

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr May
Headteacher
Watermill School
Turnhurst Road
Chell
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
ST6 6JZ

Dear Mr May

Short inspection of Watermill School

Following my visit to the school on 3 October 2017 with Robert Roalfe, 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 good in May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

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

Since the last inspection, you have moved to a new site and the school has been re-named 'Watermill School'. You are also a member of a cooperative trust with three other special schools. You pool your work and expertise to moderate the judgements you make about pupils' achievement and the impact that teaching is having on learning. You and your team have given great thought to planning a site and building that meet the needs of your learners. Members of the school community are now fully settled into the new site. Pupils have ample space to learn, and the range of specialist facilities is impressive.

You and governors have recruited and developed a workforce with clear talents and expertise. This includes two specialist leaders of education who provide specific support in relation to behaviour and mathematics. You have an accurate view of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Your own assessment information shows that strong outcomes have been sustained. Leaders and governors are proud of the school they serve.

At the last inspection, you were asked to improve the quality of teaching and learning further and extend the period of forward planning for whole-school improvement.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is improving. You do not shy away from tackling any weaknesses in teaching. Your appraisal systems and programmes of staff training demonstrate your clear expectations. Lesson objectives focus on pupils' learning. You have introduced a set of expectations that staff should follow when they introduce learning. Work in pupils' books shows that learning has a clear focus. Inspectors also observed pupils being presented with work that offered challenge. However, you acknowledge that there remains some variation in the quality of teaching, and there is more work to be done. Specifically, some teachers make better use of assessment information than others do. Explanations in 'Inspection findings' set out this variation in teaching in more detail.

School development planning now takes account of the improvements you intend to make over several years. This forward planning allows change to be managed more easily by staff. For example, you are currently introducing a number of changes to assessment. These changes are set out over a three-year period so that staff have time to understand and apply their learning. Despite these improvements, I found that there is scope for you to bring greater rigour to some aspects of school planning.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding systems and procedures are well organised and fit for purpose. You have devised bespoke electronic systems to make information easier to collate and review. This includes helpful chronologies that set out pupils' needs in one document. Inspectors spoke to pupils, parents and staff throughout the day about their views on safety. No concerns were shared about the school's work. Parents that inspectors spoke to at the start of the school day commented on how friendly and supportive they find staff. They are particularly pleased with the effectiveness of communication.

Leaders with responsibility for overseeing safeguarding are trained to a high level. They fully understand their duties and responsibilities with regard to keeping children safe.

Inspectors reviewed a range of documents relating to safeguarding including the single central record, risk assessments, child protection files, training records and care plans. These documents are well managed, and staff training is up to date.

Inspection findings

- At the start of the inspection, I met with you and senior leaders to review your self-evaluation and school improvement plans. During our discussions, we devised key lines of enquiry to test out the school's effectiveness and ascertain whether it remains good. Key lines of enquiry included how effectively leaders and teachers use assessment information and the security of teachers' judgements about pupils' learning, the extent to which pupils are challenged in lessons so that they can achieve at the highest possible level, and how well

improvement plans capture the desired impact of leaders' actions.

- Assessment has evolved since the last inspection. Leaders have taken account of changes at a national and local level. As outlined at the start of this letter, you are currently introducing a new assessment system. Changes in assessment are being managed well. Teachers that I spoke to are clear about what these changes mean for planning and pupils' learning. You also plan regular opportunities for teachers to moderate their judgements internally and with other schools locally. This enhances the reliability of teachers' work and provides valuable chances to share effective practice.
- Assessment information is used increasingly more effectively by teachers over time. For example, in the early years, staff keep detailed evidence of what children can do. Pictures, annotations and examples of work are used to build a picture of children's achievement over time. This is then used to plan what children should learn next. Similarly, in key stage 1, teachers are careful to capture individual assessments and 'next steps' for pupils, lesson by lesson. In some classes, subject leaders extract assessment information effectively and use it well to move pupils on in their learning. However, these effective strategies are not evident in all classes. Some of the best practice in school is not shared widely enough.
- Opportunities to challenge pupils were evident in most classes. In the best lessons, the focus of the learning is precise and pupils are moved onto new learning if they demonstrate that they are ready. In a key stage 1 mathematics lesson, I observed pupils using objects and pictures to explore patterns. Once pupils were showing an awareness of understanding, the teacher was inviting them to apply their learning in more complex ways. Similarly, in a key stage 3 lesson, pupils were being challenged to explain and discuss the use of speech marks in a text. We agreed that, although challenge is evident across the school, there is scope for this to be developed further so that all pupils progress at an even faster rate.
- Leaders have devised improvement plans to address the key areas for development in the school. Plans effectively respond to emerging issues. Assessment information is analysed well to identify any aspects of underachievement. For example, leaders have recognised that boys and pupils who have moderate learning difficulties are not making as much progress in some aspects of mathematics as other key groups. As a result, the mathematics leader has included specific actions to tackle these issues within a new plan.
- The school is focused on developing its workforce. Staff have opportunities to undertake their own research in areas of interest. The skills of leaders at all levels have been developed since the last inspection. As a result, you have a highly capable workforce.
- Leaders have been given the scope and autonomy to develop their areas of responsibility. However, the programme for developing leadership is not set out in a clear plan. As a result, governors are not able to fully monitor this aspect of the school's work. Oversight of the development and work of leaders, and of the impact they are having on learning, requires more rigour.

- Governors have a broad range of skills. Many governors have specific expertise in education and special educational needs. These skills help them to hold leaders to account for outcomes. Governors are clear about the school's key strengths and weaknesses. Minutes of governing body meetings demonstrate how they challenge and support leaders. Governors are very receptive to feedback and are committed to securing further improvements.
- An inspector visited the school's Inspire provision with leaders. Inspire caters for permanently excluded primary-age pupils. Relationships are strong in this provision. Pupils' needs and behaviour are carefully tracked to ensure that improvements are secured. As a result of the school's effective work, a high proportion of pupils successfully re-join mainstream schools.
- The local authority has worked with the school to develop assessment systems. Local authority officers schedule regular reviews of the school to ensure that standards are maintained.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers make better use of assessment information by sharing more widely the most effective practice in the school
- pupils are routinely provided with challenges when they show that they are ready to move on in their learning
- the impact of programmes to develop leadership are evidenced fully through the school's action plans and monitored by governors.

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

Yours sincerely

Jonathan Keay
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

At the start of the inspection, inspectors met with senior leaders to review the school's self-evaluation and school improvement plans.

Inspectors conducted a learning walk through all key stages and the school's Inspire classes. During learning walks, inspectors took account of pupils' learning in books from the start of term and during the last academic year.

Meetings were held with leaders throughout the day to focus on a number of key

areas including attendance, safeguarding, performance management and the use of assessment.

Inspectors reviewed a range of school documentation including self-evaluation, development plans, minutes of governing body meetings and assessment information.

Inspectors met drivers, escorts and parents at the start of the school day. There were too few responses on Parent View to generate a report. Inspectors took account of the findings from a questionnaire recently conducted with parents. There were no responses to the staff or pupil surveys.

The lead inspector met with two governors including the chair of governors. A meeting was also held with a representative from the local authority.