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Mrs Sandra Lamond
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Dear Mrs Lamond

Short inspection of St Mary and St Chad CE (VC) First School

Following my visit to the school on 17 May 2016, 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 January 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Under your leadership, the school has strengthened its position as a good school. Since taking on the role of headteacher in 2014, you have gained the trust, respect and confidence of pupils, staff, parents and governors. Your evaluation of the school's current performance is well informed and accurate.

During this inspection, we agreed that the current quality of teaching continues to be effective, with some pockets of excellence. In particular, the early years provision stands out as a model of superb practice. Other notable strengths include the quality of teamwork across the school, pupils' achievement in reading, and the use of the primary school sports fund to promote healthy, active lifestyles and participation in sport.

I also noted that pupils behave very well and treat one another with courtesy and respect. They show interest in learning and describe many aspects of school life with animated excitement. The parents I spoke with, and the vast majority of those who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, also praised the quality of teaching, learning and care in the school.

Nevertheless, while teaching is good and pupils are succeeding, there is still more that could be done to lift standards higher. In key stages 1 and 2 there is some variability in the quality of teaching. This is more apparent in the teaching of mathematics than in reading and writing. In the main, this is because there are times when the challenge provided to the most able pupils is not as carefully thought through as it could be.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a caring culture in this school. Everyone is aware that children's safety and well-being are top priorities and understand their duty of care. All staff know what to do if they have a concern about a child. Training and records are up to date and procedures operate as they should. When staff have had cause to take action owing to concerns about a child's well-being, they have acted swiftly and with due regard for all the proper processes. On top of this, all staff make sure they have time to offer a listening ear and a supportive word, when need be. Pupils report that good behaviour is the norm and that bullying of any sort is extremely rare. Pupils are taught about the risks they may come across in daily life and how to manage them in a sensible and proportionate way. Staff, governors and pupils demonstrate an excellent awareness of e-safety matters. Indeed, the quality of information provided by the school to parents and pupils about e-safety and associated matters is commendable. The school site is kept secure and equipment is well maintained.

Inspection findings

- You have steered the school towards further improvement with calm, kind authority. You listen to everyone's ideas, have gained the trust of staff and parents alike and ensured that the school has maintained and built further upon its good performance and caring ethos. You are assisted by an able leadership team who bring focus, good humour, ambition and common sense to their roles. Consequently, you and your team have an accurate view of the school's current strengths and areas for development and have appropriate plans in place to ensure the school continues to improve. Teamwork at all levels is strong and your staff and pupils report that this is a supportive place in which to work and learn.
- Children's knowledge and skills on entry to the Nursery vary – sometimes quite considerably – within year groups and from one year to the next. It is clear, however, that all pupils make good progress at this school, regardless of their starting points. By the time children reach the end of the early years, the proportion reaching a good level of development is above the national figure, and has risen year after year. This is the result of excellent teaching and provision in the early years.
- Teaching and learning in key stages 1 and 2 capitalises on this strong start. Pupils in all classes continue to do well and go on to reach above-average standards in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 2. Over time, however, standards in English have been higher than those reached in mathematics. My checks on current pupils' books, observations in class and examination of the school's assessment information found that the majority of pupils in key stage 1 and 2 are working at, or above, age-related expectations.

My checks also found that standards in reading and writing are still a bit further ahead of those seen in mathematics. There is no doubt that, by the end of Year 4, pupils are well prepared, both academically and socially, for their move up to middle school. Your close working relationship with the neighbouring middle school and with other nearby first schools helps to make sure this move is as smooth as possible.

- Disadvantaged pupils do very well. While their numbers are low, the bespoke support provided by your team means that their varied needs are met with great care and attention. In recent years, the academic standards reached by disadvantaged pupils have caught up with those of other pupils in the school and nationally and, in some cases, exceeded them. Support for pupils with special educational needs and disability is also effective. Again, this is due to the careful attention and support provided to individual needs.
- Practice in the early years is excellent. The learning environments in the Nursery and Reception classes, both indoors and outdoors, are superb. Children display high levels of independence and adults provide expert guidance, teaching and support. They know when to intervene and when to stand back and observe. Consequently, their knowledge of what children know and can do is exceptionally well informed and leads to teaching that meets children's needs with inventiveness, creativity and precision. Whatever children are doing in class, be it programming miniature robots, engaging in role play or creating a piece of artwork, the quality of learning and adults' attention to their next steps in learning cannot be faulted. The 'mini-me' challenge, when children are prompted to apply their skills, persevere and ultimately showcase their achievements on a celebratory wall display, alongside a small photograph of themselves, is a simple, fun and highly productive routine. Indeed, it typifies the school's approach to learning; an approach that builds self-belief and constructive pride in one's achievements, and respect for the achievements of others. These attitudes, which are promoted and nurtured in the early years, are evident in pupils' behaviour across the whole school.
- Pupils' achievement in reading is another significant strength. The attention and effort given to developing pupils' literacy skills is clearly working well. In all classes, pupils display an interest in and enjoyment of books and stories. The proportions of pupils reaching the expected level in the Year 1 screening check for phonics (letters and the sounds that they make) have been above the national figure for several years on the run. This is the result of well-organised and efficient teaching. Standards in writing have also been strengthened due to capable, enthusiastic and imaginative teaching.
- Teaching and learning in mathematics is also effective and pupils learn to be numerate and solve problems. Nevertheless, at times, teachers do not give enough careful thought to the progression of skills to be taught or how they can extend learning for the very brightest pupils. Work in books shows that this is not commonplace, but it does happen. During this inspection, for example, some worthy mathematics teaching was seen and pupils were clearly responding well, working hard and moving forward in their learning. Even so, on occasions, the most able pupils were not provided with a level of challenge that would have led to greater learning or stretched their thinking. In one instance, pupils working on finding fractions of numbers had a 'pick and mix' of different levels of challenge rather than a sequential progression that would have helped them to build upon

their current understanding in a more logical and meaningful way. In another instance, pupils who demonstrated a good understanding of the symmetry work they had tackled were not prompted to think more deeply or apply what they had discovered in order to learn more.

- This wider school curriculum has many strengths. Pupils are taught a broad range of subjects, which are often 'brought to life' through whole-school themes. In order to get the school's most recent history-based theme, called 'Time Travellers' off to an exciting start, pupils were invited to come to school dressed as an historical character. Pupils of all ages could explain how they entered the hall through a large cardboard cut-out of the Tardis from 'Doctor Who', which added to the sense of occasion of this imaginative and memorable event. Another notable feature of the school's curriculum is the provision for school sport and exercise. The primary school sport funding has been put to excellent use. The playground is full of fixed and mobile equipment for the pupils to use, and a specialist sports teacher comes into school to teach pupils and train staff. This expert help and additional resources have improved the range of sports on offer, increased pupils' participation in local tournaments and helped to develop an impressive range of active options for the pupils during playtimes and at after-school clubs. In addition, athletes and Olympians have visited the school to talk to pupils about their experiences and achievements. All of this teaches pupils to respect effort and commitment and to aspire to excellence.
- Parents and staff report that communication between school and home is considerably better than it used to be. The school's website is kept up to date and the school sends out regular newsletters. In addition, there are numerous opportunities for parents to come into school to find out about teaching and learning or to consult with teachers about their children's progress. Homework routines are also described in positive terms by parents, pupils and staff. Having said this, some parents think that the quality of information sent home from the older classes is not quite as helpful as that sent home from the younger classes. Members of the school's parents' forum, which was formed last year, have identified this as a discussion point for future meetings in order to explore this matter in a realistic and helpful way.
- Over the past three years, pupils' attendance at school has improved significantly. It has risen from below average to above average. Punctuality, too, has improved. This is due, in no small part, to school leaders tightening up the early morning routines so that all instances of lateness are noticed and recorded. This has sent out a clear message to parents and pupils that punctuality is important and a good habit that will serve pupils well, both now and in the future. In addition, frequent messages from the school to parents about the link between regular attendance at school and achievement in class have helped to reduce unnecessary absence.
- Governance continues to be effective. The governing body has actively sought out governors with particular skills and has a clear understanding of its strategic role. Governors have confidence in school leaders' judgement, but have systems and routines in place to check and verify key information and ensure that all statutory duties are met. During this inspection, the governors who met with me presented themselves as informed, articulate, supportive and ambitious.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- Continue to drive improvements in the teaching in mathematics by ensuring that all pupils, but especially the most able, are given work and guidance that enable them to build carefully on previous learning.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Lichfield, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Staffordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Martin Pye
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, the assistant headteacher, the early years leader and the special educational needs leader. I carried out short observations of teaching and learning in all classes and looked at pupils' work in books and on display. I met with a group of governors, including the chair and vice-chair of the governing body, and had a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. I talked with pupils in lessons, on the playground and in the dining hall. In addition, I spoke with parents at the beginning of the school day.

By the end of the inspection, there were 27 recent responses and 21 written comments on Parent View. I took account of these and noted the school's routines for communicating with parents and gathering their views. I looked at a number of documents, including: pupils' progress information, the school's own evaluation of its performance, school improvement plans, information about the work of the governing body, a report from the local authority and several school policy documents. I also checked the school's website and the procedures for keeping pupils safe. I talked with members of staff about safeguarding matters.