

Homewood College: Safety Review

Brief

Concerns were raised with the LA by staff about the safety of the school community at the current time. Specific complaints or grievances are to be investigated by the Governing Body (as appropriate) through the usual procedures. However, the LA established a small team to visit the school over a period of days commencing Friday 8th March 2024 to look into whether the operational practice of the school as it affects safety is sound and reflects its policies, so that the LA could satisfy itself that the school is currently safe.

Introduction

Safety has long been a priority at Homewood College and over the preceding year, the school has been subject to monitoring on different aspects of safety via other avenues:

The BHCC Safeguarding Reassurance visit Feb 2023.

Governing Body Health and Safety visit 8 January 2024.

Governing Body Safeguarding (SCR) visit 7 March 2024.

OFSTED Monitoring visit reports following the 2021 inspection.

For this review the team also considered the school's documentation and data, toured the site, interviewed staff, observed the day to day working of the school, including lessons, assembly, and unstructured time. A range of staff were interviewed, and all staff who wished to, were given the opportunity to speak to one of the team.

Overall conclusion

The review team concluded that at that the time of the review, the school appeared safe overall. However, safety is not a fixed state and is subject to risk affected by a number of factors. Some more administrative and process elements of risk can often be mitigated relatively easily. However other elements are more challenging to tackle, resolve and maintain.

The staff were in a period of heightened fragility at the time of this review. The introduction of Beckmead into the management of the school in November 2023 has been challenging in different ways. Some staff reported feeling disempowered and devalued. Others felt more positive about this change and welcomed the rigour which they saw the new regime bringing. Beckmead staff have also had the challenge of working within inherited practice and procedures whilst evaluating and effecting change where it is most needed. It is clear that action taken by the new headteacher has the best interests of the students at heart.

The recent launch of the consultation on the future decommissioning of the school was clearly causing great anxiety and particularly long-standing staff were unsettled not only by the uncertainty about their jobs, but also the prospects for the pupils to whom they were very committed.

The education of students with SEMH is inevitably a challenging environment. Whilst teaching and learning was not the focus of this review, OFSTED has previously reported that managing the classroom environment, particularly when pupils are dysregulated has overshadowed curriculum delivery. This remains the case and impacts on the school's ability to promote engagement in learning and raise achievement whilst maintaining a safe environment. The impact that staff unrest and class/school closures due to staff absence will have had on the students should not be underestimated.

The school has been in special measures since 2021. It is clear that the LA has invested a high level of support in the school without the required change resulting. The Governing Body has been diligent

and committed to their responsibilities related to safety. The school's financial situation has also impacted on their ability to recruit and maintain an experienced and stable staff team. Nevertheless, temporary and agency staff have much to contribute to the staff team, given the appropriate level of guidance and support.

The ability of the whole staff to pull together as a team, remain positive, and set aside any personal, political or philosophical views to commit to the change necessary to support the new management will be key to maintaining the safety of the school community.

Findings

(A) Pupil safety

1. Risk assessments, management plans and positive handling responses were in place for the identified sample of pupils. However, there was often a disparity between what was on paper and what was actually happening.
2. After a period of 6 weeks of observation at the end of the Autumn term, the new headteacher looked to introduce a more thorough and consistent behaviour management system, this being a less punitive and more nurturing approach that includes specific consequences for certain actions. This was introduced with 2 days of INSET and a follow up refresher offered to all staff.
3. Some staff have welcomed the new approach and acknowledged that it was not so different from that used previously. OFSTED reported in their December 2023 visit that the whole staff training to secure a consistent approach to de-escalating challenges and build expertise appears to have been an empowering session that many staff mentioned to them as a positive step to help all to change the current situation. However, some individuals are openly non-compliant with this new regime. During this review, some senior staff were clear in their lack of respect for the headteacher and it is hard to believe that this prevailing attitude has not seeped down to other members of staff.
4. During the week of the review, there were as many, if not more staff on-site than students. The headteacher recently made changes to the class structure, to improve student/staff ratios and this has also helped avoid the need for class closures when staff absence has been high. Despite the improved ratios, many of the staff were unable to regulate situations and model positive behaviours for learning and personal interaction. The level of inexperience amongst staff clearly has an impact on their ability to implement strategies to manage pupil behaviour.
5. Although teaching and learning was not a focus of this review, far too many pupils were not actively engaged in their learning in the classroom, and this allowed more opportunity for dysregulated behaviour. This results in staff attention being drawn away from the curriculum offer as it is overshadowed by the demands of behaviour management. OFSTED had recognised the need to ensure that all staff have high aspirations and expectations for the learning and achievement of all pupils across the curriculum and that these aspirations were consistently realised in the classroom. and this remains a concern which can impact on behaviour and pupil safety.
6. The presence of the team as visitors across the week was well tolerated by the students. Some days were calm, but incidents were observed on other days, some of which led to exclusions. The headteacher is committed to exclusion only as a last resort, in order to protect the safety of the school community. Observation of incidents indicated both a lack of knowledge and confidence in some staff dealing with the students, and despite the whole staff training referred to above, some uncertainties remain. It is critical that protocols are clear, known and implemented to ensure safe handling of the situation.

7. No pupils were interviewed as part of this review. However, when safety concerns were raised by staff, the headteacher had asked tutors to complete a survey with pupils to gain their views about their own safety. Whilst not all staff complied with this request to conduct this survey, the analysis of the responses returned indicated that pupils did feel safe overall and the headteacher has undertaken to explore further changes to increase pupil confidence in the arrangements for their own safety.
8. Online safety is taken very seriously and no pupils were seen to have had unsupervised access to IT during lessons. Mobile phones are handed in at the start of the day.
9. 12 pupils have a programme of education which is delivered off-site by a range of providers. These can be either on-line or in person, at local venues or at home. The school's keeps records of the offer, and the lead for off-site provision has identified a glitch in the recording system of providers which needs rectifying. The sight and sound tracking system monitors attendance for these students, which is overseen by the DSL. The level of engagement is reported by providers but there is no one available on the staff team to routinely visit and monitor all off-site provision. The DSL liaises as appropriate with parents and colleagues in social care where a child is supported by social services.
10. Securing good attendance is an ongoing challenge for the school .and although the school works with the LA attendance team, overall attendance figures remain stubbornly low. In order to minimise potential risk, the absence of particular individual students is monitored very closely. The level of staff absence is also high and this creates a lack of consistency in staff teams supporting students , which has the potential to destabilise students. OFSTED reported in 2023 that 'it is very difficult to explain to a student that school is important and that you have to attend when it has been closed to you due to staff absence'.

Recommendations

- **Closer monitoring of the implementation of agreed behaviour strategies for individual students and regular review to ensure safety for both students and staff.**
- **Arrangements for monitoring off-site provision should be improved.**
- **Training to enable staff to fully implement the new behaviour management approach needs to be ongoing, with additional refresher sessions, including modelling and individual pupil focussed role play, this to give them confidence in working safely. Non-compliance needs to be addressed.**

(B) Challenging Behaviour Incidents – reporting, investigation and follow up action

1. There is a positive culture of incident reporting at the school. The Staff Handbook 2023/23 provides details on incident reporting procedures and members of SLT confirmed that they are confident that staff (including new employees and supply staff) now report incidents and near misses, including those relating to pupil behaviours.
2. There has been a considerable increase in the number of pupil behaviour incidents resulting in staff injuries and property damage reported to Health and Safety. H & S colleagues had met with SLT in November 2023 to clarify reporting expectations relating to pupil; behaviours. It is difficult to determine if the increase in the number of incidents is a direct result of more incidents occurring or is partly due to a more proactive incident reporting culture.
3. Significant incident report forms are completed locally. Pupil behaviour incidents and near misses are reported to Health and Safety on an HS2 form. HS2s submitted to H&S via email are copied to Headteacher so they have oversight.

4. Incidents and significant 'near misses' are investigated/signed off by one of the Assistant Headteachers. An appropriate level of investigation appears to be undertaken. The Assistant Headteacher makes recommendations for further actions and additional control measures and records this under 'Headteacher Actions'.
5. The school's usual recording system did not historically facilitate any analysis of HS2s and the Headteacher has recently introduced an electronic system to undertake a detailed analysis of incidents to identify causes, key issues, trends, and actions.
6. Significant incidents are discussed in daily debrief sessions. It was stated that after a significant incident has occurred, a wellbeing check/debrief with injured staff members takes place as soon as possible. Students affected by significant incidents are supported by members of the staff team and contact with the pupil's parent/carer is made if necessary.

Recommendations

- **SLT to produce an Action Plan following the Headteacher's analysis of pupil behaviour incidents.**
- **To continue to ensure that all staff are aware of and follow BHCC H&S Team's Behaviour Reporting Guidance to determine if incidents and near misses meet the criteria for reporting to Health and Safety.**
- **Staff to be continually encouraged to use debrief sessions positively to explore issues of concern to help them feel protected and safe.**
- **To ensure staff affected by an incident are made aware of any action taken and provided with appropriate wellbeing support.**

(C) Wellbeing Support

1. There is a Wellbeing Policy in place (January 2023). The Health and Safety Policy also includes staff wellbeing. The Staff Handbook includes a reminder for staff to look after themselves and speak to a colleague or line manager if they are finding any aspect of their work difficult.
2. A risk assessment for staff safety has been produced by SLT (March 2024). This includes the risks associated with work-related stress. Some good measures are in place to support the wellbeing of staff e.g. (daily debrief sessions, access to counselling for staff and agency staff, weekly wellbeing counsellor led sessions, SLT ON-Call Support, in-house Mental Health First Aider etc.) Additional measures have also been identified e.g. weekly line manager check-ins, stress risk assessments for staff (where required).
3. A Safeguarding Risk Assessment and Risk Reduction Plan has also been produced by the Headteacher (4th March 2024).
4. Wellbeing is not a standing agenda item at weekly SLT meetings however it was confirmed that this topic is discussed when necessary.
5. Several staff stated that they were experiencing work-related stress, and some said that this had resulted in absence from work. A need for individual stress risk assessments for staff has been identified. A meeting for SLT and H&S to discuss the process and best approach, is being arranged.
6. Some staff spoken to did not know who their line manager was and stated that appraisals and 1-1 supervision sessions are not taking place. The Headteacher inherited little HR information and in response to staff concerns about the lack of clarity about line management, the headteacher has subsequently produced a staff structure document. It is best practice and advisable for agency staff to be assigned a line manager.

7. SLT confirmed that they had an 'open door policy'. Staff spoken to felt able to talk to SLT but tend to go to the Assistant Headteachers with any personal issues because they know them better.
8. Mandatory whole team- start of day/end of day, briefing/debriefing sessions were taking place under previous management and staff found these useful. A decision was made for the afternoon sessions to be replaced with small team nurture sessions. Staff wanted the whole team sessions to be reinstated because they found them more beneficial. The current Headteacher acted upon this and has reinstated the previous arrangements, and this has been well received by staff.
9. The Headteacher has funded an increase in the availability of a counsellor , to make counselling sessions available for staff, agency staff and pupils. It was stated that Employee Assistance Posters are displayed in staff areas. Arrangements are also in place for supply staff to access support via an online charity contact. It was also stated that a Mental Health First Aider is available on-site.
10. A wellbeing circle for staff takes place after pupils have gone home on a Wednesday. This is led by the external counsellor. Key issues are fed back to the headteacher anonymously. Members of SLT do not feel it is appropriate for them to attend this session.

Recommendations

- **To encourage staff , including agency staff, to complete a personal Wellness Action Plan to identify key areas of stress, triggers and support required.**
- **SLT to complete individual stress risk assessments for staff experiencing work related stress and review them regularly to ensure controls are working effectively. Keep HR updated and ensure they are made aware of any significant concerns.**
- **The headteacher should consider completing a Stress, Work Life Balance & Team Resilience Process to identify key stressors/issues affecting the whole team and practical controls/solutions and quick wins.**
- **To ensure all staff (including agency staff) have a designated line manager, appraisals and regular 1-1 supervision sessions.**
- **The Headteacher to consider how best SLT can also receive the appropriate wellbeing support.**

(D) Policies and Procedures and Risk Assessments

1. Relevant policies published on the school website. This includes the Behaviour Policy, Statement of Behaviour Principles and the Health and Safety Policy (December 2023). These have not yet been updated to reflect the new approach to behaviour management.
2. The Homewood H&S Policy dated January 2024 is a localised version of a previous BHCC model template. It does not include sections such as 'Allergen Management Arrangements' which are part of the 15/8/23 updated BHCC model document and we are aware that e.g. school meals are prepared offsite (Caterlink) and provided to students at Homewood. There are signatures on the Introduction (General Policy Statement) page, but names cannot be determined. Whilst there is reference to an Organisational Chart at Appendix A, this shows a list of useful contacts and not a staffing structure. The previous Headteacher is also listed as the responsible person for three areas of H&S in that list. There is no Appendix B showing record keeping arrangements.

3. A risk assessment for staff safety has been produced by SLT (March 2024). This includes the risks associated with work-related stress. Some good measures are in place to support the wellbeing of staff e.g. daily debrief sessions, access to counselling and the wellbeing session on a Wednesday, SLT ON-Call Support, in-house Mental Health First Aider. Additional measures have also been identified e.g. weekly line manager check-ins, stress risk assessments for staff (where required).
4. A Staff Handbook 2023/24 and a booklet containing information for visitors has been produced. The handbook provides useful information about the school and the operational arrangements on-site but does not include any reference to security arrangements, fire safety, Lockdown procedures, asbestos, and wellbeing etc. The booklet for visitors covers key risks. Separate arrangements are in place for the communication of Asbestos risks to contractors.
5. A lone working policy is in place but appears to be out of date. (Review date is showing as November 2022). The policy includes a lone working risk assessment. Whilst some hazards, risks and controls have been identified, other significant/foreseeable personal safety risks have not been considered, e.g. home visits, meetings with parents or pupils alone, unwanted attention from pupils, being followed, etc.
6. Specific procedures/risk assessments are in place for staff to follow to minimise significant risks and help keep themselves and pupils safe e.g. (pupil on the roof, absconding and climbing, driving pupils, use of two-way radio communication for urgent support). This is very positive.
7. A 'Code Blue' system is in place. Staff use walkie talkies to call for urgent support e.g. when a pupil has become highly dysregulated and is displaying unsafe behaviours. Generally, the staff spoken with said that this system works effectively and prompt support is usually provided when required.

Recommendations

- **To review the H&S policy, utilising the latest BHCC model template for Special Schools, to ensure it reflects current H&S arrangements, personnel etc.**
- **To ensure all staff (including Beckmead consultants and agency staff) are aware of the relevant policies, procedures, and arrangements for their health, safety, and wellbeing at work.**
- **To expand the staff handbook to include key H & S information/signposting to : Fire Safety arrangements, Emergency Evacuation and Lockdown, Asbestos, Wellbeing support etc.**
- **To cross-check the existing staff safety risk assessment in response to the decommissioning proposals with the model Risk Assessment on BEEM for staff working with students with known complex needs.**
- **To review and update the Lone Working policy with input from staff.**
- **To keep the Code Blue system under review to ensure that it is working effectively and staff receive prompt support when required.**

(E) Induction, Training and Communication

1. The induction process for new employees and agency workers is inadequate and inconsistent. Insufficient information is provided to new staff to ensure they are aware of the relevant policies, procedures, and arrangements for their health, safety, and wellbeing at work. Induction which is largely verbal is not sufficient. Induction for those working with students also needs to include relevant student related information.

2. The Beckmead Trust provided Price training to the whole staff team. (including agency staff) <https://www.pricetraining.co.uk/> to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to de-escalate situations. This introduces a nurturing approach and physical restraint techniques. Some staff stated they needed refresher training to build confidence. New staff and agency staff are not permitted to engage in the physical restraint of a pupil until they have completed this training. One of the Beckmead consultants is a Price Trainer. He stated that a few refresher training sessions have been arranged recently but there have been low numbers of staff attending.
3. Weekly SLT meetings take place and information in the staff handbook indicates that weekly meetings for teachers should also occur weekly. Daily briefing sessions for staff do take place at the start and end of each day.
4. A specific risk assessment has been produced for staff safety in response to the decommissioning plans from the local authority (29.2.24) This has identified significant and foreseeable hazards, the associated risks and required controls to support staff. Additional controls have also been identified to minimise risks.

Recommendations

- **To arrange regular Price training sessions referred to elsewhere in this report to develop staff confidence, knowledge and understanding of the current approach to behaviour management, including the required skills for de-escalation and physical restraint techniques.**
- **To review the first aid needs assessment to ensure there are enough trained first aiders available to cover absences, staff being off-site with pupils etc.**

(F) Fire Safety

1. A Fire Risk Assessment was carried out as part of this review. The last had been completed in August 2022, and although a reinspection was not due until 2025, it was agreed that a full fire risk assessment should form part of this review.
2. The outcome was: *a broadly compliant assessment, with further ongoing remedial work will be monitored via the stage 2 reporting process. There is no requirement for a follow up visit to this FRA.*
3. A Fire Action Plan is in place and the Site Manager has already acted on some of the items raised by the FRA.

Recommendation

- **To systematically put in place the required improvements.**

Jacqueline Coe (*SEND adviser*)

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On behalf of the review team:

Antony Gurr

Lead Consultant, Health, Safety and wellbeing (Fire)

Mark Holdaway

Senior Specialist Teacher SEMH. Trauma and Mental health Informed practitioner

Alison Pitts

Health and Safety Business Partner

