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15 October 2018

Ms Rachel Cave  
Headteacher  
Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre  
Surley Row  
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Reading  
Berkshire  
RG4 8LR

Dear Ms Cave

### **Short inspection of Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre**

Following my visit to the school on 2 October 2018 with Sharon Cromie, Ofsted Inspector, and Paul James, 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 April 2015.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have established a strong culture where professional learning supports all staff to aspire to continually improve their practice. As a result, pupils thrive and enjoy their lessons. You have set high expectations and have created a very cohesive staff team whose members appreciate your efforts to support their workload in order to provide a well-rounded education for all pupils. Parents also expressed confidence in your leadership and the way the school is developing. One parent who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, summed up the views of many in concluding: 'This is a school that supports children to achieve their full potential and has excellent pastoral care.'

You are ably supported by the leadership team, which has improved many of the school's systems and procedures. Teachers make good use of assessment information to plan work that meets the needs of all pupils and as a result, the school has shown steady improvement over the last few years. Leaders recognise that some subjects need further support to meet the high standards of the best lessons available in the school. Middle leaders appreciate the 'coaching for excellence' programme and feel that this is having a positive impact on improving teaching across the school. Inspectors noted the work teachers have done on shaping a more challenging curriculum for pupils in Years 7 to 9. However, in some subjects, the barriers faced by disadvantaged pupils were limiting progression for a small number of pupils.

The school is characterised by an inclusive and nurturing ethos. Teachers know their pupils as individuals and there is a strong culture of mutual respect where all are valued. Pupils appreciate what staff do for them and as a result, they behave well, both in lessons and around the school. The Star Centre is a haven where pupils can find support when in difficulty or just when they want to have time with an adult.

You have successfully addressed the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection. Leaders, including governors, are open and honest in evaluating the school. You know the strengths, and where there are weaknesses, you are acting to improve them. You have a focused plan to raise the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and are supporting a few subject areas where the GCSE results have not yet shown the same high levels of progress seen in most subjects. Leaders are proactive in seeking the support of external providers locally to ensure that there is rigour and challenge in all aspects of the school's work. A good example of this is the collaboration with the local pupil referral unit to ensure that the right packages of support are provided in a timely manner to help some of your most vulnerable pupils. Leaders are also continuing to seek support from the local authority to reduce persistent absence further.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Governors and the leadership team have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are kept securely but are quickly accessible for the specialist team. Record keeping is thorough and methodical. Staff and governor training on safeguarding issues is robust and leaders ensure that there are regular updates as necessary. Governors check that processes and procedures are up to date at frequent intervals. Leaders carry out appropriate checks on the suitability of staff before they are appointed.

There is a small team of staff whose members work sensitively with pupils, parents and carers, and external agencies to help the most vulnerable pupils. Pupils who were interviewed both formally and informally reported that they feel safe at school and that all staff are approachable. Pupils also could talk with ease about how they learn to keep themselves and friends safe. This includes constant reminders about how to keep themselves safe online. Many mentioned the Bikeability programme, which encourages them to cycle to school safely.

### **Inspection findings**

- During the inspection, the inspectors focused on the following lines of enquiry in addition to checking safeguarding:
  - how well leaders tackled the areas for improvement from the previous inspection
  - how senior leaders and governors are ensuring that the curriculum meets the needs of all pupils, so that key stage 3 prepares pupils well for courses in all subjects at GCSE, especially for disadvantaged pupils

- how effectively leaders are ensuring that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is consistently good across all subjects
- whether sixth-form provision has improved since the last inspection
- whether leaders and governors have tracked attendance for all pupils and reduced persistent absence
- In most subjects, teachers' subject knowledge and clarity of expectations are promoting good progress, which is evident in pupils' books and school performance information. Since the last inspection, the GCSE results have shown steady improvement, with mathematics and English showing particularly good progress for all groups of pupils.
- Disadvantaged pupils have benefited from the emphasis on more personalised strategies to target the areas they need to work on. Middle leaders have worked on providing a more consistent approach to planning. They feel that the work on increasing the level of challenge in key stage 3 schemes of learning is now preparing pupils better for the new GCSE courses and beyond.
- The 2018 provisional GCSE results show that disadvantaged pupils have stalled in further improvement, but leaders are determined to drive forward with renewed effort. Performance information supports this. The most able disadvantaged pupils have continued to perform well and in line with their peers.
- Leaders have ensured that there is good breadth available in curriculum choices for pupils. As one parent enthused, 'The Mandarin Excellence Programme is a brilliant addition to the curriculum, offering fantastic opportunities to the pupils.' Leaders have now established a coaching programme that provides targeted support for improving subject teaching. Teachers are actively seeking further support from external experts in some cases where improvements have not influenced examination results, such as the performing arts subjects or computing. Pupils feel that they have enough homework and that it supports their learning.
- A-level results have strengthened considerably in the sixth form and there have been some excellent outcomes for most students in recent years. There is a dedicated sixth-form area with a study room and access to computers for independent work. There is strong leadership of the sixth form and leaders carefully analyse results to ensure that students remain on track.
- Teachers ensure that students have well-organised notes that will support them in independent study and revision. The recent focus on improving teaching at this level has paid dividends. Students enjoy their lessons and appreciate that their teachers will often go 'above and beyond' to support them. Inspectors observed some high-quality work going on in lessons. For example, some impressive work was seen in Year 12 art portfolios for this early stage of the course. Year 13 students felt that the support for university applications was particularly good. Inspectors noted the strong provision for advice and guidance for students for their future.
- Leaders and governors are alert to the need to continue to work on ensuring good attendance for all pupils. A new team has recently refreshed procedures. Local authority advisers have worked with the school, but more needs to be done

to further reduce persistent absence, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- subject leaders further sharpen the use of performance information and share good practice, so that disadvantaged pupils reach similar outcomes as other pupils nationally with the same starting points
- pastoral leaders reduce persistent absence, especially for disadvantaged pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Beverley Murtagh

**Ofsted Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

Inspectors met with you, your leadership team, and middle leaders. I also met with members of the governing body and I spoke on the telephone with the local authority head of education and with the headteacher of the local pupil referral unit. We met formally with groups of pupils from Years 8 and 9 and with students from the sixth form. We looked at lessons in a variety of subjects across different year groups, accompanied by senior leaders. A wide range of documents was scrutinised, including your analyses of pupils' achievement, attendance information, and a range of policies, including those for safeguarding. We checked that the single central record complied with requirements. We analysed the 168 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, the 68 responses to the staff survey, and the 88 responses to the pupil survey.