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Mrs Jo Nutbeam
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Dear Mrs Nutbeam

Short inspection of Hickling CofE VC Infant School

Following my visit to the school on 23 May 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 July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in this small school since the previous inspection. In a period in which there have been several leadership and staffing changes, you have successfully preserved the caring ethos which is valued by pupils and parents. One parent stated her appreciation for 'the detailed attention paid to each child', while a pupil commented that school 'is like a big family'. Inspection evidence confirms that Hickling Infant School is one in which pupils' personal development and welfare are provided for well.

There is a harmonious atmosphere in the school. You are rightly proud of pupils' behaviour. Inspection evidence demonstrates their behaviour in lessons is typically polite and kind. Pupils respond well to clearly understood routines and display an infectious enthusiasm for their learning. They move around the small school site in an orderly fashion. Pupils mix together well at break and lunchtime, be it when making energetic use of the play equipment, or simply enjoying each other's company.

Under the assured leadership of the head of school, pupils at Hickling Infant School develop into confident, reflective learners. They understand the importance of the school's learning 'characters', which represent attributes pupils know as 'resilience', 'resourcefulness', 'reflective', 'reasoning' and 'responsible'. For example, pupils explained how resilience helps them in their learning and play. One pupil described how it helps him 'get up when I fall over in PE [physical education] and keep on

running to the end'. Another explained how she now 'never gives up' when the work is challenging.

It is your deeply held conviction that the school should be a central part of the village community. Pupils take part in events such as the local food fayre, pancake day and visits to a residential home. Pupils also develop an awareness of the wider world through work such as the topic in which they learn about Nepalese culture. As a consequence, pupils are being prepared well for the next stages of their education.

Since the previous inspection, the school has joined the Swallowtail Federation of Church Schools. You are making good use of the additional capacity this brings to ensure that the enthusiastic and effective head of school has the skills and knowledge to carry out her role well. For example, through her work with the federation's executive deputy headteacher, who also acts as the special educational needs coordinator, vulnerable pupils are now very well cared for. Similarly, as a result of appropriate improvements made working alongside the federation's early years leader, the head of school has ensured that the quality of this aspect of the school's provision has improved and outcomes are good.

When the school joined the federation in 2014, you judged teaching, learning and assessment to be inconsistent and rightly set about improving the quality of provision. For example, you made improvements to the early years outdoor learning space and raised expectations of what pupils could achieve. Adults in school explained to me how the training offered through the federation helps them develop their practice in activities such as delivering phonics. The impact of your work is evident in the significantly improved pupil outcomes in 2015. Under a different accountability measure, in 2016, pupils typically made good progress from their starting points by the end of key stage 1.

There is one governing body responsible for the governance of all three schools in the federation. This body shares your commitment to provide high-quality education, while maintaining close links with the local community. Through the cohesive federation plan, governors have ensured that the priorities of the school are appropriately aligned to those of other settings in the federation. Governors make effective use of their knowledge and skills to provide appropriate challenge and support to you and your senior leaders. As part of its reflective approach to governance, the governing body gathers views of parents, pupils and staff. Inspection evidence supports governors' own findings that while governors have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, some parents would welcome greater clarity about the work of the federation, its governors and leaders.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, ensure that the school fulfils its statutory safeguarding duties. The chair of the governing body explained that safeguarding is 'top of our list of priorities'. Together, leaders have been successful in creating an ethos in which pupils develop the confidence that comes from a strong sense of

security and well-being. Every parent who responded on Parent View, or to the school's own survey, agreed that their child is safe and cared for well at Hickling Infant School. Pupils told me that it is a safe, happy place in which to learn and that adults would listen to any concerns that they had.

Pupils have an age-appropriate understanding of what bullying is. They are clear that it is 'not a nice thing to do'. Pupils struggled to recall any incident of bullying at their school. They told me that they are confident such issues would be dealt with well by staff. Pupils also explained how the school helps them to understand how to keep themselves safe. For example, as a result of information provided by their teacher, pupils could describe how they would protect themselves from risks when using the internet. Pupils also outlined how the adults in the school help them understand how to keep safe when near roads.

As a result of appropriate safeguarding training, adults know what to do if they have concerns about a pupil's well-being. Leaders keep careful records that document the suitable, timely actions taken when a pupil is in need of support. These records confirm the view expressed by a representative of the local authority that leaders correctly seek advice from external agencies when it is in the best interests of a pupil to do so.

Governors ensure that policies are kept up to date and that leaders carry out appropriate checks on adults working at the school. However, governors have not ensured that the most up-to-date safeguarding policy or pupil premium report have been available on the school's website. Both documents were on the website by the time the inspection was completed.

Inspection findings

- As an initial line of enquiry, I sought to establish how well pupils are progressing in phonics. Since the previous inspection, pupils have typically achieved well in the phonics screening checks. However, the proportions achieving the expected standard fell in 2016.
- Guided by you, the head of school is ensuring that pupils are making good progress from their individual and varied starting points in phonics. Pupils are confident when recognising and sounding out letters and words. Pupils respond enthusiastically to the wide variety of activities that enable them to hear, speak, read and write increasingly complex words and sounds. You put in place appropriate support should a pupil fall behind. However, you recognise that most-able pupils could be moved more quickly onto more challenging work in their phonics sessions.
- Pupils are also confident when applying the techniques learned in phonics sessions to their reading. Pupils who read to me did so confidently and with a clear sense of enjoyment. These pupils determinedly used the skills learned in their phonics sessions to decode unfamiliar and tricky words accurately. Work in pupils' phonics books demonstrates that they are also increasingly assured in their spelling.

- A second line of enquiry was to establish how effectively leaders are ensuring that higher proportions of pupils are working at greater depth by the end of key stage 1. As your accurate self-evaluation identified, since the previous inspection, the proportions of pupils working at higher levels or greater depth have fluctuated and could be increased.
- The head of school has correctly raised expectations of the quality of pupils' writing and has also focused on further developing pupils' handwriting skills. Accurate guidance from adults in the class is helping pupils to form their letters precisely and well. The impact of this is evident in pupils' improving handwriting.
- Pupils have responded well to imaginatively planned learning activities and apply their literacy skills in complex and creative ways. For example, in their work on 'Supertata' (the school's superhero character), pupils, in particular those who are most able, wrote with fluency, ambitious use of language and increasingly accurate spelling and grammar. Evidence in pupils' books supports your assessment information that higher proportions of pupils are on track to be working at greater depth in writing by the end of key stage 1.
- Similarly, the head of school has taken action to provide opportunities for pupils to apply their mathematical skills to more-challenging problems. Pupils told me they enjoy working on the practical mathematics activities. This enjoyment was clearly evident as pupils worked together well when comparing the volumes of water different containers could hold. A scrutiny of work in pupils' books demonstrates that pupils make good progress in mathematics.
- To ascertain if the school continues to provide a good standard of education, I examined the progress that pupils make in subjects other than English and mathematics.
- You have ensured that pupils have access to a rich and well-constructed curriculum. While pupils generally make good progress across a range of subjects, the head of school acknowledges they could do even better. For example, pupils are not consistently given opportunities to apply the same standards of literacy and numeracy in other subjects as those they apply in English and mathematics.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they communicate the federation's leadership and management roles and responsibilities clearly to parents on a regular basis, and also ensure that the school website reflects the most up-to-date policies and practices that exist within the school
- most-able pupils have the chance to apply their skills learned in phonics in more complex and challenging activities
- pupils are provided with more frequent opportunities to apply their literacy and numeracy skills across a range of subjects so they make even stronger progress across the curriculum.

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

Yours sincerely

John Lucas

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- During the course of this inspection I held meetings with you, your office manager, other senior leaders and one governor. I held separate phone conversations with the chair of the governing body and a representative from the local authority.
- Together with you and the executive deputy headteacher, I visited each class to observe pupils' learning. I also undertook a scrutiny of pupils' work in their books and folders to determine their progress over time.
- Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined along with the school's record of checks carried out on adults working at the school.
- A range of documents was analysed or discussed, including: self-evaluation and improvement plans; documents relating to pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour; and minutes of governor meetings.
- I spoke with pupils informally in classrooms and when walking around the school site. I also met with all pupils currently in Year 2 who were in school on the day of the inspection.
- I considered the views of six parents who responded to Parent View, as well as those of the very small number of parents who provided comments using the free-text service. I took account of the larger number of parents who responded to the school's own surveys. I also took into account the opinions of parents who spoke with me informally over the course of the inspection.