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Ms Eileen Hinds  
The Headteacher  
Ashdale Centre  
Marton Road  
Middlesbrough  
TS4 3RX

Dear Ms Hinds,

## SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ASHDALE CENTRE

### Introduction

Following my visit to your centre on 26 September 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the centre became subject to special measures in March 2006.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

### Evidence

During the visit seven part lessons, two support sessions and a tutorial period were observed. Documents were scrutinised and meetings were held with the interim leadership team, the newly appointed teacher-in-charge, the deputy teacher-in-charge, the consultant headteacher, representatives of the local authority (LA), the education welfare officer, members of staff, students and a representative of the management board.

### Context

The interim leadership team, who were appointed just prior to the last inspection, continue to manage the centre. A permanent teacher-in-charge has been appointed and she will take up her post in January 2007. A deputy teacher-in-charge has been appointed and she is now in post. There have been extensive staff changes and 6 of the 13 staff are on temporary or supply contracts. Some roles and responsibilities have been restructured but, until permanent staffing is in place, this is at an early stage. The

centre has been redecorated and refurbished. Resources are new and are of good quality. The centre currently caters for 47 students.

### Achievement and standards

The attainment of pupils on entry is generally below that expected for their age but this is not always the case. All pupils have gaps in their learning which reflect the considerable disruption they have experienced to their education. There have been some difficulties in obtaining information about the prior attainment of students, but the mechanisms through which this can be collected are improving. Information about attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 is available for most students in Year 10 and an on-line assessment system can provide data on the attainment of all students. Induction procedures have been considerably improved and detailed interviews with students and families help the centre gain information about prior attainment, attitudes and needs.

The standards achieved by students are below average. In 2006 only 11 of the 16 students in Year 11 achieved at least one GCSE D-G grade. One student achieved a C grade in mathematics and another C grade in English literature. One student left the centre without any nationally recognised qualification. There is potential for students to achieve much more than this. There are a wide range of abilities and needs in the current cohort. A small number of students are working at levels in line with national expectations in science and mathematics but for the majority achievement is well below this. The progress made by students is not yet good enough. The use of assessment data is at a very early stage and staff do not always plan work which accurately meets individual needs. While all students made progress in the lessons seen, in many not enough was demanded of them. In two lessons students worked at nationally expected levels; the work they were given was challenging and teacher explanations and questioning were complex. In these lessons students remained fully on task and asked for help when they needed it. Their attitude to work and their behaviour were very good and, as a result of the good progress they made, they gained real satisfaction and self-esteem.

### Personal development and well-being

Very effective action has been taken to improve the personal development and well-being of students. Attendance is still unsatisfactory but is improving, albeit from a very low baseline. At the time of the last inspection average attendance was 30%. Some students had not attended since the start of the academic year. There were no consistent systems for following up non-attendance. There is now a system of first-day phone calls to alert carers to a student's absence. These are made as early in the day as possible and have resulted in improved relationships with families and better attendance. The centre registers pupils at the start of both sessions and in every lesson. As a result they are aware of how many students are in the building and carers can be informed if students leave the premises. During the visit no students left the premises at other than the usual times. The attendance of students at off-site provision is also recorded. Attendance has improved from a low of 24.92% in April to 52.30% for the week ending 15 September. One student returned to the centre in September after

a year-long absence. The attendance of 33 of the 47 students currently in the centre has shown some improvement although it is not yet at acceptable levels. The attendance of the remaining 14 students continues to cause concern. These have been referred to the education welfare service, who are taking legal action against some families and tracking the whereabouts of other students who are proving hard to find. This work is supported in the centre by the attendance officer, who follows up cases or pursues attendance issues on a day-to-day basis.

Poor behaviour was an issue at the time of the last inspection. Staff changes just prior to the inspection led to a high number of exclusions, as the new management team established routines and expectations. Between September 2005 and March 2006 there were 102 fixed-term exclusions totalling 181 days and involving 38 students. Between April and July 2006 there were 3 exclusions totalling 5 days and involving 3 students. Since the start of the new term only one student has been excluded for five days. The LA aims to have no exclusions at all but accepts that there may be some fluctuations as the new systems become established. A series of meetings and work with families have provided valuable background information about the causes of some challenging behaviour. As a result mechanisms to support students in crisis have been established and there is greater awareness about the problems faced by some individuals. All staff have attended training on managing challenging behaviour and establishing a more positive ethos. A new behaviour policy has been written by staff, with support from external consultants. As a result of these actions relationships between staff and pupils are mostly effective and are characterised by openness and transparency. Clear boundaries have been set and, in the main, students operate within them. While some students still have difficulty conforming to new expectations the challenging behaviour seen during this visit was mostly attention-seeking and posed no threat to the safety of other pupils. These minor challenges were managed well by staff and not allowed to disrupt the learning of other students.

Measures have been taken to stop students smoking in the building. Whilst this has been successful, smoking remains a problem. Staff accept that smoking is an addiction and a smoking cessation programme is planned. Some students also talk freely about drug and alcohol misuse. Counsellors visit the centre and preventative work is ongoing. Students drink water during the day and every opportunity is taken to discuss lifestyle choices. Information about the needs of students is shared between staff, when appropriate, so that individuals can receive the help and support they need. There are very good opportunities for students to work on their health and fitness at a specially designed gym. Some boys particularly enjoyed this and worked hard during their session there, however, students are less keen on healthy eating.

The LA and leadership team have prioritised health and safety issues. At the time of the inspection many students were beyond the control of staff. A number of measures are now in place to strengthen health and safety. The perimeter fence has been strengthened so that pupils can no longer simply leave the premises, and students who arrive late are logged in and escorted to lessons. The building has been reorganised and refurbished and electronic alerts have been fitted. All staff are now checked by the police and there are protocols to cover data protection and use of the internet. All staff will have received updated child protection training by the end of the autumn term.

Risk assessments, which conform to the LA's guidelines, are in place for all visits and off-site provision, including compliance with child protection and health and safety. Minibus driver assessments are being updated. The centre is working with a consultant headteacher to establish a health and safety committee which will include student representatives.

Additional resources have been provided, including a very well equipped information and communication technology (ICT) suite. Much of the building is newly decorated, and attractive displays and the use of flowers and plants provide a welcoming and attractive environment. Since the refurbishment, damage to the building has been reduced and is now minimal. Students are aware that damaging property incurs penalties, including the matter being reported to the police, but there is also an increasing sense of ownership and of commitment to the centre. In lessons students treat resources with respect, they take great care with the presentation of their work and there is no evidence of graffiti. Students move around the building in an orderly manner and even when upset they make no attempt to leave classrooms. Some students commented positively on the improvements which have been made in recent months. The centre now provides a calm, pleasant and purposeful environment in which to learn.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- Improve the attendance and behaviour of pupils - satisfactory progress

#### Quality of provision

Attendance, behaviour and health and safety issues have been the priority in recent months. While some work has been done on improving the quality of teaching and learning, developments in this area are at an early stage. Teaching and learning were good in three lessons and satisfactory in the remaining four. No lessons were unsatisfactory. All lessons had some good features, mainly the opportunities students were given to express their opinions and discuss issues and the attention given to developing literacy and reading skills. Teaching in science continues to be good and has been enhanced by the introduction of a new GCSE syllabus which is both interesting and appropriate to the needs of students. Good teaching linked to appropriate choices of curriculum materials ensured that students in this group worked diligently and effectively throughout the lesson. Teaching in mathematics is also good, the teacher has high expectations for student achievement.

Students are well supported in all lessons but the management of this support requires review. There are too few opportunities for independent learning. Small group sizes, the commitment of staff to student success and a high level of adult support mean students receive individual attention and, as a result, seldom get things wrong. Although support for individuals requires careful management, some students are too quick to ask for help without attempting to find a solution and most need some opportunities to work independently even if this means they make mistakes. The balance of direct teaching and independent work was the weakness in some satisfactory lessons. Tasks were too often undemanding or repetitive and students

became bored by too much teacher explanation or discussion. No paired or group work was seen during the visit and there were no opportunities for students to evaluate their learning. In a lesson where the task made few demands on students their attention was captured and their interest remained high because staff challenged them with problems that required lateral thinking. These were complex but students responded very positively showing an aptitude for 'thinking outside the box'. Information collected about the achievements of individuals is not yet used to plan demanding and appropriate work. Some students produce a good quantity of interesting and descriptive writing. However, sentence structure, organisation and grammar are weak. Too little has been done to improve this and there is little evidence that the improvement of basic skills is a priority in all subjects. In order that all students develop to their full potential these issues need to be tackled with some urgency but at a pace appropriate to individuals. Targets to improve pupils' learning are in place but are not accurate enough. Individual learning plans have been written but are not yet responsive to students needs. Some students are now accessing GCSE courses and Passport 2 Learning through on-line training. This is a very positive development for those students who rarely attended or who had challenging behaviour when in the centre.

The curriculum has been enriched by an appropriate and varied range of vocational and work-related training. The Key Stage 4 transition officer has an extensive knowledge of what is available and uses a number of funding streams to provide an exciting and interesting range of opportunities for students. She also ensures that students receive the support necessary to benefit from the experience. These arrangements are ambitious and complex to manage and care should be taken to ensure an appropriate balance of vocational training, the core curriculum and basic skills. Staff work hard to ensure that students are not disadvantaged when working outside the centre, even down to washing the overalls they will wear. Careers' planning is available and care is taken to raise the aspirations of individuals and give them an understanding of the skills they will need.

A support worker has been temporarily employed to undertake challenge and adventure activities. These are very popular with students and staff. Day visits at the end of the summer term provide convincing evidence of how well students respond to challenge and high expectations. The care given to students is good. Staff are fully committed to their welfare and are now much more aware of their emotional needs. Students are now safe when in the centre. A good quantity of support is given to students and this is mostly effective. However, this is not always responsive to the needs of individuals. The guidance given to students is improving, in some areas, but is not yet rigorous enough to bring about improvements in basic skills and to close the gaps in previous learning. Some staff do not place enough emphasis on providing guidance on other aspects of personal development. There are inconsistencies in the way staff respond to rudeness or bad language. When these are tackled firmly but unobtrusively students usually respond well. A minority of staff are not yet able to anticipate possible problems or to avert difficulties by taking early action. The support given to students with learning difficulties or those who are vulnerable is the same as that received by others.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- Provide greater challenge through more rigorous target setting, higher expectations for pupils' learning and improved subject expertise - inadequate progress
- Strengthen the centre's procedures to ensure that the safety and well-being of pupils are secured - good progress
- Develop a more motivating and enriched curriculum with a balance between the core subjects and accredited vocational opportunities - satisfactory progress

## Leadership and management

The interim leadership team have provided strong and effective leadership for the centre. They bring a wealth of personal and professional skills to the role. Systems designed to monitor improvement against key issues are robust and the centre receives good support from the link inspector, whose monitoring provides both a detailed evaluation of progress and areas for development. His visits to the centre are regular and issues are revisited on subsequent visits so that there is a high level of accountability. The LA and the centre have produced detailed plans in order to bring about further improvements. The LA has shown its commitment by investing a considerable amount of officer time and additional funding in the centre. This funding has been well spent in providing additional support, better resources and improvements to the environment. The evaluation of progress which was provided was detailed and accurate in its judgements. The leadership team are aware that many of the actions taken, although providing a secure basis from which to bring about further improvement, have not yet made an impact on the learning and progress of students. However, newly established systems are effective, and careful monitoring and consistency of application should ensure that the attendance, motivation and behaviour of students continue to improve. Stability has been restored to the centre, relationships are much improved and clear boundaries and expectations have been set. A calm and purposeful climate has been created and the centre is now a very pleasant place for learners and for staff.

The new teacher-in-charge takes up her appointment in January and plans are in place to ensure that this transition is managed as smoothly as possible. The LA is aware that the new management team will require both support and guidance in order to ensure that the overall effectiveness of the centre continues to improve. Work on restructuring roles and responsibilities has been effective but is not yet complete because of uncertainties around staffing. Some staff are on temporary contracts and it is important that thought is given as to how the valuable contributions they make can be continued. Little work has been done, as yet, on the role of middle managers but some staff are well placed to support the improvement process. There is much to be gained, for all parties, in more collaborative working with other schools. It is noticeable that where this occurs on a voluntary basis, in science, teaching and learning are very effective.

The management committee are well informed about the work of the centre. There are formal and informal visits and accountability through the executive committee.

There is a genuine desire to provide support and challenge to staff and to hold management to account in order that students receive the best possible education.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- Provide a strong leadership team to facilitate improvements in leadership and management at all levels, and to boost pupils' achievement and personal development - satisfactory progress

#### External support

The LA acted promptly to improve provision at the centre following a review in November 2005. The interim management team were in place in February 2006 and plans to bring about improvement were written before the inspection in March of that year. The management team were well chosen and have made significant improvements to the education provided for students. Whilst additional external support was a little slow to start, once in place it has proved to be effective. A suitable amount of well-targeted support has helped the centre to secure the health, safety and security of students. A School Improvement Partner is in place but will delay working in the centre until the substantive leadership team are in post. The LA and current leadership team have identified that the pace and focus of the external support needs to change this term in order to focus on the improving teaching and learning. Plans to achieve this are in place.

#### Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures - satisfactory

The LA's statement of action is satisfactory. It details the support the centre will receive and when it expects the unit to be removed from special measures. An action plan provides further detail and success criteria.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

#### Priorities for further improvement

- improve the basic skills of students
- improve teaching and learning
- use information on prior attainment to plan teaching and learning which accurately meets the needs of students

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of the management committee and the Corporate Director of Children, Families and Learning for Middlesbrough.

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham  
H M Inspector