

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234  
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Mrs Carole Bradley  
Headteacher  
St Helen's Primary School  
Durham Street  
Hartlepool  
TS24 0HG

Dear Mrs Bradley

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Helen's Primary School**

Following my visit to your school on 3 November 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in November 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- refine improvement plans to include clearer criteria for evaluating the impact of leaders' actions, particularly actions relating to the progress and achievement of pupils
- further refine teachers' use of assessment information, so that activities planned focus precisely on developing pupils' subject-specific skills, particularly in subjects beyond English and mathematics
- continue to diminish the differences between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including most-able disadvantaged pupils, and that of their peers.

## **Evidence**

During the inspection, I met with you, senior leaders, four representatives of the governing body, including the chair of the governing body, and a representative from Hartlepool local authority. The focus of the meetings was to review the actions taken by leaders since the last inspection. We visited a range of lessons together with the deputy headteacher, observing learning, talking to pupils about their work and reviewing their books. A range of documents was scrutinised, including the school's action plan, pupils' progress information and external reviews of the school and the work of the governing body.

## **Context**

There have been several changes to the senior leadership of the school since the previous inspection. In September 2017, you appointed a new deputy headteacher and two assistant headteachers. Three newly qualified teachers have also been appointed.

## **Main findings**

You and the governing body are resolute in your determination to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school and raise pupils' achievement. You have established a range of important initiatives and actions to tackle the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection. Your thorough action plan defines the objectives and timescales for improvement effectively. The timely monitoring and review process you have developed means that you can clearly identify what is going well and the areas that still require improvement. Implementation of this plan is improving many areas of the school's work. However, some of your impact measures in the plan are too broad and not linked precisely enough to the gains in pupils' outcomes you desire. This makes it difficult for governors to hold you to account and for you to measure the impact of your and your team's work accurately.

One of your most important initiatives has been the successful restructuring and extension of the leadership team. This has ensured that clear lines of accountability and well-defined areas of responsibility are firmly in place and well understood by leaders and staff. Leaders are fully involved in the monitoring process and have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning. As a result, the capacity of leaders to effect change and bring about improvement is secure. Collectively, you have united the wider staff team, whose members share your ambition and determination to ensure that the school gets to good quickly.

In 2017, pupils' provisional outcomes at the end of key stage 2 showed some improvement in the proportions of pupils reaching the high standard in reading, writing and mathematics. This was the result of additional support and leaders' raised expectations of the most able and the disadvantaged most able pupils'

achievement. However, you were disappointed in the proportions of pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, reaching the expected standard in reading and writing. This is reflective of the pockets of underachievement that you have identified and that you continue to tackle. Since the last inspection, you have introduced a detailed assessment system that tracks pupils' and groups of pupils' achievement accurately. Your regular meetings with teachers are ensuring that any gaps in pupils' learning are identified swiftly and interventions are put in place to accelerate pupils' progress. Consequently, across the school, there is now an improving picture of pupils' achievement. It is strongest in key stage 1 and in early years, where the legacy of some historical weaker teaching and underachievement is less predominant.

Along with your deputy headteacher, you make a formidable team, determined to tackle the barriers faced by disadvantaged pupils and to raise their achievement to be consistently in line with that of other pupils. You have conducted research nationally to find examples of good practice to inform your own initiatives. For example, 'pupil premium passports' are detailed documents that provide teachers with essential information on the barriers faced by individual pupils and their starting points. This strategy is paying dividends and teachers are now more aware of the disadvantaged pupils in their class and the issues they face. This is helping them to plan for their needs more effectively. You have had some success in diminishing the differences in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, particularly at key stage 1. However, there remain significant differences in pupils' achievement at key stage 2, which you are trying to reduce doggedly.

Your relentless focus on developing strategies to improve pupils' reading and writing skills are also paying dividends. One of the many strategies you are employing to extend pupils' vocabulary is the 'ninja word of the week'. All pupils try hard to use each 'ninja' word appropriately in their writing. You have established a consistent approach to the teaching of writing, which uses good-quality texts as a stimulus for pupils' writing. Staff hear pupils read regularly and there is a greater focus upon developing pupils' reading skills of inference and deduction. This is strengthening pupils' progress effectively. However, occasionally, some teachers do not use the assessment information they have about pupils' current skills precisely enough to move pupils on in their learning as effectively as they could.

Since the last inspection, you have introduced a new scheme of work for mathematics that includes daily arithmetic sessions and regular opportunities for pupils to develop their skills of reasoning and problem solving. As a result, pupils are becoming increasingly fluent and confident in their mathematical abilities. Standards at the end of Year 2 and Year 6 in 2017 were close to the national averages. This represents a marked improvement upon previous years.

We looked at pupils' work in a range of subjects across the curriculum. In all cases, the quality of pupils' presentation was exemplary and reflective of the pride pupils are now taking in their work. However, while pupils receive regular opportunities to

apply their writing skills in other subjects, this is at the expense of developing their subject-specific skills, which you know will help your continued focus on raising standards across the curriculum.

Improvements made to the quality of provision in the early years have had a positive impact on the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception. This has increased year on year and in 2017, it was in line with the national average. Children's skills and abilities on entry to early years are often below those typical for the children's age and stage of development, and consequently this represents good progress. In September 2017, you established provision for two-year-old children. You are hopeful that this will have a positive impact on children's starting points in Nursery. It is certainly the case that the children observed in the unit were already very settled and strong relationships with their key workers were well established.

You are working hard to strengthen your links with parents. This is already having a positive impact on pupils' attendance and punctuality, which are improving strongly. The number of pupils who are persistently absent from school has halved in one year.

Governors have undertaken their own improvement journey, and have embraced the findings from the review of their work recommended at the last inspection. They now have a detailed action plan in place, which guides their work. The continued support of a national leader of governance focuses their efforts and energies to become increasingly involved in improving the overall effectiveness of the school. Governors are keen to develop their skills further. The accurate information they receive about pupils' achievement and attendance is enabling them to work closely with you to secure a good judgement at your next inspection.

Governors have ensured that the pupil premium review was completed in a timely way. The resulting action plan identifies clearly the actions being taken to improve the achievements of disadvantaged pupils. An accurate and evaluative report is available on the school website.

### **External support**

You and governors have valued the timely support from the local authority improvement consultant and specialist advisers for English and early years. They have provided helpful support and challenge. The impact of their contributions has been to equip leadership more effectively in holding teachers to account and to work with you to develop strong improvement plans that support your drive for improvement. Reports from the local authority are insightful and explain clearly the strengths and weaknesses that need to continue to improve.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Buckle  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**