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Ms Karen Joy
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Dear Ms Joy

Short inspection of Abbey Court Foundation Special School

Following my visit to the school on 14 September 2017 with Jonathan Whitcombe, Ofsted Inspector, 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 outstanding in October 2012.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You lead with great determination. Together with your senior leadership team, you are relentless in your drive to continue to raise standards. Middle leaders are extremely effective in their roles. Leaders' self-evaluation of the school's strengths and aspects that need to improve further is sound. Staff at all levels reflect perpetually and are very self-aware, seeking to improve practice wherever possible.

Classrooms are happy and lively places. Expectations of pupils' behaviour and engagement in learning are high. Visits to the primary phase showed pupils being challenged to learn about different modes of transport in French. Other pupils were excited and captivated by the task of deciding where dinosaurs might like to live. Secondary-phase pupils were equally engaged, with one group spellbound as they tried to describe the sound of autumn leaves falling to the floor.

Leaders understand that developing high-quality relationships between pupils and adults is of paramount importance. The school motto, 'we grow people', is clearly at the heart of all aspects of the school's work. Support staff are highly effective in providing the care and appropriate levels of challenge that pupils require. Teachers plan learning that matches the needs of individual pupils very well. The impact of these key factors ensures excellent outcomes for the vast majority of pupils in all

phases of the school, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors highlighted the many strengths of the school, including your inspirational leadership, strong governance and the outstanding progress of pupils. They also identified the need for leaders to work with the local authority to increase opportunities to share outstanding practice beyond the school. You have improved this aspect of the school's work effectively, not least through your own contribution to other settings in your work as a national leader of education. The expertise available within the wider staff base is also put to good use in supporting other schools locally and further afield. This is particularly the case in the support of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Since the last inspection, leaders have continued the important process of self-evaluation. The fact that the school offers an outstanding quality of education has not deterred you from striving to improve key aspects of provision over time. The recent opening of the new primary phase of the school provides testament to this. We both agreed that further developing the school's provision, particularly in relation to the secondary-phase site, in order to give all pupils at the school access to the highest quality facilities, should be made a key priority for the future.

Safeguarding is effective.

Arrangements to safeguard pupils are effective. Staff and governors were able to talk readily to me about the culture of keeping children safe both in and outside of school. Strong partnerships with parents and effective communication are key aspects of the school's work to provide the highest levels of care for pupils with very complex needs. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe in school and that they trust staff to deal with their concerns. All of the parents who replied to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, feel that their children are safe in school.

Staff training is thorough and up to date and has recently focused on key national priorities to help keep pupils safe. Staff know what to do if they have concerns and told inspectors that school leaders and governors take their responsibilities to oversee the safeguarding of children very seriously.

Inspection findings

- Most pupils make outstanding progress at Abbey Court. This is true of pupils' personal development, as well as their academic progress in a range of subjects in all phases of the school. Leaders have ensured that systems to track pupils' progress are very efficient. This includes the school's own data tracking software and the use of individual 'pupil portfolios', which exemplify pupils' achievements and help staff identify next steps in learning.
- The school's curriculum is a great strength and meets the needs of pupils well. It is varied and exciting, encompassing appropriate areas of learning for pupils across the school, including in the early years and post-16 provision. Leaders constantly review the curriculum to respond to the ever-changing needs of

individual pupils or year groups. This enables teachers to plan learning that is relevant, as well as building on pupils' own interests.

- The school's extra-curricular offer is also strong, providing pupils with a wide range of experiences over and above what might be expected. This includes a state-of-the-art horse riding simulator, which has extended riding opportunities to many more pupils, allowing them to engage with the riding experience without leaving the school site.
- The school's provision for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is excellent. Leaders and governors monitor the progress of disadvantaged pupils well. As a result, staff are very focused on ensuring that these pupils make the progress required. Additional funding for disadvantaged pupils is spent effectively. This includes providing extra staff and resources, as well as enhancing the breadth of the curriculum and funding access to extra-curricular activities.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- a high priority is given to working in partnership with the local authority and other agencies, in order to further develop the school's sites to provide the very best facilities and resources for the benefit of all pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Clive Close

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors visited classrooms, monitoring the quality of teaching and learning, and assessing the quality of pupils' work. Inspectors were accompanied by senior leaders during classroom visits. Inspectors assessed pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning in classrooms and around the school. Meetings were held with senior and middle leaders; the chair of the governing body, accompanied by three other governors; and a representative group of pupils. Inspectors took into account 17 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire and accompanying free-text responses. Inspectors considered 35 replies to the staff questionnaire. A wide range of documentation was scrutinised, including policies, pupils' progress information, the school's self-evaluation and development planning, and minutes of governing body meetings.