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Mrs Catherine Karunaratna
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Dear Mrs Karunaratna

Short inspection of Northbourne Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 14 September 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 2012.

This school continues to be good.

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

You have created a vibrant school making the most of the idyllic setting. You have recruited an effective team to work with you who carry out their roles with passion and compassion. Pupils told me they 'like to come to school because teachers make learning fun!' A parent commented, 'it is attention to the small things that make this school amazing'. Pupils thrive at the school because teachers know each member of their class well. They also understand how well each pupil is doing and what, if any, are the barriers they have to learning. Your team works efficiently to put in place extra opportunities or support to help overcome such barriers.

Leaders ensure that children make a strong start in the early years. More children than is typical nationally attain a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year. Effective teaching means that they progress well through key stage 1, attaining outcomes that are close to those of pupils with similar starting points nationally. This good progress is maintained throughout key stage 2 so that the vast majority of pupils are prepared well for secondary school.

Just before the last inspection, leaders established the forest school in land next to the school's field. This has matured over the last three years and now supports and enriches pupils' learning experiences. The school's well-managed garden also

extends pupils' learning opportunities in a variety of ways. Pupils learn to appreciate the importance of caring for the environment, and plants and animals within it. They are enabled also to acquire scientific knowledge in a real-world context. Pupils' work shows that they build mathematical skills, such as creating graphs and recording data, through clearly focused learning activities which draw on the natural resources teachers have available.

The forest school contributes well, therefore, to pupils' spiritual, cultural, moral and social development. This is further enhanced by a strong programme of religious education which takes appropriate account of the diversity of religious expression in the United Kingdom. The Christian foundation of the school underpins much of its work, as well as the development in pupils of strong values of respect, celebration of difference and inclusivity. You also use the forest school as a powerful means of building resilience in some of the more vulnerable pupils. You provided me with powerful evidence of how aspects of the forest school's work had benefited some pupils whose behaviour previously had been challenging.

We agreed that progress since the last inspection has been strong. You have used all reasonable endeavours to reduce the problem absence of some pupils, raise the levels of attainment in phonics and also speed up the rates of progress in mathematics, especially in key stage 2. You showed me evidence that publicly held information about rates of absence is skewed by a tiny minority of pupils for whom irregular attendance is not their only barrier to learning. You also provided strong evidence that pupils' reading is not held back by a lack of ability to pass the phonics check in Year 1. We did agree, however, that further work is needed to ensure that pupils make even more rapid progress in formal mathematics lessons, especially for those who are most able.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of good quality.

You are committed to ensuring that all pupils are safe at all times. You showed me the additional work you have undertaken to secure the site. It is well maintained and decorated. You insist that the dogs many families walk with to school are kept on a leash and remain outside the playground gate. Your procedures for ensuring that adults are suitable to work or volunteer with the pupils is thorough. Your team maintain accurate and clear records of the checks made. You have ensured, with the help of the governors, that staff training is up to date on child protection matters, the 'Prevent' duty and other safeguarding issues.

In addition to this statutory work, you have also ensured that a culture of safeguarding permeates all aspects of the school's work. Of particular note is the innovative approach to pupils' understanding of 'risk' in the forest school. I watched a small group of pupils learning how to chop wood safely. Instructions were clear and purposeful and paid appropriate attention to safety matters. Pupils learn the importance of correct wet weather clothing and footwear. They also learn the

importance of communication and teamwork, particularly to keep each other safe. All pupils look out for each other in a range of contexts to ensure each other's well-being.

Inspection findings

- Outcomes for the vast majority of pupils are strong. Pupils read well, write clearly in a range of subjects, and apply mathematical skills in various contexts.
- Pupils speak clearly and can explain to adults what they are doing. Most have remarkable self-confidence. Pupils are polite and respectful of each other. Their behaviour is exemplary.
- In each year group, but for different reasons, individual pupils make slower progress than their classmates. Some miss too much school. A few need to catch up as a result of weaker teaching in schools previously attended. A small group across the school face considerable personal challenges, which affects their resilience.
- A tiny proportion of pupils are disadvantaged. Their performance is rightly evaluated by leaders on an individual basis rather than as a group. This means that teaching and resources are used effectively to support their equally good progress.
- The teaching of phonics has needed to strengthen. This is because some pupils who are able to read well enough for their age underachieve in the Year 1 phonics check. Leaders showed me the impact of time missed from lessons so that some pupils do not possess specific phonics skills. They struggle particularly with recognising 'alien' or 'nonsense' words.
- This is one example of the impact on outcomes of barriers to learning. Regrettably, this means that the profile of published outcomes for the school appears 'spikey'. You are aware that further effort is needed to reduce this variability over time. All leaders are clear that this is part of the journey towards your shared goal of a judgement of outstanding overall effectiveness.
- Older pupils who joined the school part-way through a key stage sometimes have gaps in their knowledge or skills. Teachers have become adept at identifying these gaps. They pay particular attention to any pupil's specific learning needs. They are ably supported by the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), who holds this responsibility across the federation of the Downs and Northbourne schools.
- Teachers, particularly those with mixed age group classes, make sure that pupils have work that is matched well to the expected standards for the age group. At the last inspection, it was noted that levels of attainment in mathematics needed to rise. Changes to the curriculum are reflected well in the school's approach to teaching mathematics. However, more of the most able pupils could still attain even higher standards. They need to do more work and at higher levels of expectation and challenge.
- The teaching of science is a strength of the school. Pupils use their mathematical skills well in this context. Pupils clearly enjoy the approach to learning in science which allows them to explore the properties of materials, 'things' and nature. They are fascinated by the hens, 'lizards' (newts) and wild birds, including

buzzards, that they encounter on a daily basis.

- Leaders have developed a range of effective strategies for improving attendance. The work of the family liaison officer has had a positive impact on reducing the high levels of absence of a small number of pupils. This means that overall attendance is now in line with national averages. Leaders are not complacent, however, as there are still a few families whose children's rate of attendance remains too low.
- The vast majority of parents are clear that the leadership of the school is highly effective. The continually increasing numbers on roll show the community's growing confidence in the school. Most year groups are now full. Many parents are making a positive choice for Northbourne and its unique rural context.
- The vast majority of staff also applaud leaders' relentless efforts to improve the school. You have recruited successfully to cover vacancies that emerged in the last academic year. The new teachers have made a secure start to their time in school. You shared with me remarkable evidence of the numbers of people applying for available teaching support roles in the school. This bucks local and national trends. It is a tribute to the growing reputation of the school.
- Leaders at all levels are responsible collectively for this growing reputation. Together, you judge accurately the schools' strengths and the areas where it still needs to improve. You are highly ambitious and intend to lead the school to a judgement of outstanding. Your understanding of what needs to be done next is correct.
- Governors play a full and active part in the leadership of the school. They are insightful and challenging. They hold you to account for aspects of the school's work. They have recently revised how they conduct their business so that they can be even more effective.
- Governors were understandably frustrated that the website was not compliant with the Secretary of State's requirements at the beginning of the inspection.
- Both the local authority and the Diocese of Canterbury are fully supportive of your leadership of the school. They contribute light-touch support, such is their confidence in the team's ability to maintain the school's development. You keep them well informed about school matters. Both draw on your expertise and experience to assist other schools in challenging circumstances. This makes good use of your former, formal role as a local leader of education.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the impact of any barriers to learning, such as absence, in-year mobility or a lack of resilience, is as small as possible
- outcomes for pupils with high prior attainment are as strong as possible, especially in mathematics
- recent strengthening of the teaching of phonics reduces further variability in outcomes between cohorts.

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

Yours sincerely

Simon Hughes
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I observed learning jointly with you in all classes, on the field, and in the forest school setting. You showed me a wide range of the school's documents. I also looked at a very helpful sample of pupils' work in English, mathematics and science. You also provided me with work undertaken in religious education and in the pupils' topic books. I examined nine responses to Parent View (Ofsted's confidential online survey) and I spoke informally with eight sets of parents at the end of the school day. I heard four pupils read and talked informally to several others. I examined 32 responses to Ofsted's confidential pupil survey. I met with you, other leaders and some of the staff, and considered 21 responses to Ofsted's confidential staff survey. I met with representatives of the governing body and the local authority, and conducted a phone conversation with the deputy director for education for the Diocese of Canterbury.

These inspection activities were employed to gather evidence against the following lines of enquiry arising from pre-inspection analysis:

- How effective are leadership and management arrangements across the federation?
- How effective is the teaching of mathematics?
- How effective is the teaching of phonics now?
- How effective are strategies for improving attendance and reducing persistent absence?
- How effective are leaders at all levels in ensuring that individual pupils who might be part of a focus group have their needs met?