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Mr Martin Clephane
Headteacher
St James' RC Voluntary Aided Primary School
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Dear Mr Clephane

Short inspection of St James' RC Voluntary Aided 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 November 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained and improved upon the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You acted swiftly to address the areas for improvement from the last inspection and have continued to refine and develop the curriculum so that it provides pupils with many memorable and exciting experiences. Despite some turbulence in staffing, you have improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by providing very well-focused training. Teachers hold high standards and most are skilled at stimulating pupils' curiosity and creativity. Lessons are purposeful and productive and pupils are eager to participate and share their ideas.

There is a tangible atmosphere of care and consideration for one another. Pupils feel safe and comfortable to contribute during lessons, in assemblies and at social times. They behave extremely well and are polite and welcoming to visitors. Your passionate commitment to addressing inequality and tackling disadvantage is clearly evident in the strength of provision for pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development. Excellent experiences, such as the trip to Rome and the opportunity to take part on a professional stage in a production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, typify your values and approach.

Outcomes in the school have improved since the last inspection. The proportion of children attaining a good level of development by the end of the Reception class is rising each year and strong progress in key stage 1 has ensured that levels of attainment have been above the national average by the end of Year 2. Strong

progress is sustained across key stage 2. Last year, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics was well above the national average. Disadvantaged pupils made similarly strong progress and attained outcomes above those of other pupils nationally. As a result, all pupils are well prepared for the next phase of their education. However, you have rightly identified that not enough pupils attained the higher levels in reading or mathematics and you have begun to focus on teaching strategies that will address this issue.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have sound systems in place to check the suitability of all members of staff and other adults that come into the school. You ensure that all members of staff are well trained and understand the duty upon them to act if they have a concern about a child's safety. You act quickly to ensure that the necessary actions are taken to protect children at risk of harm and doggedly pursue these concerns through to a successful resolution. The governors have a good understanding of their statutory safeguarding responsibilities, although they could strengthen their approach to safeguarding by auditing the effectiveness of safeguarding work more thoroughly.

Inspection findings

- Members of the early years team make visits to all local nursery providers and liaise effectively with parents prior to children entering the Reception class. Children settle well and quickly learn to socialise and play cooperatively with one another. Regular, well-focused assessments ensure that adults provide appropriate activities to address gaps in children's knowledge and understanding. On average, children enter the Reception class with skills and abilities below those typical of children their age. They make strong progress in developing their reading and number skills, although some children make less progress in other areas. Although still below average, the proportion of children that attain a good level of development by the end of the Reception year has risen steadily over the last three years.
- A focus on reading continues in Year 1. Pupils become increasingly skilled in their use of phonics to decode words and most begin to read fluently. By the end of Year 2, all pupils attained the expected standard in the phonics check last year. Strong progress also ensured that the proportion of pupils that attained the expected standard in writing and mathematics was well above that seen nationally. However, numbers of pupils reaching the higher level in reading, writing or mathematics were no better than average, indicating room for improvement for the most able pupils.
- A similar pattern exists across key stage 2. Pupils make strong progress which accelerates in Years 5 and 6. The proportion of pupils that attained the expected standard was above the national average last year, with progress in writing being a significant strength. In mathematics, the curriculum ensures that pupils master methods of calculation, but teachers do not require pupils to reason or apply their knowledge and understanding to mathematical problems frequently enough. As a result, the proportion of pupils attaining the higher level in mathematics was

no better than that seen nationally.

- Pupils benefit from a good range of memorable experiences that develop their knowledge and understanding of other subjects. For example, in science pupils learned about the circulatory system and had the opportunity to dissect a lamb's heart. There is a good range of residential trips and numerous sporting opportunities that help to broaden minds and develop a good understanding of healthy lifestyles. However, more thorough planning is required to ensure that pupils have enough opportunities to practise and master the particular skills that underpin success in subjects beyond English and mathematics.
- The level of overall attendance has improved markedly this year because you have successfully worked with families to improve the attendance of some pupils that missed school regularly. Efforts to improve attendance need to be sustained and focused on disadvantaged pupils and boys in particular, who continue to be more likely to miss school.
- You have managed some turbulence in staffing well, so that pupils' learning and progress has continued to be strong. Although there is some variability in the quality of teaching, well-focused training is ensuring that teachers continue to refine their practice. All teachers ensure that pupils work hard in lessons and take real care with the presentation of their work. Most parents that responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire were full of praise for the care and consideration that teachers show.
- The governing body uses performance data, reports from the local authority and surveys of parents carefully to identify priorities for improvement. They ensure that you and the wider staff team are held to account for these priorities. They meet each year with subject coordinators to check on the impact of school improvement work. Newer governors ensure that they attend relevant training so that they can use performance information to challenge leaders effectively. The governors also ensure that policies are up to date. However, governors could be more systematic in checking their effectiveness in order to assure themselves that their statutory responsibilities are fully met.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they increase the proportion of the most able pupils that attain the higher levels at the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2, particularly in reading and mathematics
- the teaching of mathematics provides pupils with more frequent opportunities to apply their knowledge to mathematical problems and to explain their reasoning
- pupils have more time to practise and master skills in subjects beyond English and mathematics.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle and the director of children's services for South Tyneside. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one day inspection I pursued the following lines of enquiry:

- Do children make enough progress in the Reception class? Is their ability on entry correctly assessed and do teachers use assessment information well enough to address gaps in children's knowledge, skills and understanding?
- Are current pupils making strong and sustained progress across key stage 1? Is there good provision in place for pupils that start Year 1 below expectations?
- Are pupils currently in the school making strong progress across key stage 2 in a range of subjects? Does the curriculum provide sufficient breadth, so that pupils develop a broad understanding of the world and develop creatively and physically?
- Are leaders taking effective action to improve attendance, particularly the attendance of the disadvantaged, boys and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities?
- Do governors have an accurate evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses and do they hold leaders to account effectively?
- Are child protection and safeguarding arrangements robust and does a culture of vigilance exist across all members of staff?

During the inspection I met with you, the deputy headteacher and other teachers and a group of governors including the chair of the governing body. I spoke with pupils both formally and informally during social times and in lessons. I also met with a representative of the local authority. You and I visited a number of lessons across each phase of the school. We discussed the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans, assessment information, attendance data and safeguarding practice. I also reviewed information on the school's website. I scrutinised in detail the books of some of the most able and some disadvantaged pupils. I also took into account the views of parents through their responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire.