

Northern Counties School

Tankerville Terrace, Jesmond, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Tyne and Wear NE2 3BB

Inspection dates

28–29 March 2017

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Outstanding

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Leaders identify and assess the full extent of the needs of each pupil meticulously. They ensure that sufficient resources are in place to meet the needs of each pupil so that most achieve good outcomes. Leaders' focus on pupils' safety and welfare is highly effective.
- Leaders and teachers ensure that the range of subjects and enrichment opportunities enable pupils to flourish. The needs of pupils who have hearing impairment, autistic spectrum disorder or profound and multiple learning difficulties are equally well met.
- Precise teaching, which is well matched to pupils' needs, ensures that most pupils make good progress from their different starting points. Their progress in developing effective communication skills is particularly strong.
- The range of therapists and the nursing team make a positive contribution to the progress pupils make. Their impact is slightly restricted as some therapy targets are not closely aligned to the targets that teachers set for pupils.
- Limited contact with other, similar settings has resulted in leaders having a slightly optimistic view of pupils' achievements. Governors have not challenged this view effectively. As a result, only a few pupils make sustained and substantial gains in their knowledge, skills and understanding.
- Opportunities for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are threaded across the school day. As a result, pupils learn about their own and other people's rights.
- The behaviour intervention team provides exceptionally effective support to pupils who face significant challenges in learning to manage their emotions and responses to the world. This approach leads to outstanding progress in the personal development of this group of pupils.
- The individual needs of post-16 students are met in the same way as in other areas of the school. Most students make good progress, particularly in their personal development and communication skills.
- The majority of parents are very positive about the school. A small proportion indicated concerns about changes in the school since the last inspection.
- Attendance is low and leaders have only recently begun to fully address the reasons for the frequent absence of some pupils.
- Leaders do not check the impact that teaching has on the progress pupils make. Consequently, their support to teachers is not effective enough to iron out the inconsistencies that slow the progress that some pupils make.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Secure outstanding outcomes for pupils by making sure that:
 - leaders and managers analyse information about pupils' progress, compared with the progress that pupils make in other settings, to identify how to increase the proportion of pupils who make sustained and substantial progress
 - leaders and managers reduce the inconsistencies in the effectiveness of teaching through precise feedback to teachers about the impact of their work on individual pupils' progress, including how well pupils' learning time is managed
 - governors probe the information provided by leaders more deeply to assure themselves that all staff have high enough expectations of what pupils could achieve
 - the pace of developments to fully integrate the therapists' and teachers' targets for pupils' learning is increased
 - a sustained and robust approach to improve pupils' attendance is developed and effectively implemented.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Since the last inspection, leaders have faced three challenges. The number of pupils has increased by over a third. The complexity of the pupils' needs, particularly those who have autistic spectrum disorder, has increased. There has been a significant shift in how local authorities commission places for individual pupils. Despite these challenges, leaders ensure that pupils achieve good outcomes because of their unrelenting focus on the holistic needs of each pupil.
- Leaders and managers have a detailed understanding of pupils' needs, including those who have hearing impairment and deafness (HI), profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). They use this understanding to ensure that the right staff are in the right place, doing the right thing to meet the wide range of pupils' needs.
- Provision for the three groups of pupils is closely matched to their different needs. Importantly, leaders are confident that across the three groups, all pupils have an equal chance to develop and thrive.
- Records, confirmed by discussions with a range of staff, indicate that staff at all levels are well trained to meet pupils' healthcare and physical needs and their specific learning needs. Staff appreciate the training and support they receive as they rightly recognise that this helps them to meet pupils' needs effectively.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is effectively promoted through the wide range of learning experiences that leaders provide. Visitors and artists in residence extend the wealth of staff skills and broaden pupils' understanding of the wider world. The physical education and sport premium is wisely used to provide additional rebound therapy and adventurous outdoor activities.
- Pupils who are disadvantaged, including the high proportion of pupils who are looked after, achieve as well as other pupils. The small number of pupils for whom the school receives the pupil premium, benefit from additional activities to overcome individual barriers to learning.
- Leaders' surveys of parents' views about the school over the last two years indicate that the vast majority are highly satisfied with their children's progress and care. However, a small number of parents who expressed their views on Parent View during the inspection expressed some dissatisfaction about the school's leadership and current developments within school. Leaders agreed that they need to ensure that they communicate more effectively with all parents about the need for these developments.
- The therapy team, working under a new leadership arrangement, is re-energised following a period of staff changes within the team. Pupils gain enormously from the specialist skills the therapists bring to their daily experience. For example, the specialist speech and language therapist works effectively with pupils who have recently had a cochlear implant. This ensures that these pupils get the maximum benefit from their hearing to articulate words, which they use to support their signing skills. The impact of the therapists' work is slightly reduced because their work in classrooms is not fully reflected in joint planning and shared targets for the pupils.

- Leaders have a wealth of information about pupils' progress and behaviour. However, they do not fully analyse it or compare it with the progress that other pupils make in different schools. This has led to a slightly optimistic view of how well pupils achieve and has reduced leaders' ability to be precise about the priorities for the school's further development.
- Leaders have a systematic method in place for checking the effectiveness of teaching. However, they do not consider the impact of teaching on the progress that pupils make across a range of subjects. This has also led to an inaccurate view of the effectiveness of teaching. Crucially, leaders do not give teachers precise enough feedback about the areas of their practice they need to improve to ensure that more pupils make sustained and substantial progress.

Governance of the school

- Governors have a good range of skills to support and challenge leaders to continue to improve the school. For example, work undertaken by one governor to understand the temporary difficulties experienced by the therapist team led to an additional leadership post to lead the newly formed team and get it quickly back on track.
- Governors also give the school a strong strategic steer. A recently developed leadership structure within the Percy Hedley Foundation is providing clarity about the long-term development of the school.
- Since the last inspection, changes in how local authorities commission places at the school and a change in leadership at the school have caused some distraction to the governing body. Some aspects of their work, for example challenging leaders about the use of pupil premium funding and the additional funding that individual pupils' special educational needs attracts, have not been strong. Fortunately, leaders have ensured good outcomes for all pupils without robust challenge from governors.
- Governors have not probed the information that leaders have given them about the effectiveness of teaching and its impact on pupils' outcomes and so have shared leaders' slightly over-generous view of the school's effectiveness. As a result, they have accepted recommendations from leaders about performance-related pay awards without significant challenge.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders are diligent and encourage complete openness about how staff work to keep pupils safe. This involves detailed reporting of any incidents, including when physical intervention is needed to keep pupils safe. Staff are well trained in different aspects of safeguarding. They use their knowledge to make timely referrals to the appropriate person about any concerns they have about pupils' well-being.
- Leaders keep appropriately detailed records of their involvement with the other services supporting pupils' safety and well-being. The transition to an electronic record-keeping system is under way. This addresses the need to keep clear chronologies of meetings and discussions about individual pupils.
- Pupils say, sign and indicate through their responses that they feel safe in school.

Pupils who have HI could describe what they have learned about keeping safe online. Parents all agree that pupils are safe in school.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Effective teaching leads to good outcomes for the three different groups of pupils. Teachers skilfully plan activities that are well matched to individual pupils' interests and needs. A feature of the most effective teaching is the precision with which individual plans are delivered. Staff play close attention to the level of language they use to ask questions or explain concepts. Equally, they consistently give pupils time to think about their responses.
- Teachers use their knowledge of specific ways of overcoming pupils' barriers to learning effectively. For example, systematic use of shape-coding sentence structures leads to pupils who have HI learning how to write using English grammatical structures rather than the sign language grammar they use to communicate.
- For pupils who have PMLD, learning activities are planned to enable staff to assess how well they retain new skills over time. Teachers judge precisely when to encourage pupils to use skills in different places and when to move them on to their next step. For example, pupils practise visual tracking skills in lots of different ways so these essential skills are secure. As a result, pupils are successful when they move on to use eye-gaze communication devices.
- Staff in the Hillcrest Centre, which is the provision for pupils who have ASD, extend pupils' learning through teaching systematic skills for reading, writing and number. They combine this with projects based on pupils' interests. This leads to pupils' increasing levels of engagement in tasks set by staff. The proliferation of TARDISes and racing buggies during the current project on travel is testament to the positive impact of this approach.
- Therapists work directly with pupils alongside teaching and other staff on a regular and planned basis. This ensures that their skills and knowledge have good impact on the progress pupils make. A recently introduced programme to improve pupils' communication skills when out in the community, led by therapists, is one example of their direct impact. Initially used with pupils who have HI, its use is now being successfully extended to pupils who have ASD.
- Teaching assistants are an integral part of the effective teaching pupils enjoy. They diligently follow teachers' planning and are skilful in meeting pupils' physical, healthcare and emotional needs.
- Teaching would be more effective, and lead to more pupils making rapid and sustained progress, if inconsistencies in the use of these positive strategies were smoothed out. Some teachers do not use every opportunity to develop pupils' communication, reading, writing and mathematical skills across the breadth of subjects and enrichment activities. Some pupils spend too much time travelling to different venues, when similar learning opportunities could be provided closer to the school.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Some pupils display a range of complex and challenging behaviours. The behaviour intervention team is exceptionally skilful in working out why these pupils behave in the way they do. They gather detailed information about pupils' patterns of behaviour. Their forensic analysis of this information leads to effective plans that well-trained staff diligently follow. As a result, pupils' sensory and emotional needs are met in safe and acceptable ways and they settle and are receptive to learning.
- A range of enrichment activities is provided alongside the core timetable. This includes trips to London and visiting the 'Britain's Got Talent' stage. These experiences help pupils to develop their confidence when out and about in the wider world. Pupils learn about personal rights and responsibilities, for example, through a visiting deaf person who explained deaf people's rights when at work. In this way, pupils develop their understanding of being British and respecting other people's views.
- Leaders are thorough in ensuring that staff have all aspects of pupils' welfare uppermost in their minds. Medical needs procedures are delivered by trained and supervised staff. Risk assessments relating to individual pupils' needs are robust and enable pupils to enjoy a wide range of activities safely.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. In lessons and around school, pupils behave respectfully to one another and adults. This is because staff model positive social behaviours throughout the day.
- When pupils are anxious or distressed, staff are skilful at minimising the impact this has on other pupils' learning. Many pupils who have ASD have their own learning areas, which, with staff support, they use for varying amounts of time. This helps them to manage their own feelings and responses when they are anxious without distressing other pupils.
- Attendance is too low and leaders have only recently taken a more robust approach to supporting families to ensure that all pupils attend regularly. It is too soon to see the impact of this work. While some pupils have healthcare needs that lead to prolonged absence, this is not the case for all the pupils who are frequently absent. Leaders ensure that they check that absent pupils are safe and support the parents of children facing very difficult healthcare needs.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Leaders' information shows that most pupils make progress that is in line with pupils who have similar starting points in other schools. A few pupils make accelerated progress when all elements of their needs are met over time. Equally, a few pupils make less progress than other pupils who have similar starting points.
- Assessment records and the work in pupils' books confirm that pupils make good progress, particularly in developing communication skills and learning how to manage

their emotions and responses to the world around them.

- The most able pupils who, for the most part, are those who are deaf or have a hearing impairment, achieve strong gains in their reading, writing and mathematical skills. This leads to success for some in a small number of entry-level qualifications and other accredited awards by the time they leave school aged 19. A very small number of pupils gain success in the practical element of GCSE design and technology.
- The pupils for whom autistic spectrum disorder is their primary need make good progress in developing their communication skills through the skilful use of a range of approaches. These include assistive communication devices, pictures and symbols, British sign language and sign-supported English. Some of these pupils make exceptional progress because they develop skills to manage their emotional responses and the ability to learn a wider range of basic academic and life skills.
- Pupils who have profound and multiple learning difficulties make understandably small steps of progress. Crucially, most maintain skills when facing significantly compromising health issues. The assessments used by staff record in detail the level of pupils' responses to different stimuli and their successful attempts to communicate. Records show that most pupils either increase the level of complexity of their interactions or generalise their reactions over a range of different activities with different staff. For these pupils, this represents good progress.
- The small number of pupils for whom the school receives the pupil premium make similar progress to that of other pupils as a result of leaders' careful use of this additional resource.
- Leaders and class teams work effectively to support pupils when they are first admitted to the school, for example, by close liaison with parents and their previous school or setting. Records show that pupils, most of whom leave school when they are 19 years old, are well supported to move on to a range of placements, including mainstream further education colleges, as well as specialist provision and supported independent living. A very small number of pupils choose to leave at the end of Year 11. They are equally well supported to develop the specific skills they need to succeed in their chosen destination.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- Post-16 students are taught in the three different provisions within the school. Most are in mixed-aged groups, which include younger pupils. However, leaders ensure that appropriate attention is given to the requirements of the 16 to 19 study programmes because learning is planned around individual students' needs.
- All students continue to develop their English and mathematical skills at an appropriate level. For the majority, this rightly involves a strong focus on communication skills. Teaching is as effective for these students as it is for younger pupils. It also shares the same inconsistencies.
- Recent developments in the curriculum have led to students studying for a wider range of appropriate qualifications and accreditation. For example, some students' achievements in their personal development and essential life skills are recognised

through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Students also achieve a small range of entry-level qualifications in English, mathematics and information technology. A very small number of the most able students who use assistive technology to communicate also achieve a level 1 qualification in the use of their personal device. This is also the case for students who have HI who achieve qualifications in the use of British sign language.

- Students learn how to keep themselves safe and they feel safe in school. Staff are successful in teaching students a vocabulary, either through signing, assistive devices or verbally, to ensure that they can communicate when they feel worried or in pain. This ensures that students can seek help when needed.
- Leaders have trouble ensuring that all local authorities responsible for each student provide the required impartial careers advice and guidance. However, the range of work-related learning experiences helps students to develop aspirations for their future. For example, one student is aiming to combine their love of art with supporting younger deaf children to learn to sign. Following a relevant work placement, the student can identify what they need to do to achieve this worthy ambition.
- Over time, the destinations of students vary. In 2015, all students moved on to further education provided by the Percy Hedley Foundation. However, in 2016, students moved on to a wide range of further education colleges, including a mainstream college, and supported independent living.

School details

Unique reference number	108551
Local authority	Newcastle-upon-Tyne
Inspection number	10012577

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Special
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	89
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	21
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Peter Wignall
Head of school	Joanna Allen
Executive headteacher	Sue Fisher
Telephone number	0191 2815821
Website	www.ncs.percyhedley.org.uk
Email address	info@percyhedley.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	20–21 March 2013

Information about this school

- The school is smaller than most special schools and provides education for pupils who have hearing impairment or who are deaf (HI), pupils who have autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and pupils who have profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD).
- Currently, 12 local authorities place pupils at the school. All pupils have statements of special educational needs or education, health and care plans.
- The proportion of pupils for whom the school receives pupil premium funding is much

smaller than the proportion of pupils who are known to be disadvantaged. Most local authorities placing pupils at the school consider that the fees paid include the pupil premium.

- A small proportion of pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds and speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils who are looked after by local authorities is higher than in most schools.
- At the time of the inspection, too few children in the early years attended the school to be reported on separately.
- The school is part of the Percy Hedley Foundation and is governed by a local governing body. The chair and vice-chair of the governing body are trustees of the foundation.
- The school's residential provision was inspected in February 2017 and did not form part of this inspection.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited most classes at least once, for varying amounts of time. Most of the visits were with senior leaders. During visits, inspectors spoke with pupils and reviewed their workbooks and assessment records. Staff facilitated communication when necessary.
- Meetings were held with: the retiring chair of the governing body; the incoming chair of the governing body; a parent governor; senior leaders, including the therapy leader; teachers; teaching assistants; therapists; and four pupils from the school council.
- School documents were reviewed. These included: the school self-evaluation and development plan; records relating to behaviour and safeguarding; individual pupils' records, including assessment and progress information, therapy and health plans; records of the work of the governing body; reports from moderation activities with other schools; and documentation related to examination boards.
- There were 21 responses to Parent View (Ofsted's online survey for parents) during the inspection; these and the 13 written comments were considered alongside the school's own parent surveys.
- No staff or pupils responded to Ofsted's online surveys.

Inspection team

Susan Hayter, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Suzette Garland-Grimes

Ofsted Inspector

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In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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