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Ms Sheila Holden
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Dear Ms Holden

Short inspection of Pitcheroak School

Following my visit to the school on 10 October 2018 with Derek Barnes, 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 October 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Your ambitious and determined leadership, combined with the actions you have taken, has ensured that the school has improved since the last inspection. Your recent reviews of the curriculum, and the improvements made to teaching, have ensured that the school is evolving to meet the pupils' growing complex and wide-ranging needs, including autism spectrum disorder and severe communication difficulties. Where necessary, you have insisted that teachers and other staff develop their practice and you have worked resolutely with all staff to ensure that pupils are taught and achieve well.

Together with the other senior leaders, you have successfully tackled the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. You have built stronger links with other local schools and ensured that subject leaders take greater responsibility for developing teachers' subject expertise. You recognise that further detailed alterations to the curriculum, and its delivery, are likely to be necessary to reflect the wide variety and changing needs of pupils who attend the school.

Leaders are insightful about the school's strengths and weaknesses. They have a sound grasp of what routine teaching is like and how it can improve further. Regular checks on teaching, and on how well pupils are doing, help leaders to establish what training is needed for staff. In some instances, teachers do not seize or build enough on incidental opportunities for learning.

The school is a confident, outward-looking and calm community. It gives its pupils ample opportunities to develop personally and academically in an attractive and well-maintained environment. All pupils study a suitable range of subjects and they benefit from an imaginative and far-reaching extra-curricular programme, including forest school, swimming, a recent trip to New York and filming a residential experience in Somerset. Trusting relationships exist between staff and pupils, and between the pupils themselves, and these underpin the friendly, fun and hardworking ethos of the school.

Pupils achieve well during their time at the school, personally and academically. They make and keep friends and are very well prepared for life beyond school. During the inspection, pupils were very enthusiastic about their involvement in school council elections. As the results of voting were announced in an assembly, they congratulated the winners and commiserated with the losers maturely and sensitively. A particular emphasis on learning key skills needed for later life, and careful advice on what to do after school, combine to prepare pupils thoroughly for the next stage in their education or training. The school helps pupils to understand British values and their importance to society.

Governance is strong. The governing body is obviously committed to the welfare and success of pupils. Its members are hardworking, skilled and experienced. Increasingly, they use regular and reliable information to check on how well the school is doing. The governing body won a national award just over a year ago.

Although very few parents or carers completed the Ofsted online questionnaire, those we spoke to during the inspection were unfailingly positive. Parents and carers believe that Pitcheroak School helps pupils and families to flourish. Parents and carers are confident that pupils enjoy coming to school and that they benefit from high-quality care.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is very well led. It is a priority for the school, and senior leaders take their duty to protect pupils very seriously. Pupils in the school say that they feel safe and are happy. Bullying in the school is infrequent but it is dealt with sensitively if it occurs.

Staff in the school know what to do if they have any safeguarding or welfare concerns. They are well trained in keeping pupils safe and actively promote pupils' safety in the classroom and around the school. They are vigilant and alert to any potential issues. In turn, pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe, including when travelling or walking near traffic, when meeting others, and when using computers.

Leaders and other staff monitor the risks to pupils' well-being, including their attendance, effectively. They communicate any concerns promptly, including to other agencies. They are persistent when following these referrals up and relevant agencies are reminded about the need for any pressing action. Where required, they escalate their concerns to the most senior managers in other agencies. In most instances, this ensures that pupils get access to timely outside help.

Pupils' medical needs are met well. Staff are clear about the care that is required for each pupil and any specific needs are handled capably. All staff are trained in dealing with pupils who may, from time to time, become upset. All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality.

Inspection findings

- As well as safeguarding and the areas identified as needing improvement at the last inspection, this visit focused particularly on whether or not pupils do well enough while they are at the school, their behaviour and attendance, and the qualifications they achieve.
- Most pupils who start at the school stay until they leave the sixth form. A few join the school midway through a year, or a key stage, but these pupils do as well as the others. Although each pupil in the school has different needs, all start the school with very low prior attainment and significant obstacles to learning.
- When they join the school, all pupils are assessed very carefully. All pupils have an education, health and care plan or equivalent. Staff at the school use this plan, as well as their own observations, to develop a bespoke education and wider support programme for each pupil. Detailed checks are made by leaders and other staff on pupils' progress towards the individual targets set out in their programmes.
- Pupils are doing well across all key stages, including in the sixth form, taking their individual starting points into account. While many pupils have very complex and varied needs, in particular the youngest pupils, staff usually give them activities to do that are suitably challenging.
- The diverse needs of pupils, and their rapidly changing nature, means that the school revises the overall curriculum and its delivery regularly. Occasionally, pupils would benefit from staff refining the fine detail of the curriculum. Planning ahead in more depth would allow staff to make the most of additional adults, available resources and opportunities for learning.
- Some teachers could build more on incidental opportunities for learning. In the most effective lessons, teachers are adept at adjusting what they teach to suit the moment. This practice is not as widespread as it could be.
- Senior staff regularly review the range and type of qualifications available to pupils, particularly at age 16 and beyond. This helps to ensure that pupils achieve the qualifications they are capable of.
- Pupils' behaviour and attendance are good. Praise and positivity abound around the school. Incidences of upset or misbehaviour are managed very well. Leaders and other staff make very good use of data, and other information about pupils' welfare and behaviour, to review and improve the care they provide.
- Pupils' attendance figures have been consistently strong in recent years. Attendance is close to the national average and instances of persistent absence are low. The school works very closely with families and carers of those pupils who are reluctant to attend school. In most instances, the school works effectively with the local authority to discourage absence.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers and other staff refine the detail of the curriculum so that all lessons fully meet the changing nature and needs of pupils at the school
- pupils are helped to make the most of all incidental opportunities for learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Cladingbowl
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection we visited lessons and observed pupils in lessons and during social times. We looked at the activities set for pupils and the quality of the work that they complete. We spoke with pupils and parents before and during the day and met with staff and senior leaders at the school. We also met with representatives of the local governing body. We visited an assembly and an after-school club.

We reviewed a range of key documents, including information about safeguarding, training, attendance, behaviour, curriculum planning, assessment and the pupils' achievements. We scrutinised the school's self-evaluation and records of meetings of the governing body. We took account of four written responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online staff questionnaire and 37 responses to the Ofsted staff questionnaire.