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8 March 2018

Mr Michael Thompson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Thompson

Short inspection of Hexham Priory School

Following my visit to the school on 6 March 2018 with Zoe Westley, 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 December 2012.

This school continues to be outstanding.

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

Your strong and quietly resolute leadership has created a culture that puts the needs of every child firmly at the centre of the school's work. You have nurtured and developed an effective multi-professional staff team that embodies the school's motto of 'Never underestimate a child's ability'.

You have created a school community where teachers and teaching assistants work together effectively. This teamwork is characteristic of the strong multi-disciplinary approach that enables the school to achieve good outcomes for pupils who have a wide range of needs. Leaders value the work of the school-based health therapists, who have successfully integrated their work into teaching programmes. For example, speech and language therapy targets are incorporated effectively into pupils' communication objectives, and physiotherapy targets are incorporated into movement and mobility programmes. Pupils use symbol systems to communicate, and staff use symbols to make class routines, school signs and other information accessible to pupils with delayed communication skills. I observed the school's music therapist working with pupils who have complex needs, successfully enabling pupils to join in a music activity through her sensitive attitude and knowledge of the needs of each pupil.

Pupils make good or better progress as a result of a well-planned curriculum and

effective teaching, with activities closely matched to each pupil's needs. There is a strong partnership between teachers and teaching assistants, and effective teamwork with the school-based therapists. Teachers know pupils well and, as a result of detailed assessments, teaching is pitched at a level that meets the needs of pupils with different starting points. Teachers and teaching assistants work effectively as class teams, and teaching assistants work successfully to support small groups and individual pupils. Leaders have deployed teaching assistants effectively, enabling the most able pupils to develop their independence skills, while ensuring that those pupils who have complex needs are supported effectively.

Leaders have successfully used the skills of the wider staff team to review and develop the curriculum and identify solutions to barriers that limit individual pupils' progress. Leaders moderate pupils' work and plan the transition of pupils between classes and departments. Leaders carry out regular lesson observations and check teachers' assessment judgements through detailed work scrutiny. As a result, leaders have created a culture of mutual enquiry where staff meet regularly to discuss pupils' progress in their own class and across the school.

Leaders have successfully developed a broad curriculum to meet the needs of pupils who have a wide range of special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Throughout the school, there is an emphasis on the development of communication skills, key skills and personal independence. As pupils grow older, there is an increasing focus on preparing pupils for life after school. Leaders have organised the school into separate primary and secondary departments, including a post-16 department. This has enabled pupils to develop a sense of progression as they grow older. A pupil told an inspector that they are being helped to become an adult. The individual and personalised approach to the curriculum is evidenced across the school, and with pupils who have a wide range of SEN. Throughout the school, pupils engage enthusiastically in learning as a result of well-chosen activities, the good use of resources and the effective support of teaching assistants.

Pupils who have complex needs access learning through a sensory-based curriculum, with programmes from the school-based therapists closely integrated into each pupil's timetable. Primary-aged pupils follow a curriculum that is topic-based and develops their key skills in literacy, numeracy and communication. Pupils in the secondary department are grouped by ability for a part of the week to follow a carousel of lessons which include science, modern foreign languages and history.

In the post-16 department, pupils develop their practical independence skills and vocational interests in preparation for leaving school. Middle leaders have started to develop curriculum pathways to enable pupils in the post-16 department to successfully move to post-school education, employment and training. Middle leaders understand that many pupils will find it difficult to travel to the nearest further education colleges in Gateshead and Newcastle, 25 miles away. Therefore, they are working effectively with local providers and employers to develop vocational pathways in the Hexham area. As a result of these developments, and effective relationships with local businesses, leaders have been successful in arranging a variety of work-experience placements and pathways to post-school

education and training.

As a result of their analysis of pupils' progress, leaders have made changes to the curriculum for groups of pupils. Leaders identified a small group of pupils who were making strong progress in science. In response, leaders arranged a part-time inclusion programme in a local mainstream primary school to further improve the outcomes for these pupils. Leaders identified that progress in literacy and numeracy was stronger in the primary department than in the secondary department. As a result, leaders have reviewed the curriculum and, after consulting parents and pupils, introduced a range of accredited courses in key stage 4 that more closely meet the needs of pupils.

The school's curriculum is enhanced through regular visits by musicians and artists and visits to the local community. During the inspection, an inspector visited a performance by a musician. Pupils listened attentively, were well supported by staff and had the freedom to respond to the concert in an individual manner. The curriculum has been enhanced with the recent development of a 'forest school' on the school site. All pupils have the opportunity to visit the forest school each week. This activity has enabled pupils to learn about the natural environment, develop teamwork, and practise their communication and problem-solving skills in an outdoor setting.

Leaders have used additional funding to support staff training, improve the school's resources, and support access to after-school and residential activities. Leaders, including governors, do not assess the effect of this additional funding closely enough.

Senior leaders are developing a new online assessment system to more effectively track pupils' progress. Although this system is not fully embedded, leaders are using the evolving system effectively to analyse individual pupil progress. The introduction of the new assessment system has enabled leaders to respond positively to the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

The effective working partnership between phase leaders has enabled leaders to swiftly identify pupils making slower progress and to put appropriate support in place. Senior leaders analyse a wide range of factors that may have an impact on pupils' progress. This approach is characteristic of the school's analytical approach, working with each pupil as an individual, and developing a personalised approach to their learning. Working with parents and carers and the wider staff team, including therapists, leaders make changes to the curriculum and timetable to ensure that any barriers to pupils' learning are successfully removed.

Through the effective support of the school's fundraising group, a programme of regular residential visits is offered to all pupils. For younger pupils, this starts with an overnight visit, with older pupils attending specialist outdoor education centres to take part in a range of accessible activities, such as canoeing and abseiling. Pupils gain in confidence and develop their communication skills through these activities. Parents value highly the opportunity for their son or daughter to attend these visits.

Pupils' behaviour is strong in lessons and when moving around school. There is a strong culture of mutual respect and community throughout the school. This is evidenced by pupils' well-mannered behaviour, confidence and concern for one another. Pupils are understanding of one another's needs and are respectful of staff and visitors. Members of the school council spoke enthusiastically about their lessons and learning. Pupils reported that they are happy in school and that there is no bullying. One pupil said, 'I have best friends who are always there for me.'

Staff report that they are happy and very proud to work at Hexham Priory School. The majority of the staff who completed the staff survey believe the school has continued to improve. Staff say that pupils are safe and well behaved, and that bullying is dealt with effectively. Staff believe that the school is well led and managed and that their practice is enhanced by professional development. Staff say that they are treated with respect and that leaders are interested in their well-being.

You understand that parents have an important role in their child's education. Staff have developed a close partnership with parents, who value the school very highly. All the parents who completed the Ofsted online survey, Parent View, reported that their child is safe, well looked after and making good progress. Parents value the regular communication with their child's teacher and say that staff are professional, friendly and always willing to listen. Indeed, many parents say that the school has transformed their child's life. One parent commented, 'Hexham Priory School is an amazing school and I feel privileged that my child can attend here.' Another parent said, 'absolutely brilliant school, they care very deeply for my son and are providing all sorts of opportunities for him to learn and develop'. These commendations were echoed by many parents.

Governors are very proud of the school. They have established close links and visit school regularly to meet staff and pupils. Strong strategic leadership is provided by the experienced chair of governors, who has worked effectively with other governors to create effective working relationships with you and senior leaders. Governors value your dedicated leadership. Governors receive regular reports from senior leaders to evaluate the school's performance, and hold leaders to account. They work with you and the senior leaders to identify development priorities. Governors attend regular training and have carried out an audit of their skills. As a result, new governors with appropriate skills have been recruited to enhance the work of the governing body. For example, governors with skills in finance, education and human resources have recently joined the governing body.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have created a strong and effective safeguarding culture where pupils' safety and well-being have a high priority and are promoted through effective multi-agency working. The systems to safeguard pupils are robust and are monitored rigorously by leaders, who take swift action when safeguarding concerns are raised. Policies and procedures are reviewed regularly, and staff and governors are very knowledgeable as a result of regular safeguarding training. Pupils say they feel safe

and know that they can share any concerns with an adult. This is as a result of the respectful relationships between pupils and staff. Parents agree that their children are safe in school and that they are well looked after. Pupils are taught how to stay safe online and this information is shared with parents.

Inspection findings

- Your determined leadership has created a culture that puts every child firmly at the centre of the school's work. Your resolve to improve the outcomes for all pupils, and their families, is valued highly by parents, staff and governors. Through your leadership, the school achieves its motto of 'Never underestimate a child's ability'.
- The broad and well-designed curriculum meets the needs of pupils who have a wide range of SEN. The curriculum encourages the development of pupils' key skills and their personal and social independence, and effectively prepares each pupil for life after school.
- Pupils make strong progress as a result of effective teaching, excellent teamwork and the regular monitoring by leaders of the quality of teaching and the analysis of pupil progress information. Pupils' behaviour is excellent, and they are considerate and understanding of individual needs.
- Leaders have created a strong safeguarding culture. You lead safeguarding effectively and are well supported by senior leaders and the safeguarding governor. There is effective multi-agency working. As a result, pupils feel safe and their parents agree.
- Parents value highly the quality of education provided by the school and your dedicated leadership. Parents report that their child is making good progress and they value the support and work of the staff team.
- Governors are very effective. They are ambitious for the school, provide strong strategic leadership, engage effectively with the school, and challenge and support leaders to continually improve.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the recently introduced assessment system is quickly embedded, and that leaders analyse the information collected to check that all pupils continue to make strong progress
- the impact of additional funding is analysed in detail, and published on the school website.

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

Yours sincerely

George Gilmore
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, members of the senior leadership team and middle leaders. Meetings were also held separately with four parents and five governors. I had a telephone conversation with the local authority's school improvement partner. Inspectors visited lessons with school leaders and scrutinised pupils' work. An inspector spoke to a group of pupils from the school council. We spoke with pupils in class and at lunchtime. Inspectors scrutinised school documents, including information about pupils' achievement, the school's self-evaluation report, the school improvement plan, behaviour and attendance records, individual case studies, information about safeguarding and the records of governing body meetings. Inspectors took account of 27 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, as well 29 staff responses to Ofsted's staff survey.