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Mr N Dimbleby
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Dimbleby

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Altwood Church of England School

Following my visit to your academy on 9 December 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, your staff and pupils made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in April 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection the academy was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, senior and middle leaders, three representatives from the governing body and the principal secondary adviser from the Diocese to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. In addition, I held a telephone interview with the school improvement partner (SIP). I evaluated the academy's improvement plan, subject improvement plans and information about the academy's use of the pupil premium funding. I also reviewed the academy's self-evaluation document and recent information about pupils' attainment and progress. Together we visited 10 lessons briefly, observing teaching and learning across key

stages in: English, mathematics, science, geography, art, design and technology, and government and politics. I also met with 12 pupils from Years 10 to 13.

Context

Many staff are new to the academy or new to post. Twenty members of staff have joined the academy this academic year, including two assistant headteachers and the head of English. The head of mathematics is also new to post. The Chair of the Governing Body was appointed in September. The school improvement partner began working with the academy after the last inspection. A representative from the Department for Education visited the academy in November and will return in March.

Main findings

After a slow start, you and your leaders are taking decisive and appropriate action to improve the academy so that it becomes good. Developments in leadership and the quality of provision have been more noticeable since September. Nevertheless, more needs to be done to ensure that these recent improvements have a more discernible and rapid impact on raising achievement.

Leadership structures and systems have been strengthened considerably. However, many leaders are new and, as yet, unproven. There are early signs that leaders at all levels are getting up to speed with their roles quickly. Line management arrangements have been strengthened and middle leaders are being held to account more strongly for their work. Approaches to monitoring are more consistent than previously, providing middle leaders with a better overview of teaching and pupils' progress.

The academy's improvement plans are clearly presented, identify appropriate actions and link to the areas for development identified at the last inspection. However, the criteria for judging impact are too general and difficult to measure. Overall, self-evaluation is broadly accurate but lacks sharpness. For example, the publicly available audit of the academy's use of pupil premium funding provides details of how the money has been spent and some general information about outcomes for eligible pupils. However, it is not clear to what extent specific activities were of benefit to pupils or whether they offered good value for money.

The governing body is knowledgeable and is holding leaders to account more robustly than at the time of the most recent inspection. Nevertheless, governors need to interrogate more precisely the impact of the academy's actions on raising achievement for cohorts and groups of pupils. There has been a strong focus on training, with individual governors well informed about current issues such as the Prevent strategy. Consideration should now be given to the potential benefits of working in partnership with other successful governing bodies.

For some time now, it has been difficult to recruit and retain good teachers. In some cases, there have been wholesale changes at department level. Decisions on appointing new staff, including those trained overseas, have mostly been successful. As a result, teaching is improving steadily across a range of subjects. Teachers now share an understanding of the academy's non-negotiables for good teaching. There are also regular opportunities for teachers to share effective practice. The Friday morning 'take-away' is just one example of how departments are being encouraged to share successful approaches and resources with other staff.

Pupils reported that teaching is more challenging than previously and that teachers give of their time generously to help them learn. Systems to help pupils to reflect on their strengths in learning and their next steps for development are embedding well. In some subjects, pupils say that they have seen 'dramatic' improvements. However, such improvement is inconsistent and some previously stronger areas have not developed at the same rate. Where teaching is stronger, teachers adapt their approaches and the pace of learning to meet pupils' needs. Where less successful, a more narrow range of approaches makes it difficult for some to learn quickly. Pupils also said that lessons are more purposeful than in the past; they feel more motivated and are getting more work done. Inspection evidence and the academy's own monitoring information substantiate their views.

Overall, improvements to teaching and strengthened behaviour management systems are leading to better attitudes to learning and fewer incidents of off-task behaviour in lessons. Nevertheless, leaders recognise that there are a minority who still find it hard to behave well all of the time. The decision to restrict the use of mobile phones during school hours has been broadly welcomed and has reduced the small number of incidents of misuse seen at the last inspection.

Unvalidated examination results for Year 11 in 2015 were disappointing. Attainment and rates of progress fell for these pupils when compared with the previous year. There were some improvements to standards in the sixth form but, overall, the rate of progress made by pupils was too slow. Inspection evidence and the academy's tracking information indicate that the rate of progress made by pupils currently in the academy is improving, but slowly at this stage.

The academy collects information about pupils' achievement regularly. Since the summer, there has been a strong focus on ensuring that teachers' assessments, an issue last year, are accurate. Some progress has been made but more needs to be done so that the moderation of assessment information is more rigorous. Leaders should also seek external support to improve the way achievement information is presented. Currently, some high-level performance information is unclear or difficult to interpret. As a result, it is hard to pinpoint improvements to outcomes or challenge underperformance.

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

External support

The academy is making effective and judicious use of external support. Leaders are outward-looking and take every opportunity to strengthen their practice through partnerships with other successful schools and school leaders.

Support from the Diocese has improved since the time of the last inspection, and more strongly since September. Support from the school improvement partner has also been helpful and challenging. Both strands of support have focused rightly on improving leadership capacity and accountability systems. It is too early, therefore, to see if this support has had an impact on raising achievement.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Windsor and Maidenhead, the Education Funding Agency, the Diocese and the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Wood
Her Majesty's Inspector