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Mrs Rosemary Bradley  
Headteacher  
Portal House School  
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CT15 6SS

Dear Mrs Bradley

### **Short inspection of Portal House School**

Following my visit to the school on 15 May 2019 with Anne Allen, 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 June 2015.

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

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You, your leadership team and staff share an ambitious vision for all your pupils, many of whom have had negative experiences of school in the past. Together, you are dedicated to ensuring that all pupils are equipped with the skills, confidence and resilience they need to move on to the next stage of their education or training.

Since the last inspection, the school has remained on the same site but moved into a purpose-built building. The new school was creatively designed to meet the complex needs of the pupils. You were instrumental in developing the plans and therefore ensured that quiet spaces for pupils to study, or to calm down, were incorporated into the design. Additionally, you understand that for some pupils participating in physical education (PE) lessons can be daunting. Pupils may not have a PE kit, or they may not want to get changed in front of other people. You addressed this sensitively by ensuring that each pupil is given a clean PE uniform each day and by providing individual changing rooms. As a result, all pupils are equipped and eager to actively join in all sporting activities.

You and senior leaders are determined to make sure that pupils achieve good academic standards, but you also recognise the importance of developing their personal, social and independence skills. You accomplish this skill development successfully. This was seen at lunchtime with pupils eating in small groups with the staff, learning valuable social interaction and life skills.

Leaders and staff have continued to build strong working relationships with pupils and their families. Staff have a comprehensive knowledge of pupils in the school and their individual needs and circumstances. They use this knowledge effectively to produce challenging, individual programmes. Leaders have appointed specialist teaching assistants for each department. This has ensured that all staff have secure subject knowledge and pupils get the right support. As a result, all pupils, including the disadvantaged, make solid progress. In lessons, we found pupils fully engaged and learning with enthusiasm. Your robust monitoring of teaching indicates that the quality of teaching is good and constantly improving. Leaders recognise that this is because staff are highly reflective and respond readily to feedback. You were therefore confident that any areas for development are always actioned.

Pupils told inspectors that they are very happy at school. Parents and carers were also positive about the school. All who responded to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, said they would recommend the school to other parents. One parent said: 'The head and staff work hard to maintain an amazing school for boys with special needs, staff deal with the boys when they are having their "moments" professionally and respectfully, you really cannot fault the school in any way.'

Governors hold leaders to account. Governors have a wide range of skills which enable them to provide an effective balance of support and challenge to leaders. Governors are clear about the strengths and areas of development for the school and set challenging targets for improvement.

At the last inspection, inspectors highlighted the school's many strengths. They also recommended that the school improve the progress of most-able pupils. Leaders and staff have responded to this positively and there is a real drive and determination to ensure that all pupils achieve their potential academically. At the last inspection, only a few pupils left the school with GCSEs. Now all pupils, including the most able, achieve a wide range of qualifications at grades that match their ability. The last inspection report also suggested that pupils should be given more frequent opportunities to practise their writing skills across a wide range of topics. Leaders have addressed this effectively; however, they recognise the need for pupils to develop writing in greater depth.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

There is a very strong safeguarding culture within the school. The school's recruitment procedures ensure that checks on staff are completed thoroughly before they start employment. Training is comprehensive and up to date, enabling staff to have a clear understanding of current legislation, guidance and their responsibilities. This ensures that staff are proactive in dealing with any safeguarding concerns. Leaders work with a range of agencies and, collectively, they help the most vulnerable pupils. This ensures that these pupils and their families get the support they need. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe when online. This enables them to make positive choices when using the internet

and social-media sites outside of school. Pupils told inspectors that they enjoy coming to school and know who to speak to if they have any concerns.

### **Inspection findings**

- Pupils join the school with knowledge and skills well below the level typical for pupils of their age. Leaders assess pupils comprehensively to agree a secure starting point for every pupil, once they have settled into the school. This detailed information is used to plan suitable individual learning programmes. Consequently, any gaps in pupils' learning are identified and addressed promptly. Pupils not making progress are given extra support and interventions. As a result, most pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, make strong progress.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced. Pupils in key stage 4 follow accredited courses and an individualised programme which equips them with the qualifications, attributes and skills for employability and life in the future. All pupils benefit from work experience which is tailored to meet individual needs and aspirations. Your staff team works tirelessly with parents and providers to ensure that all pupils progress confidently to the next stage of their education or training. As a result, last year all pupils successfully gained suitable places at college.
- Pupils' behaviour in lessons, before school and during unstructured times is good. They understand what is required, and when they need to, pupils use the strategies they have been taught to regulate their own behaviour. Pupils are proud of the sustained progress they have made with their behaviour in and around school. Staff's consistent implementation of the school's behaviour and reward policy has led to substantial reductions in exclusions and incidents of poor behaviour.
- All leaders and governors recognise the importance of good attendance in keeping pupils safe and giving them the best opportunity to achieve well in school and beyond. All staff work proactively to engage with parents to improve attendance. There are clear structures to follow up poor attendance, which are having a positive impact. Consequently, pupils' attendance continues to improve. However, leaders are rightly focused on reducing absence further.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils have opportunities to write at greater depth across the curriculum
- they continue to work with pupils and their families to improve 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

Susan Conway  
**Ofsted Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During this inspection, my colleague and I met with you, the school's leadership team, a group of governors, including the chair of the governing body, and the local authority's adviser. We visited classes in all key stages to observe pupils learning, talk with pupils about their progress, and look at their books.

We spoke to a group of pupils. We looked at four responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, including four free-text comments. We also considered the responses to Ofsted's surveys from 19 members of staff. We looked at a range of documentation, including information about the work of governors, safeguarding, the curriculum and assessment. We examined the school's analysis of pupils' progress and attainment, leaders' self-evaluation and their plans for improvement.