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Ms Monica Quinn
Acting Headteacher
RNIB Sunshine House, Northwood
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Northwood
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Dear Ms Quinn

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF RNIB SUNSHINE HOUSE, NORTHWOOD

Following my visit to your school on 30 April and 1 May 2008, 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 December 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report 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.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State and the chair of governors.

Yours sincerely

Judith Charlesworth
Additional Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF RNIB SUNSHINE HOUSE, NORTHWOOD

Report from the first monitoring inspection: 30 April – 1 May 2008

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work including lessons, individual pupils' work and assembly. She scrutinised documents, and met for discussions with the acting headteacher, the teachers, some of the therapists, the chair of governors, the school's external support (a National Leader in Education) and a representative of the proprietor, the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB).

Context

There have been a number of changes since the inspection in December 2007. A new acting headteacher took up appointment in February 2008. The previous acting headteacher, in post for two months, reverted to her position as Manager of Children's Services for the RNIB. She continues to offer regular support for the school. A third round of recruitment for a substantive headteacher is currently underway. The post of deputy headteacher was made redundant in the last few weeks as the first phase of a staffing re-structure. The post-holder (who was also the last substantive headteacher) had been on long-term sick leave for some months. External support through the National College for School Leadership commenced in March 2008. In the week of the monitoring visit the school was notified that the line manager from the RNIB was leaving the organisation. A school staffing review and proposed re-structure is being undertaken by RNIB and consultation with the school will open in May.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement is still not good enough. This is fully acknowledged by the acting headteacher who has identified a number of developments to improve it. One of these is to improve the usefulness of pupils' individual education plans (IEPs), and this has already been successfully implemented. The format of IEPs has been changed. Fewer, clearer targets are set and, as a result, pupils are making satisfactory progress towards them. They also make good progress in the programmes set by the therapists. Nevertheless, this cannot contribute to improved overall achievement because other aspects of the school's provision, such as the curriculum, and assessment and its use, are not good enough to underpin effective teaching and planning.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' personal development and well-being are satisfactory. The school provides a very safe and secure environment. Attendance and behaviour are both good, taking the pupils' special needs into account. Relationships between staff and pupils are good and, often, outstanding. The staff are clearly committed to looking after the pupils, maintaining their dignity and helping them to be safe and

comfortable. The school is beginning to promote pupils' healthy lifestyles more robustly, for example making sure that they use the excellent outside facilities as often as possible during lessons and at playtimes. While pupils are content to be in school, they do not always appear to particularly enjoy what they are doing. Some activities, such as work focused on their IEP targets, can be very repetitious and do not engage the pupils sufficiently well. At times, activities are overly low-key. The benefits of more exciting and interesting activities are reflected in the delight and interest on pupils' faces. The pupils generally enjoy outings and activities carried out in small and whole class groups. Where effective, these give pupils a sense of belonging and contribution to their community. However, at times, staff do not do enough to help all pupils in the group know what is happening when it is not directly their turn.

Quality of provision

Although individual teachers can provide satisfactory and good lessons, the quality of teaching overall remains inadequate because there is no agreed curriculum to provide a purposeful context for lessons and activities, or a basis for assessing pupils' progress. In effective lessons, activities include all pupils in the group through intensive interaction with staff and the good use of resources. Activities are lively, fun and well chosen to use and develop pupils' existing skills. They take good account of their visual difficulties. The pupils are consequently alert and engaged. However, such lessons cannot form part of a systematic approach to promoting pupils' progress over time because of the weaknesses in curriculum and assessment.

Staff know that the curriculum is inadequate and are very keen to improve it. They have tried various curricula and methods of recording and assessment over the past few years, but their use petered out because they were unsuitable and weak leadership did not address the situation. The timetable does not give enough time to the statutory curriculum. Mornings are largely spent on individual IEP work and therapy programmes. However, these sessions are not included in curriculum time. Afternoons are allocated to topic work which does take account of National Curriculum subjects, but does not provide enough opportunity for pupils to work towards their IEP targets in this curricular context. In addition, there is no suitable overview of which subjects or strands of subjects are addressed in each topic to ensure breadth, balance and the systematic build-up of pupils' skills over time. Assessment of pupils' developing skills is therefore arbitrary.

This situation is now being robustly addressed by the acting headteacher. Curriculum development is a high priority in the new school improvement plan and is a focus for this term's support from the school's external consultant. Good work has already taken place in the early years class in preparation for the new Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum which will become statutory in September 2008. Curriculum development will be complemented by the recently purchased, nationally used commercial assessment system which enables very small steps of progress to be recorded, tracked and compared with similar pupils in other schools. Teachers have been trained to use the system and time has been set aside for staff teams to assess each pupil and enter the information into the system. Although progress on the area identified for development has not yet been sufficient, nevertheless, much has been put into place in the past two months to support future improvement.

A renewed partnership with parents has been instigated by the development of a home/school book for exchange of information, an invitation to parents for membership of a new committee to look at aspects of the school's work, and an upbeat letter from the new chair of governors urging parents to rebuild the family community feel of the school.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in December 2007:

- Set challenging targets for each pupil and monitor their progress regularly to ensure that all make the progress of which they are capable— inadequate

Leadership and management

The school has made satisfactory progress towards one of the areas for improvement identified, and inadequate progress on the other two. Some of this has been out of the school's hands. No progress has been made towards restoring stability to the senior management structure; indeed, the position as outlined in the context section of this letter has worsened. Nevertheless, there have been significant, positive developments in the last two months which have improved the school's ability to move forward, although these are still very new and not yet embedded. Staff have confidence in the new acting headteacher although they remain anxious about the future leadership of the school. The acting headteacher is strongly supported by the chair of governors who is providing very constructive challenge to both the school staff and the RNIB. The acting headteacher, through the RNIB, has commissioned the support of an external consultant. Together, and with the support of the governing body and the RNIB Manager of Children's Services, they are laying down the initial ground work for improving the quality of education, raising standards and dealing with the identified areas for improvement. While developments are detailed in a suitable school improvement plan, this is not yet a reflection of effective whole-school self-evaluation. The school's written evaluation of its performance, which was found to be over-optimistic in the last inspection, has not been updated. Nevertheless, discussions with the senior managers indicate that they now have a realistic view of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

The RNIB has developed new governance structures, and has spelled out the various roles and responsibilities of the governing body. Governance is now improved. Governing body meetings are more frequent and purposeful, communication with the school is now much improved, and a governors' visits protocol has been established so that they better understand the working of the school. A committee has been established to support and monitor improvement so that the school can be removed from special measures as quickly as possible. However, although progress in governance has been satisfactory, the governing body has a few vacancies and impending changes which put its effectiveness in jeopardy. The chair is fully aware of this and is proactively seeking nominations for new members.

The acting headteacher has identified a number of systems and practices that are needed to improve the school's effectiveness. These are appropriately detailed in the school improvement plan. Some action has already begun, although it is too

early to see a positive impact. Actions include tackling significant weaknesses in provision, improving IEPs and the purchase of a reputable commercial assessment system. The external consultant has started to provide professional coaching for teaching staff which has been well received. However, other identified, important, longer-term developments to improve teaching, such as staff performance management and curriculum development, have not yet begun.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in December 2007:

- Restore stability to the senior management structure to set a clear context within which the school can move forward with confidence – inadequate
- Ensure that all governors are clear about their roles and responsibilities so that they can act as an effective critical friend to the school – satisfactory
- Implement rigorous and robust systems so that the effectiveness of the school's provision can be judged accurately and bring about improvements in teaching – inadequate

External support

The RNIB was not able to send the statement of action to Ofsted in time for it to be evaluated before this inspection. The statement of action will be evaluated and reported on in the next monitoring letter.

As the proprietor, the RNIB was slow to act on the judgement that the school required special measures. However, support has been more appropriate since the appointment of the most recent acting headteacher. Good support and guidance is provided by the Manager of Children's Services. The organisation has more recently listened to the identified needs of the school and provided additional financial resources to fund support and improvement, for example to provide coaching and classroom cover for staff so that they can develop their understanding of the new systems.

The school has recently commissioned the support of a National Leader in Education and his work started in March. This began with professional coaching for staff to help empower them and support the distribution of leadership and management through the school. This has so far been well received but has further to go. The main focus of this term's work will be on working with staff to establish a suitable curriculum which will act as the key stone for improvement in teaching, assessment and pupils' achievement.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop and implement a suitable curriculum.