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Mrs Sharon Brown
Headteacher
Barkway VA Church of England First School
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Dear Mrs Brown

Short inspection of Barkway VA Church of England First School

Following my visit to the school on 22 February 2018, 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 March 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Leaders have ensured that all areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been addressed.

You were appointed as acting headteacher in September 2016 and became the substantive headteacher over the federation of Barkway and Barley schools in September 2017. When you were first appointed into the acting role, you already had a good idea of the school's strengths and where it needed to improve further because you had already been teaching at the school. You set about putting in place systems and procedures to ensure that the school remained good. This included strengthening leadership by appointing an assistant headteacher and new subject leaders for English and mathematics. You have worked with governors to further develop the federation between the schools. A new teacher has been appointed to teach the Year 3 and Year 4 pupils across both schools. In Barkway School, this very small cohort comprises only five pupils.

You are providing strong and effective leadership. This ensures an orderly, attractive and stimulating learning environment, together with motivated staff who are proud to work at Barkway. The school's strong Christian values permeate all aspects of school life. Staff know all pupils extremely well and the small size of the school enables it to provide highly effective provision for each individual pupil. The school lives up to its claim of being 'A small school that does big things!' The vast majority of parents and carers spoken to and those who completed Ofsted's online

questionnaire, Parent View, commented very positively about the school. Typical comments included: 'It's a friendly, well-run school. Teachers, governors and the head listen to parents and their concerns'; and 'A fabulous school where staff are responsive, caring and enthusiastic. The extra-curricular activities are excellent.'

Since taking up the role of headteacher across the federation, you have developed a range of opportunities for the pupils from both schools to work together to enhance their learning experiences. For example, every week, all pupils in Years 1, 2, 3 and 4 come together to learn in the 'forest area'. Pupils in Year 3 and Year 4 are taught at the Barley site with pupils of the same age. You have identified that you want to move away from teaching mixed-year groups and therefore plan to introduce single-age classes next year with Nursery, Reception and Year 1 being taught at the Barkway site and other years being taught at Barley School.

Pupils behave very well, both around the school and when they are learning. They are polite to each other and to staff and visitors. Those spoken to during the inspection told me that they love coming to school and meeting their friends and that they love learning. Several parents also commented that their children missed coming to school at weekends and during holidays.

Pupils benefit from a rich curriculum, which provides memorable learning experiences. During the inspection, Year 1 and Year 2 pupils enjoyed a range of outdoor learning activities, including orienteering in the forest area. We saw them engaged in collage work in the afternoon, led by a specialist art teacher. Year 3 and Year 4 pupils from both schools were on a visit on the day of the inspection. The school has established links with a large multi-cultural school in inner London and visits take place on a regular basis between these schools. On their return, pupils that I spoke with were keen to tell me about their day, including their visit to a Hindu temple. All pupils benefit from specialist music tuition. Additionally, the curriculum is enriched by a range of after-school clubs, including for Lego, multi-sport, gymnastics and art. The school has achieved the school games gold award.

Children in the Reception class benefit from a rich learning environment, both inside and out. During the inspection, they were highly motivated by the space theme and delighted in wearing the space boots, helmets and jet packs that they had made. There is very good provision for all areas of learning and number and reading are particularly well supported. However, we agreed that there need to be more structured activities which enthuse children to write.

Members of the governing body are strongly committed and bring a broad range of appropriate skills to their role. Additionally, they ensure that they are well informed and have put in place very effective systems for their work. Consequently, this is highly effective.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, have ensured that there are strong systems and procedures in place to keep pupils safe at all times. This includes when travelling

from one school to another and when attending off-site learning in the forest area. When pupils travel on the school's learning bus, there is always an assistant in addition to the driver, who ensures that they wear their seat belts throughout the journey and that they board and alight the bus safely. The assistant knows pupils well and talks to them about all aspects of school life.

Procedures for checking staff's suitability to work with children are clear and very well organised. All staff are included in the single central record of both schools. All receive regular training and are therefore alert to potential welfare concerns.

Pupils spoken to said they felt safe in school and that if they had any concerns they were confident that adults would sort these out. Parents also commented that any concerns that they reported were always resolved swiftly.

Inspection findings

- In order to ascertain that the school remained good, my first line of enquiry focused on how well the curriculum meets the needs of all learners. This was because challenge for the most able was an area for improvement from the previous inspection. Additionally, no pupils exceeded age-related expectations at the end of key stage 1 in 2016. (There were no pupils recorded as being in key stage 1 in 2017.)
- The work that we scrutinised in pupils' books and your internal tracking information show that almost all pupils are making at least good progress from their starting points in English and mathematics and across the curriculum. This includes the very small number of pupils who are disadvantaged or who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Tracking information also indicates that several pupils are likely to exceed age-related expectations at the end of key stage 1 this year. This evidence supports the fact that the curriculum meets the needs of all learners well.
- My next line of enquiry was about leadership and management and whether there was evidence to confirm that leaders have the capacity to ensure continued improvement. I found that leadership, including governance, was strong. Your self-evaluation is accurate. Since your appointment as federation headteacher, you have swiftly established an effective leadership team and accurately identified areas which you know need to improve further. For example, you have identified some inconsistencies in how well teachers across all year groups follow the marking and feedback policy, and also that presentation is not as good as it could be for all pupils. You have put in place appropriate actions to bring about improvements in these areas which are already beginning to impact.
- My final line of enquiry concerned attendance. This was because, in 2017, the proportion of pupils who were classed as absent or having persistent absence was above the national average. This had also been the case historically. We discussed attendance data and also looked at the attendance of both current and previous pupils in detail.
- You have a few pupils with medical needs who miss school because of hospital and other medical appointments. Due to the small number of pupils in the school,

the absence of these pupils impacts on overall attendance. You also have a few pupils who do not attend as regularly as they should for other reasons. You track the attendance of all pupils vigilantly and encourage high attendance, including issuing certificates for good attendance and other rewards. You are doing all that you can to ensure that all pupils attend regularly. There are one or two parents who do not ensure that their children attend school regularly. You have rightly not hesitated to send out clear messages to these parents.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they build on existing good practice in the Reception class to provide more activities which enthuse children to write
- plans to ensure greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning across key stages 1 and 2 are fully implemented.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Beale
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

On the day of the inspection, the five pupils in Years 3 and 4 were on a visit together with their peers from your federated school, Barley. These pupils are normally taught at Barley. I discussed the work of the school with you, your assistant headteacher, subject leaders and eight governors. Additionally, I held a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority.

Together with you and your assistant headteacher, I observed teaching and learning in the Nursery and Reception classrooms and in the mixed Year 1 and Year 2 class. I also visited the 'forest area' where Year 1 and Year 2 pupils from both schools were engaged in outdoor learning activities. We looked at the work in pupils' books in all year groups in a range of subjects. I made a visit to Barley School to see where the Years 3 and 4 pupils normally learn and spoke to the English subject leader who is based there. I met with two groups of pupils to talk about their experiences at school.

I scrutinised safeguarding policies and practice, including your risk assessments and arrangements for transporting pupils between Barkway and Barley schools. I considered the school's own evaluation of its work and plans for improvement and future development. I took account of 20 responses to Ofsted's online

questionnaire, Parent View, and nine comments received electronically. I also spoke with nine parents when they were delivering their children to school. I further considered three responses to the staff questionnaire.