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Ms D Shepherd
Executive headteacher
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Dear Ms Shepherd

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of St John Fisher Roman Catholic Comprehensive School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 17 February 2011, and for the information that you provided during the inspection. Please thank the members of the sixth form, school council, staff and members of the governing body for helping me with the inspection.

St John Fisher is a larger-than-average, ethnically diverse secondary school located on two sites that are about one mile apart. Since September 2010, Year 7 and Year 8 have been located at the Maidstone Road site and the sixth form have moved to the Ordnance Street site, which they share with Key Stage 4 students. Less than half of the students are from White British backgrounds, with the largest groups from Black African, Asian or Eastern Europe heritages. The proportion of students who have a statement of special educational needs is below average but the proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average. One in four of these students has behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. The school has recently strengthened its leadership capacity by entering into a partnership with The Rochester Grammar School. The headteacher from the grammar school has been appointed as Executive Principal, working three days a week at St John Fisher, with a deputy headteacher working at the school for a further two days per week. The school has joint teaching of post-16 courses with the partner school. The governing body has been strengthened by the recruitment of members who have significant educational experience.

As a result of the inspection on May 2010, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement, which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

GCSE results in 2010 showed an increase in the proportion of students who achieved five or more passes at grade C or above. However, the proportion who achieved five good GCSEs, including both mathematics and English, was lower than in the previous year. Students who had average prior attainment did not make the expected progress and many gained grade D rather than grade C. Performance in English was stronger than in mathematics.

In the sixth form, the declining attainment trend was halted and the average points score per student rose. This represents satisfactory progress in relation to students' low starting points.

Good systems and procedures to track the progress of students are in place. The data these provide show that the majority of students are on track to achieve challenging targets. Some students have been entered early for examinations; 41% of Year 11 students have achieved a grade C or above in English and 41% have achieved grade C or above in mathematics. Based on this, and the school's tracking data showing current progress, student attainment is expected to be higher than last year.

Teaching is improving because of rigorous and systematic monitoring. Staff are well supported and the impact of coaching and professional development opportunities can be seen in the improving profile of teaching. The proportion of good or better teaching and learning is improving and inadequate lessons are increasingly rare. Joint observation of lessons conducted with two senior members of staff confirmed that the school has an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Students say that lessons have improved and that learning is more interesting. They say that they are better informed about how well they are doing in relation to their targets. Teaching, although improving steadily, is not strong enough to consistently accelerate learning and enable all students to overcome previous underperformance.

Lessons are generally well structured and students are encouraged to be active rather than passive learners. Teachers use a common format for planning and plan lessons that are tailored to three levels of ability. However, in some lessons, particularly those where there is a wide range of attainment, planning does not take sufficient account of the precise needs of all groups of students. Learning objectives are generally clear but a few of the lessons plans seen were little more than lists of activities and some lessons were too teacher led. In the best lessons, teachers use questions well to assess students' understanding and to help them focus on the key areas of their work. However, occasionally, teachers accept simple answers and do not press students to speak at length. Opportunities for students to discuss work with a partner are missed and, although an increasing proportion of lessons provide good opportunities for peer and self-assessment, this is not a common feature of all lessons. Marking of students' work is variable. It ranges from good constructive marking, which provides clear points for improvement that are linked to the learning

objective for the lesson, to marking that is little more than ticks and a brief comment that does little to inform the student about how to improve or develop their work.

Significant changes to the sixth form were underway when the school was inspected. The sixth form has been relocated to the main site and sixth-form students have their own accommodation, which includes private-study areas, with good information and communication technology facilities and a café area. Those responsible for leading and managing the sixth form have an ambitious vision to create a sixth form where excellence is central to the ethos. Provision has improved. The curriculum now provides a wider range of pathways and different entry points that are better matched to students' needs and prior attainment. Sixth-form students are appreciative of the changes and the number of students choosing to stay on in the sixth form is increasing year on year. Sixth-form students provide good role models and take an active part in the life of the school. They now have more opportunities to participate in enrichment activities and take positions of responsibility.

The local authority statement of action has been revised to provide a clear distinction between the roles of those who will carry out a monitoring function and those who will evaluate the impact of the actions being taken. The local authority had previously identified that the school was causing concern and brokered the partnership with the grammar school. It has continued to provide an appropriate balance of challenge and support. Reviews are held to monitor the progress of the school. Staff and the governing body are involved in evaluating the effectiveness of the support that the school receives. Advanced skills teachers work effectively with the school to help improve the quality of teaching and learning. The school has particularly valued the support of the local authority in dealing with personnel issues.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Robert Ellis
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in May 2010

- Improve the quality of teaching so that students' progress is more consistent across the school, by:
 - giving students work which consistently engages and interests them
 - using the information from the marking and assessment of students' work to plan work which is appropriately challenging and closely matched to the prior attainment of the different groups within the class
 - matching the support from teaching assistants more closely to the needs of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who speak English as an additional language.

- Raise students' attainment in the sixth form by improving the quality of sixth-form teaching and implementing the planned changes for their curriculum by the beginning of the next academic year.