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Mrs Maxine Hepple
The Pheonix Centre
Eldon Street
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Dear Mrs Hepple

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE PHEONIX CENTRE

Following my visit with Katrina Gueli HMI to your school on 6 and 7 May 2008 and my subsequent visit to the alternative provision site on May 19 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in October 2006. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services at Darlington.

Yours sincerely

Tom Grieveson HMI

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF THE PHEONIX CENTRE

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 6 and 7 May 2008.

Evidence

Inspectors observed a range of lessons at Key Stages 3 and 4. Registration procedures were monitored, documents scrutinised and formal meetings were held with the centre's headteacher and senior leadership team, centre staff and representatives of the local authority (LA). The chair of the management board was also interviewed and informal discussions were held with students and other staff. Examples of students' work were examined in lessons.

Context

This fourth monitoring visit was originally planned for March 2008 but was delayed due to the temporary closure of the centre to accommodate its move to a new site. Since the previous visit in November 2007 substantial changes are evident in the centre's leadership, staffing, operation, premises and curriculum.

The senior leadership team of headteacher and two deputy headteachers are now in place. The headteacher and one deputy headteacher are new appointments. The centre has been relocated to re-modelled premises at the former Rise Carr Primary School site and has been re-named 'The Phoenix Centre.' These new premises offer students and staff substantially improved accommodation and a greatly enhanced environment in which to work and study. The move has not been without its difficulties however as building works were incomplete when staff and students arrived and important resources were not place. This has created unnecessary complications for both staff and students and has made the transfer more difficult than it should have been.

There are 102 students on the centre's role. Forty eight Key Stage 3 and 4 students, who were mainly housed at the Gladstone Street and McMullen House sites, are now located at the Phoenix Centre. A further 52 places are provided for at the newly remodelled Key Stage 4 Alternative Centre which is based at the former Mc Mullen House site. This provision coordinates vocational programmes, mostly through accredited providers, offering a 'bridge between the centre and college.' The site was closed during the inspection visit to allow equipment to be installed. Consequently, a further visit took place on the morning of 19 May 2008 in order to monitor the quality of provision for Phoenix Centre students.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards were reported on fully at the previous visit and no further examinations have been taken by students since that time. Standards observed in lessons remain inadequate although an increasing proportion of students continue to make satisfactory progress and particularly at Key Stage 3. The introduction of the new Key Stage 4 curriculum represents significant progress in providing a suitable course of study for older students. However, its introduction is

too recent to have a measurable impact on their learning and achievement although initial evidence is promising.

The centre has established a comprehensive tracking system which matches students' prior attainment to future targets, enabling staff to monitor rates of progress. This work is recent and requires further time to become fully embedded and to be utilised by staff in preparing lessons and tracking students' progress.

Personal development and well-being

The personal development and well-being of most students continues to show satisfactory improvement overall. While the majority of students have moved successfully to the new site, a significant proportion of the Key Stage 4 students in particular have found the move to be difficult. A combination of heightened expectations regarding their behaviour and conduct (including a ban on smoking on the site); the introduction of a new curriculum; unfamiliarity with the physical layout of the building and its unfinished state and the need to develop relationships with new staff have resulted in significant behaviour problems and reduced attendance amongst some older students. Staff have worked diligently to overcome these difficulties but a minority of Year 11 students do not attend.

In most lessons relationships between students and the staff are positive with the majority being cooperative, displaying satisfactory attitudes to learning. Some however are reluctant to engage in lessons and when this occurs, older students in particular demonstrate challenging behaviour and use abusive language towards other students and staff.

The number of exclusions at KS4 has remained in line with that seen previously but at Key Stage 3 the number has increased. This is due mainly to the very challenging behaviour exhibited by some relatively recent newcomers to the centre. Support for targeted individuals through for example, time spent in the nurture centre and pastoral counsellor support, is complimenting existing strategies and is proving to be effective.

Attendance figures for Key Stage 3 remain in line with those seen in November 2007 although several students still have very high levels of absence. There has been a slight decline in overall attendance at Key Stage 4 with this decrease due in part to the reaction of some older students to the new regime and the move to the new premises. Centre staff continue to work effectively with individual students, their families and outside agencies and the maintenance of good attendance amongst targeted students is testimony to this work.

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

- Take action to improve attendance so that pupils can take advantage of the learning opportunities available. – satisfactory
- Take action to manage pupils' behaviour more effectively so that exclusions are reduced. – satisfactory

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning has improved since the previous visit because important changes have occurred to the way that teachers plan learning and structure lessons. These changes have made most difference at Key Stage 4 where previous provision has been inadequate. It is now satisfactory. Most teaching and learning at Key Stage 3 remains good.

There is greater consistency in the way that teachers identify learning objectives and build progression into their planning so that lessons have coherence. When teachers set the context for the lesson well, so that students understand what they are required to do, matters progress successfully and students engage productively in tasks. Teachers are most successful when they interpret the lesson structure flexibly, allowing time to pursue aspects of learning which most interest the students. The majority enjoy practical activities, opportunities to use the new computer facilities and to undertake tasks which have relevance to their personal interests and future prospects. When these factors combine in lessons students make good progress.

Conversely, when students are confused about the purpose of lessons they become bored and some refuse to take part. This occurs because the language used by staff to describe the lesson's objectives is inaccessible to students and creates confusion. Similarly, when activities are mundane (mainly worksheet based) and fail to inspire or generate interest, students are more likely to become restless and on occasions this leads to aggressive behaviour, unacceptable language and attempts to leave the room. When incidents of this kind do occur, much learning time is lost.

The use of computers and interactive whiteboards is increasing but remains under-used by some teachers and the opportunities afforded by these new technologies are missed. Due to delays in the installation of the centre's information and communications (ICT) facilities staff have restricted access to software which would considerably enhance the quality of students' learning.

There have been significant improvements to the curriculum for centre based students since the previous visit and particularly since Easter at Key Stage 4. Students at both key stages now have a structured timetable with an increased focus on the development of English, mathematics, science and ICT skills. Opportunities to develop students' social skills are more explicit for example through breakfast club registration and weekly tutorial sessions. In addition, regular practical sessions have been introduced to include creative subjects and life skills. Physical Education facilities are now available on site and these lessons in conjunction with the PSHE programme are contributing to students' understanding of how to keep fit and live healthily. The variety of sport on offer is however limited as outdoor space is not ready for use and some aspects of the indoor facilities require completion. Students at McMullen House benefit from a core curriculum, including Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship education, and have opportunities to study an expanding range of vocational courses. These include outdoor education, woodcraft, hair and beauty, construction, groundwork and motor vehicle maintenance. Cultural studies are beginning to promote students understanding of different cultures and lifestyles. Opportunities to gain course work accreditation are being increased and the

curriculum is becoming more effective in promoting reintegration to school or alternative provision although much further work is required.

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

- Eliminate weaknesses in teaching, by introducing an accurate assessment system and raising teachers' low expectations of pupils' achievement. – satisfactory
- Develop an appropriate curriculum. – satisfactory

Leadership and management

The strategic purpose of the centre has been clarified, including its integral place in secondary school provision within the LA. The centre's management committee is comprised of headteachers or their representatives from all the LA's secondary schools. Student access to the centre's provision is now managed according to set criteria based upon the needs of individual students and the range of provision which the centre offers. It is no longer a place of first resort but an appropriately planned part of wider LA provision for students with challenging behavioural and emotional needs.

The re-organisation of the centre's leadership structure has been completed. The senior team is now fully in place. Teaching and support staff are deployed according to mainly age appropriate class groups with the majority of students being taught separately in either Key Stage 3 or 4. Important decisions to improve the curriculum to better meet the needs of all students have been implemented recently and although further work is still required, improvement is evident.

The physical transition to the centre has been successfully managed although this has presented a significant challenge to the centre's senior leadership and staff. Important health and safety matters regarding the security of the site and the welfare of students requires speedy resolution including all relevant safeguarding matters. In addition, delays in completing building works and installing resources has resulted in staff and students not benefiting fully from all the opportunities that the site affords.

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

- Ensure that the centre has the effective leadership and management to make the improvements necessary to raise pupils' achievements and the overall quality of education. – satisfactory

External support

The LA has delivered on its plans to establish appropriate provision for students attending the pupil referral unit and to appoint a new senior leadership team. Important strategic decisions have secured the centre's role within LA secondary provision under-pinned by a clear rationale and sense of purpose. The centre's management board is fully in place and an admissions forum provides a suitable gate

keeping role to ensure that student admissions are commensurate with the centre's capacity to provide appropriate education and care. Difficulties remain however with regard to the health, safety and welfare of students and these require urgent resolution.

Priorities for further improvement

- Complete all site works and resolve resourcing delays to ensure that the centre is fit for purpose in all respects.
- Urgently address all outstanding health and safety matters and compliance with safeguarding regulations.