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Juli Timoney
Elms School
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Dear Mrs Timoney

No formal designation inspection of Elms School

Following my visit with Susan Bzikot, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 9–10 October 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector wished to determine the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements at the school as concerns had been raised with Ofsted about aspects of the effectiveness of leadership and management in the school (including governance), and behaviour and attitudes of pupils at the school.

Evidence

We scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements and met with you and other leaders to discuss safeguarding, behaviour and attendance. We visited classrooms and toured the school at different times of the school day to observe behaviour and talk to pupils. We held discussions with teachers and support staff in small groups and individually. We looked in detail at the curriculum for personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. My colleague visited one of the alternative providers you use.

I met with the chair of the governing body and three other governors. I also met your school improvement partner and held telephone conversations with two senior officers from the local authority.

We looked at a wide range of documentary evidence, including education, health and care plans (EHC plans) and information about pupils on part-time timetables. We took account of the 51 responses to the confidential staff survey, the 12 responses to the pupil survey and the six responses to the Ofsted Parent View online survey.

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

Safeguarding is effective.

Context

Since the previous inspection in October 2017, the number of pupils on roll has grown significantly from 105 to 147. All pupils have an EHC plan. Approximately three quarters of pupils have a main diagnosis of social, emotional and mental health needs, with the remaining quarter having a main diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders. The school has reorganised into a lower school for Years 1 to 4, a middle school for Years 5 to 8 and an upper school for Years 9 to 11. Leaders have a strategy to increase provision for younger pupils so that their needs can be supported earlier. As a result, an additional primary class was opened in April 2019.

As part of the rapid growth, the school worked with the local authority to admit a number of additional older pupils who had been out of education for prolonged periods of time. The school uses two alternative providers and external tutors to support pupils who are unable to attend the school site full time (or at all) for various reasons. Approximately 15% of pupils on the school roll attend the school site part time or not at all.

At the time of this inspection, there were significant ongoing building works to improve the safety of the school site; these were being carried out while pupils were not at school during evenings, weekends and holidays. Staff turnover is in line with other local special schools; however, there has been a recent increase in staff absence.

There is a well-defined culture of safeguarding within the school that takes into account the context of the pupils that the school serves and the communities in which they live. Policies and training are adapted to take specific account of the needs of pupils. Staff have up-to-date training and a thorough understanding of how to record and pursue any concerns about pupils' welfare. Staff develop a bond of trust with pupils while maintaining appropriate boundaries. Leaders responsible for safeguarding work well with other agencies and professionals to help keep pupils safe.

The school's innovative introduction of its own fleet of transport means that school staff have direct contact with the majority of families on a daily basis. As a result, drivers and escorts are often able to flag any worries about pupils to senior staff at

an early stage. However, a few pupils on the school roll do not currently attend the school site or have regular contact with school staff. This makes it more difficult for leaders to ensure that they are safe and well.

At times, the school is lively and loud, which is not unexpected given the needs of the pupils. Staff are well trained in managing behaviour and this means that for most pupils the day runs smoothly, they learn well and they take pride in their work. From the well-rehearsed arrival at school, through lesson times, breaktimes and on to the end of the day, there are clear routines. As pupils settle into the school they know what is expected of them. Most pupils appreciate and understand the rewards available for behaving well and the sanctions that are used when they do not. Some pupils take on additional responsibilities and leadership within the school; they are known as the 'leaf' team, which stands for 'listen, empower, action and friendship'.

Current building work is designed to make the school safer and sensibly manage the movement of pupils. These changes are much needed given the more complex needs of some pupils and recent incidents of very challenging behaviour. Although not yet complete, leaders, staff and pupils believe that the improvements are for the better and will make everyone feel safer.

The programme of PSHE is well thought out and meets the requirements of national guidance and the needs of pupils. Important life skills and relationships and sex education are appropriately included in the programme that most pupils study weekly on a Monday afternoon. The school-wide programme is very much planned to help keep pupils safe, including when online. In addition to the planned programme, leaders respond well to emerging issues. For example, some pupils have received additional guidance and support about the dangers of drug misuse and gang culture, including from well-informed outside speakers.

On the whole, staff feel well supported by colleagues and leaders when it comes to managing behaviour. They are well trained and know there are experts and leaders they can call upon in the school when needed. Most staff feel part of a strong cohesive team of staff who work together to do the best they can for the pupils they teach and care for. However, there are a few staff who do not feel positive and feel less well supported by leaders, or question the consistency of decisions that leaders make, including about behaviour. Staff appreciate the steps leaders take to support their well-being, including providing access to enhanced health care. Nonetheless, recent high levels of staff absence have taken their toll on staff morale and well-being and have had a negative impact on the behaviour of some pupils.

Sometimes, a pupil's behaviour is so challenging that they could put themselves, a peer or a member of staff in danger of harm. In these instances, staff are trained to try to deescalate situations through talking. However, staff may ultimately need to use appropriate physical interventions. There has been a recent improvement in the way these incidents are recorded. Despite this improvement, leaders do not analyse

the cause of the incidents carefully enough to understand when there are peaks in the need to use physical intervention and what led to this.

Overall rates of attendance are rising slowly but still remain low. In addition to regular absence, a significant minority of pupils on roll do not attend the school full time or at all for a variety of reasons. Some pupils attend alternative provision for part of the week and some pupils are on part-time timetables as part of the transition phase when joining the school.

A small group of pupils do not attend the school at all because they, their peers or staff may feel or be unsafe. Some of these pupils have been waiting for up to 18 months for more suitable educational provision. The school and local authority are not ensuring that these pupils are receiving their entitlement to a full-time education. At best, they receive some individual tutoring in English and mathematics off site. As a result of this inspection, the headteacher has formulated a plan to give these pupils access to a wider, more practical curriculum, including art, computing, design technology, food technology, physical education and science, individually or in small groups outside of the normal school day.

Governors receive suitable training and visit the school regularly. They also receive detailed termly reports from the headteacher. However, they do not know enough about the pupils who are not attending school full time or about the recent spikes in behaviour incidents and physical interventions. As a result, they are not able to support or challenge leaders to work with the local authority to improve access to full-time education for some of the most vulnerable pupils on the school roll.

External support

In recent months, the local authority has carried out an audit of the school's safeguarding arrangements. Among other findings, this confirmed the need for the current building improvements. The school improvement partner analysed the records of physical intervention and gave school leaders advice on how these could be improved, and the additional training staff would need to do this.

Local authority case workers were aware that individual pupils were not attending school or were on part-time timetables. Senior officers explained the difficulties of finding alternative suitable placements for these pupils. However, the local authority did not have a strategic overview of the high numbers of pupils who were not receiving a full-time education for various reasons at the time of this inspection.

Priorities for further improvement

- Leaders and governors should ensure that all pupils on the school roll receive their entitlement to full-time education and a broad and balanced curriculum by:
 - working with the local authority to speed up the movement to new placements when Elms School is deemed unsuitable
 - helping new pupils to settle quickly in to Elms School so they can attend full time
 - implementing plans to introduce a wider curriculum to pupils on part-time timetables by using school facilities and teachers' expertise outside of the usual school day.
- Leaders need to work together cohesively to ensure that pupils consistently receive the best possible care and teaching. This includes ensuring that systems are in place to manage pupils' behaviour well during periods of staff absence.
- Governors need to have a more strategic understanding and overview of how behaviour is being managed and of the pupils who are not receiving a full-time education. Governors must use this information to help them challenge leaders and the school's partners to make the improvements necessary.
- Leaders should continue the work with families to improve overall levels of attendance.

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

Yours sincerely

Lee Selby
Her Majesty's Inspector