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Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234  
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Mrs Julie Vernon-Hamilton  
North Area Pupil Referral Unit  
Briar Patch Lane  
Letchworth Garden City  
Hertfordshire  
SG6 3LY

Dear Mrs Vernon-Hamilton

### **Short inspection of North Herts Education Support Centre (NHESC)**

Following my visit to the school on 28 February 2018 with Kerry Grubb-Moore, HMI, 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 outstanding in May 2014.

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

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Pupils thrive in an atmosphere of dignity and respect. Leaders support pupils' needs well so that they learn how to enjoy positive relationships with each other, teachers and support staff. Consequently, pupils are courteous, happy and well looked after. Their behaviour is generally excellent both during lessons and breaktimes.

Your calm and quiet determination to improve the school further is evident. You, ably supported by the two deputy headteachers, have worked alongside other leaders, governors and your dedicated staff team to build on the outstanding practice identified in the previous inspection. You are held in high regard by your staff, local leaders and external partners. Your outreach service is particularly valued by mainstream schools as the effective support it provides has prevented their pupils being excluded. Staff, pupils and parents and carers agree that you go the extra mile to make sure that every one of your pupils gets the support that they need.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is exceptionally well supported. The value of respect, particularly respecting the differences between people, is actively promoted throughout the school. Leaders support pupils to openly discuss the challenges that they face in a secure and supportive environment. Over time, pupils learn to be considerate and thoughtful; they acquire the knowledge, skills and positive attitudes they need to be confident, independent and successful citizens in modern Britain.

Changes in governance since the previous inspection have been well thought out and governors undertake their roles with exceptional skill and dedication. The change from a federated management committee to one completely dedicated to NHESC has been extremely positive and governors continue to hold leaders to close account. They offer appropriate support and challenge to leaders and they know what the school does well and what it needs to do to improve further. Governors have played a significant role in maintaining the very high standards in the school.

You and your team know the school very well and where improvements are still needed. You have already identified that some of the pupils who access your key stage 3 provision require further support to reintegrate quickly into mainstream provision. You also highlighted that although the attendance of pupils who have previously had exceptionally high rates of absence is showing marked and sustained improvement, this remains an area of continuous and constant work for your team.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors undertake all appropriate checks on the staff that are employed at the school. Leaders work well with a wide range of external agencies to provide timely and effective support to families. Leaders have provided regular, appropriate training which has provided staff with the skills to identify potential risks and to know how to report concerns. Staff promote equality and tolerance remarkably well. Pupils say that bullying and inequality are not accepted in the school, and that they trust adults to support them with any issues.

The school's personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum ensures that pupils are equipped with age-appropriate knowledge and skills to keep themselves safe, including online, at school and when out in the community. Leaders constantly review the curriculum so that it is flexible and staff can respond quickly to address issues that occur locally. Outside speakers help to reinforce the messages you are trying to put across, including speakers involved in the prison and rehabilitation services.

### **Inspection findings**

- As part of our inspection of the school, we reviewed the quality of the curriculum and teaching, learning and assessment. Your pupils often arrive at your school after turbulence in their previous schooling. Most pupils join you in Year 10 or Year 11 and remain with you until the end of key stage 4. Your central role is to ensure that pupils engage with learning, achieve, and secure a post-16 destination, so they can be successful young citizens in the community. Moreover, in the previous inspection, inspectors suggested that pupils needed to have a greater wealth of experiences within their curriculum.
- Since the previous inspection, you have developed strong links with construction companies, hair and beauty salons, garages and restaurants. This is ensuring

that your pupils access a range of high-quality work experience placements that match their aspirations and interests. This is a real strength in your provision.

- You have incorporated business enterprise into your curriculum in a well-thought-out way. For example, pupils' most recent efforts at a 'Dragon's Den' style competition meant that they understood the concept of investment and profit, and used marketing techniques to raise £1,700 from a £100 investment.
- Senior leaders have developed much closer links with North Herts College, developing a 'My Life at College' programme for your pupils to participate in. This is enabling most pupils to make very successful transitions into college once they leave NHESC. Pupils spoke enthusiastically about the various speakers that have visited the school.
- You continue to ensure that teaching and learning are outstanding. Teachers have strong subject knowledge, which they use to set challenging work that particularly helps the most able pupils to develop high-level skills such as analysing and evaluating complex and conflicting information. Pupils make outstanding progress in developing the skills, qualities and dispositions they need to be successful and resilient learners.
- Older pupils access a rich range of experiences which are very well matched to key stage 4 pupils' interests, needs and future plans. They make strong progress across this curriculum, most notably in English, mathematics and science. They also achieve well on a wide range of accredited work-related courses. Extra-curricular opportunities inspire pupils' curiosity. As a result, most pupils make excellent progress, and most go on to college, employment or training.
- At the present time, there are only a few key stage 3 pupils attending the Briar Patch site. However, in negotiation with the local authority, plans are under way to extend the key stage 3 provision at NHESC. You are in the process of developing a key stage 3 curriculum that will support pupils more successfully to transition back into mainstream education.
- As part of the inspection, we also reviewed how you are supporting pupils' behaviour and significant and complex needs so that they behave and attend well.
- Your induction of new pupils ensures that they settle quickly when first joining the school, while also leaving pupils in no doubt about the high expectations that you have about their behaviour. There are very effective systems in place to get to know pupils when they join NHESC. Time is taken to identify what pupils already know and what is needed to help them improve their emotional well-being and behaviour.
- Your 'twin-track' system in meeting social, emotional and mental health needs as well as academic needs means that all staff are skilled at managing pupils' behaviour. They quickly identify pupils who are upset, anxious or troubled and use calming and de-escalation techniques effectively. Leaders routinely review their records to reflect on how they could support pupils even more effectively. Pupils spoken to during the inspection were effusive about how staff help them to improve their behaviour.
- Over the last three years, the school's overall attendance figure has risen quickly

but is not yet in line with national averages. This is partly due to the ever-changing nature of the cohort of pupils who attend the school, many whom are not with you longer than a year. However, you identify that as more pupils begin to join in key stage 3, you need to develop higher expectations for those pupils who are with you for longer periods of time about the importance of better attendance.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they focus on developing the curriculum in key stage 3, as the provision continues to expand, so that these pupils reintegrate into mainstream as rapidly and successfully as possible
- they continue to raise pupils' attendance rates and reduce persistent absence so that percentages are more in line with national figures for all 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 Hertfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lynda Walker  
**Ofsted Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, we met with you, senior leaders, teaching and support staff, and the chair of the governing body. We also spoke with a representative of the local authority. We considered the responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and the school's own parent survey. We met formally with a group of pupils. We visited classrooms to observe pupils' learning and to talk to pupils and the staff who work with them. We also observed pupils during social times, such as breaktime. We reviewed an array of documentation, including information about pupils' progress and attainment, the school's self-evaluation and action plans, and documents pertaining to the school's safeguarding procedures and systems.