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Mr Chris Rafferty
Acting Headteacher
Holm Cultram Abbey CofE School
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Dear Mr Rafferty

Short inspection of Holm Cultram Abbey 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 April 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

At the time of the last inspection the school was led by two executive headteachers. Following their departure, the school went through a period of uncertainty. During your tenure as acting headteacher, you have restored strong leadership to the school, and raised staff morale enormously. All staff speak very positively of your leadership and say that they are proud to work at the school.

The governors are a highly committed group of people who have demonstrated very strong leadership to maintain the good quality of education in the school. They have been successful in their goal of appointing a permanent headteacher to bring sustained, effective leadership and drive the school further forward.

Parents are very positive about the school. Those who spoke with me and responded to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, commented on how friendly and approachable all the staff are. They were very keen to tell me how happy their children are at the school. These positive views can be summed up by one parent's comments: 'This is a fabulous little school. I wouldn't send my daughter anywhere else.' The family ethos in the school clearly helps pupils to thrive.

At the last inspection you were asked to ensure that pupils, particularly the most able, were being challenged. Teachers now routinely make this a high priority when planning learning. They take advantage of the flexibility that mixed-year classes provide, and pupils work effectively with others of different ages to support and challenge each other.

When you took up your post at the start of the year you quickly identified that there were aspects of teaching in key stage 1 that required some improvement, so that more pupils met the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils in the Reception/key stage 1 class are now making more rapid progress, but this still remains a key focus area. The teaching of phonics has improved. However, the headteacher designate is keen to ensure that all staff throughout the school are highly skilled in teaching phonics.

The work that you and the governors have done to improve the attendance of an identified group of disadvantaged pupils has made an impact. Most of these pupils now have an attendance rate that is above the national average. You intend to continue this work until all pupils are attending school regularly.

Safeguarding is effective.

You ensure that there is a strong culture of safeguarding in your school. All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose, including protocols and practices for record-keeping. Systems to ensure that only suitable people are recruited to work with children in the school are secure.

You, your staff and governors know all your pupils extremely well. This, coupled with the training that staff receive, means that you are all well placed to spot any signs or symptoms of potential risk or abuse.

Pupils feel that all the adults in the school look after them well and care about them. Pupils know that if they are worried about anything, they can talk to any member of staff, and they are confident that adults in school will help them.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on a number of key lines of enquiry, the first of which related to the effectiveness of leadership and management. The transition from the school being led by two executive headteachers to the appointment of a permanent headteacher has not been straightforward. With the help of the local authority, governors have steered the school through this challenging time in an effective way. Governors know their school extremely well. They knew exactly what skills and qualities they were looking for in a new headteacher and were determined not to settle for anything less. The headteacher designate comes to the school with a successful track record, and a clear vision and plan to drive the school forward. She takes up her post in a two weeks' time and was fully involved in the inspection. This new appointment, following on from your strong

leadership, means that the school now has good capacity for further improvement.

- Over the last few years, the local authority has worked alongside governors to maintain the good quality of education in the school. Funding has been secured to continue to support the school. The headteacher designate will decide how best to use this support once she takes up her post.
- The second focus for the inspection concerned the attendance of disadvantaged pupils. Over recent years, too many of these pupils have not been attending school regularly. Working with governors, you have identified the different reasons why these pupils have a high absence rate. You are working very closely with parents to improve their children's attendance. This is having a significant impact, and the attendance rate of most of these pupils is now above the national average. However, this work remains a priority for you until all pupils are attending school regularly.
- My line of enquiry relating to the progress of pupils in key stage 1 matched your own concerns in this area. You had already identified that pupils in the Reception/key stage 1 class were not making rapid enough progress. Pupils in this group are now benefiting from stronger teaching, and current assessment information shows that this is having a positive impact on their progress. This means that a higher proportion of this cohort than last year are on track to achieve the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Very small cohorts of pupils in Year 1 over recent years mean that comparisons with national averages are not appropriate. However, a focus for the inspection was to look at why some pupils had not reached the expected standard in the phonics screening check at the end of Year 1. This was related to the quality of teaching in this area, which has now improved. More effective teaching and targeted work with current Year 1 pupils mean that the proportion of them who will reach the expected standard in the phonics screening check is likely to be at least in line with the national average. The headteacher designate has particular expertise in training staff to teach phonics effectively. During the inspection, she explained that one of her first priorities on taking up her post will be to ensure that all staff throughout the school become highly skilled in teaching phonics.
- My final line of enquiry related to the area for improvement identified at the previous inspection about making sure that all pupils, particularly the most able, were being appropriately challenged. You have worked with teachers to ensure that they plan learning in such a way that the most able are challenged to achieve high standards. During the inspection, I saw the high standard of writing that key stage 2 pupils produce. Pupils were able to explain to me why they were using particular language techniques in the persuasive letters that they were writing. Pupils in both key stages told me how much they like the way that their teachers challenge them, particularly in mathematics, where it is helping them to make good progress.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils continue to make good progress throughout their time in key stage 1, so that the majority of them achieve the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 2
- all staff in school are highly skilled in teaching phonics
- they build on the significant improvements already made to ensure that all pupils, particularly those who are disadvantaged, attend school regularly.

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

Anne Seneviratne
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and the headteacher designate and six members of the governing body, including the chair. I spoke with a representative of the local authority on the phone. I met formally with three groups of pupils from across the school and talked informally with others at playtime and in lessons. I listened to pupils read. I also talked with parents informally at the start of the school day. Accompanied by you and the headteacher designate, I observed teaching and learning in both the Reception/key stage 1 class, and the key stage 2 class. I examined a range of documentation, including the self-evaluation document and current assessment information. I also undertook a review of the school's website. As part of the inspection, I considered the responses to Ofsted's Parent View, responses from parents to Ofsted's free text, and responses to Ofsted's staff and pupil questionnaires.