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Mrs Joanne Coulson
Acting Headteacher
Mill Hill Nursery School
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Dear Mrs Coulson

Short inspection of Mill Hill Nursery 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 January 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Despite the uncertain financial future of the school, you have brought much-needed stability to the staff team. They value your leadership in these difficult times and share your commitment to fostering a strong team that works collectively to support the children at Mill Hill Nursery School.

You know the children very well and have at your fingertips an in-depth knowledge of their needs. This, coupled with your knowledge of early childhood development, means that your monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning is precise. This has ensured that the good quality of teaching and learning identified at the time of the previous inspection has been sustained and built on well.

You personally welcome every child into nursery each morning and your care and affection for them are greatly appreciated by parents and carers. They are wholly supportive of your leadership and the school. Those spoken with voiced their praise for the positive impact you and your team have had in preparing their children for primary school. It is a testimony to your leadership that, despite the difficult circumstances surrounding the school and the potential impact of changes in national funding arrangements, parents remain wholly supportive of what Mill Hill does for their children. Indeed, there is a waiting list for much-sought-after places.

As part of the inspection I looked at the effectiveness of governance. This was an

area for improvement at the last inspection. Governors have successfully strengthened their role in holding you to account. They use their skills to good effect and have designated governors with responsibility for specific areas of the school's work. Governors' visits to the school are undertaken more regularly and reports to the wider governing body are detailed and well-prepared for scrutiny. Minutes of meetings demonstrate that governors are more rigorous in their questioning and that this aspect of their role in challenging you is commonplace. They hold leaders at the school to account successfully. Governors are currently securing the financial viability of the school and exploring all options. They have a good understanding of how children are achieving, particularly disadvantaged children, and they make sure that the small amount of pupil premium funding is spent wisely. Information they receive shows that this group of children make good progress and achieve as well as their peers. However, governors have not ensured that the pupil premium report is provided on the school's website. This is a requirement of the Department for Education.

I also wanted to check that the recently introduced provision for two-year-olds was of an equally good standard as the other classes in the nursery. You have appointed staff whose skills complement each other. They are skilled practitioners and have a calm and encouraging approach with very young children. They are good role models in fostering those crucially important language skills in children. As a result of their collective strengths, children are making good progress from their starting points and in securing basic skills, knowledge, understanding and confidence. This is ensuring that they settle quickly into the larger Nursery class space when they transfer following their third birthday.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that all policies and procedures are up to date, taking good account of the most recent legislation. Staff undergo regular training to ensure that they, too, are aware of the most recent legislation and that they know what to do should they have any safeguarding concerns. Record-keeping is detailed and of high quality. A designated governor is responsible for health and safety and safeguarding and carries out her role well. She makes regular checks to ensure that the school is compliant with requirements and to identify any potential hazards. Findings are reported back to the wider governing body, which ensures that appropriate actions are taken to minimise risks and keep children safe.

The curriculum is used well to support children's understanding of how to keep themselves and others safe. For example, a group of boys were very keen to show me their mouldy bread, which they were observing, but they were equally aware of why they were observing under clear plastic. Gentle reminders and encouragement are given to children to share equipment and to be considerate of others when using resources. Children are taught from a young age their responsibilities of playing safely.

Inspection findings

- Outcomes for children are good. The vast majority of children enter the school with skills below those typically expected for their age. As a result of effective use of assessment information, by the time children transfer to primary school they have made good gains in their learning and are ready to start school having reached age-related expectations. That said, at the end of the last academic year no children exceeded these expectations.
- You track carefully the progress of every child from entry into the school and respond swiftly to any stalled achievement. This means that the progress of children in all areas of learning is good.
- Children arrive into Nursery at various times during the school year. This requires you to keep and maintain detailed records of each group of children, including records of their progress over time. However, you do not routinely track the progress of the most able children. This means that opportunities are missed to check if they are making the accelerated progress required to enable them to exceed age-related expectations by the time they leave school. Consequently, although they achieve well, they do not consistently achieve as highly as they could.
- Children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported and outcomes for them are strong. This is because of the effective leadership of the coordinator. Highly effective relationships with the health visitor service in particular is ensuring that children's needs are identified quickly and that no time is wasted in ensuring that provision is appropriate.
- There are few disadvantaged children in the Nursery, but you do monitor their progress carefully to ensure that any differences in their achievement from that of their peers is diminished. Access to the two-year-old provision is supporting improvement in these children's achievements well. However, at the time of the inspection the pupil premium report was not available on the school's website, which is a statutory requirement.
- You have a clear understanding of the school's strength and areas for improvement and use this to develop targeted improvement plans. For example, you recognised that outcomes in the specific area of learning for understanding the world were lower than those of others last year. You made this a priority for improvement this year. As a result, there is now an increased emphasis on planning activities that will encourage children's curiosity in the world around them. Evidence within current assessment information clearly shows the improvements in children's acquisition of early scientific knowledge and skills.
- The Nursery provides a rich and vibrant place for children to learn, both inside and outdoors. Staff pay great attention to ensuring that space is used well to give children a breadth of good-quality learning experiences. These are responsive to children's interests and motivations and support children's growing confidence and independence. However, occasionally some activities are not sufficiently challenging to sustain children's interests and when this happens their progress slows.

- Carefully focused sessions in mathematics and phonics ensure that children get off to a good start in acquiring early literacy and numeracy skills. This supports successful transitions into primary school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the pupil premium report on the school's website is fully compliant with the Department for Education requirements
- planned activities are consistent in the challenge they provide to children to enable them to sustain interest
- the progress of the most able children is monitored with the same precision as that of other key groups of children within the school, to ensure that more children make accelerated progress and exceed age-related expectations.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Buckle
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

As part of the inspection, I reviewed a range of school documentation. These included documents relating to the safeguarding of children, the school's improvement plans and your written evaluation of the school's work. I visited lessons with you and reviewed past and current information on children's learning and progress. I talked to children about their learning during the day. Meetings were held with you, senior leaders, staff and three representatives from the governing body. I took account of 34 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and I talked to parents at the end of the day. I also checked the school's website.