

Northumberland PRU

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	132130
Local Authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	315929
Inspection date	21 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Jim Bennetts

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

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	16
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	Mr Tom Dexter
Date of previous school inspection	1 June 2005
School address	Hepscott Park Stannington Morpeth Northumberland NE61 6NF
Telephone number	01670 514963
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

This is the only pupil referral unit in Northumberland. Currently, almost all its students are boys in Years 7 and 8. About half its students are permanently excluded from mainstream schools. Others are dual registered at the unit and at their mainstream school. The main aim of the unit is to enable students to return to mainstream education, or on to other suitable provision, as soon as possible. All students are at 'school action plus' on the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice and the unit has a contributory role in assessment of some students for statements of special educational need. All students are of White British heritage; at present there are very few students in the care of the local authority.

The role of the unit is extending to offer support on a part time basis to students who are at risk of exclusion. This outreach work will be developed in liaison with other provision in the county for students with behavioural difficulties. The unit is preparing to receive its first contingent of 10 part time students in November this year.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This unit provides good education and support for its students. The enhancement of students' personal development, well-being and self-esteem is central to its work. Students' strengthened determination to make the best of their opportunities underpins their accelerated academic progress. Though the unit is going through a time of review and realignment of its role, morale is high and students thrive.

Due to disruption in their previous schooling and previous weak attitudes to learning, most students joining this short-stay school have standards that are significantly lower than is usual for their age. This underachievement is swiftly countered. In the supportive and encouraging climate of the unit, students set themselves on a fresh track; they are willing and often keen to learn. By the time they leave, generally to return to mainstream education, standards are approaching average overall. They are a little stronger in art, woodwork and cookery but a little lower in science because expectations are not always high enough. A few could be expected to make more progress in mathematics whilst some lack opportunities for wider challenge in information and communication technology (ICT). For a few, current strategies to bring on literacy are not always effective. Teaching is good overall, though on occasion, not as refined as it should be. The unit provides a good range of learning opportunities in different subjects and an even better range of opportunities for students to stand tall and develop self-respect.

Personal development is a strength of the school. Students enjoy what they do, their attendance improves and they get on well together and with the staff. They learn how to stay healthy, act sensibly, and develop consideration for the way they relate to the communities in which they live, work and play. Students get a feel for cultural traditions, learn to discriminate between right and wrong; and reflect increasingly on where they have come from in terms of attitudes, and where they are going. They are supported and given confidence at every turn and are well prepared to return to mainstream schools.

The unit is well led and managed. Despite uncertainties in staffing, and whilst addressing the call to a wider role, spirits have stayed high. The core work of the unit in re-engaging youngsters has remained vigorous. It is aware that assessment, and what staff sense about students' learning potential, could sometimes be harnessed more effectively and that teaching could occasionally be sharper. Leaders know how things stand and the school is well placed to go from strength-to-strength as it embraces its new roles.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve teaching, to raise standards for those who have potential for higher achievement in science, mathematics, ICT and English.
- Use assessment and other indications of students' potential more effectively in planning learning opportunities.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Most students enter the unit with standards that are below and occasionally well below average for their age. In many cases this is due to discontinuities in their schooling in the past on account of exclusions or poor attendance. In the calm classroom situations, students settle, wax positive in their willingness to learn, and generally thrive. Most achieve well for most of the time and

standards improve rapidly. The school has detailed assessment information, for instance from commercially published diagnostic tests in mathematics, that shows rapid improvement over a term or two from a low starting point. Overall, achievement is good.

In lessons, standards in current work in mathematics are similar to those found nationally for students of this age. They are a little lower in English and lower still in science. In ICT, standards are similar to national standards in work covered, but some aspects, such as spreadsheet work, are underdeveloped. Displays of two and three-dimensional artwork and samples of woodwork show standards that are better than are usually seen for students of this age.

From test scores and the evidence of inspection, it can be seen that a few students are not stretched enough in lessons in some subjects. Occasionally, there are sharp contrasts in the levels at which individuals can operate, for instance with mathematics and ICT at a high level whilst literacy is weak. In such cases, the school is not always sufficiently inventive in seeking strategies to overcome barriers to learning.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

The school is highly effective in winning over students who arrive with negative attitudes to learning. As they kick a football about on the yard, play board games together at breakfast club, and show willingness to give and take in lessons, it is apparent that team work and consideration for others are taking hold. The positive attitudes and generally very good behaviour underpin the good academic achievement. Students like what they do at school. Attendance is improved from a low level to a regularity that compares favourably with that in other schools of this kind.

Lunchtime is a civilized occasion and students enjoy well balanced meals; in cookery, they value chances to develop skills in producing healthy meals cheaply. Though the school is obliged to use facilities a distance away for PE lessons, students enjoy energetic outdoor play each day and there are ample opportunities for outdoor activities. On trips, they pick up something of the strands in the culture of Britain and learn about weighing up risks and adopting safe practices.

Those who on occasion in the past have been prone to outbursts, which have put themselves and others at risk of injury or upset, learn how to manage themselves in a more grown up way. Students make occasional contributions to the wider community by, for example, collecting litter on the beach. More fundamentally, they brace themselves for re-integration to mainstream schools by understanding their need to conduct themselves with consideration for the community in which they live and seek friendships. This crucial outcome, together with enterprise education, and improvement in knowledge of citizenship issues, prepares them well to move on. Striking life size statues, constructed by students, greet at the gate. Display boards within the school explain how these depict advancement in state of mind from depression to confidence and celebration.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good overall. Lessons are characterised by good relationships and methodical work. Students are compliant, attentive and often show eagerness to get on with

the task. Good work habits and positive attitudes to schooling have been firmly established. A good citizenship lesson had been put together well with computer based resources which engaged students effectively. Work in ICT captured students' imagination and they worked with interest and perseverance. Artefacts on display attest to the care and pride that students have put into work in art and craft.

However, sometimes all the students in a group do the same thing, for instance with problems on the angles in a triangle, though it is known that some could do more demanding tasks or work more speedily. Though ICT lessons can be stimulating, the range of opportunities does not give sufficient scope for those with existing accomplished skills. Some work in science is mundane and tends to comprise undemanding literacy tasks when practical work should be a possibility.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum covers all the subjects normally taught to students of this age. The unit sensibly gives strong focus to students' development in the core subjects of English, mathematics, science and ICT. As this is a short-stay placement, the skills and content covered in these subjects concentrates on the 'fundamentals' in order to raise students' basic proficiency for their return to mainstream schooling. Plans for the part time students who will shortly start attending the unit are wisely based on the same principle. Meanwhile, the opportunities provided in art, woodwork and cookery bring out the best in students.

The furtherance of students' personal development and well-being is central to the work of the unit. The implicit curriculum of learning to get on with others, getting tasks accomplished and getting a grip on one's own feelings and emotions is robust, vibrant, and permeates every minute of the school day.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Staff take very good care of students. This is apparent throughout the day in the comings and goings between staff and students, and in the detailed records that are maintained. It is particularly evident in the reflective after-school meeting each afternoon, when teachers share their views on the day's ups and downs for each student in their care. No stone is left unturned in smoothing the path for students' return to mainstream school. This was clear in a meeting to 'hand over' a student to a middle school: parents, the local authority, both schools, and the student, joined with commitment in this bold venture. Arrangements for safeguarding students are fully in place and there is comprehensive liaison with the health service and all other appropriate services to support students.

The unit has reliable assessment information about each student's academic standards when they arrive and as they make progress. Moreover, inferences about their capacity for learning and what may or may not go well can be drawn from day-to-day observation. For instance, the way they assimilate the rules of games and the way they clam up if there are pressures they are uncomfortable with can indicate potential stumbling blocks. To a point, these indicators of how best to meet individuals' needs are identified and acted upon. But this could be sharper.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The acting headteacher took charge of the unit at the beginning of 2008. He is well supported by an acting deputy headteacher. The future role of the unit in providing support for students in Northumberland with behaviour difficulties has been under review since September 2007. It will shortly extend its role to provide part-time schooling for students from several middle schools; further development is anticipated. There have been some recent staff appointments and several staff are on temporary contracts. During this time of uncertainty, yet opportunity, with challenging new work to be put in hand, morale has been sustained and resilience has been marshalled. This unit is a happy ship and an effective one.

Notwithstanding the background uncertainty about futures, the unit has continued to give high quality support and counsel to young people who have temporarily lost their way through adolescence. Expectations of behaviour and effort are unremitting. The well-being of students is the top priority; all students get a fair deal. Leaders have a clear appreciation of how things stand; they know that on occasion some students could cope with a little more challenge in lessons.

As the unit extends its functions to play a greater part in support of Northumberland's school communities, it is becoming increasingly cost effective. It is well guided in its evolving work by the management committee and well directed by the local authority. The unit does its job well. It has the capacity for yet greater impact as it extends its role and refines the provision it makes.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

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

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	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	2

The quality of provision

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

22 October 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Northumberland PRU, Northumberland, NE61 6NF

I enjoyed my visit to your school. Thank you for the help you gave me when I met some of you in lessons and around the school.

You go to a good school. You get on well with one another and with the staff. You work hard in lessons. You enjoy attending and you make the most of the opportunities that the unit offers. I was impressed by the way you got the day started with games of chess and a slice of toast; and I could see from the photographs on display that you have lots of happy times on educational trips. Staff look after you really well, and make every effort to help you move on to other schools.

Because of your good attitudes, you do well in the subjects you learn. Some of the artwork and craftwork on display is really good. Your lessons are effective and I saw some very worthwhile work going on in citizenship. Though facilities for PE are not ideal, you get a wide range of opportunities in all the subjects that are normally taught in schools. I could see from the recipes that you make good use of the cookery room – and that you like to eat liver!

The unit is well run. Things have been put in place to welcome the new students who will be coming as part-timers in November. Preparations are in hand for further links with schools across the county. I have asked your staff to make just two improvements. Occasionally, one or two of you could do work that is just a bit harder, for instance in science, mathematics or with computers. Teachers could spot that you could handle harder things by looking at how you do in tests, or even by watching how quickly you create a second queen in a game of chess.

You have a good unit that you can be proud of. Keep on working hard, and, as with those statues at the gate: be confident; celebrate!

Yours sincerely

Jim Bennetts

Lead inspector