

The Phoenix Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	131629
Local Authority	Darlington
Inspection number	329920
Inspection dates	27–28 November 2008
Reporting inspector	Tom Grieveson HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

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)	51
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Keith Cotgrave
Headteacher	Mrs Maxine Hepple
Date of previous school inspection	1 October 2006
School address	Phoenix Centre Eldon Street Darlington County Durham DL3 0NS
Telephone number	01325 348600
Fax number	0

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

Most students placed at the centre, in the past, have been excluded from school or deemed to be at risk of exclusion for behavioural reasons. Admissions to the centre are now considered against revised criteria. The new admissions forum meets regularly to consider whether the centre has appropriate provision for students identified by schools and the local authority (LA) as requiring placement. Most students at the centre reside in the LA but some attend from neighbouring council areas. The proportion of students with statements of special educational need has increased. The centre moved to its new premises in April 2008.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 4

In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures. Nevertheless, in accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could reasonably be expected to perform. The school is therefore given a notice to improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to students' achievement and standards; the accuracy, reliability and use of assessment information; the quality and consistency of differentiation in teachers' planning and the attendance of older Key Stage 4 students.

Much has been achieved under the leadership of the headteacher since her appointment in January 2008. The move to the new centre has marked a break with the inadequate provision and facilities at the former sites. The headteacher, senior team and LA have realigned the centre's strategic role, making it integral to behaviour management within the secondary sector. Student placements are now better matched to the centre's provision; it is no longer a place of first resort for excluded students.

The quality of provision has improved since the inspection of October 2006. This includes improvements to teaching and learning and the curriculum and extends to the good care offered to students. The impact of this provision is evident in much improved student behaviour and attitudes towards learning and each other. Achievement remains inadequate and standards are significantly below average. Improved teaching and learning is helping Key Stage 3 and younger Key Stage 4 students to make much better progress than previously, but they are capable of achieving more. The legacy of past failings is most evident in the inadequate achievement of the majority of older Key Stage 4 students and is compounded by their poor attendance. Several of these students rarely attend despite the best efforts of the school and the LA.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory and a small but growing proportion is good. Most teachers use their keen awareness of students' learning needs to design well-planned and appropriate activities. Their good subject knowledge and evident enthusiasm engages and interests students and is effective in helping them to improve. Teachers are sometimes hampered in their lesson preparations by an ineffective assessment and tracking system that restricts their efforts to provide consistent, meaningful and well-matched learning experiences for all students. Teachers work hard to overcome this but on occasions it does inhibit students' progress.

A clear focus on improving students' basic skills and a broader range of enrichment activities has improved the curriculum. This is successfully involving students more fully in learning. The curriculum is satisfactory and recent changes at Key Stage 4 have further strengthened provision. Better use is made of various organisations to provide training and courses that are well-matched to students' individual needs. This is proving successful for all except the most disaffected older students.

The high degree of care and concern shown by staff has underpinned the progress made in improving students' behaviour and is reflected in the positive relationships evident between staff and students. Expectations of students' behaviour are more overt. Stringent rules have been largely accepted by the great majority of students and this has led to a calmer environment in which to learn. Incidents that do arise are dealt with calmly and assertively. Staff provide students with greater confidence that difficulties are being successfully managed.

What the school should do to improve further

In order to improve students' achievement and standards, the centre should:

- Improve the accuracy, reliability and use of assessment information to ensure it becomes an integral part of teaching and learning
- Improve the quality of differentiation in teachers' planning so that the needs of all learners are met all of the time
- Improve attendance, particularly for the older students.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 4

Attainment on entry to the centre is exceptionally low for the majority of students usually because their schooling has been interrupted regularly by a pattern of exclusions and poor attendance. Some students enter at national curriculum level two, although the majority have attained levels three or four. Very few have achieved more highly. Progress at Key Stage 3 and for younger students at Key Stage 4 is inadequate, although it is better than at the time of the previous inspection. Older Key Stage 4 students, whose attendance remains stubbornly low, continue to underachieve significantly. The centre's ability to accurately track students' progress is severely limited by the absence of reliable assessment information. This inhibits teachers when planning learning and occasionally results in students not being sufficiently challenged in their work. More able students are particularly disadvantaged by this.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. Many learn how to think and talk sensibly about their problems. They show a growing understanding of the importance of trying not to lose their temper and not putting other people at risk through irrational or impetuous behaviour. That is not to say such incidents do not occur; they just happen less frequently than in the past. Social development is sometimes hampered by very small class groups, which give few opportunities for students to learn how to work co-operatively. It is further hindered, in some situations, where there are more adults than students in a lesson and this results in students having insufficient opportunities to work independently.

Attendance at Key Stage 4 is inadequate. This is in marked contrast to Key Stage 3 where the majority of students respond positively to what the centre offers and attend regularly. The move to the new site and heightened expectations about behaviour and conduct has led to infrequent or non-attendance by some older Key Stage 4 students.

Nonetheless, most students demonstrate an enjoyment of the centre and each other's company. This occurs mainly in less formal settings such as in the 'zone' area at lunchtimes. Students' interest and commitment is captured well by staff in many lessons such as the centre's fashion project, 'strictly come designing,' preparations for a forthcoming skiing course and in physical education lessons where many students throw themselves wholeheartedly into strenuous activities. Students' commitment to living a healthy lifestyle is also improving. Most enjoy the healthy school dinners and there is compliance with the centre's complete ban on smoking on site in marked contrast to the past.

Students develop a satisfactory sense of citizenship and have worked well together to organise fund raising for 'Children in Need'. Opportunities for older students to learn workplace skills

are limited but improving, with a growing number gaining valuable skills such as bricklaying and hairdressing.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory and a small proportion is good. Most teachers use their personal knowledge of students' capabilities and past learning to good effect when preparing lessons. This ensures that activities support students effectively and is helping increasing numbers to make better progress. When this aligns with teachers' use of good subject knowledge and enthusiasm for a particular subject, it motivates students by setting an effective context for the lesson. Students respond positively by listening attentively, answering questions and by sharing their ideas. Inaccurate assessment information makes it harder for teachers to plan lessons than it should be. This leads, on occasions, to students' being insufficiently challenged in their work and restricts the progress of which they are capable, affecting more able students in particular. Class sizes vary widely. In some older classes where attendance is poor, students may be outnumbered by staff. This can lead to over-direction and restricts opportunities for students to work independently.

Students' attitudes to learning and their behaviour have improved since the previous inspection. There are few examples of challenging behaviour. In most lessons, relationships are positive and students respond well to staff requests and instructions. Lessons are mostly calm and where disruption does occur staff deal with matters effectively. Teaching and support staff work well together targeting students for additional help or withdrawal as appropriate. Increasingly students cooperate well together and where disruption does occur, other students tend to remain focused on their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The curriculum is satisfactory and much improved since the previous inspection at both key stages. The new headteacher and staff, supported by the LA, have worked hard to develop and strengthen the provision which the centre makes for all students. The curriculum promotes the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology but also includes opportunities for students to study art, participate in physical and practical activities, study science and elements of the humanities. Recent changes have tackled weakness in the curriculum for Key Stage 4 students. A widening range of new activities with different organisations, training providers and the local college is beginning to make the curriculum better tailored to the needs of individual students. Relevant opportunities are being afforded, which hitherto were not.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Staff exhibit a very high degree of care and concern for the welfare of students and the centre works effectively with several agencies and professionals to improve students' lives. While expectations about behaviour are more exacting, the majority of students have embraced this changed context well and this is reflected in their positive interaction with staff. Staff understand students' personal needs well and work hard to support and cater for them. All health and

safety and safeguarding requirements have been met. Outstanding site security matters, identified during the summer term 2008, have been resolved and safety further enhanced by the high levels of supervision evident throughout the day. Strategies to tackle non-attendance are proving successful at Key Stage 3 and with younger students at Key Stage 4, but the attendance of the oldest students is poor despite the centre's best efforts to improve matters.

Academic guidance remains weak because the collection, analysis and use of student performance information is inaccurate. The new procedures introduced earlier in the year promised much but these have not been developed well. Consequently, the collection of assessment information is inconsistent and unreliable and does not provide staff with a secure basis from which to plan learning or accurately track students' progress. This undermines teachers' capacity to improve students' achievement and standards. Regular opportunities to review progress with students are mostly behavioural or attendance driven and are done well. However, the evaluation of progress towards academic targets is too infrequent and not given sufficient emphasis.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The centre's strategic leadership has improved well under the direction of the headteacher. There is now a secure focus on raising standards and strengthening students' achievement underpinned by significant efforts to address the inadequacies identified at the previous inspection. Self-evaluation is mostly accurate, although the centre's leadership has been overly confident about the quality and reliability of student performance data.

The headteacher has been successful in gaining the support and commitment of the staff. There is a collective determination to improve and meet the needs and aspirations of the students. Students and staff have settled well in their new premises; there is a sense of pride in the accommodation it offers. Collectively, they view it as a new beginning for the centre and recognise the scope it offers compared to its inadequate predecessor.

The centre's role in supporting community cohesion is satisfactory and improving. Since locating to the new site, the headteacher and staff have worked diligently to engage with the local community. There is, for example, an agreed action plan for community involvement; work with a local charity has resulted in community commitment to the new centre allotment and the premises have been made available for community use.

Governance continues to strengthen. The membership and commitment of the management committee, which includes representatives from all the LA's secondary schools, reflects an emerging consensus that the centre is integral to the management of students with challenging behaviour in the LA. There is much evidence of success, with overall exclusions in the LA reducing and students being placed appropriately at the centre now that admissions criteria are clear. While committee members are appreciative of the work of the headteacher and staff, they demonstrate high expectations about their work on behalf of the students.

Value for money remains inadequate but there is satisfactory and strengthening capacity to improve.

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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?	4
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?	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Achievement and standards

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

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?	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	3
The attendance of learners	4
The behaviour of learners	3
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	4

The quality of provision

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	4
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	4
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
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?	Yes

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

1 December 2008

Dear Students,

Inspection of The Phoenix Centre, Darlington. DL3 0NS

On behalf of Mr Younger and myself, I would like to thank you all for the welcome that you gave to us during the inspection of the centre on 27 and 28 November 2008. We really enjoyed meeting you, observing you in lessons and around the centre and discussing your views about the work that you do. The report is now complete and I would like to tell you what it contains.

Firstly, although much has been achieved in the last two years, there is still a great deal of hard work ahead. Mrs Hepple and all the staff are working diligently to improve the centre and we know how much you appreciate their efforts. We were very impressed by your behaviour in lessons and around the school. Well done. We consider that most aspects of the centre are satisfactory now but that you all need more support to reach higher standards and make more progress in your learning. Therefore, we have given the centre a 'Notice to Improve'. This means that the centre will be inspected again in about a year's time and that another inspector will visit during the coming year to check on the progress that is being made.

We have asked Mrs Hepple and the staff to concentrate on making improvements in four areas:

- To help you all to reach higher standards and make better progress in your learning
- To ensure that the staff make better use of assessment information so that they can track your progress and achievements more accurately
- To give teachers access to better assessment information so that they can always plan lessons which meet the needs of all of you
- To help you to improve your attendance even further, particularly for the older students at Key Stage 4.

Perhaps in discussion with the staff you can suggest ways in which you can help the centre to make improvements in these areas. Please accept our very best wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Grieveson

Her Majesty's Inspector