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Mrs Maria Wilson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Wilson

Short inspection of St Paul's RC Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 17 October 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 October 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. During this time, you have managed carefully and sensitively the local authority's re-designation of your school from a first school to a primary school. The process was particularly complicated because it involved federation with the local middle school and subsequent de-federation following the middle school's closure. As of 1 September 2017, you are now a primary school and offer education for pupils from the age of two up to the age of 11.

Some of the uncertainties surrounding the closure of the middle school presented you with considerable recruitment challenges. You are still without a substantive deputy headteacher, despite two rounds of recruitment. Having said that, the acting deputy headteacher is offering purposeful and highly effective support in the interim period. Together, you have harmonised the school's approach to assessment as you extended your age range to become a primary school. Although this has taken longer than you would have wanted, you now have secure and accurate assessment systems in place. As a result, your self-evaluation is accurate and this enables you to identify priorities for improvement effectively and allocate resources where they are most needed.

Your action plans are detailed and involve all leaders in the school. However, some subject leaders' plans are not directly linked to the gains in pupils' achievement that you desire. You know that this is an area for improvement, so that leaders, including governors, can evaluate precisely the effect of actions taken to accelerate

progress and raise standards even further.

Despite your best efforts, several years of staffing turbulence have affected the progress of some pupils in the school. This is particularly the case for pupils currently in Year 6. They are now benefiting from exceptionally strong teaching and a raft of intervention support that is accelerating their progress well. Moving forward, you now have a settled staff and governors who are enthusiastic about the future, know precisely the improvements that are needed and are keen to support you in your efforts. This places you in a strong position to go from strength to strength.

At the last inspection, you were asked to provide opportunities for teachers to learn from each other and share good practice. You have invested heavily in quality training opportunities to ensure that teachers' subject knowledge is secure and you have used digital technologies to observe practice in the classroom. This has been particularly powerful in improving the effectiveness of teachers' questioning in helping to move pupils on in their learning. It has also helped to sustain pupils' good outcomes at the end of key stage 1 over time.

Pupils value the feedback that they receive on their work in line with the school's policy. Pupils in several year groups expressed how this was helping them make their work better. The evidence seen in pupils' books across a range of subjects indicates that this is clearly embedded practice in both key stages and is helping effectively to secure good outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics.

A further area for you to improve was the progress that pupils make in acquiring and applying their phonics skills. Over the time since the last inspection, you have introduced a consistent approach to the teaching of phonics. You ensure that pupils receive the right level of support according to their stage of development. Consequently, pupils' outcomes in the Year 1 phonics screening check are consistently above the national average. For the last two years, all pupils leaving Year 2 have reached the required standard. This means that pupils are well placed for the next stage of their education.

Pupils are happy in school. The strong Catholic ethos that underpins your work is ensuring that pupils are nurtured in their faith to be understanding and tolerant of others. Pupils display a good understanding of how to keep themselves and others safe. Opportunities to develop cooperative skills are built into pupils' personal and social development. Older pupils commented on how important this work has been in helping them to appreciate each other's personalities and frailties. The work that you do to teach pupils about other world religions gives them a strong understanding of the differences and similarities of those of other faiths and cultures. Pupils explained: 'People may believe slightly different things, but we're all the same inside.' Consequently, pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain.

You have embedded a culture of high expectations for pupils' behaviour. Pupils are polite and well-mannered, offering broad smiles to visitors. They confidently say good morning and eagerly hold doors open for adults and their peers. Pupils are

equally positive about their learning and take great pride in their work. This is particularly the case in upper key stage 2, where pupils' books are exemplary. As a result, pupils say that they are happy and feel safe in school. Parents and carers who made their views known endorsed this view.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that records are detailed and of high quality. Recruitment procedures are carefully considered and follow local authority recommendations to ensure that those who work with pupils in the school are fit to do so. Despite the recruitment difficulties you have experienced, you remain uncompromisingly diligent in your procedures.

Staff and governors are trained regularly in all aspects of safeguarding and are fully aware of the role that they play in keeping pupils safe. Leaders ensure that policies are kept up to date with the most recent legislation. You know that some elements of your website need to reflect the new status of your school and this is under construction.

You take prompt action in referring any safeguarding concerns to appropriate agencies and have developed strong partnerships with colleagues. Your vigilance has been commended by other professionals whose responsibility it is to keep children safe and this has enabled vulnerable pupils to receive timely and effective support.

Inspection findings

- As part of the inspection, I wanted to find out what actions leaders had taken to improve pupils' attendance, particularly that of disadvantaged pupils. You use local authority officers to support you in working with those parents of pupils who have repeatedly poor attendance. Additional funding is used effectively to incentivise and support disadvantaged pupils' improving attendance. A raft of activities and rewards is used to encourage good punctuality and full attendance, including breakfast and chill club places as well as homework club. You have also reorganised aspects of the timetable to encourage pupils into school. This is resulting in improving attendance. At the end of the 2016/17 academic year, attendance overall had increased by one and a half percentage points from the start of the year. Persistent absenteeism of disadvantaged pupils had reduced by six percentage points. While you are delighted with the improvements, you are not resting on your laurels but continuing to look for new incentives to improve attendance even further.
- I wanted to review the effectiveness of provision in the early years, as the proportion of children reaching a good level of development had fluctuated over recent years, particularly for boys. By the end of the 2017 academic year, it dipped to below the national average. I found that children in the Reception class were listening attentively and able to read and write simple words correctly. Skilful teaching enabled all children to be successful. This is providing a strong

foundation for developing children's early reading skills. In both Reception and Nursery, routines are very well established and children demonstrate good behaviours and positive attitudes to their learning. A range of exciting activities is on offer, both inside and outdoors, for children to explore and investigate. For example, children in the Nursery were keen to share the witches' spells that they had created. Occasionally, however, some activities are not precisely matched to children's needs, particularly the boys. When this happens, they lose interest and concentration and their progress slows. You recognise that this is an area for improvement.

- At the same time, I also wanted to judge the impact of the recently introduced provision for two-year-olds. It is too early to judge the impact that it will have on the proportion of children achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception. However, there is already evidence that children are now starting Nursery with skills that are expected for their age and stage of development. In the past, the majority of children started school with skills below those expected; now, under half do. Strong relationships are established with health visitors and the speech and language therapist. This means that any additional needs are identified much earlier than was previously the case and appropriate support can be quickly put in place.
- As you have extended your provision to include key stage 2, I wanted to see whether teachers' expectations were sufficiently demanding to enable pupils to be successful in their learning. Work in pupils' books showed that they are receiving an appropriate curriculum, working at the right level and making good progress. Subject leaders have worked hard to provide guidance and support for the teaching of reading, writing and mathematics. This is consistent in both key stages. As a result, your own internal assessment information indicates that the vast majority of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, have achieved well to reach age-related expectations at the end of the summer term. However, subject leaders' action plans are not precisely linked to the specific gains in pupils' and groups of pupils' achievement. This needs to happen, so that they can be more sharply evaluated by leaders and governors.
- You know that this is not the case for pupils in Year 6, where there is still a tail of underachievement to address. That said, pupils have exemplary attitudes to their learning and they are benefiting from exceptionally strong teaching. Evidence in pupils' books shows that they are making rapid progress in their learning.
- My last focus for the inspection was to review outcomes for the most able and the disadvantaged most-able pupils. Pupils' outcomes at key stage 1 have been securely good in the proportion reaching age-related expectations in reading, writing and mathematics since the last inspection. However, the proportion of pupils achieving greater depth has been more variable. Observations of learning in class and reviews of pupils' books and assessment information provide clear evidence that teachers are successfully and effectively moving pupils on from what they already know. Occasionally, pupils complete work within their abilities before moving on to more challenging tasks. You have already identified this as an area for improvement. While increasing proportions of pupils are achieving the higher standard in reading, writing and mathematics across the school, you are determined to eliminate the variability evident within historic outcomes.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the determination to improve pupils' attainment and accelerate pupils' progress in Year 6 is continued
- subject-leaders' action plans are more precisely linked to the specific gains in pupils' and the main groups of pupils' achievement, so that they can be more sharply evaluated by leaders and governors
- the proportions of pupils who are able to achieve at the higher standard in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of key stages 1 and 2 are increased
- there is greater consistency in the proportion of children, particularly boys, achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Buckle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and the deputy headteacher to discuss the impact of actions that you are taking to continue to improve the school, and to discuss safeguarding. Together, we observed learning in the early years and key stage 2. While in lessons, we looked at pupils' books and talked to pupils about their learning. I also looked at some pupils' books from this and the last academic year. I held meetings with two representatives of the governing body and the local authority's school improvement officer. I talked to pupils at playtime and talked formally to a group of key stage 1 and key stage 2 pupils. I took account of 32 responses from Ofsted's online parent survey, Parent View, alongside your own survey from the summer term. I scrutinised a number of documents, including a range of safeguarding documents, the school's written evaluation of its work and the school improvement plan. I also reviewed your most recent headteacher's report to governors and minutes from recent governing body meetings.