

SPECIAL SCHOOL INSPECTION

Ardnashee School and College, Derry/Londonderry

DE Ref No 231-6695

Report of an Unannounced Inspection in April 2021



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Introduction

The Department of Education requested that the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carry out an unannounced inspection in Ardnashee School and College, Londonderry in April 2021.

The most recent inspection of Ardnashee Special School (the school) in March 2017 was impacted by industrial action short of strike. During the inspection, the school provided evidence that arrangements for safeguarding reflected broadly the guidance issued by the Department of Education, and the pupils who met with inspectors reported that they felt safe in school. They knew what to do and who to talk to if they had concerns about their safety and wellbeing. However, owing to action short of strike, the ETI were unable to evaluate fully the outworking of the arrangements for safeguarding in the school.

The ETI undertook the inspection in line with the school's COVID-19 procedures and the ETI guidance based on the Public Health Agency/National Health Service advice.

Context

In September 2014, Belmont House and Foyle View schools amalgamated to form Ardnashee School and College. There have been temporary, acting arrangements for the role of principal of the school for almost seven years. The current senior leadership arrangements include an acting-principal who has been on an Education Authority (EA) secondment to the school on a part-time basis since July 2016, and two temporary vice-principals. The acting-principal carries out the role on a part-time basis and continues to maintain his responsibility as permanent principal of another special school. The chair of the board of governors has resigned recently.

The current school accommodation does not meet fully the needs of the pupils and staff; recently, a business case for a new school building on an alternative site has been granted final approval by the Department of Finance. The build is due to commence in the Autumn Term of 2021 and it is anticipated to take approximately 30 months.

The enrolment of the school has increased from 298 in 2018, to 339 in 2021, and there has also been a significant increase in the number of pupils who have complex learning and medical needs. This places growing pressures on existing accommodation and staffing.

Staff questionnaire responses

Fifty percent of the teaching staff and forty-two percent of non-teaching staff responded to the online, confidential questionnaire. The responses to the questionnaire were mainly positive. The written comments from the staff indicated high levels of satisfaction about many aspects of the life and work of the school including: the commitment and expertise of the current senior management team; the development of staff expertise; and the dedication and hard work of staff in meeting the holistic needs of the pupils. The additional written comments also indicated concerns about accommodation and the temporary and part-time senior leadership arrangements. The inspection team has communicated to the acting-principal and the chair of the Board of Governors the main findings, and any individual issues arising from the questionnaires.

Focus of the inspection

The main focus of the unannounced inspection was to assure the Department of Education of the efficacy of the school's current arrangements and provision for safeguarding, child protection and pastoral care.

Key findings

- The school has in place all of the required policies relating to pastoral care and safeguarding, including: child protection; pastoral support; the positive management of behaviours; a Code of Conduct for staff; and whistleblowing (raising concerns at work) policies and procedures. Each of the policies has been updated since June 2019 as part of a planned review cycle and all of them are clear and coherent. There has been extensive consultation with parents, staff and governors in the review process.
- The safeguarding and child protection policy, procedures and reporting arrangements were updated in March 2021 following a safeguarding case review by the SLT and governors. The revised policy and procedures are clear and have been shared with staff across the school; visual displays around the school have been enhanced to ensure that the safeguarding staff are recognisable to all pupils, including newcomer children and those who have communication difficulties. In discussion with the pupils, they confirmed that they know what to do and who to talk to if they have concerns about their safety or welfare.
- In June 2019, as a result of a serious incident in the school, senior staff enhanced the whistleblowing (raising concerns at work) policy in order to develop further the staff's understanding of their role in ensuring the ongoing physical and emotional safety of the pupils and the importance of reporting any concerns. The staff make very good use of the school's "note of concern" system to monitor and identify any patterns of concern in relation to individual pupils. Further training has been planned with the EA, to explore with staff the wider ethical issues in relation to child protection and whistleblowing; this training will take place in August 2021.
- The Code of Conduct for staff has been updated, shared with, and adopted by staff. Members of staff are aware of their responsibility and the importance of sharing information promptly if they are concerned about pupil wellbeing and report any concerns to a member of the school's safeguarding team. In addition, a well-structured Code of Conduct for governors has also been developed and provides a clear outline of the commitment and standards of behaviour expected of governors in their role. Both of these policies are currently being ratified by the governing body.
- There are effective arrangements in place for the recording, retention, storage and sharing of information pertaining to child protection and safeguarding issues. Agreed procedures are followed in a thorough manner by the school when dealing with individual cases.
- Risk management systems are in place and used appropriately to inform decisions in relation to child protection and safeguarding. These include appropriate risk assessments for educational outings, the administration of medicines and medical procedures, and the school's COVID-19 procedures.

- In all of the classrooms visited and activities observed during the inspection, the teachers had created a warm supportive environment conducive to learning. The working relationships between staff and pupils are very good; staff know the pupils very well and show commitment and sensitivity in meeting their often complex individual needs. The staff provide high levels of pastoral support to help individual pupils address challenges, overcome barriers and engage effectively in their learning.
- The senior leadership team (SLT) prioritise purposeful engagement with a wide range of multi-disciplinary agencies whose contribution to the health, wellbeing and education of their pupils is essential. Proactive planning to ensure the involvement, input and attendance of key professionals at review meetings is common practice in the school, and parents and carers are involved fully at all stages.
- There are appropriate and flexible reporting and accountability arrangements in place for the days when the seconded part-time acting-principal is not on-site. Safeguarding reporting arrangements remain constant and there is always a member of the SLT with overall leadership responsibility for the school and for safeguarding.
- The SLT and governors report that they have been supported effectively by the EA in reviewing all procedures and protocols in relation to child protection, safeguarding, communications, legal services, and governance, subsequent to the resignation of the chair of governors. The SLT liaised purposefully with all relevant EA bodies through regular online and face-to-face meetings. With the support of the EA, the SLT and governors have managed all issues related to his resignation, including any safeguarding matters, comprehensively. However, there are no agreed protocols for the EA to keep DE informed appropriately about such incidents or concerns.
- The school's Board of Governors was reconstituted by the EA in 2016 and additional governors were appointed. However, there is not currently a full quota of governors to enable maximum support for the SLT.
- The acting-principal is developing well the capacity of senior and middle leaders in the school through, for example, the sharing of good practice with another special school and their involvement in the design and planning of the new school building. The temporary nature of the senior leadership roles needs to be resolved by the EA in order to support the long-term development of the school.
- The SLT have reflected on learning from past safeguarding incidents and, with the support of the EA Communications Team, ensure that the staff and parents/carers are informed promptly and appropriately in relation to child protection and safeguarding matters.
- Inspectors met with pupils from across the key stages. The pupils reported that they feel safe, are happy and they talked very positively about their experiences in school. The pupils recounted the various ways in which staff encourage personal safety and wellbeing, including around the current pandemic and on-line safety. A number of pupils highlighted that they feel highly-valued and cared for as a result of the recently established, whole-school nurture programme "Good-morning Ardnashee." This daily programme is part of a well-informed strategic review of the school's curriculum, which now incorporates pastoral, nurture-based programmes into curriculum planning.

- The school staff have demonstrated considerable innovation and creativity in planning to meet the needs of pupils, despite the shortcomings of the current school accommodation and lack of outdoor space.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the arrangements for safeguarding the pupils reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education. The pupils report that they feel safe in the school and that they are aware of what to do if they have any concerns about their safety or welfare.

Areas for improvement that need to be addressed by the EA are:

- to prioritise the maintenance of the current school estate until the new school building is ready;
- to address, as a matter of urgency, the temporary nature of the leadership roles;
- to review and agree with the Department of Education information sharing protocols and thresholds regarding serious child protection/safeguarding issues to ensure that the Department are kept informed appropriately; and
- to ensure that additional governors are appointed to make up the full quota.

Appendix A: Inspection methodology and evidence base

Two ETI inspectors observed interactions between staff and pupils from all key stages in classes, outdoor activities and as they moved around the school. Discussions were held with senior leaders, including the acting chair of the Board of Governors, and the designated governor for Safeguarding, and safeguarding and governance staff from the EA. The school's pastoral care and safeguarding policies and procedures, and other relevant documentation were also scrutinised. In addition, the school completed an audit of its safeguarding arrangements and a confidential questionnaire issued to all staff to provide an opportunity for them to reflect their views of the life and work of the school.

Appendix B: Health and safety/accommodation

The school has identified an accommodation matter which is being progressed by the relevant stakeholders.

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