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26 October 2015

Mrs A Mead  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Mead

**Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Cramlington Hillcrest School**

Following my visit to your school on 12 October 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in January 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

**Evidence**

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, governors and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school development plan was evaluated. A learning walk was undertaken with you to observe the school's work in several lessons. A sample of books were scrutinised and informal discussions were held with students about their work. The outcomes of the school's monitoring activities and school information relating to safeguarding, pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour were reviewed.

## **Context**

An assistant headteacher remains absent. A senior leader from Northumberland Pupil Referral Unit joined the school, on secondment, in September 2015. One teacher left in July and four teachers joined in September 2015. A new Chair of the Governors has been elected and two new governors joined the governing body since the previous monitoring inspection.

## **Main findings**

Since the previous monitoring inspection in April 2015, leaders and governors have acted quickly to secure sufficient staff at teaching and leadership levels. Revisions to the school development plan have addressed the points for improvement. The strengthened plans provide a firm guide for teachers, leaders and governors about the difference they are intended to make to pupils' learning and progress. As a result of these changes, and the close working partnership that you have established with the seconded leader, you are driving improvement more securely. You actively model the strategies and expectations you demand from staff and a new culture is emerging in the school.

The school is moving forward more securely with developments to strengthen the sixth form curriculum. Students who did not previously have an opportunity to study for a qualification in English and mathematics now do so. Individual learning programmes are beginning to be more closely tailored to students' needs and to preparing them for further study and work. We discussed your plans for how 'The Lodge', a new separate base for sixth formers, is intended to take forward plans to enable students to develop greater independence in their learning.

An assessment policy is in place and the school is starting to more securely develop its use. Plans to work with other schools in order to develop greater robustness and accuracy are in hand. Changes to the marking and feedback policy have made it clearer and simpler. Pupils know where they have been successful and some understand their responsibilities to respond to teachers' comments. Overall, it is not being used well enough to help pupils to improve their work. It was clear in our discussions, following the learning walk, that you know where stronger practice is emerging and where further challenge is required. School performance information shows wide variation in the performance of disadvantaged pupils in reading and writing compared to their peers, while across all groups their performance in mathematics is significantly low. To date, checks on the school's work have tended to focus on improving teaching but have not focused sufficiently on identifying the barriers to learning for pupils. Your plans to sharpen the focus of school monitoring to tackle this issue and to provide greater direction for middle leaders are well advised.

The school is calmer. The increased staffing levels are having a strong influence in bringing this about and time outside of lessons is more structured. Pupils are pleased that they now have more activities at breaktimes and lunchtimes. A more consistent approach to applying the school's behaviour policy is emerging. Staff are using rewards and sanctions better to encourage and support students in controlling their behaviour. Incidents have reduced, particularly the most serious incidents, and more information is beginning to be shared with governors to enable them to keep a better oversight of this key aspect of the school's work.

New governors have brought further specialist educational needs expertise and knowledge to the governing body. Expectations of school leaders and staff are high. The reorganisation of staffing, changes to the curriculum to strengthen literacy and pupils' acquisition of early reading skills and the introduction of a 'Nurture unit' to support pupils with intensive behavioural needs are some of the ways in which leaders are responding to the greater accountability. Reports to governors have not always specified the impact that the school's work is having on pupils' learning and progress. Governors are beginning to exert greater challenge, starting with an expectation that the headteacher's written and verbal reports must now include this key information.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

### **External support**

The local authority has acted quickly and provided much assistance to the school since the last monitoring visit. This has been effective. It has helped the school to implement alternative arrangements during the assistant headteacher's absence and provided additional governors. As a result of the increased leadership support, the headteacher is able to lead her staff and implement improvement plans more productively. Partnerships are beginning to be forged with good and outstanding schools to assist Hillcrest staff in securing further improvements in pupils' progress.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Northumberland.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Gina White

**Her Majesty's Inspector**