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Mrs Judi Johnson-Clarke  
Headteacher  
John Donne Church of England Lower School  
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Dear Mrs Johnson-Clarke

### **Short inspection of John Donne Church of England Lower School**

Following my visit to the school on 17 January 2017, 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 March 2012.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. I was impressed by the environment for learning that staff create – with attractive, high-quality and striking displays of pupils' work in classrooms and corridors. A sense of order, tidiness and celebration of pupils' achievements is immediately apparent.

You have maintained each of the many strengths identified at the time of the previous inspection report. You have a clear vision for the school and communicate your desire for every pupil to succeed. You understand the important role the school plays within the local community. Over time you have continued to add to the building so that even more children can start their school life at this small village school. Currently, you have agreed plans to become a primary school from September 2017.

One aspect of your strong leadership is how well you deal with challenges. Where there have been staff changes, you demonstrate a clear determination to appoint the best candidates that you can. When appointments have not been possible, you often choose to teach yourself so that pupils can continue to make the very best progress and have high-quality experiences. The impact of your decisions is evident in the progress that pupils are currently making in lower key stage 2.

Children start well at John Donne Lower School. This is because leadership of the early years is a strength of the school. Staff ensure that individual needs are met well so that children grow in confidence and skills. The focus on developing early reading skills is reaping rewards and many achieve beyond what is usually expected for their age. One parent commented, 'My daughter is doing very well, especially with reading.'

Your flexible approach to how parents of children who attend Nursery can use their hours is much appreciated. These young children start their education in a warm and caring environment. The children who then move into your Reception Year are well prepared. They are keen, happy and enthusiastic in their learning. The early years classrooms and outdoor areas are engaging and well resourced. Children are making at least expected progress from their individual starting points, including the most able children.

Pupils are proud of their school. Those I spoke with confidently and willingly shared their work and achievements. Pupils spoke maturely of their responsibilities as part of the eco work of your school and the awards that you have gained. Others, particularly those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, demonstrate confidence in their learning and are fully included in activities. Pupils are extremely polite and well mannered. Their conduct around the school is exemplary and relationships with each other are, for the most part, very positive. Consequently, learning in lessons proceeds without interruption and friendships are evident at less structured times.

Much of your ethos focuses on providing pupils with a strong moral code. You develop your ethos through the promotion of termly values. Over the inspection, there were many references by both pupils and staff to the current value of 'perseverance'. Comments from parents show that they appreciate this aspect of the school's work.

Most parents are happy with the school. Many who provided responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, commented that the school is caring and focuses on individual needs very well. One parent commented, 'The ability of this small school to focus on the differing needs of each child in its care is excellent.' Another commented, 'It is fantastic that good behaviour, responsibility and work are rewarded; my children thrive.'

You recognise that there are still areas to move the school forward and improve the educational experience for the pupils. Given the very good start in the early years, you have already identified that raising the expectation and achievement in writing at key stage 1 is a priority. As the school becomes a primary school, taking Year 5 pupils from September 2017, this aspect is crucial to ensure that every pupil starts key stage 2 as well as possible, particularly for individuals who are most-able.

## **Safeguarding is effective.**

School leaders place the highest priority on keeping pupils safe and providing strong pastoral care for pupils at John Donne Lower School. Leaders have been successful in creating a safe and caring environment in which pupils and staff have confidence and feel valued. You have ensured that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.

The vast majority of parents who responded to the online questionnaire, Parent View, agreed that their children were safe and happy. One comment made by a parent summed up the many positive comments received: 'The staff are caring and knowledgeable... My children are incredibly happy.'

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that suitable records are in place and kept in suitable order. Training for staff and governors ensures that they keep up to date and are suitably qualified and confident to implement the school's policies.

Although safeguarding and child protection practice in school are robust and rigorous, new governors have not checked the website well enough to make sure that the wealth of good practice is communicated effectively to parents. Consequently, some areas of the school website are not compliant with statutory expectations. The website was easily updated during the inspection.

## **Inspection findings**

- During the inspection, I considered the progress that the pupils have made in lower key stage 2. This is because pupils leave the school part way through a key stage and there are no formal assessments to indicate their achievement. It is clearly evident that the small numbers of pupils who remain at the school after key stage 1 make at least good progress. This year particularly, you are ensuring that, following lower results in Year 2 in 2015, individual pupils in Years 4 receive appropriate challenge and support so that they deepen their understanding in English and mathematics. From the work in exercise books and from speaking with pupils, the evidence shows that they continue to make strong progress in the mixed Year 3 and 4 class, particularly in writing.
- Another line of enquiry I pursued was to consider the quality of education across the curriculum, particularly in science in key stage 1. This was because, in 2016, the proportion of pupils who reached the required standard in science by the end of key stage 1 was below that found nationally. In looking through a wide range of pupils' books, it was evident that most pupils achieve well in English and mathematics. However, you have identified that more could be expected of pupils in other subjects. Currently, pupils' exercise books show less opportunity to develop and use practical enquiry skills at a high standard in science. In lower key stage 2 there are many more examples of where pupils are practising their scientific observations and experimental skills. You have firm plans in place to provide greater opportunity for scientific investigation for the whole school, through the planned science week in the spring.

- In Year 2, there has been a great deal of turbulence with pupil numbers. Currently, with this very small cohort, pupils are provided with precise teaching in writing and mathematics so they can achieve at least the standards expected for their age. You have highlighted writing at key stage 1 as an area to continue to improve, so that the most able pupils can excel and standards continue to remain high.
- Another area I investigated was how well leaders and governors have responded to improving the early years provision. This was an aspect you were asked to improve in the previous inspection. Often, due to the small numbers in each year group, it is difficult to draw too many conclusions from the data. Nevertheless, it is clear that children start their school life well. Children consistently leave Reception achieving a good level of development that is above that found nationally. Your own evidence shows that children make good progress from generally typical starting points, and external moderation confirms the accuracy of your assessments. Adults in the early years know every child well and plan learning activities carefully and skilfully. From looking at teachers' plans and work produced in children's learning journeys, the most able children are provided with opportunities to excel and go beyond the expectations of the early years curriculum. During the inspection, some children were blending sounds and reading words that were beyond the expectations for their age while playing in the sand pit. Children are well prepared for Year 1.
- In 2016, the attendance for pupils who are eligible for free school meals and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities was lower than others in school and was in the bottom 10% nationally. Persistent absenteeism for these groups was also high. This was a key line of enquiry for this inspection. I found that this year, pupils currently on roll rarely miss a day. In your school, each child represents a high percentage and, therefore, overall attendance figures can fluctuate widely and swiftly. Currently, all groups of pupils attend school well and attendance figures for all groups of pupils show that their attendance is above national averages. Your staff rigorously follow school procedures for pupil absence. You provide suitable support and challenge for families when required. Consequently, you are raising attendance as much as you are able.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they further:

- raise the challenge for pupils' writing in key stage 1 so that the most able pupils can excel
- improve the quality of the science curriculum so pupils have more opportunities to develop their enquiry skills
- routinely check that the website consistently meets statutory requirements.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of St Albans and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Kim Hall  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

- I gathered a wide range of evidence to judge the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. This included: short observations of lessons, jointly with you, in all classes; sampling of pupils' current work across all subjects and a wide range of abilities.
- I spoke informally to a number of pupils in classrooms and listened to pupils read in class. The teaching of phonics was seen.
- Meetings were held with you, the leaders of the early years, and two governors. The minutes of governors' meetings were evaluated.
- I looked at a range of documentation including information about the school's self-evaluation and plans for future improvement.
- Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined including mandatory checks made during the recruitment of new staff, and a case study about referrals made to external agencies.
- The views of 17 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View) were taken into account, as well as the responses they made using the free text service. The views of five staff who responded to the staff questionnaire were considered.