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Dear Mrs Slater

Short inspection of Houghton CofE School

Following my visit to the school on 28 March 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 the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection, and has ensured that Houghton CofE School continues to improve. You have created a highly positive culture in the school, in which each different aspect of a pupil's education is given equal priority and developed successfully. As a result, pupils perform well academically and become well-mannered and thoughtful individuals, while also developing skills in diverse areas, such as sport and art. Staff said that they are proud to work at the school, and every parent who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, said that they would recommend the school to other parents.

Pupils are polite, friendly and welcoming to visitors. They behave sensibly around school and have coped very well with the reduction in size of their playground while building work is going on. Pupils say that they like the clear systems that are in place to encourage good behaviour, and to ensure that staff quickly deal with any incidents of silly behaviour. Relationships between staff and pupils are warm and positive, and pupils are eager to learn.

The school's curriculum is broad and well balanced. It provides pupils with good learning experiences across a range of different areas, such as the Battle of Hastings, Roman Britain and China. The curriculum is further enriched by school trips to places such as Hadrian's Wall, and through a varied selection of extra-curricular clubs covering areas including sport, art and music. The school has a

strong sporting tradition and many pupils have the opportunity to take part in sporting events in school and with other schools. Pupils understand the importance of making healthy lifestyle choices and talk knowledgeably about staying healthy, both physically and mentally.

You have successfully addressed the areas for improvement identified by the previous inspection. Standards of attainment in writing have risen to be above the national average in key stages 1 and 2, for each of the last three years. Teachers encourage pupils to check and edit their work, and provide them with opportunities to practise and develop their writing across a range of different subjects. Pupils' written work shows that they respond well and are quickly becoming confident and capable writers. The previous inspection report also highlighted the need for teachers to make sure that they set work that met pupils' different learning needs and stages. The 2016 key stage 2 results showed that pupils are making strong progress whatever their starting points, because teachers are setting work at the right level. Furthermore, the proportion of pupils reaching the highest standards across a range of subjects confirms that the most able pupils are being well challenged by their teachers.

You acknowledge, though, that there is still more work to be done, particularly in the area of phonics teaching. Over time, results in the Year 1 phonics screening check have not been as strong as most other results across key stages 1 and 2, and suggest that pupils' progress in phonics is less secure than in mathematics and other aspects of English. Evidence from my visit confirmed that the teaching of phonics is not as effective as it could be. This is because the school's approach to teaching phonics is not sufficiently consistent or well structured, and so is not giving younger pupils the skills or confidence to use phonics well to help them to read.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have created a culture throughout the school in which safeguarding is given a very high priority. Staff have an extremely good understanding of what to do if they are worried about a pupil's welfare, and leaders have put secure procedures in place to ensure that all concerns are effectively followed up. The school has established positive relationships with external agencies and works well in partnership with others to ensure that children are kept safe.

Staff and governors receive regular training so that their knowledge of good practice in safeguarding is kept up to date. Leaders ensure that detailed checks are made on staff, governors, volunteers and regular visitors to the school to make sure that they are suitable people to work with children. Safeguarding records are maintained securely and are of a good quality.

During the current period of substantial building work, leaders and governors have taken great care to ensure that the school site is safe for staff and pupils. Pupils and parents say that they feel that the school is a safe place. Pupils also understand how to keep themselves safe in different situations, such as when crossing the road or when using the internet.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on a number of key lines of enquiry. The first of these was to look at how effectively mathematics is taught in key stage 1. You had recognised that, over time, pupils' attainment in mathematics in key stage 1 has not been as consistently strong as in reading and writing. In response, you and other school leaders have reviewed the school's approach to teaching mathematics and have made some adjustments. These have included increasing the amount of practical mathematics work in key stage 1 and placing a greater focus on developing pupils' problem-solving and reasoning skills. The school's tracking information indicates that these changes are having a positive impact and that the proportion of pupils on track to reach the expected level in mathematics by the end of Year 2 is rising. This is also seen in pupils' books, which show that they are responding well to the greater level of challenge and are becoming skilled at using their number skills to solve written problems.
- The second of my key lines of enquiry was to look at the quality and impact of the support that the school gives to its pupils who are members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. This group of pupils account for almost a quarter of the number of pupils at the school. The school has a clear and cohesive approach to working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils and their families. This includes rigorous promotion of good school attendance, setting work for pupils when it is known that they are going to be absent for a period of time and providing intensive catch-up sessions after extended periods of absence. Assessment information and work in pupils' books confirm that this approach is working well, and that this group of pupils are typically making good progress from their different starting points. There are also positive signs that the attendance of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, while still well below the national average, has improved this year.
- Finally, I looked at the effectiveness of phonics teaching in the school. It is clear that the less confident readers in key stage 1 do not have the phonics skills and knowledge that they need to help them to tackle unfamiliar words. This has a negative impact on the speed and accuracy of their reading, and also on their spelling. Teaching, currently, is not enabling children and pupils across the early years and key stage 1 to develop a secure grasp of phonics as swiftly as it should. You and the leaders responsible for English recognise this and are currently reviewing how phonics is organised and delivered, so that attainment in phonics rises to match that in other areas.
- An important factor in the improvements that have been made by the school since its last inspection is the quality of its leadership. Governors are knowledgeable and provide a good balance of challenge and support. Your leadership abilities have been acknowledged by the local authority, and this led to you providing support for another school through a secondment arrangement. This also indicates the strength and capacity of other senior and middle leaders at Houghton, who were able to step up and ensure that the good quality of education at the school was maintained. This also illustrates the school's strong capacity for further improvement.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school adopts a more consistent and sharply focused approach to teaching phonics, so that more pupils reach the expected standard in the national phonics screening check.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Dixon

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this short inspection I met with you, six members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. I also met a group of teaching and support staff. I considered 37 responses from parents to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, along with 16 responses to the staff survey and 40 responses to the pupil survey. I met with a group of pupils and heard a number of other pupils read. I visited classes in the early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2, and you accompanied me to observe phonics being taught. I looked at pupils' work across a range of year groups and subjects. I also looked at a range of documentation covering different aspects of the school's work.