

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Helen Stead
Fearn Community Sports College
Fearn Moss
Bacup
Lancashire
OL13 0TG

Dear Mrs Stead

Special measures monitoring inspection of Fearn Community Sports College

Following my visit to your school on 6–7 December 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in May 2016.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is not fit for purpose.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Bonenfant
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in May 2016.

- Improve the impact of leadership and management through:
 - developing well-focused plans to bring about rapid improvement
 - making accurate use of robust evidence to judge the quality of provision and to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies for improvement
 - providing governors with accurate information so that they in turn can challenge the school's leaders effectively
 - ensuring that there is a shared view among leaders and teachers as to what constitutes effective teaching and learning
 - working more effectively with parents to build their confidence in the school.
- Urgently improve the quality of teaching, particularly in English and mathematics, so that:
 - the needs of pupils, including the most able and those who have special educational needs or disability, are catered for so that they achieve their full potential
 - lessons are engaging and engender an enjoyment of learning
 - literacy and numeracy skills are developed to a high standard
 - adults' feedback and assessment enable pupils to make good progress and develop their skills.
- Improve the behaviour of pupils by:
 - consistently applying the school's behaviour policy
 - clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all staff in improving behaviour
 - reinforcing the expectation that pupils show respect for each other, teachers and the environment and firmly challenging any prejudice-based language or behaviour.
- Rapidly improve pupils' attendance.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 6–7 December 2017

Evidence

I observed the school's work and scrutinised a wide range of documentation. I met with the headteacher, groups of pupils, members of staff, governors and representatives from the local authority. I conducted a scrutiny of pupils' work with subject leaders and observed teaching in lessons. During the inspection, I also examined a range of documents relating to safeguarding.

Context

The school was put into special measures in April 2014 and received a number of monitoring visits by HMI. During that time there were many changes of leadership. The school was then reinspected in May 2016 and was again found to be inadequate. Since that inspection, the leadership team has been restructured and also strengthened by the appointment of additional leaders with whole-school responsibilities. The school has appointed three new governors. Over time, a large number of staff have left the school. A home-school liaison officer and a librarian have been appointed. The number of pupils on roll has dropped considerably and, as a result, this school is now much smaller than the average-sized secondary school. The school has been the subject of a directive academy order from the regional schools commissioner since May 2016. So far, there has been no progress made towards academy status and the school is still without a sponsor.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Fearn's Community Sports College is led by a passionate team whose commitment to the pupils of this school is second to none. Unfortunately, it is only very recently that the leadership team has been able to rely on a critical mass of staff being behind them.

School leaders got off to a stumbling start in addressing the areas for improvement identified at the most recent inspection. This school was broken and proved very difficult to fix. Teaching had been too weak for far too long: the school was plagued by low expectations and staff were demoralised. Staff absence and pupils' poor behaviour meant that senior leaders' energy was diverted from strategic priorities. This is partly why progress towards the removal of special measures has been too slow.

The current headteacher has had to wage an uphill battle to eradicate underperformance. She has shown considerable fortitude in doing so and, as a result of her efforts, the school is now in a better place to go forward. Performance management of staff is now much more rigorous than at the time of the previous inspection. Weak performance is challenged and when staff are not willing to step up to the mark they are moved on.

Actions taken this year to improve the school are now beginning to bear fruit. Pupils spoken to during this visit stated categorically that teaching and behaviour have improved considerably, and inspection findings confirm this point of view. Fearn's has finally started to move in the right direction.

School leaders now have a realistic perception of their own effectiveness but they still think teaching is better than it is. The school development plan, drawn up with the help of the local authority in response to the previous inspection, is not fit for purpose. This document is too unwieldy, lacks measurable success criteria and is not sufficiently focused on what difference actions will make to outcomes for pupils. As such, this plan has been of little help to school leaders in their attempts to improve the school.

School leaders have faced several obstacles in their attempt to turn this school around since the previous inspection, not least of which has been uncertainty about its future. This has had a deleterious impact on staff morale.

Since the previous inspection, the governing body has been strengthened by the appointment of additional governors. Governors have a good grasp of the school's ongoing shortcomings and relative strengths. They remain fundamentally loyal to the school. Governors rightly see their role as one of responsibility for the strategic direction of the school. However, they have sometimes missed opportunities to reward staff for excellent work or, alternatively, to challenge staff more rigorously when they are not pulling their weight. The local authority has plans to provide training for the governing body to improve their understanding of assessment information. In this way, the local authority hopes to make sure that all governors have the skills and knowledge to hold staff more stringently to account.

The perception of the school in the local community is slowly starting to improve. After years of falling rolls, the tide is on the turn and there are currently more pupils in Years 7 and 8 than there were last year.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Since the inspection in May 2016, school leaders have worked hard to remind all staff what good teaching looks like through an extensive programme of professional development. However, until relatively recently, the impact of this training has been minimal. This year, the leadership and management of teaching and learning have been overhauled and are now more stringent. Expectations have been made clearer to staff and training has been redesigned so that it better meets the needs of individual teachers. As a result, there are some early signs of improvement in the quality of teaching. It is for this reason, along with improvements in pupils' behaviour, that I recommend that the school may now appoint newly qualified teachers.

Staff absence has been an obstacle to school improvement and teachers have not always set a good example to their pupils in this respect. School leaders are now tackling this more effectively and, overall, staff attendance has improved. Pupils I spoke to during the visit said that they greatly appreciate the fact that they now have fewer temporary teachers.

Pupils' work seen during this visit was marked in accordance with the school's assessment policy. Pupils I spoke to were unanimous that marking has improved considerably since the previous inspection. Pupils also commented that 'even supply teachers now mark our work'. This is evidence of the impact of leaders' actions to raise expectations of staff.

Since the previous inspection, subject leaders have amended schemes of work to reflect the increased challenge of the revised national curriculum. However, teachers still do not always build effectively on what pupils have already learned at primary school. Some teachers are insufficiently up to speed regarding the raised expectations inherent in the primary curriculum. As a result, pupils do not always get off to a flying start when they join this school.

There remains a woeful lack of challenge for most-able pupils. Too often, most-able pupils are assigned unimaginative tasks that they can complete with little intellectual effort. Such activities fail to move pupils' learning on and simply fill the time. A proportion of teachers still do not have high enough expectations of what most-able pupils can and should achieve.

Lower-ability pupils, by contrast, are now making better progress because teachers stretch and challenge these learners, enabling them to gain skills and knowledge in a wide range of subjects.

Teaching is strong in religious studies. Almost every pupil spoken to during the inspection said that this subject is well taught, and many nominated it as their favourite subject. There are also pockets of good teaching across other subjects, such as languages, and teaching in English is improving apace.

There are still weaknesses in the teaching of mathematics, particularly for most-able pupils.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Safeguarding procedures are effective. School leaders have worked hard to promote a caring ethos where the individual pupil is respected. Pupils spoke fondly of the fact that, because the school is small, there is a strong sense of community and people look after one another.

Pupils spoken to during the inspection said that they feel safe and that the school raises their awareness of how to protect themselves in the outside world, such as when they are online.

Pupils said that the incidence of bullying has reduced markedly since the previous inspection. They feel they can talk to their fellow pupils, such as the 'anti-bullying ambassadors', or staff if they are unhappy. Pupils feel that the school helps them to appreciate diversity and say that homophobic bullying is now very rare, as are racist incidents.

The curriculum in religious studies helps to support the spiritual development of pupils and it is of note that this subject enjoys widespread popularity. In an English lesson, observed during this visit, pupils' social awareness was broadened through discussion of poverty in Victorian England, stimulated by their study of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

There was a marginal improvement in attendance in the academic year 2016/17. However, the rates of absence and persistent absenteeism are still far too high. The poor attendance of large numbers of disadvantaged pupils is of particular concern. This issue remains a considerable stumbling block in the way of further improvement.

A number of local schools have in the past removed pupils from their own school for a variety of reasons and often these pupils end up in Fearn. Last year, over 15% of Year 11 pupils had arrived at the school during key stage 4. This was a contributory factor to the high rate of absence for that year group because some of these pupils had not developed good habits regarding attendance in their previous school. It is to the credit of the staff of this school that they did well by these pupils: every single one of them went on to further education, training or employment.

New leadership of the management of pupils' behaviour has already had a positive impact. The incidence of poor conduct has reduced, along with the rates of both fixed and permanent exclusion.

Pupils observed during this visit conducted themselves well for the most part and demonstrated good attitudes to learning. However, it is still the case that too many pupils lack confidence in their own abilities and so sometimes they are overdependent on staff, requiring reassurance that they have got things right before they move on to the next activity. This slows their progress.

Pupils are in general sociable, friendly and polite. They show a pride in their school. However, examples of poor behaviour, although reducing, are still evident. A very small minority of pupils have not responded as well as they might to improved procedures to manage their behaviour. It is disappointing to see that some pupils remain impervious to teachers' efforts and still choose to disrupt the learning of their classmates.

The school has maintained its strong provision for careers education, advice and guidance. Pupils I spoke to during my visit were ambitious for their future and keen to do well.

Outcomes for pupils

Published data show incontrovertibly that most pupils who entered public examinations in 2016 and 2017 made inadequate progress during their time at Fearn. Results in some subjects, such as the separate sciences, were reasonable, but across the school underperformance was the norm.

Weak teaching in the past continues to blight the progress of pupils currently in key stage 4. During my visit, school leaders shared information on current progress. This indicated that the overwhelming majority of pupils in Years 10 and 11 are underachieving to an unacceptable degree across a wide range of subjects.

Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities now make better progress than was found at the time of the previous inspection because teachers have higher expectations of what they can achieve.

Assessment information for pupils in key stage 3 indicates improvement in pupils' progress on the previous inspection. Pupils are on the whole on target to achieve in line with their potential across a range of subjects. This more positive picture regarding progress in key stage 3 was confirmed when I examined the work in pupils' books. This is a heartening sign that procedures to improve the quality of teaching are finally having an impact.

The lack of challenge for most-able pupils across both key stages and many subjects continues to impair their achievement.

External support

The local authority now works more effectively with the school than at the time of the previous inspection. It has provided substantial support through working with subject leaders and by supporting the school's partnerships with two local national leaders of education to reinvigorate teaching. By challenging school leaders, the local authority has helped the school to develop a more realistic view of its effectiveness.

The local authority is committed to keeping Fearn open. Currently, the school and the local authority are exploring a possible solution to abiding uncertainty surrounding the school's progress towards becoming an academy through links with a multi-academy trust. The multi-academy trust has offered support to the school. This proposal is currently under review by the office of the regional schools commissioner.

Priorities for further development are as follow:

- School leaders should take urgent steps to ensure that the current underperformance of pupils in Years 10 and 11 is tackled immediately so that these pupils achieve their potential in their forthcoming public examinations.