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Mr Iain Williams
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Dear Mr Williams

Short inspection of Holly House Special School

Following my visit to the school on 26 September 2018 with Caroline Oliver, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in February 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

You became the headteacher of the school in April 2016. You provided evidence to show how, recently, the school has admitted pupils who have more complex needs than those on roll historically. Many pupils now have not only challenging behaviour, but have a range of specific learning difficulties, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autistic spectrum disorder and mental health needs.

You have restructured the leadership within the school. There are senior leaders with responsibilities for the care of pupils and for helping them move to a mainstream school or to an alternative setting. You have, with stakeholders, produced a vision and ethos document that begins to address this difference. This document has identified a clear set of values and expectations across the school. The intent of the school is clear, but leaders are not yet working consistently enough together to raise the quality of teaching in different subjects. While there are specialist teachers of mathematics and English at key stage 3, staff told me that they were unsure who these were. You described the leadership of core subjects as 'piecemeal'.

The school's new system of assessment is still to be fully implemented. It identifies the learning that pupils should acquire in mathematics and English during each

school year. However, some teachers do not use the information about pupils' starting points well enough to plan their next lessons. Leaders are not consistently clear about what progress they expect pupils to make. Consequently, they are hampered in their ability to set targets for pupils and to then evaluate and review them. Areas where pupils do not make sufficient progress are, therefore, not addressed briskly and effectively.

Pupils have a positive start to their time at Holly House School. Their needs are assessed upon arrival through a small nurture class in the Pod. We observed motivated pupils engaging with focused reading tasks, based upon recipes for making cakes. This led to a productive writing activity during which teachers checked pupils' spelling and pupils used the correct terminology. Parents and carers told inspectors that the induction arrangements for pupils are strong. Each pupil has a 'My Plan', which identifies their additional needs and what staff can do to ensure that those needs are met. However, these are not consistently well used to adjust the curriculum to meet a pupil's specific needs.

Staff told us that they have been able to access a range of professional development to help them better meet the needs of pupils. This includes training in areas such as bereavement, attachment theory, autistic spectrum disorder and increasing awareness of the risks of child sexual exploitation.

At the last inspection, the inspector asked you to ensure that teachers made use of their knowledge of pupils' abilities to set work at the correct level of challenge. However, this is inconsistent across subjects. In science, careful planning leads to lessons where pupils are, for example, asked to predict and test the effectiveness of electronic circuits. I saw pupils engaged and learning new things. In mathematics, however, pupils are given work that does not consistently challenge them. On occasion across different subjects, pupils do not understand sufficiently what they are meant to be learning. Pupils then communicate their lack of interest through negative behaviour. Leaders have not supported their colleagues well enough to improve the quality of teaching in mathematics and English, and to ensure these issues are addressed.

The governing body recognises that the rate of fixed-term exclusions is higher than average. Leaders have planned for their reduction strategically. However, while changes in the school have resulted in the number of physical restraints used in the school decreasing, the number of exclusions in the last academic year increased from the previous year.

At the last inspection, you were asked to ensure that pupils at key stage 3 improved their attendance by 10%. You set clear targets for this, and there is a procedure for checking pupils' absence. Attendance has risen for these pupils. The school uses other agencies, such as educational welfare officers and social care, to help ensure pupils have good attendance. The impact of this is mixed. Attendance at key stage 3 has improved since the last inspection, but remains below the average for special schools.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements meet requirements and are fit for purpose. Staff are well trained in this area, including in local priorities such as child sexual exploitation and peer-on-peer abuse. Leaders have created a more open culture with improved communication with other agencies and local authority officers. The school has a detailed system for tracking concerns in school that is reviewed daily. Consequently, staff are vigilant for the signs of abuse and respond to concerns.

You have worked well to make the school environment safer. Pupils who are accessing the extended day and residential unit say that they enjoy their learning. Consequently, the number of physical restraints has decreased since the last inspection.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have worked with stakeholders to produce a clear vision for the school. This has had a positive impact on school development planning. Leaders have an improved understanding of the strengths and areas to develop across the school.
- Senior leaders do not have a full oversight of pupils' progress. A new assessment system has been introduced to improve the way teachers evaluate pupils' progress in mathematics and English. However, the system is not yet effective across both key stages. Consequently, leaders' plans to improve the progress of all pupils in mathematics and English are not fully established.
- Subject leaders for mathematics and English do not yet have a sufficiently high profile in the school. Their monitoring and evaluation of the subjects they lead are developing, but subject leaders are not entirely effective in helping their colleagues to improve their teaching of these subjects.
- In mathematics, pupils' understanding of number is secure. They learn effectively about shape, time and capacity. However, their ability to reason and problem solve is underdeveloped because the work pupils are given in this subject insufficiently challenges them to develop these skills.
- Pupils' progress in reading is good. Pupils in key stage 2 read with fluency and expression. They say that they enjoy reading. Staff monitor pupils' attainment well.
- Teachers do not plan their teaching of writing as well as they could. Strategies to motivate pupils to write are not sharply evaluated to ensure that pupils make consistently good progress.
- Pupils clearly enjoy the wider curriculum offered by the school. Pupils were enthusiastic and excitedly told inspectors about their sailing opportunities and projects with the local fire service.
- Although absence for pupils in key stage 3 has reduced since the last inspection, overall absence and persistent absence rates remain above those typically found nationally.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all staff have high expectations for pupils' progress, particularly in English and mathematics
- assessment information is used to specifically identify where pupils do not make sufficient gains and then to plan clear actions to move pupils on in their learning
- the subject leaders for English and mathematics become more effective in improving pupils' outcomes and the quality of teaching in their subjects
- the rate of absence is reduced and there are fewer fixed-term exclusions.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Derbyshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Steven Barnes
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and shared my lines of enquiry. I also met with the chair of the governing body, the deputy headteacher and other members of the leadership team. I considered the responses of parents and carers to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, read all the free-text comments and telephoned parents in the afternoon. I considered the responses from staff to Ofsted's questionnaire regarding their views of the school and its leadership. We visited all learning areas together and I looked at many samples of pupils' work in their books and on display. I observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and during lunchtime. I viewed a range of documents, including leaders' evaluation of the school's current performance and their plans for its further improvement. I considered a number of policy documents, including those for safeguarding. I had telephone conversations with representatives of the local authority. I examined the school's website to check that it meets requirements on the publication of specified information.