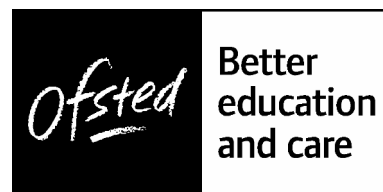


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Mrs J McBride  
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22 November 2006

Dear Mrs McBride

## SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF MERIT MEDICAL PUPIL REFERRAL UNIT (PRU)

### Introduction

Following my visit to your PRU on 8 and 9 November 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 school 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

Inspectors observed the unit's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the teacher in charge, representatives from the local authority (LA), the chair of the management board, and the school improvement partner.

### Context

The number of pupils attending Merit has declined from 31, at the time of the Section 5 inspection, to 24. Significantly fewer now remain for more than two terms. Educational provision has increased by two and a half hours per week. Additional time has been allocated for staff to plan and train. Two teachers have resigned and the unit is interviewing for replacements immediately after the first monitoring visit. A consultant, who was formerly a headteacher, was

appointed in late October to support leadership and management for two days each week. At the time of the Section 5 inspection the management board was responsible for all three PRUs in Stoke-on-Trent. Subsequent reorganisation has resulted in a management board specifically dedicated to the Merit Medical PRU. This met for the first time in September 2006.

### Achievement and standards

Many of the young people who attend the PRU have emotional and psychological needs and the unit is successful in helping them to re-engage with their education. The pupils' personal and social development is good. However, a significant proportion of the pupils are of above average ability and the unit's educational provision does not offer them sufficient challenge to make adequate academic progress. Of the pupils who completed their compulsory education in 2006, all attained qualifications and most attained GCSE passes in English and mathematics. All Year 9 pupils attained National Curriculum levels in English, mathematics and science but the majority were below national expectations for their age. Despite the medical history of the pupils, these results represent uneven progress across subjects and unsatisfactory achievement for the more able. Most pupils pursue Entry Level qualifications which do not provide sufficient challenge for a significant proportion.

Since the last inspection some progress has been made on assessing pupils' ability and needs on entry and tracking achievement on a termly basis. However, it is too soon for the PRU to be able to demonstrate that pupils are meeting their targets. Importantly, given the emotional and psychological needs of pupils who attend the PRU, appropriate procedures to track their personal development are also in hand.

In lessons pupils are well motivated and keen to learn. Teachers have very good relationships with their pupils and have established a secure learning environment. Planning is now more systematic and provides opportunities for pupils to develop their social skills. However, learning activities do not take sufficient account of pupils' starting points and individual needs. As a result of training on assessment, teachers have helped pupils to record in their files the level they are currently working at and the level they are aiming at. However, there are too few references in lessons to the next steps individual pupils need to do to improve their learning. Marking motivates through praise but does not identify what pupils have achieved in individual pieces of work or what their next targets for improvement should be. The PRU recognises the urgent need to adopt an assessment policy which sets clear expectations and reinforces good practice. Pupils have too few opportunities to work independently, reflect on their performance, consider what they could do better, or comment critically on the quality of one another's work. The regular use of worksheets restricts opportunities for pupils to develop the skills of extended writing, although some classroom resources include helpful prompts to support pupils in expressing opinions or writing to inform.

The monitoring of lessons has become more frequent and better focused on recognising features of good practice. However, the observations are not sufficiently rigorous in identifying areas for improvement in teaching and subsequently checking that appropriate action has been taken by individual teachers.

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

- ensure that all pupils make sufficient progress in their lessons and courses and that this is fully monitored and evaluated – satisfactory.

### Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development and well-being is a strong feature of Merit's work. The pupils are encouraged to become confident young people and have a clear sense of belonging to the unit. Pupils enjoy their lessons, have positive attitudes to learning, are good humoured and behave well. Social skills are being developed through activities such as drama where pupils are given opportunities to participate in discussion and debate. A particular strength is the very positive relationships between staff and pupils. Pupils with very complex social and emotional needs are able to share their thoughts and feelings in a safe and secure environment. The pupils benefit from links with the local community, for example Britannia Football Stadium and the New Vic Theatre.

### Quality of provision

The curriculum offered remains too narrow and too few hours are offered each week. The courses followed by pupils do not sufficiently meet their individual needs, match their starting points, or link to the courses they will be pursuing when returning to mainstream education.

Since the last inspection the range of the weekly timetable has been extended to include information and communication technology and art as well as opportunities to experience other subjects such as history, geography and drama. The unit plans to significantly extend provision over the next two years including much improved access to work related learning and enterprise education. The unit is also actively exploring the use of e-learning to increase curriculum continuity and so support the prompt reintegration of pupils into their schools. Links are being established with local schools in order that pupils will have access to design and technology specialist areas.

The PRU has judicious plans to concentrate provision at one site or two sites in close proximity to one another. It intends to have achieved this by Easter 2007 at the latest with a view to using teachers more efficiently, creating curriculum continuity for those few pupils who may remain at the unit for

more than twelve months, providing a specialist science base, having more appropriately sized classrooms, and addressing health and safety concerns.

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

- improve the curriculum by increasing the breadth and quality of provision so that it meets the needs of all pupils – satisfactory.

### Leadership and management

Leadership and management are now more purposeful than at the time of the last inspection. The introduction of shared planning and training time for staff is helping to improve capacity. Procedures for monitoring lessons, planning and the quality of pupils' work are beginning to clarify the priorities for improvement. However, lesson observations are not yet sufficiently rigorous. The new management board is beginning to ask pertinent questions regarding the quality of monitoring and the allocation of the unit's budget in order to address priorities. Its membership is continuing to grow to include an appropriate range of agencies responsible for pupils' welfare. It is planned to appoint the equivalent of one full time teaching assistant from January 2007 in order to support more effectively the reintegration of pupils into mainstream education. To further improve the unit's capacity, an administration officer will take up post in the new year and the LA is actively seeking the resources to appoint a deputy headteacher from Easter 2007.

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

- ensure that the management committee holds the unit to account for its outcomes and acts as an advocate in seeking suitable provision for all pupils – satisfactory.

### External support

The LA's satisfactory statement of action identifies March 2008 as the target date for the removal of special measures, which is realistic. It identifies appropriate actions and targeted support from the LA and partners. However, the chronological order of planned training is not clear. The responsibilities of key personnel are helpfully explained and the resources for advice and support are quantified. However, the frequency of, and responsibility for, evaluation are not always evident. All the key issues of the last inspection report are addressed although some of the specific elements are missing, for example actions to provide qualifications beyond Entry Level.

The LA is providing a range of helpful support. A consultant has been appointed who is significantly helping to identify priorities for action and providing training opportunities to develop staff expertise. She has an accurate picture of the unit and what needs to be addressed. The teacher in charge intends to observe some lessons jointly with her in order to sharpen

judgements and confirm suitable targets for improvement. The LA has also been supportive in conducting a range of lesson observations although the quality of judgements is too variable. The LA's training is suitably focused on assessment and monitoring progress but the impact in the classroom has so far been limited. Helpfully, the LA is taking action to ensure that all schools understand their responsibilities with regard to pupils with medical needs and have a named person who will liaise with staff at Merit as required. The school improvement partner has taken up her responsibilities this term and is already providing challenge and high expectations.

#### Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Quality of the local authority's statement of action – satisfactory.

#### Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of lesson planning so that learning activities better meet the different individual needs of pupils.
- Ensure that recent training on assessment is regularly reflected in classroom practice so that pupils know what the next steps are to improve their work and develop their skills as independent, self-critical learners.
- Improve the rigour of classroom observations by identifying areas for the development of teaching, and monitoring the actions taken to improve performance.
- Ensure that the qualifications and courses taught provide sufficient challenge for each pupil and enable rapid and effective reintegration into mainstream or alternative education.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of the management board and the Director of Education for Stoke-on-Trent.

Yours sincerely

David Simpson  
H M Inspector