

10 February 2020

Mrs Helen Cullen
Sexey's School
Cole Road
Bruton
Somerset
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Dear Mrs Cullen

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Sexey's School

Following my visit to your school on 21 January 2020, with Tina Maddison, Social Care Regulatory Inspector and Teresa Hill, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and 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 most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in March 2019. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the director of education for the Diocese of Bath and Wells, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Somerset. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.



Yours sincerely

Stephen Lee
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in March 2019

- Improve the quality of teaching and raise pupils' achievement by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what the most able pupils in key stage 3 are capable of
 - establishing greater consistency and quality of teaching across the school and particularly in mathematics
 - planning work that is closely matched to pupils' prior attainment
 - providing further guidance for teachers and teaching assistants so they are better able to support pupils with SEND.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - ensuring that learning activities are engaging and motivating, particularly in key stage 3
 - encouraging those pupils who do not take pride in their work to complete it and present it to the highest standard they are capable of
 - checking that risk assessments for vulnerable pupils are timely and identifying relevant protective strategies.
- Improve 16 to 19 study programmes by extending range and depth in issues covered by the sixth-form tutor programme, particularly those issues relating to internet safety and radicalisation.
- Improve the experience of pupils in the boarding provision by raising the quality of accommodation in one boarding house to bring it in line with that of the other two houses.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - urgently improving safeguarding practice at the school
 - providing training for the safeguarding team so that its members develop an accurate understanding of inter-agency work and so that they respond quickly and effectively to concerns and risks
 - checking that health and safety procedures, such as fire-safety arrangements, are detailed and are followed by all staff
 - acting on the findings of the recent review of governance so that governors' challenge of senior leaders is more effective
 - developing the accuracy of middle leaders' self-evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of their departments to ensure effective teaching
 - improving the leadership of the provision for pupils with SEND so that these pupils' needs are identified accurately, and support is aligned with those needs.

The school must meet the following national minimum standards for boarding schools.

- The school ensures that the welfare of pupils at the school is safeguarded and promoted by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written risk-assessment policy, and that appropriate action is taken to reduce risks that are identified. (NMS 6.3)
- The school ensures that: arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the secretary of state. (NMS 11.1)
- The school's leadership and management demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role (specifically in relation to leadership of safeguarding matters). (NMS 13.3)
- The school's leadership and management and governance actively promote the well-being of pupils (especially in relation to management of safeguarding matters). (NMS 13.5)
- Schools operate safe recruitment and adopt recruitment procedures in line with the regulatory requirements and having regard to the relevant guidance issued by the secretary of state. (NMS 14.1)
- Any staff member or volunteer employed or volunteering in a position working with boarders receives regular reviews of their boarding practice. Specifically, this is related to supervision for boarding staff and those staff who support children with or manage safeguarding matters. (NMS 15.1)

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 21 January 2020

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders (including the directors of the sixth form and boarding), governors and other staff. Inspectors visited lessons, talked to pupils and looked at their work.

Context

Since the inspection in March 2019 that resulted in the school receiving a serious weaknesses designation, significant changes in staffing at all levels have occurred. The school has appointed new senior leaders, including new leaders for boarding and the sixth form to increase the capacity of the senior leadership team to support the headteacher in her drive for improvement. New heads of English and mathematics joined the school in September 2020. The entire mathematics department is new to the school.

New governors with specific, relevant expertise have joined the governing body. The school is working with the regional schools commissioner to facilitate a move into a multi-academy trust from September 2020. As a result of the previous inspection's findings, one of the boarding houses has been closed for refurbishment.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

Safeguarding was judged to be ineffective at the inspection in March 2019 and this has been a significant focus of leaders' activity since then. As a result, safeguarding is now more effective. Safeguarding systems in the school and boarding provision have been reformed and improved. Leaders issued a new safeguarding handbook to staff in January 2020, following previous updates in April and September 2019.

Leaders have established a clearer procedure for reporting safeguarding concerns that staff understand and feel confident to use. The oversight of safeguarding has also improved, and leaders have made good use of the advice from external partners, including an independent social worker. Staff's understanding of multi-agency work is now better. These developments are becoming increasingly embedded in the school's safeguarding culture.

Leaders have introduced a 'lessons learned' procedure for when they identify that safeguarding concerns could have been managed more effectively. The learning from this is then incorporated into staff training. Staff are now demonstrating higher levels of professional curiosity and vigilance.

A new system of care planning and risk assessment has been introduced for vulnerable pupils. This provides staff with clear guidance about how to manage identified risks. This is an improvement on the approach seen by inspectors in March 2019.

Fire safety procedures are now more securely in place, with regular evacuation drills taking place during both day and night. Fire safety records show that every pupil has taken part in an evacuation drill.

One area of safeguarding remains a concern. Despite regular checks, the single central register of the school's pre-employment checks on staff's suitability to work with children contains errors and omissions. This indicates that leaders' processes to assure themselves that safer recruitment practice is watertight are not fit for purpose.

The curriculum is undergoing a review, the first stage of which is near completion. In some subjects, such as science, English and mathematics, the impact of this work on improving the quality of education that pupils receive is clearly seen. The science curriculum is coherent and well sequenced across the three components of biology, chemistry and physics. The science curriculum is becoming more inclusive as well. Leaders no longer only offer triple science to pupils with higher predicted grades. Enthusiastic scientists are now welcome to study all three sciences in key stage 4, whether or not they are predicted to be higher attainers.

In recent years, and particularly in 2019, GCSE results in English literature have been significantly lower than results in GCSE English language for the same pupils. The new head of English is redesigning the curriculum to ensure that pupils get an appropriate preparation in both aspects of English. For example, new literature units, such as gothic poetry, have been introduced to the key stage 3 curriculum.

In mathematics, the curriculum is also developing. This will take time, as for older pupils there is a legacy of weaker teaching to be overcome. This will require the curriculum to be regularly reviewed to ensure that gaps in their learning are filled.

In history, teaching of the GCSE content has been brought down into Year 9, based on the argument that this is necessary in order to cover the required content in time for the examination at the end of Year 11. This approach risks, however, narrowing the key stage 3 curriculum by squeezing out other topics. It also involves preparing some pupils for an examination they are not going to sit, as they do not opt to study history for GCSE. It is important to note, however, that those pupils who go on to study history at GCSE and A level do succeed.

Leaders have addressed the concerns about the variable quality of teaching raised at the inspection in March 2019 by setting clearer expectations of what they want teaching to look like at Sexey's. They have introduced a common lesson structure that they expect all teachers to follow. Leaders are clear, however, that the

application of this common structure should be flexibly done to accommodate the needs of particular subjects, avoiding the danger that pedagogical choices determine curricular goals rather than vice versa. This is a relatively new approach for the school and leaders' expectations are being met more completely in some subjects than in others. Pupils say that regular reviews of key subject knowledge are helping them to learn more and remember more.

A key area of concern identified at the previous section 5 inspection was the provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Leadership of this area of the school's work is in a period of transition. The school has engaged the services of a part-time locum special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), prior to a substantive SENCo taking up her post from Easter 2020. Thus, while the statutory aspects of SEND provision are being met, little effective work is being done to improve the quality of support that pupils with SEND receive in the classroom. While pupils with SEND are well cared for, it is not clear how they are being supported to achieve ambitious curricular goals. Leaders have not put robust processes in place to assure themselves that pupils with SEND are receiving a good quality of education. Teachers are not consistently using the information they have about pupils' needs to plan teaching.

Leaders have made some significant improvements to the quality of the sixth-form tutorial programme. The school introduced a new personal, social and health education programme in September 2019, with a focus on preparing pupils for life in modern Britain. Year 13 pupils say that this programme is much more structured than in the past. It focuses on topics that challenge their thinking and encourage debate, such as the dangers of radicalisation. Year 12 pupils were positive about recent sessions on knife crime, but said they found some of the work on e-safety repetitive.

The supervision for boarding staff is not fully developed. For example, it does not link closely enough to safeguarding matters or identify the training needs and areas of development for individual staff.

The effectiveness of leadership and management at the school

School leaders, including governors, are determined to tackle the areas of concern identified at the previous section 5 inspection. They have taken a proactive and outward-facing approach, drawing on as much external help as they can. There is no sense of complacency or lack of awareness of the size of the task they face. This approach has paid dividends and has resulted in the school taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weakness designation.

The headteacher, supported by governors, has taken decisive steps to strengthen leadership capacity in the school at both senior and middle leader level. As a result, the school is now better placed to address the areas of its work that need to improve if it is to have its serious weaknesses designation removed. As part of her

commitment to improving safeguarding, the headteacher has taken personal charge as the designated safeguarding lead while she develops the capacity of the new safeguarding team.

The governing body has been significantly altered since the previous inspection. Its capacity to exercise strategic oversight of key aspects of the school's work is increasing. This is most noticeable in the areas of safeguarding and the provision for pupils with SEND, where new governors with professional expertise have joined the governing board. Using the support of a national leader of governance, the governing body is increasing the level of challenge it provides to school leaders about the decisions they make and the performance of the school. Governors have a clear succession plan in place for the role of chair of the governing body.

Following the inspection of March 2019, the school appointed a specialist improvement leader with a background in social care to tackle the immediate issues with the boarding provision identified at that inspection. As planned, a new director of boarding with an educational background has been in post since January 2020. This approach has paid dividends and the school is making effective progress towards meeting the national minimum standards for boarding schools that were identified as unmet in March 2019.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The willingness of leaders, including governors, proactively to look outward for support is a significant strength. They recognise the need to build capacity within the school and have taken appropriate steps to do so.
- Leaders have a secure overall view of the areas in which they have made more progress than others. They understand that there are significant aspects of the school's work, such as the provision for pupils with SEND, that have some way to go before they are good enough.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Despite having a good overall awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the school, leaders are not as well informed about which of the many initiatives they have taken is having the most sustained impact. Some of their self-evaluation amounts to a description of activities undertaken, with relatively little attention to success criteria and evaluation of impact. This is seen, for example, in the school development plan for 2019/20.

External support

School leaders, including governors, have actively sought external support and engaged well with it. The school has received support from a school improvement partner and a senior leadership consultant. The school has also drawn on the

support of an independent social worker and a local authority safeguarding adviser. Governors have benefited from ongoing support from a national leader of governance, who conducted a review of governance. It is anticipated that he will assume the role of chair of the governing body in the near future. As noted already, taken together, this external support has made an important contribution to the effective action the school is taking towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.