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Mr G Cordwell
The Headteacher
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Dear Mr Cordwell

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Burton Learning Centre

Following my visit with Alan Dobbins to your school on 9 December 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 June 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

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, the chair of the management committee and the Director of Education for Staffordshire.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Burton Learning Centre

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 9 December 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, groups of staff, the chair of the management committee and two representatives from the local authority. Inspectors had conversations with pupils at each site.

Context

A new substantive headteacher and deputy headteacher took up post in September 2008. The Winshill site was closed for three weeks at the start of September to allow the PRU to make its long awaited move into a new building. In September, the local authority decided that there were health and safety issues for pupils at the Uttoxeter site and closed it except as a staff base. The six Uttoxeter based pupils are currently working in a local church hall and library and spending the rest of their week with alternative providers or taking part in sports or educational visits. The Waterloo site remains at the same venue as at the time of the section 5 inspection. Additionally, small numbers of pupils are home tutored, attend an alternative off site provision full time, or attend college. The total number on roll at the PRU is currently 46, which is lower than at the time of the section 5 inspection.

There is a greater degree of movement between the Winshill and Waterloo sites than at the time of the section 5 inspection, with several pupils spending some time at each site for different subjects, and some staff teaching at both sites.

Achievement and standards

A third of the pupils who left the PRU in summer 2008 gained no qualifications. Others gained one or more GCSE or other qualifications, mainly at lower grades. Overall, standards attained by pupils at the end of Year 11 in 2008 were well below national averages and achievement was inadequate. One Year 10 pupil gained a grade D GCSE in science a year early, which was a good achievement.

The headteacher and deputy headteacher have introduced a range of suitable measures to begin to improve achievement. These have not yet been consistently implemented across the sites and leaders are aware that doing so is now a priority. However, where the strategies are being used well, primarily at the Winshill site, they are beginning to have some positive impact on pupils' achievement.

The work in pupils' books and the progress in lessons indicate that pupils based at the Winshill site are beginning to make better progress than previously in a range of subjects. This is because of the greatly improved assessment of their starting points when they join the PRU and the introduction of lessons which are more tightly

focused on the pupils' needs. Senior leaders' evaluation is that this improved progress will be demonstrated by the PRU's end of term assessments. A much improved range of accreditation is helping pupils, including those with a statement of special educational needs, to see more reason to work hard in each lesson. At the Waterloo Street site, the work pupils are given to do in English and mathematics lacks sufficient rigour and progression is not clearly built in. Marking is unsatisfactory and there is no evidence that pupils' achievement in these subjects has improved at this site. For several pupils at each site, poor attendance means that they are severely underachieving.

Appropriate training has been introduced to support staff to meet the needs of pupils with statements of special educational needs better. Better assessment for all pupils is helping this group to make progress, as is the use of individual literacy targets, particularly when they are working at the Winshill site. Assessment information now needs to be used to identify any additional provision necessary to meet these pupils' additional needs.

Progress since the section 5 inspection in June 2008 on the areas for improvement:

- improve the achievement of all pupils especially those with a statement of special educational needs – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour during the inspection was at least satisfactory and often good. In well taught lessons pupils were well motivated and keen to learn, even when they were not very confident in their ability to do so. Few reminders about appropriate behaviour were needed. A new tracking sheet, which focuses on the behaviours needed for learning, is a useful reminder to pupils about what is required, and the related points system is motivating.

Pupils at the Winshill site now have a choice of healthy lunches which they enjoy. Eating together at lunchtime with the staff is a good opportunity to socialise, and pupils make the most of this. No lunches are provided at the other sites which lead to pupils eating unhealthy food. However, the headteacher has taken appropriate steps to ensure that this is fully remedied from January.

Attendance remains too low. The PRU's figures initially seemed to indicate some good improvements, but these have been miscalculated. Revised figures suggest that attendance has improved since the time of the section 5 inspection, but it is not clear by how much. There are still too many pupils missing significant amounts of learning time, although greater involvement from the education welfare officer, working with the PRU, is starting to have an impact. The PRU's systems to record and track attendance require improvement. The targets set by the local authority for improvements in attendance are not sufficiently aspirational given the PRU's long history of low attendance.

There have been no exclusions since September 2008.

Progress since the section 5 inspection in June 2008 on the areas for improvement:

- improve pupils' attendance – inadequate.

Quality of provision

Teaching seen during the visit was satisfactory overall, with a number of good elements seen in the lessons at the Winshill site. Relationships between staff and pupils at all sites were positive – staff were consistently supportive and were sensitive to pupils' needs. The most productive relationships additionally involved staff challenging pupils to take risks with their learning or to try something new. The best lessons were very well planned and moved at a good pace. In these lessons, relevant targets were set for pupils' learning, both on a group and individual basis. These were used well at the end of the lesson to review learning and pupils were included in evaluating their progress. Good attention was paid both to pupils' personal development and academic progress. In all lessons, pupils showed, by the efforts they made to produce their best work, that they have accepted the PRU's rules and the expectations for learning.

An analysis of pupils' work in mathematics and English showed variations in quality between the Winshill and Waterloo sites, indicating variability in the expectations and the quality of teaching. At Winshill, where pupils attend well, pupils' work is presented carefully and shows clear progress related to learning objectives over time. At Waterloo, while pupils produce a reasonable quantity of work, progress in English and mathematics is limited because lessons are not planned well enough to ensure progression in learning.

The curriculum for pupils who attend the three sites has improved since the time of the section 5 inspection. Senior leaders have thought carefully about the direction they want the curriculum to take and plans to improve it further are thorough and well thought out. Importantly, for those pupils who are permanently excluded, it is based firmly on a range of recognised and relevant qualifications. Key Stage 4 pupils follow one of five 'Learning Pathways', which include a suitable core curriculum enriched by a broad menu of personalised options such as motor mechanics or a sports and fitness award. All full time pupils who attend the three sites now receive weekly personal, social and health education. Crucially, sex and relationships education has begun at one of the sites and the leaders intend to introduce this to the others in the new term.

Staff have worked in partnership with the off site external provider attended full-time by a small number of pupils in order to improve the curriculum offered, although this is not yet in place. For those few pupils who tutored at home, the curriculum remains very narrow, although this has begun to improve.

The new premises at the Winshill site have greatly enhanced the provision. Classrooms are well equipped and, crucially, the centre includes specialist teaching rooms for science, food technology and design and technology. Pupils have access

to plenty of computers. Appropriate plans are in place to improve the quality of the teaching space at Waterloo Street. The headteacher recognises that the temporary Uttoxeter site is not fit for purpose, and this will cease to be used from the end of this term.

Progress since the section 5 inspection in June 2008 on the areas for improvement:

- ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all groups, especially pupils with a statement of special educational needs, and that all pupils receive their full entitlement to personal, social, citizenship and health education – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The new headteacher, very well supported by the new deputy headteacher, has made clear inroads into improving the provision for all pupils. The leaders have a clear vision for the PRU's future, and this is being realised through a series of well targeted actions. Their focus has rightly been on injecting rigour into the systems and structures which support learning, for example the way in which pupils are assessed on entry to the PRU, the ongoing assessment of their progress, the expectations for behaviour, and the planning and teaching of lessons. Good attention has been paid to staff training. Importantly, teachers have been paired with mainstream school teachers to keep their subject knowledge up to date. Several staff have responded well to the new expectations and teaching is improving as a result. Leaders are aware that the new routines and expectations, for example the use of targets and regular tutor time sessions, are not being implemented consistently enough across the sites. Sensibly, more flexible timetabling is planned for January to make the most of staff's skills and enhance pupils' experiences.

The headteacher has thought carefully about the function of the three sites and improvements in their use are planned for January. The purpose of each new staffing appointment has been carefully thought through. The rationale for having a new base at Uttoxeter is clear, as are the criteria for the evaluation of its effectiveness. However, there is not yet a clear enough rationale for the use of the Waterloo and Winshill sites.

The new management committee is well organised and well led. Members are a useful representation of local schools, the local authority and outside agencies and, importantly, membership includes a carer. Minutes indicate that the committee is already providing robust challenge and a good level of support to the headteacher. Dialogue has begun with local headteachers about their relationship with the PRU. The committee's growing understanding of the needs of the PRU makes it well placed to be able to support with the strategic direction.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- put in a place a management committee that can provide effective strategic planning, and which rigorously monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of the senior leadership team and quality of the PRU's provision – satisfactory.

External support

Support from the local authority has been satisfactory overall, although there are significant weaknesses in the way in which the local authority has carried out its statutory duties with regard to pupils with statements of special educational needs.

The school improvement officer has a secure understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the PRU and its different sites and has given valuable support and challenge to the new leaders. The revised action plan is more ambitious and usefully includes dates by which each step should be achieved. The local authority's core group meetings are an appropriate forum to evaluate the impact of its own support as well as the PRU's progress, although the depth of discussions are not fully reflected in the minutes. Support has been given to develop teaching strategies for pupils with special educational needs and appropriate additional support for the development of personal, social and health education is planned for the new year. Importantly, the local authority has agreed to fund additional administrative support for the PRU, and to provide training and support to ensure that attendance is accurately recorded. The local authority has supported the appointment of new staff and, with the headteacher, has begun to take appropriate action to rationalise the staffing structure.

The local authority recognises that the temporary accommodation at the church at Uttoxeter is inadequate and will ensure that this is no longer used.

The local authority has not met its statutory responsibilities to carry out annual reviews of pupils' statements of special educational needs. Several pupils' statements have not been reviewed since their placement at the PRU. This needs attention as a matter of urgency.

Priorities for further improvement

As a matter of urgency the local authority should:

- carry out all overdue and due annual reviews of the statements of special educational needs of pupils on roll at Burton Learning Centre
- through this process assess, with the PRU leaders, any additional provision needed for these pupils, such as community and adolescent mental health services or additional Connexions support
- ensure that this support is put in place

The PRU should:

- ensure that attendance is recorded accurately, analysed regularly and any inadequate attendance is addressed
- develop a clear rationale for the use of each site
- ensure the consistent implementation of the emerging good practice, especially the use of targets, the use of tutor time and the structure of lessons.