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5 June 2015

Mr Gary Hilton  
Headteacher  
Berwick St Mary's Church of England First School  
Newfields  
Berwick-upon-Tweed  
Northumberland  
TD15 1SP

Dear Mr Hilton

**Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Berwick St Mary's Church of England First School, Northumberland**

Following my visit to your school on 4 June 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- review the school's improvement plan to include measurable, short-term milestones for pupils' achievement so that leaders and governors can check the impact of the school's work
- provide support for newly appointed leaders to enable them to develop the skills they need to lead improvements to the quality of teaching.
- provide focused support and training for teachers and teaching assistants to reduce the variability in the quality of teaching.

The local authority and diocese should:

- work together to determine precisely how they will support and challenge the school to be good at the next inspection.

## **Evidence**

During the inspection, I met with you and the newly appointed assistant headteacher, the acting Early Years Foundation Stage leader, a group of staff, a small group of pupils, the Chair and two members of the governing body, two representatives from the local authority and a representative of the diocese to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school development plan and scrutinised other documents, including the school's evaluation of its performance, minutes of governing body meetings and records of monitoring of teaching. I toured the school with you, visiting all classrooms and looked at a small sample of pupils' work.

## **Context**

A teacher from within the school has been appointed on a permanent basis to the role of assistant headteacher from May 2015. One governor has announced their resignation with effect from the end of the summer term 2015.

## **Main findings**

You have a clear vision of what you want to achieve in the school and an admirable determination to serve your school community. Your improvement plan is focused on the most important priorities and includes a number of appropriate actions to address them. While the plan includes long-term targets for improving pupils' achievement, these are not always ambitious enough and are not sufficiently specific for higher attaining pupils. The plan also lacks short-term, measurable milestones which will allow you and governors to check progress on a regular basis. As a result, the plan is not robust enough to drive rapid improvement.

Despite this, you have begun to make some positive changes to address some of the areas for development from the last inspection. You have improved the way in which teachers provide feedback to pupils and this is beginning to bear fruit. Pupils are now encouraged to respond to teachers' comments and pupils talk eagerly about these increased opportunities to practice their skills. However, there is variability in the consistency of this from class to class. In addition, teachers do not always identify the most important priorities in their feedback to pupils and this prevents pupils from making more rapid progress.

Instability in staffing is a key issue which is preventing the school from improving quickly. While you have taken some appropriate action to overcome this, the quality of teaching remains too variable. You are now focusing more intensively on the

achievement of different groups of learners when you meet with teachers to discuss the progress their pupils are making. This has resulted in teachers setting different work for children, dependent on their levels of ability. However, you recognise that the level of challenge in the work is still not always at the appropriate level. As a consequence, pupils' achievement is not improving quickly enough. Teachers and other adults do not always make best use of their time in class to ask probing questions to unpick children's understanding and tackle their misconceptions. As yet, you have not developed a sufficiently robust programme of professional development for teaching staff to address these issues and to improve the proportion of good teaching.

Two staff have received external training in a new scheme for teaching letters and the sounds they represent (phonics). This has been used to help some children catch up in Year 1 and 2, but it is too early to judge the impact of this work. You have timely plans to cascade this training to all staff and implement the programme across the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 from July 2015.

You and the governing body have taken steps to restructure the leadership of the school. This includes the recent permanent appointment of an assistant headteacher from within the existing staff and you have plans to make an additional leadership appointment. New leaders speak enthusiastically about their areas of responsibility but do not yet have sufficient experience and knowledge to carry out the full scope of their roles. Opportunities for professional development are planned, but have not happened quickly enough. As a result, the capacity of leadership to bring about improvements in teaching and learning is limited.

The governing body is committed to improving the school. Governors are clear about the barriers which are preventing the school from moving forward. They have taken some initial steps to reorganise committees to make best use of their expertise. Governors have plans in place to make their visits to school more purposeful and to improve their skills in challenging and supporting the school. However, these plans have not translated into action quickly enough. Governors have also not been sufficiently involved in determining ambitious, measurable targets in the school's improvement plan which will enable them to hold leaders to account.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

### **External support**

The diocesan and local authority representatives rightly have confidence in the headteacher's skills and abilities to lead the school. However, they have failed to recognise that, due to staffing issues, the school's leadership needs more support in the short-term to increase the pace of improvement in teaching. The headteacher has valued the challenge from an effective school improvement partner, brokered through the local authority, who has correctly identified the issues affecting the

school. She has also delivered useful training which has helped governors to understand national expectations of pupils' achievement.

While the diocese has submitted a bid for additional funding to the National College for Teaching and Leadership to secure a partnership with an outstanding school in a neighbouring authority, this has yet to come to fruition. Local authority and diocesan representatives agree that there is much work still to do to overcome the barriers which are preventing the school from becoming a good school. They acknowledge that there is insufficient evidence of the impact of their support since the section 5 inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Northumberland and the Director of Education at the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle.

Yours sincerely

Claire Brown

**Her Majesty's Inspector**