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Mrs Zoe Batten
Headteacher
St Helen's Church of England Primary School
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Dear Mrs Batten

Short inspection of St Helen's Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 6 June 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. You have recruited a strong team of leaders across school who are carefully trained to carry out their roles. This has allowed you to focus clearly on securing improvements to the quality of teaching and pupils' learning. Together, you have gained the confidence of the school community. You have been able to influence change and make improvements very quickly due to your skills as a leader.

Leaders throughout the school, including governors, have a secure understanding of the school's strengths and the areas to work on. Governors provide strong support and effective challenge. As a result, the school has made significant improvements in a number of key areas since the last inspection. For example, well-considered changes to the curriculum have led to an improvement in the quality of pupils' work. In addition, focused work to improve attendance has been successful and has resulted in reduced rates of absence. However, further work is required so that all teachers have high expectations of pupils' learning in key stage 1, especially during the transition from the early years.

At the previous inspection, you were asked to increase the opportunities for pupils to extend their thinking and evaluate their learning. Inspection findings confirm that all learners, including the most able, are able to direct their own learning. Pupils use critical thinking skills in mathematics consistently. Pupils decide for themselves which strategies to use to improve their work. Opportunities are provided for every

pupil to discover new areas of talent.

You were also asked to improve the curriculum by extending the opportunities for pupils to use new technology to enhance their learning. Your work in this regard is highly effective. During my visit, it was evident that all teachers plan lessons from an inspiring curriculum which interests and motivates pupils. Activities are tailor-made to extend the thinking for all pupils, including the most able and those who need extra help. Pupils enjoy a very well-rounded approach to their education.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is of great importance to all staff and governors. You and your staff know your pupils and their families very well and are quick to spot any problems, including unusual patterns of attendance or punctuality. Any concerns are swiftly investigated and specialist agencies involved when required. Leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality.

Pupils report that they feel safe in school. They know there is always an adult available to help them with any worries or concerns. They apply their knowledge of internet safety wisely when using laptops and tablets. Messages about staying safe are reinforced by 'digital leaders', a group of pupils across key stage 2 who provide an initial point of contact for pupils experiencing concerns. The curriculum is crafted carefully to ensure that pupils are fully aware of how to stay safe in their local, rural environment and in larger cities.

Inspection findings

A key line of enquiry focused on teachers' use of assessment to build on what pupils already know in key stage 1, so that pupils' progress is sustained and at least good.

- Teachers use detailed assessments well to secure improved achievement. For example, those pupils currently in Year 2 who failed to meet the expected standard in phonics at the end of Year 1 are making strong and often rapid progress. Leaders have tackled quickly historical weaknesses in these pupils' reading and writing skills. As a result, pupils in Year 2 now read with greater confidence, expression and stamina. They write with good accuracy in punctuation, phonics and grammar. Leaders recognise that pupils' spelling is not yet as strong and are fully committed to improving this.
- A small group of middle-attaining pupils need to make increased progress to meet age-related expectations. This is because teachers' expectations are not high enough. The school is aware that activities and assessment for these pupils are sometimes insufficiently precise to ensure pupils make even more rapid progress.

Another line of enquiry explored how effectively teachers use strategies to develop independent, enquiring pupils. Leaders' monitoring of the curriculum was evaluated to ascertain the impact of new technology on enhancing pupils' learning.

- The curriculum motivates and engages pupils. Classrooms and corridors display interesting examples of pupils' work that demonstrate the breadth of topics covered. The quality of pupils' art and design work is particularly high. Typically, pupils are inquisitive about the topics being taught and they respond positively to teachers' questions and guidance. Pupils particularly enjoy the online reading portal where they share their love of books together. Parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, overwhelmingly agree that their children enjoy school and achieve well.
- Pupils have extensive access to modern technologies across all aspects of their learning. Pupils have frequent opportunities to demonstrate expert application of their computing knowledge. They particularly enjoy the 'computational thinkers project' because they learn to use algorithms and coding from specialist teachers. These key computing skills are meshed very carefully with a curriculum that promotes independent learning skills. The 'Science Day' provided opportunities for pupils to learn well through group investigations, including learning about robotics and new inventions.
- Teaching is successful in developing pupils' positive attitudes towards learning. Innovative teaching places high importance on science, technology, engineering and maths. Work in books demonstrates that pupils think creatively and debate challenging topics with self-assurance and enquiring minds. Pupils report that they are encouraged to 'own their own learning' across all areas of the curriculum. Consequently, they are well prepared for their next steps in education because they persevere as self-confident and resilient learners.
- Pupils explore a wide range of religions and cultures. They contribute productively to curriculum projects linked to the ecological and economic world. An example of this is through pupils' charity work to raise funds to install solar panels in their partner school in Uganda. This will enable pupils from both schools to communicate using modern technology. Pupils successfully apply their learning to study global problems. Consequently, they are fully prepared for life in modern Britain.

My final line of enquiry was to evaluate the impact of the school's systems to ensure that pupils' attendance is good, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.

- Despite being vigilant about attendance, you know that it was below the national average last year for some pupils. You and your parent support adviser have gained some success by introducing new rewards and merits for good attendance such as the special 'governors' tea party'.
- The parent support adviser provides high-quality support to families who need it and works closely with external agencies. This provides the school and its community with helpful advice. Her focused work with disadvantaged pupils and their families has been effective in improving their attendance and punctuality rates, which are now better than the national average.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers in key stage 1 have high expectations so that pupils make even more progress from their starting points

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

Yours sincerely

Susan Costello
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and we talked about the improvements that had been made since the last inspection. I also considered your self-evaluation of the school's effectiveness. I held a discussion with three middle leaders. I looked at safeguarding records and explored your recruitment and vetting procedures. I met with five governors, including the chair of governors. I also had telephone conversations with the diocesan director of education, a national leader in education and a local authority school improvement representative.

Together we visited lessons in Reception, Year 1 and 2. We also carried out a learning walk in key stage 2. We looked at a sample of books from all classes to establish the current quality of pupils' work and their progress over time. I had a discussion with the school council. I also listened to the children read. I considered the responses submitted by parents through Parent View, the online inspection questionnaire. I also considered the views of staff and pupils through an online survey and discussions during my visit.