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2 February 2013

Mrs Samantha Leslie  
Headteacher  
St Benedict's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School  
Moorhouse Lane  
Ashington  
Northumberland  
NE63 9LR

Dear Mrs Leslie

### **Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of St Benedict's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School**

Following my visit to your school on 1 February, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in November 2012. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

### **Evidence**

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher and senior leaders, four representatives of the governing body and a school improvement adviser from Northumberland local authority. Two headteachers and three senior leaders from two schools supporting the school also spoke to the inspector. The local authority's statement of action and the school's post-Ofsted improvement plan were evaluated.

### **Context**

Since the inspection a new Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body have been appointed. Two senior leaders in mathematics from an outstanding local Roman Catholic secondary school are currently working in the school two days a week. The Department for Education has held discussions with the local authority, school and diocese on proposals for academy status.

## **The quality of leadership and management at the school**

Following the inspection, senior leaders, the governing body and staff moved on quickly to focus their efforts on driving the school's improvement rapidly; with an ambition to become a good school within the year. The local authority and diocese worked quickly to secure additional Northumberland advisory service support and advice and guidance from an outstanding secondary school and local middle school. A joint action plan was developed quickly that appropriately describes the actions the school and partners will take to drive improvements. Leaders are aware that in their race to set out actions, the plan did not have a clear enough focus on how the impact of the collective work will be measured over time. Consequently, the headteacher and local authority advisers are currently refining the plan to include more measurable targets for success and interim milestones to help leaders and governors know whether actions are making a difference. A separate senior leaders' mathematics plan is helpful in identifying exactly what the specialist teachers will do but is not as clear on how the impact of their intensive work will be measured.

Governors accepted fully, albeit with disappointment, the outcome of the inspection and have been energised by the task ahead. They have set plans in place to be trained on the use of data and in improving their skills in holding senior leaders to account. On her appointment, the Chair of the Governing Body quickly grasped the situation and is fully appraised of the actions the school and the governing body have already taken and need to take to drive rapid improvement. She has undergone training to develop her 'chairing' skills with an imminent plan for the Chair from the outstanding school to mentor her in her developing role.

Directly following the inspection, the local authority set up a Steering Group to oversee the improvement strategy. Fortnightly meetings between senior staff, the governing body and local authority officers are planned to enable regular review of actions in the joint plan. These meetings will continue until the successful conclusion of the interventions and support. Involvement of partners and the frequency of meetings will rightly reduce as school leaders increase their own capacity to deliver required improvements. The headteacher and senior staff value the timely, practical and proactive work from local authority advisers and regard highly the prompt advice partner schools are providing. However, this support needs to be proportionate, related only to recommendations in the report and also build on the good practice that was clearly seen in the school at the time of the inspection.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Education for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Newcastle and Hexham and the Corporate Director of Children's Services for Children and Families for Northumberland local authority. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow

**Her Majesty's Inspector**