



Northern Counties School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 108551
Local Authority Newcastle upon Tyne
Inspection number 300384
Inspection dates 21–22 November 2006
Reporting inspector Susan Preece HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special	School address	Great North Road
School category	Non-maintained		Newcastle upon Tyne, Tyne and Wear
Age range of pupils	6–19		NE2 3BB
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	0191 2815821
Number on roll (school)	32	Fax number	0191 2815060
Number on roll (6th form)	12		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr Peter Wignall
		Headteacher	Mrs Judith James
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected		

Age group 6–19	Inspection dates 21–22 November 2006	Inspection number 300384
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by three of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Description of the school

Northern Counties School is a non-maintained special school for children who have sensory impairments, communication and learning difficulties and/or autistic spectrum disorders. The school provides a total communication environment and each child has a statement of special educational need. Four pupils board at the school from Monday to Friday. There are more boys than girls. Most pupils are from White British ethnic heritage; two pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Pupils come from across the city and from other nearby authorities. Two pupils are looked after by the local authority. Northern Counties Charity merged with the Percy Hedley Foundation charity just over a year ago.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Northern Counties School provides a good standard of education for its pupils. The school has responded well to very significant changes in the last few years in the nature and severity of the pupils' learning difficulties and/or disabilities. During this time there has also been a change of senior leadership and management, including the appointment of a new headteacher just over a year ago. The new management and leadership team have tackled these changes with enthusiasm and commitment in order to better meet the increasingly complex learning difficulties of the pupils. This has included a strong emphasis on team working, so that the skills and experiences of the entire staff team can contribute fully to assessing, planning and meeting individual needs. Staff have responded very well to this encouragement and take pride in the work that they do. As a result, pupils are making good progress, especially in their communication skills and personal and social development. The school is aware that in order to raise achievements even higher it needs to improve the accuracy of its assessment of pupils' progress. Managers are also very aware that there must be more rigorous targets set for each pupil across the core areas of the curriculum, to a quality that matches the targets set in personal development and independence skills within individual education plans (IEPs).

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The quality of the 16–19 provision is satisfactory. Students make particularly good gains in their communication skills. When there is opportunity they take responsibility to help others, for example, through the school council. The curriculum is satisfactory and the school has clear plans to improve choices and broaden vocational learning opportunities through its links with another special schools. Work experience opportunities are satisfactory. Links with the Connexions service are good to help plan for when students leave school.

Effectiveness and efficiency of boarding provision Grade: 2

The Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI) conducted a separate inspection of boarding provision last year and found it to be good overall. The school has successfully addressed issues raised at the last CSCI inspection concerning the vetting arrangements for new staff. The residential provision makes a good contribution to pupils' welfare and to their education. Excellent communication with parents and very good liaison between care staff and school staff are strengths of the provision. There is a good range of extra-curricular activities, for example, access to a range of sports, bowling, swimming and cinema outings.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the accuracy of assessment outcomes.
- Set rigorous and challenging targets across all key areas of the curriculum for each pupil.

- Develop the curriculum for post-16 students.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

As a result of their learning needs, most pupils enter the school with standards that are well below what is expected for other youngsters of their age. The school's self-evaluation accurately judges the progress pupils make as good, given their abilities and starting points. Pupils make very good progress in developing communication skills, especially in the use of signing, as a result of the consistent use of the total communication approach by all staff. There are no significant differences in the progress made by different groups of pupils, including looked-after children.

Pupils make good progress towards personal and social development and independence targets within their individual learning plans; these targets are challenging and realistic. However, the school does not set targets for the core subjects of the National Curriculum in order to establish high yet achievable expectations. The school is aware of this weakness and has recently begun to improve the accuracy of assessment as a basis for this development.

Students in the post-16 group make satisfactory gains in work-related learning that contributes to preparing them for when they leave school. This progress is limited because of insufficient opportunities to develop these skills at Key Stage 4 and the narrow choice of vocational learning opportunities.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school considers this aspect of its work to be good and inspectors agree. Attendance is good and behaviour in all settings is excellent. Pupils know how to stay safe both in and outside of school. They also know how to keep healthy and benefit from regular physical education sessions. Pupils' enjoy school greatly and are very aware of whom to turn to if they have worries or problems. They confirmed that there have been no incidents of bullying. Pupils are satisfactorily prepared for life beyond school. For example, they are encouraged to recognise both their strengths and their disabilities in relation to future career possibilities. However, they do not have adequate opportunities for work experience at Key Stage 4.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness is well developed. Spiritual awareness is strongly developed through class and whole-school assemblies. Social awareness is well developed and successfully promoted through opportunities to mix with different age groups and with pupils from other schools. Cultural development is enhanced through contact with visitors from other cultures and the celebration of festivals. Good role models from the 'deaf culture' are frequent visitors to school.

Good opportunities exist to exercise responsibility, such as taking messages, serving as school councillors and contributing to the school newspaper. Students run a tuck shop and, on occasion, help with playground duty.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Inspectors agree with the school that teaching and learning are good overall. A key strength of teaching is the total communication approach adopted by all staff. Learning activities are generally well matched to individual pupils' needs. At the start of lessons, pupils are clearly informed of what they have to do. Teaching resources are well prepared and imaginatively used; such as the use of eggs in a literacy lesson. Pupils and students are keen and enthusiastic learners; they collaborate well together and make good progress. Contributing factors in these achievements are the good levels of caring support, enthusiastic and motivated teaching and the brisk pace to lessons. Skilled learning support assistants are used well in most lessons. Pupils and students with profound and multiple learning difficulties benefit from high levels of individual support. Teachers involve them well in stimulating classroom activities. The effective and appropriate use of questioning successfully challenges pupils and students. Intervention by support assistants is well balanced so that pupils are appropriately supported but also have adequate opportunities to develop independence. A minority of lessons are not sufficiently well planned and in these lessons activities are not effectively matched to pupils' needs. All teachers provide encouraging comments to pupils about their work but there is variation in the day-to-day assessment and recording of pupil's progress. The school is aware of these areas for development and plans are in place to bring about improvement.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The school accurately identifies that there is a good range of subjects to meet pupils' needs. National Curriculum subjects are enhanced well by more specialist ones to meet individual needs, including British Sign Language, Braille and mobility training. An excellent and highly individualised programme has been designed to meet the needs of a pupil who has an autistic spectrum disorder. The experiences of pupils who have the most severe learning difficulties are also improved by the use of a sensory curriculum approach. Curriculum opportunities are extended by links with other schools and colleges, especially for sport. The curriculum for post-16 students is satisfactory.

The personal, social, health and citizenship education curriculum is good and covers important areas to help pupils develop healthy and safe lifestyles. There is a good range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities, including an arts week, residential

trips and access to sports activities in the evenings and at weekends. Work-related learning is satisfactory for post-16 students, including through work experience and mini enterprise projects. The school is aware that there are insufficient use of these opportunities for pupils at Key Stage 4 for provision to be judged good. There is appropriate use of nationally recognised awards for older pupils to work towards. The school is aware that it needs to further broaden the range of opportunities for older students to learn vocational skills. Pupils contribute to the local community by making visits to local hospices and residential homes for special events.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of care, guidance and support provided by the school is good, although the school judged it to be outstanding. A high level of support and concern for the needs and welfare of the children is evident as soon as they start school. High quality medical care and advice from a wide range of specialists ensure that pupils' medical and therapeutic needs are very well met. There is one-to-one support for the most vulnerable pupils and care is taken not to allow them to become too dependent. A successful focus of the school's work is to encourage pupils to manage their own carers. Specialist facilities and programmes such as hydrotherapy, rebound therapy and the sensory room help meet the needs of pupils with more severe and complex difficulties. Support is also provided for parents on learning issues, such as the well attended signing classes. Comprehensive arrangements for the safeguarding of pupils are in place as are appropriate risk assessments. Effective liaison exists with other schools and colleges. There are good links with the Connexions service for post-16 students. Parents' views, and the views of all pupils, are actively sought. For example, each classroom has a suggestion box which is used by pupils. The views of the school council are taken into account and considerable care is taken to explain to pupils why certain suggestions are not feasible, for example, the request for thinner chips. Pupils receive good guidance on healthy eating, and the dangers of hazardous substances. Appropriate and sensitive guidance is given on the preparation for adulthood programmes. Less well developed is the academic guidance that pupils receive but the school has identified this as an area for development.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Leadership and management of the school are good overall. Inspectors agree with the school, that despite previous anxieties surrounding a proposed closure, change of senior managers and pupil population, it is emerging strongly from an insecure past. The recently appointed headteacher has established a sense of purpose and introduced new systems, which are shared by staff. The senior leadership team receives high levels of support and is fully involved. A model of devolved leadership is developing well.

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Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	NA	NA

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	3	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Northern Counties School

Great North Road

Newcastle upon Tyne

Tyne and Wear

NE2 3BB

23 November 2006

Dear Pupils and Students

As you know we recently visited your school to find out how well you are doing. Thank you for looking after us and making us feel so welcome. We really enjoyed our visit and learned a lot about your school. Thank you for telling us about the things you do and how you think your teachers and other staff are helping you to learn.

What we liked about your school.

- The way you enjoy school and want to learn.
- The progress you make, especially with your communication, personal and social skills.
- The care that all staff take of you.
- The way all staff work so well together to help you.
- The links the school has with other schools, and people who help you.

What we have asked your school to do now.

- Collect more accurate information about your progress and lessons to help you learn even better.
- Set targets so that your teachers are clear about what they expect you to learn each year.
- Improve what the post-16 students learn.

Best wishes

Sue Preece

- Her Majesty's Inspector