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Julie Crouch  
Headteacher  
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NN13 5QT

Dear Mrs Crouch

### **Short inspection of Helmdon Primary School**

Following my visit to the school on 24 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 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 and your staff have ensured that Helmdon continues to be a very happy school where everyone gets along together and the pupils work hard. Parents value the school highly and every one of the 66 parents who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire indicated that they would recommend the school to other parents. The pupils I met were utterly delightful; polite, welcoming and keen to tell me about all the things they love about their school. They played well together at break and lunchtime, with some pupils playing the games organised very efficiently by the sports crew. Pupils behaved impeccably as they entered assembly to a recording of Beethoven's Eroica Symphony and then sang with great gusto at the end.

The pupils are considerate towards others in the school and in the wider community. For example, older pupils take responsibility for looking after younger children in the playground. Pupils regularly raise money for charitable causes such as Macmillan Cancer Support. Older pupils are also well informed about current affairs. The Year 5 pupils I met with talked knowledgeably about the Syrian refugee crisis and the United States presidential election. They drew on their knowledge of the Holocaust to explain how we should always guard against racism. While pupils understand that everyone should be respected, regardless of any differences, they are not sufficiently well informed about all of the protected characteristics set out in the 2010 Equality Act, particularly those relating to gender and sexual orientation.

This is because the curriculum does not currently promote all forms of equality systematically enough.

Pupils continue to learn and achieve well. They make exceptional progress in mathematics and achieve very well in reading. Pupils' achievement in writing remains a little less strong than in the other core subjects. At the last inspection, the inspector asked the school to tackle this by increasing opportunities for pupils to practise their writing skills across the curriculum. In response, you and your staff have ensured that writing is given greater attention in topic work. You remain keen, however, to explore ways to increase the proportion of pupils who achieve at greater depth in writing. You have rightly ensured that this is a key focus of the school's improvement plan.

You and your staff are well supported by a highly committed and reflective governing body. Governors know the school well and are ambitious for the pupils. They continually search for ways to improve their effectiveness. Following recent training, for example, they devised an effective action plan. This is helping to strengthen further the way in which governors support and challenge the school.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The pupils feel safe and are safe. The pupils I met all described how happy and safe they feel in school. They expressed great confidence in their teachers' ability to sort out any problems should they ever occur and said that bullying is extremely rare. Teachers, along with the e-cadets, ensure that pupils know how to stay safe online. One group of pupils I met broke spontaneously into the 'stay safe on the internet' song they have learned by heart when I asked them what they knew about e-safety.

You and your staff pay very close attention to pupils' well-being, including their mental health. Worry boxes in every classroom, together with an effective buddy system and displays such as 'the wall of kindness', ensure that everyone in the school understands the importance of being kind to one another. You know the pupils extremely well and have cultivated strong relationships with parents and carers to ensure that all the pupils, including the most vulnerable, are safe and protected from harm. Strong record-keeping enables you to keep track of any pupils you are concerned about, including those known to social care.

A very wide range of policies is in place to promote pupils' safety and well-being, including a lockdown policy, an anti-bullying policy and a cyber bullying policy. The school's child protection policy, however, does not reflect all of the changes set out in the statutory guidance which was revised in September 2016. In discussions, it was clear that you, staff and the school's governors are well informed about the changes that have been made. You must now quickly ensure that these are fully reflected in the school's updated child protection policy.

## Inspection findings

- From starting points which are usually above those typically seen, children make good progress in the early years. Last year, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development was well above average, though in 2015 it was no better than average. Changes to staffing arrangements have ensured greater consistency in the quality of teaching in the early years. The early years leader manages children's learning well and maintains good oversight of teaching led by other adults. This ensures, for example, that children learn to use their phonics skills well. As a result, nearly all children reach the expected standard in the phonics screening check at the end of Year 1. The children were keen to share their reading and writing skills with me, particularly those who had just successfully written 'I am hot if I run.' While outside space remains limited, this aspect of provision has improved since the last inspection and is now sheltered from the weather. You and your staff know that the next steps for improvement are to increase the proportion of children who exceed the early learning goals, including in writing.
- Provision for mathematics in the school is outstanding. Pupils consistently make progress in line with the top 5% of schools in the country. This is because they experience consistently high-quality teaching. Staff have responded well to the raised expectations set out in the revised national curriculum and it is to their credit that standards in mathematics remained high in 2016. They remain ambitious, though, to raise attainment further and have identified that while pupils are highly skilled and confident at arithmetic, they sometimes struggle coming to terms with more abstract concepts. As a result, teachers are tweaking their approach to lessons to ensure that pupils are better equipped to work through challenging problems independently. They are very skilled in encouraging pupils to talk about mathematics in a way that deepens their conceptual understanding, confidence and their enjoyment.
- Pupils' achievement in writing, while generally good, is less strong than in reading and mathematics. In particular, fewer pupils achieved the very highest standards in writing last year than in the other subjects. Leaders are working hard and effectively to improve attainment in writing. You and your staff have noted that while pupils are very skilled and confident in writing formal letters, they demonstrate less flair in writing imaginatively. This aspect of writing is improving, however. For example, pupils in Year 6 recently produced high-quality imaginative writing in response to an animation called 'The Piano'. One wrote, 'Tenderly, his fingers floated along the keys, trying to unlock his recollections and drown his sorrows in the melancholic chords of the past.' You continue to trial different approaches to improve the quality of pupils' writing in other subjects across the curriculum.
- Pupils achieve well in science and understand the principles of 'thinking scientifically'. The pupils routinely make predictions before conducting experiments and write their own conclusions. The pupils I spoke with were able to explain how their different parachute designs led them to understand the relationship between the parachute's size, the amount of friction this caused and the resulting impact on the pace of the parachute's descent. Other pupils were able to explain the human digestive system as a result of the models they had made. Pupils are increasingly skilled at devising their own experiments.

- The curriculum also ensures appropriate coverage of other subjects. While governors regularly meet subject leaders, visit lessons and look at books, they recognise that they now need to monitor pupils' attainment in subjects across the curriculum as rigorously as they do in English and mathematics.
- The school works very effectively to support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who need extra help to catch up. The special educational needs coordinator, who also monitors provision for disadvantaged pupils, works very effectively with pupils, staff and parents to ensure that all those who need or are entitled to additional support receive the help they need. Very close monitoring of their progress ensures they make good gains, for example in improving their reading or numeracy skills.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school's child protection policy fully reflects the most recent changes to statutory guidance
- the curriculum promotes, systematically, tolerance towards people with legally protected characteristics, including those relating to sexual orientation and gender
- the proportion of children exceeding the early learning goals increases to reflect children's starting points, including in writing
- the proportion of pupils attaining highly in writing increases to be more in line with the high proportions who do so in reading and mathematics
- governors monitor pupils' attainment in all curriculum subjects as rigorously as they do in English and mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

Daniel Burton  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, I met with you and other members of staff and representatives of the governing body. We observed learning together in lessons across the school, including in the early years. We also scrutinised samples of pupils' work. I met with groups of pupils and spoke to them informally at break and lunchtime and in lessons. I also listened to four pupils read. I scrutinised a range of documents including the school's improvement plan and policies and records regarding safeguarding. I considered the views of the 66 parents who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire, Parent View, as well as the responses from the 35 pupils who completed the pupil questionnaire.