

18 January 2022

Dear Parent/Carer

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) are currently carrying out visits to some schools and early learning and childcare settings across Scotland. When we wrote to you after the last inspection of Berwickshire High School, we said that we would engage further with the school to report on progress. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and the local authority and carried out a visit to Berwickshire High School. Our engagement helped us learn more about how young people and their families have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support young people's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the headteacher and local authority officer the school's progress in taking forward the recommendations from our original inspection.

This letter sets out what we found during our visit.

Supporting children, young people and families through COVID-19

The onset of COVID-19 occurred at a time of complex challenge for the school. This challenge included the school preparing for a further inspection, with an acting headteacher, and only one of the school's three substantive depute headteachers in post. A permanent headteacher was appointed in August 2020.

Pastoral staff and administration staff maintained a high level of contact with young people over the periods of school closure. The enhanced provision unit remained open, as did the school, which acted as a 'hub'. These areas provided necessary support for specific groups of young people, including the children of key workers. Staff and young people made good use of digital devices to maintain contact with one another and to continue learning, teaching and assessment. Young people and staff developed effective digital skills, which they continue to use to enhance learning and teaching. Senior leaders and staff engaged in considerable planning to prepare for the safe return to school of young people and staff after the second period of school closure.

The current school improvement plan identifies clearly the actions that senior leaders and staff are taking to support recovery. Each action point on the plan links specifically to closing identified gaps in learning and rebuilding young people's resilience and progress. Staff continue to implement strategies to encourage young people to re-engage fully with their learning. These strategies include, for example, providing phased-return programmes for young people whose anxiety continues to be a barrier to their return to school.

At the time of our visit, the headteacher reported there had been a few cases of COVID-19 amongst young people in recent weeks, and some staff absence.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

Senior leaders have supported young people and staff to engage in leadership roles and activities in faculties and across the school. This includes a 'head team' of young people,

prefects, and house captains who are working enthusiastically and responsibly with senior leaders to improve the school. It also includes a student council that is working continuously to encourage and act on young people's views. Senior leaders have strengthened a staff 'extended leadership team', and increased the roles for middle leaders across the school to impact positively on change. Teachers are also demonstrating leadership behaviours more consistently. For example, most teachers now have a more visible presence. They communicate more effectively with young people and their parents, and are more willing to engage in professional learning to develop their classroom practice.

Almost all stakeholders spoken to during the visit identified the very positive impact of the headteacher's leadership, and the new, clearer sense of direction and purpose in the school. They describe how the clarity of this direction and purpose has helped to build an aspirational learning community. The refreshed vision, values and aims of the school, developed in partnership with stakeholders, have helped the school to establish a more cohesive identity. The school environment now provides a calm and orderly context for learning. Almost all young people demonstrate maturity, respect and courtesy in classes, social areas, and the school grounds. Overall, relationships amongst young people and between young people and staff are positive.

Improvements in the curriculum are providing a wider range of experiences and pathways for young people, and helping to motivate young people's learning. Staff are working well with partners to develop flexible pathways to meet the needs of all young people. The quality and consistency of learning, teaching and assessment have improved considerably. In the sample of observed lessons during the visit, all learning experiences were well structured and purposeful. Within the school's broad strategies to develop high-quality learning and teaching, teachers should ensure that they provide suitably challenging work to meet the needs of all young people. They should also develop strategies to engage actively all learners, for example, through improved questioning techniques. Teachers have a much improved, shared understanding of what high quality learning and teaching looks like by engaging in high-quality professional learning.

Senior leaders and staff have made improvements to tracking and monitoring in the broad general education (BGE), although continued work is required in this area to ensure increased rigour and consistency across the school. Teachers value the use of learning logs as part of the school's ongoing monitoring processes. Staff, young people and parents are engaging more regularly in dialogue to help young people reflect on their learning and develop a better understanding of their progress and learning targets. This dialogue is beginning to lead to more suitably targeted interventions.

Staff continue to help young people understand and improve their wellbeing. This includes young people having regular discussions with pastoral staff. During the visit, a few young people were able to articulate well issues associated with their mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing in relation to the national wellbeing indicators. Staff have made clear progress in identifying how the concept and practice of nurture can influence young people's learning and achievement positively. The nurture base provides an important resource to support individual young people.

Senior leaders and staff have taken a strategic and well-considered approach to planning for improvements in attainment and achievement. They have also taken appropriate action to meet all areas of improvement required in relation to safeguarding.

What happens next?

Understandably, the school has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These have had a significant impact on the work of the school. Staff are implementing plans to support recovery. Staff have also been making progress in taking forward the areas for improvement from the original inspection. We recognise that the school needs time to implement fully its priorities for improvement. We have asked Scottish Borders Council to provide us with further information about the school's progress within one year of the publication of this letter. We will work together with local authority officers to agree what will happen next. Should we require another visit to the school, we will inform parents. Otherwise, Scottish Borders Council will continue to inform parents about the school's progress as part of its usual arrangements for reporting on the quality of its education service.

Celia McArthur
HM Inspector