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Mr Jamie Brown  
Headteacher  
St Helen's Church of England Primary School  
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Dear Mr Brown

### **Short inspection of St Helen's Church of England Primary School**

Following my visit to the school on 5 December 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 2015.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection.

St Helen's Church of England Primary School is a calm, welcoming and vibrant community. The positive working relationships pupils have with each other and their teachers help to promote their progress. Pupils respond well to their teachers' high expectations. They work hard and enjoy finding out new things. Often this is because pupils complete challenging tasks, such as using their scientific knowledge to predict which materials will prove most conductive when completing a circuit. Teachers' questioning and feedback enable pupils to reflect on their work and make improvements to it. This helps pupils to understand; as one put it, 'It's actually good to make mistakes as long as you learn from them.'

Many pupils are proud to serve their peers through the many different positions of responsibility they hold, as library or lunchtime helpers, prefects, head pupils or sports leaders. These activities promote pupils' personal development; they also contribute to the school's strong sense of community. A very high proportion of pupils engage in one or more of the many activities that take place outside of the classroom. These include caring for the school's guinea pigs and chickens, playing in 'Mr Brown's band' or taking part in sporting fixtures. Trips and visits, such as the residential adventure week for older pupils, are particularly popular. Pupils told me that these aspects of school life are things that 'nearly everybody' gets involved in. Staff ensure that pupils behave very well, both within the classroom and at social

times. A very high proportion of parents and carers who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, agree that the school ensures that pupils are well behaved. Pupils work hard to earn 'house points' and enjoy the praise and rewards they receive for behaving positively. Serious misbehaviour is rare. Attendance is very high, and pupils arrive at school punctually and ready to learn. Parents are appreciative of the wealth of guidance the school provides about how they can support their children's learning outside of school.

Many parents commented positively about the support staff provide, including for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), who typically make good progress academically and socially from their individual starting points. Pupils told me that teachers help them to move forward rapidly in their work, which one described as being 'hard, but not too hard' in English and mathematics. As a result, pupils typically make good progress and achieve well.

Together with other leaders and governors, you set very high standards and check the quality of the school's work against these rigorously. Pupils' progress in reading, for example, is particularly strong. This reflects your considerable investment in the school's large, attractive and well-stocked library and the careful work to find books that match the interests of the occasional reluctant reader. You have created a culture of reading for pleasure. Pupils enjoy being read to, daily, by teachers or by older pupils who serve as 'reading warriors'. You monitor pupils' reading ability very carefully to identify any barriers to their progress. Teachers then work to address these, enabling pupils to understand and answer questions requiring them to draw inferences from text, for example. As a result of these measures and other work, pupils' progress in reading at key stage 2 is particularly strong.

Governors share your relentless determination to provide the best education and the widest range of opportunities for all pupils. They provide you with support and have a very clear understanding of the school's strengths and what needs to improve further. Governors check the progress of different groups on an ongoing basis and ask searching questions when things need to improve. Scrutiny of the school's safeguarding arrangements, including through consideration of detailed termly reports, is particularly careful. Governors are very knowledgeable about the contents of different senior and middle leaders' improvement plans and track the progress towards these. This enables governors to hold all leaders to account and helps to promote improvement.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

Pupils at the school, together with their parents and staff, are rightly confident that the school is a safe place. Leaders, including governors, have created a culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. You ensure that swift and appropriate action is taken when there are concerns about a pupil's well-being. Leaders have ensured that teaching within subjects such as personal, health and

social education, and computing, helps pupils to learn about risks and how to manage them. Pupils' use of the internet while at school is very closely monitored. The school uses a bespoke virtual learning environment, which provides a safe and secure way for pupils to blog, chat and email online.

Staff understand the procedures to follow if they have concerns about a pupil, and what they should look out for. They report any concerns promptly, and leaders follow these up appropriately. You work determinedly to ensure that pupils who need it receive timely and appropriate help from external agencies. Although persistent absence from school is rare, you ensure that any unexplained or unauthorised absence is followed up promptly.

Pupils explained that they always feel safe at school. They told me that bullying is rare and that prejudice-based bullying is virtually unknown. The school's monitoring records support this view. Pupils also made clear that there is always someone they can talk to if they have a problem and that the school works well to promote both their physical and mental health.

### **Inspection findings**

- My first line of enquiry involved establishing the extent to which pupils understand how to stay safe online. At the time of the previous inspection, this was found to be an area for improvement. You have ensured that the curriculum enables all pupils to gain an age-appropriate understanding of e-safety. Pupils learn how to stay safe when they are searching the internet, using social media or playing games online, for example. Pupils know to tell an adult if they see something that disturbs them when using the internet. Pupils also learn about the online tactics that strangers might use to find out about them and how to keep their personal information private. By the time pupils leave the school, they also learn about trolling and cyber bullying and what to do if they encounter such issues.
- The early years was found to require improvement at the time of the previous inspection. You have reviewed the curriculum to ensure that teaching during the early years helps to prepare pupils for Year 1. Teachers are planning activities for children that are highly engaging and purposeful, and that help them to take the next steps in their learning. Children become resilient and develop their independence because teachers encourage them to find their own solutions when they encounter difficulty.
- Staff within the early years skilfully adapt activities so that they provide the right level of challenge for individual children. They use their constantly updated understanding of what children can do to plan tasks that develop their ability to write or complete simple mathematics calculations, for example. Questioning helps children to consider different ways to solve problems or how they can work together to complete a task. Children quickly develop the ability to focus for lengthy periods with limited adult input because you encourage them to keep trying before asking for help.
- Changes to the early years environment, and the way in which staff work within

it, have also helped to raise standards. You have created additional areas that are attractive and well resourced with equipment which enables children to engage in varied, imaginative and purposeful play. Teachers engage children in conversation about what they are doing and extend activities, adding challenge to them. By these means, children gain much to talk and to write about. They also learn to take turns and to cooperate and work well with others. Leaders in the early years are working well to inform parents about the progress their children are making and how they can help to strengthen it. The proportion of pupils who reach a good level of development by the end of the early years has risen and is above the national average.

- We agreed to establish the extent to which key stage 2 pupils' reasoning and problem-solving skills in mathematics are well developed. Pupils' progress in mathematics at key stage 2 was in line with the national average in 2018 and less strong than in reading and writing. You have promoted pupils' mathematical fluency by, for example, ensuring that they practise and learn their times tables. You are also ensuring that the results of weekly arithmetic tests are used to focus subsequent teaching precisely upon what it is that pupils need to improve. Pupils' increasing fluency helps them to complete calculations quickly and apply their mathematics skills to real-world problems more readily.
- Your aim is for pupils to be able to use different techniques to solve mathematics problems, including when the latter appear unfamiliar to them. Over time, the most able pupils have encountered more of these kinds of challenges in their mathematics work than have other pupils. Training for teachers is helping them to deliver your chosen 'maths mastery' curriculum to all and enabling pupils to develop their mathematics reasoning. However, work scrutiny indicates that the extent to which pupils are engaging in work that develops their reasoning and problem-solving skills remains uneven.
- My final line of enquiry sought to establish the extent to which pupils, particularly the most able, make good progress and achieve well in their written work. In 2017, key stage 2 pupils' progress was significantly lower than that of pupils nationally. You have prioritised improving pupils' written work, including in the early years, where small-group work is providing effective intensive support for those struggling with writing, and challenge for those whose letter formation is already strong. Typically, pupils' ability to spell, punctuate and use grammar with accuracy is strong. Teachers monitor pupils' errors with precision and ensure that each individual receives daily one-to-one help to correct their mistakes. Staff are using their recent training to provide additional help for pupils with speech and language difficulties. This is improving these pupils' literacy.
- Pupils develop the ability to write for a range of purposes, including creatively; older pupils in particular are able to convey character, plot, atmosphere and dramatic tension well. This is because teachers show pupils what effective writing looks like and how to plan well before starting. Pupils also benefit from being able to talk about what they are writing. This helps them to reflect on the words and phrases they are using, and how they are structuring their ideas. Teachers' feedback enables pupils to understand how they can improve, and pupils willingly edit and redraft their work to make the necessary changes.
- Scrutiny of pupils' work across subjects indicates that they have too few

opportunities to complete extended pieces of writing. This limits their ability, within English, to use their strong writing skills to fully develop their ideas and stories. In subjects other than English and mathematics, pupils acquire strong subject knowledge. They are often asked to consider questions designed to help them to think deeply and acquire subject-specific skills. Too often, the development of these is limited, however, because pupils have insufficient opportunities to respond by writing at length.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils continue to develop their reasoning and problem-solving skills in mathematics
- teachers enable pupils to develop both their extended writing and subject-specific skills across the curriculum.

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

Jason Howard  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, I met with you, other senior and middle leaders, other school staff, governors, local authority representatives and a group of pupils. Together with you and other leaders, we made short visits to a number of classes to observe teaching, look at pupils' books and to see pupils at work. I reviewed samples of pupils' work. I evaluated school documents about self-evaluation, development planning and safeguarding, including the single central record and records of child protection. I also considered the 136 responses to the Ofsted questionnaire from parents, alongside other evidence about parental views, and responses to the Ofsted staff and pupil surveys.