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Mrs Maureen Galbraith  
Acting Headteacher  
St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School  
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Dear Mrs Galbraith

### **Short inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School**

Following my visit to the school on 22 June 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 September 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 then, standards have continued to rise and compare favourably with those seen nationally. Published performance data shows that rates of progress have been particularly strong in recent years and that almost all pupils have left the school having attained the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics. Indeed, last year, around six out of ten pupils attained the higher standard in reading and mathematics, and seven out of ten pupils attained the higher standard in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Attainment, therefore, has been well above national averages.

These impressive outcomes have been achieved, in part, because the staff responded quickly and thoughtfully when the government revised the national curriculum in 2014. Subject leaders overhauled their schemes of work and provided good training for their colleagues, so that everyone's expectations rose. As a result, a demanding core curriculum for English and mathematics quickly became embedded and subject leaders have been able to refine and improve how and what they teach since then. The teaching of the wider curriculum, overall, is also effective, although your recent monitoring and my scrutiny of books revealed that some teachers are less rigorous and do not challenge pupils to think so effectively in some subjects.

Although outcomes have been strong, the school is facing some challenges. The departure of the headteacher in December 2017 coincided with wider staff

turbulence. This year, only one year group has not been affected by staff absence. The governors have also been unable to appoint a new substantive headteacher, despite two attempts to recruit. Their appointment of you as acting headteacher has ensured that the school has remained stable and well managed across a difficult period. Although the governors hope to recruit a suitable headteacher to lead the school from January 2019, they know some actions need to be taken to keep the school moving forwards. They have therefore given you the autonomy and mandate to push ahead across the summer and autumn terms. In the meantime, you and other leaders are continuing to monitor the quality of teaching carefully. Consequently, you have a detailed knowledge of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

Following the last inspection, leaders were asked to improve standards in writing and to strengthen teaching so that there was more outstanding practice. Since then, subject leaders for English have embedded a tightly structured approach that helps pupils to make strong and sustained progress. The English curriculum explores topical themes, introduced through a rich variety of novels which pupils study in depth. The teaching of spelling, punctuation and grammar is interwoven cleverly, and there are some excellent examples of how the most able pupils are encouraged to be creative and imaginative in their response. Attainment in writing has improved to be well above the national average and to match that seen in reading and mathematics.

The quality of teaching has, however, been affected by the number of changes in personnel this year. Some long-term sickness absences, and staff leaving the school, have resulted in a lengthy period with some less experienced temporary teachers and full-time staff required to teach different age groups. Some parents and carers who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, expressed concerns about inconsistencies in the quality of teaching. Some new teaching appointments have been made for September which should help to bring greater stability. You and other leaders are working hard to support the staff and to check on pupils' progress and learning. My visits to lessons did show some variation in the quality of teaching and learning. Checks on pupils' books, however, confirmed that most pupils are making good progress over time. Your own assessments support this view, with outcomes still on track to be strong in each phase of the school. Your rigorous scrutiny of assessment information has shown that some groups of pupils, such as those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils, are doing less well in some year groups. As a result, you have moved some teachers to different classes and are providing extra help for particular pupils, which is helping them to catch up.

Despite the staffing turbulence, the school's Catholic ethos continues to shine through. Pupils behave well, and are kind and supportive of one another. Records show that incidents of poor behaviour and bullying are very rare. The overall level of attendance is above the national average and very few pupils are regularly absent. Pupils enjoy their lessons and work hard, taking pride in their presentation and completing lots of work from week to week. When I discussed the curriculum with a group of pupils, they were keen to tell me about the excellent music teaching

they receive, the artistic and sporting opportunities, and the mathematics challenges they enjoy.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

You and the staff give safeguarding a high priority. Together with the governors, you have systematically audited your safeguarding work and found it to be secure. Policies are up to date and procedures in school are well understood and followed closely. The staff have received up-to-date training and use the school's system for recording and reporting any concerns consistently. Weekly staff briefings ensure that relevant information is shared and staff are kept informed. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

Records show that you take prompt action when pupils are at risk and work closely with families and external agencies to coordinate your response carefully. You keep governors well informed about the ongoing breadth and range of child protection work. The school provides counselling support for identified pupils and has ensured that all teachers are trained to identify the signs of possible mental health issues. Some parents whose children have SEN and/or disabilities made it known to me that they feel well supported and very pleased with the quality of extra support their children receive.

### **Inspection findings**

- Despite two attempts to recruit a new substantive headteacher, the long-term leadership of the school remains unresolved. The governors have reflected on the nature of their initial advertisement and recruitment pack and feel they have learned lessons. They and the diocese are more confident that a suitable candidate will be appointed next term. In the meantime, you have astutely identified the need to review leaders' roles and responsibilities, as they are not as well defined and clear as they should be. The governors back you fully in making these changes, so that responsibilities are clarified and lines of accountability are clear. Furthermore, as the profile of staff has changed, with more variation in the level of experience, you have rightly identified the need to tailor how you set objectives for teachers and manage their training and performance.
- Your experience and calm leadership are helping to sustain the school's strong performance through a transitional period. The ethos of the school is ensuring that pupils continue to thrive and enjoy learning. There are many rich and varied opportunities for learning across the whole curriculum. Attainment in English and mathematics remain high. In recent years, disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities have made very strong progress overall and attained high standards. The potential negative effects of changes in staffing have been kept to a minimum and progress rates remain strong. Children continue to make a good start in the early years and perform well in the Year 1 national phonics screening check. Reading is taught well and has been improved further this year, with a greater focus on pupils' comprehension skills. However, although pupils generally make strong progress across the wider curriculum, some teachers' more limited experience has led to lower expectations in some subjects, meaning

pupils' progress is less secure.

- The most able pupils in the school make rapid progress because teachers give them greater independence and skilfully increase the level of challenge. In English, the most able pupils are encouraged to work as authors in their own right, adapting topics in creative ways to make them more stretching. For example, a pupil studying 'Kensuke's Kingdom' by Michael Morpurgo wrote a series of letters from an imaginary visit to Japan. The content of the letters reflected the pupil's detailed research coupled with expressive and creative ideas that ensured their written response was of a high order.
- However, this strong practice is not consistent across the whole school. You and your experienced subject leaders know this and are working hard to bring greater consistency of approach. For example, you have identified some differences in the way teachers assess pupils' work. As a result, you have put in place training to ensure that teachers' assessments are more consistent, so that tracking data is fully reliable. You also acted quickly to adjust the deployment of teachers when you spotted that the classes in one year group were making progress at different rates.
- During this transitional period, the governors have sustained a highly visible role in the school. You keep them well informed through your termly governor reports and ongoing discussions with different governor committees. Governors are regularly available to parents through their attendance at school events. On this inspection, it was very clear that governors know the school well and are committed to developing the school further. They point to strengths in the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and the strong promotion of human rights and environmental issues. These aspects of the curriculum help to prepare pupils well for life in modern Britain. The governors are also shrewd enough to know they cannot wait for the appointment of a new headteacher before dealing with some structural issues and addressing a budget deficit.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they secure the appointment of a substantive headteacher with the vision and skills to lead the school forwards
- leadership and management roles and responsibilities are reviewed so that lines of accountability are made clear
- performance management objectives and associated training needs are tailored to meet the individual needs of teachers at different stages in their career
- the teaching of wider curriculum subjects is suitably challenging and gives pupils a strong grounding in subject-specific skills.

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 Sunderland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During this one-day inspection, I met with you and the deputy headteacher, a group of governors, including the chair and the vice chair of the governing body, and a representative of the diocese. I also spoke on the telephone to a school improvement adviser who provides support and challenge to the school and to a representative of the local authority. I met with a group of pupils and listened to some of them read. Together, you and I visited lessons in each phase of the school to look at the quality of teaching and learning. During lesson visits, I scrutinised some pupils' books and talked to pupils about their learning and progress. Some subject leaders and I looked in detail at some pupils' books, to evaluate the progress pupils are making across a broad range of subjects. I looked at the 77 responses to Parent View and I also considered the 17 responses to Ofsted's staff survey. I scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning, policies, assessment information and other documents available on the school website. I focused particularly on the progress of pupils currently in the school, especially the most able, the breadth of the curriculum and the quality of leadership and management. I also looked at the work of governors and the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.