quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in five of the seven lessons. It was unsatisfactory in one, poor in another and good in two. The staff worked very hard to build the pupils' self-esteem and praised them regularly for their efforts. The pupils were mostly compliant in lessons and focused well on what they were doing. This was even the case when in a few lessons the teaching was dull. The personal support for individual pupils was generally good and teaching assistants were effectively used in the practical parts of lessons. However, when the whole class was taught they were sometimes little involved, other than to supervise the pupils. The teachers had at least a sound knowledge of their subjects. The headteacher has worked hard to improve the staff's subject skills and recruit staff with sufficient expertise. A few gaps in knowledge have been identified by subject leaders, such as in control work in ICT, and adequate steps are being taken to address these deficiencies. The teachers generally provided a good range of activities during lessons and balanced well the amount of time for each part of the lesson, ensuring that pupils had enough time for practical work. This kept them interested and engaged in their work.

Occasionally, there were missed opportunities to use the interactive whiteboards to demonstrate an idea. Instead, verbal explanation was used which some pupils clearly had difficulty with. The teachers usually matched the practical activities adequately to the needs of the pupils. However, occasionally, especially where the pupils' attainment is wide ranging, there was an over-reliance on using teaching assistants to help pupils work through a problem rather than to plan and provide work which is broken down into small steps more precisely matching their needs. The quality of planning was variable. Some plans showed little evidence that the pupils' individual learning targets had been taken into account and in lessons there was often little reference to these. In other plans, precise details of what different groups of pupils were to do and learn were identified. The review of the pupils' learning and behaviour at the end of some lessons was sometimes rushed and superficial. This meant that the systems the school has for monitoring or tracking improvement had little value in these lessons. Mundane tasks with little challenge were the reasons for inadequate teaching.

The headteacher is clearly driving forward improvement and has achieved much in the short time she has been leading the school. She is demonstrating well that she can take the school further forward. Stability in staffing and the appointment of staff with subject expertise have been a major achievement. She has been well supported by the LEA staff and the link with the local secondary school, as part of its science college status, has also helped, especially to support subject leaders' skills. The action plan is satisfactory. It has appropriate objectives in relation to each of its aims and timescales are realistic. However, in places it lacks clear criteria for measuring the success of actions. Staff commitment and morale are

high and the strengthened senior management team is supporting the headteacher well in making improvement. The work of subject leaders' has improved and they have a clear view of their roles and responsibilities. The headteacher recognises there is still much to do, especially in ensuring a consistency in planning and teaching through robust monitoring and evaluation. The school's plans for a specific programme for monitoring teaching and learning, from September, should aid this process. At present, however, the school's systems for self-evaluation are a weakness.

Action taken to address the areas for improvement

1: improve teaching, learning and leadership and management of mathematics, ICT and physical education

New subject leaders for mathematics and physical education are now in place and subject knowledge in these subjects is good. It is sound in ICT. In the lessons seen the quality of teaching in lessons where these subjects were taught was at least satisfactory. Leaders have a clear view of their roles and responsibilities and what needs to be done in their subjects. They are improving the planning and developing a wider range of award bearing courses. Assessment in subjects, using a published scheme, is helping identify targets for pupils - an area where provision needs to improve. Some observations of teaching and learning have taken place in mathematics which has led to improvements in how teachers approach the different ways in which pupils learn. In the other subjects there has been little opportunity for leaders to observe the teaching of other staff, although the LEA, headteacher and governor have undertaken a programme of observation across the school. Progress in implementing this issue has been reasonable.

2: to provide pupils with the opportunity to extend their writing skills in all subjects

Work has been undertaken to improve the teaching of writing skills through staff training. The pupils' writing in subjects has been analysed, which involved the LEA literacy consultant, and examples of good practice are displayed around the school. The training on persuasive writing clearly had a positive impact on how this was subsequently implemented throughout subjects. However, an examination of pupils' books shows that the impetus for this work has not been maintained and some staff appear unsure about how writing skills should be developed. In two lessons, drawing and colouring, using worksheets and copying text were the main ways of recording. There were several missed opportunities for more demanding work to improve pupils' writing. Progress on this issue has been limited.

3: increase the range of courses and accreditation for pupils in Years 10 and 11

A broad range of courses is now on offer to pupils to meet their wide ranging needs and abilities. These include Entry Level, GCSE and GNVQ. Vocational courses are planned for September, using local college facilities. The school has made reasonable progress in addressing this issue.

4: ensure that governors have a more thorough understanding of what is happening in school and fulfil their statutory responsibilities

The governors have worked hard to improve their knowledge of the school and its work. They have undertaken training, identified where they need to improve and monitored teaching, learning and pupils' work. Their records are thorough and help them to gain awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of their areas of responsibility. They also focus on the impact of the work the school has done and where improvement needs to be made further. Although governors mostly fulfil their statutory responsibilities, the prospectus and their annual report to parents still have omissions. Because of this, progress in addressing this issue is reasonable rather than good.

5: improve links with parents; ensure that they are sufficiently informed and involved in their children's learning and are able to give their views

This was not inspected.

6: For teachers to use assessment more effectively when they plan for pupils their lessons

Much work has been done to improve the school's assessment of the pupils' attainment and progress. The focus has rightly been on constructing its adequate assessment policy, reviewing baseline assessment procedures, and in implementing the use of a published scheme which records and aids the prediction of the pupils' progress in order to support target setting. However, there is little recognition of the pupils' individual targets in lesson planning or in the school's system for rewarding good learning and behaviour. The school is aware of this and is to take appropriate steps to address this weakness. Progress in addressing this issue has been reasonable.

Reasonable progress has been made in implementing the action plan and removing the causes of the school's serious weaknesses.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State and the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Gateshead. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

GEORGE DERBY
Additional Inspector