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Mr Brendan Conboy
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Dear Mr Conboy

Short inspection of Thomas Whitham Sixth Form

Following my visit to the school on 3 March 2016 with Marcia Harding, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in July 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment in October 2015, following a period of considerable uncertainty and turbulence, you have helped to engender a positive and exciting vision for the future. The stability you have brought to the school has resulted in high levels of staff and learner morale and its continued good reputation with parents and carers.

The school has maintained, and in some cases improved on, previous good outcomes. This is the result of very effective teaching and the learners' thirst for knowledge. The school has an accurate understanding of its strengths and areas for development. Plans for improvement are well considered. They include clear and appropriate actions, and timely arrangements for monitoring their impact.

Areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection, such as the need to use data more effectively, have been successfully addressed. Systems are now in place to ensure that the progress made by individuals and groups is well understood and informs interventions. For example, the early identification of the underperformance of boys in biology has led to changes to teaching methodology and subsequently improved their outcomes.

The previous inspection also identified the need to develop curriculum pathways to ensure that they met learners' interests and aspirations. This has been very well met by the school's proposed range of coherent academic and vocational programmes of

study, supported by an enhanced programme of careers guidance and work experience opportunities.

Learners who met with inspectors spoke very highly of their teachers and of the school's leadership, particularly the rapid improvements that have taken place since your appointment. They appreciate your clear focus on improving teaching and learning, and the way that you show an interest in them and listen to their views, with one describing you as 'a magnificent man'.

Governors are well informed, supportive and able to hold the leadership to account. They have worked hard to steer the school through a period of uncertainty and by making sound appointments to leadership roles they have worked to assure a positive future for the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Sound child protection policies and procedures are in place and regularly reviewed. Staff and other adults have a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities; all have received safeguarding training including in the prevention and tackling of extremism and radicalisation. Work undertaken in tutorial time and the enrichment programme helps to protect and keep learners safe from discrimination and exploitation.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Governors and senior leaders have received training in safer recruitment practices and the school routinely undertakes all necessary safeguarding checks on employees and visitors. Further to this, pastoral staff have effective working relationships with the local authority and external agencies to support the safeguarding of individuals who may be at risk.

Inspection findings

- Leadership is very strong. Following a period of uncertainty and turbulence caused by factors external to the school, you have succeeded in conveying an ambitious vision for the school, engendering high aspirations for what learners can achieve now and in the future.
- Governors have made strong appointments to senior positions and teaching and learning has improved further following the appointment of a highly accomplished teacher to lead on developments in this area.
- You have been quick to recognise and respond appropriately to any areas of underperformance. The poor GCSE mathematics results in 2015 have been effectively addressed and school performance information indicates that current learners are now predicted to achieve well.
- The underperformance in 2015 of some of the most-able learners has been taken very seriously and actions have been put in place to tackle this. Teachers have benefited from professional training on asking higher order questions and assessing learners' progress. Although it is too early to judge

the impact of these changes on the performance of the most able, the learners who met with inspectors were firmly of the view that their teachers stretched and challenged them and that marking was 'brutal but fair'.

- Previous good outcomes have been maintained, and in some cases, improved. Learners on AS-level and vocational courses make progress that is above expectations. Those on A-level courses make progress that is in line with expectations, given their starting points.
- The outcomes for disadvantaged learners and those who have special educational needs or disability exceed those of their peers. However, those who enter the school with high levels of attainment did not make expected levels of progress in 2015 and the school is doing much to ensure that this does not happen again.
- The quality of teaching and learning is good. The teacher workforce comprises highly trained professionals who demonstrate great subject expertise and a passion for teaching. Inspectors observed learners engaged in very high-level discussions with their teachers and peers. Learners appreciate the quality of education they are receiving at Thomas Whitham Sixth Form. They are enthusiastic and inquisitive learners who take pride in their work.
- Staff and learners welcome the plans to introduce new learning pathways that have been designed to support the range of learners' interests and ambitions. They follow projected career pathways such as business and legal, science and engineering, and creative industries, but also include bespoke, personalised routes to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility to match individual needs.
- Learners who met with inspectors are very supportive of the school, which many chose because of its good reputation for supporting learners into higher education. Most learners who enrol on courses complete them; they attend well and are punctual. Good relationships between staff and learners supports an open culture where staff know learners well and learners feel they have many people they can go to for help and advice on academic issues, careers guidance and personal matters.
- The tutorial and enrichment programmes support learners' good understanding of life in modern Britain, and respect for difference and diversity. However, the school's equality policy does not include all groups with protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act.
- The school works hard to provide opportunities for learners to consider and make plans for their next steps in education, employment or training. This comprises visits to institutions of higher education, including Oxbridge, and support in writing their personal statements.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school's equalities policy meets the requirements of the 2010 Equality Act by including all groups with protected characteristics.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Lancashire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Palmer
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held meetings with you and members of the senior leadership team, the Chair and vice-chair of the Governing Body, and a group of 10 learners. Meetings were held with those who hold responsibility for the curriculum, safeguarding, behaviour and attendance, and teaching and learning. Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documents, including the school's self-evaluation, improvement plans, safeguarding checks and record-keeping, information relating to learners' progress, and analysis of the school's recent parental and staff questionnaires. Inspectors observed teaching and learning across a range of subjects and looked at learners' workbooks and files.