

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Sarah Dixon-Jones
Headteacher
Houghton Le Spring Nursery School
Neasham Place
Houghton le Spring
Tyne and Wear
DH5 8AE

Dear Mrs Dixon-Jones

Short inspection of Houghton Le Spring Nursery School

Following my visit to the school on 28 February 2019, 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 October 2014.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have created a delightfully, enthralling setting in which happy children become completely engrossed in learning and exploration. Staff, parents and children themselves are true partners in learning.

As headteacher, your drive and passion for first-class, early years education is exceedingly infectious. You correctly place high importance on it, understanding the part it plays in a child's success in later life. Your far-sighted aspirations for children, effective work with parents and very high expectations of staff, are successful in securing excellent progress for children from their different starting points. Parents' and children's viewpoints are crucial to you and are used effectively to inform decision-making processes. Parents who made their views known during the inspection, used words like 'fantastic', 'amazing', 'brilliant' and 'invaluable' to describe the school and staff. They value your visibility and approachability.

The enticing environment that you and your staff have so carefully shaped is quite magical. Children's interests and needs are at the heart of all that you do. Inspiring a sense of awe and wonder among children about the intricacies of the world we share is central to your curriculum vision. You and your skilful team design exciting opportunities that give children the best possible experiences. Tasks and learning captivate children. These opportunities are firmly rooted in educational research as well as your in-depth knowledge of each child. As a result, children are successfully helped to develop life-long skills and knowledge and to achieve their full potential.

Leaders at all levels are very effective in their work and take their responsibilities seriously. Together, they are maintaining the outstanding quality of teaching over time. Keeping a close eye on each child's journey across all areas of learning is well embedded in practice. Leaders have correctly identified that systems for tracking children's progress in writing over time have room for improvement.

Self-evaluation is accurate because leaders are fully aware of the strengths of the school and are completely honest about what could be even better. A hard federation with Mill Hill Nursery School has recently been secured. Leaders feel such partnerships are building even greater leadership capacity. Some aspects of leaders' plans for improvement are fittingly generic across both schools. For example, the governing body and the coordinator for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) serve both settings, and some aspects of development are applicable to both schools. Occasionally, however, the improvement priorities for three- and four-year-olds in Houghton Le Spring Nursery School specifically, are less clear. In this sense, some aspects of improvement planning require tweaking.

Teaching and learning are of an exceptionally high standard. Children are happy, extremely well behaved and exceptionally independent. Appropriate risk-taking is encouraged, developing confidence and resilience in children. During the inspection, children expertly negotiated step ladders unaided, donned painting aprons and selected 'loose parts' equipment and materials for themselves. They returned resources carefully and with consideration for others. Children's attitudes to tasks and play are remarkable. There is no aimless flitting from area to area due to disinterest or boredom. Children consistently display the characteristics of effective learning, such as sustained concentration and perseverance: they try and try again when things get a bit tricky and are highly receptive to 'having a go' at new or demanding tasks.

Staff buzz with excitement about their roles and are enormously proud of children's achievements. They have a splendid knowledge of the early years curriculum requirements and ensure that children have positive, productive and memorable experiences. Their well-honed questioning skills encourage children to expand their vocabulary, solve increasingly complex problems and think deeply about their learning. Staff reflect carefully on the effect that their teaching and the environment have on children's engagement and progress. Children's ideas and contributions are valued; any misconceptions are addressed in a sensitive, timely manner. Adults re-shape tasks and learning 'in the moment', gently nudging and directing children to ensure that they get the best out of every experience. Displays, children's learning journals and evaluation and planning documentation all attest to excellence in practice.

Recommendations from the previous inspection report urged you to improve the effectiveness of governance. You have done so successfully. Governors, most of whom are new since the previous inspection, are committed to continuous improvement and understand the role they have to play in securing this. Governors undertake training regularly to ensure that they challenge and hold leaders to account effectively. They are skilled and knowledgeable about the quality of the

provision and the difference that early years pupil premium funding is making for disadvantaged children. Governors are currently working to develop the school's website, ensuring that all statutory aspects of it are fully up to date and reflect the high quality of practice seen in school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Due to regular, high-quality training and updates, all staff are aware of their duties and responsibilities. They understand the signs of potential abuse and neglect and know how, and to whom, any concerns must be reported. Adults are vigilant and have a secure understanding of the risks and dangers of sensitive matters such as radicalisation, extremism and female genital mutilation.

You ensure that the needs of vulnerable children and families are managed carefully and effectively. You work closely with external agencies to make sure additional support and expertise is drawn upon and available where needed. Records show that you persist to get the correct help for children and their families when external support and action is not as rapid or forthcoming as you expect.

Several parents, in discussion with the inspector during the inspection, expressed their firm belief that their child is safe, well looked after and protected by your kind, caring and capable staff. One parent's view epitomised the views of others: 'There's always someone you can talk to if you are worried about any small thing.' Another parent said: 'It's like leaving your child with a family member.'

Inspection findings

- Along with your leadership team, your efforts have ensured that teaching and learning are outstanding. A perceptible buzz of enjoyment is in the air. Staff and children alike are excited by the promise and possibilities of the day. Staff promote the prime areas of learning, and personal, social and emotional skills in particular, exceptionally well. Children's exemplary behaviour is fostered by the air of calm, well-organised comfort that exists. They are great friends and are kind to one another, adhering to subtle rules well and needing few reminders or interventions from adults. Children use the environment safely, independently and with consideration of each other. They share the space and myriad of resources exceedingly well. Happy, smiley faces abound, and this includes the warm, caring staff who take great delight in their day-to-day work with children.
- You have made sure that the wider curriculum is incredibly enriching. Children flourish apace across all areas of learning. During inspection, for example, young architects, engineers and project managers of the future were impressive in action. Using large construction materials, children designed and created buildings in the style of well-known structures such as Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. The results were eye-catching; children were rightly proud of their efforts. In this way, vital collaboration, problem-solving, critical thinking and creative knowledge and skills were visibly well exercised and developed.
- Staff also ensure that there are numerous opportunities indoors and outside for

children to practise and apply specific knowledge and skills, for example, in creative art, reading, writing and number. Several children painstakingly used fine paintbrushes to create works of art in the manner of famous painters. One group of approximately 16 children applied themselves to a drawing and writing task linked to a 'core book'. They needed little coaxing or cajoling by adults to persevere in their work for a sustained period of time. Each displayed a very good knowledge and super set of skills in selecting and using various drawing and writing tools and materials. Others counted eggs up to 20 carefully to each other. 'They're delicate, you know,' said one child, practising her number and counting skills diligently while showing sensitivity and a secure understanding of the materials she was handling.

- The needs of children with SEND are capably identified and addressed by your experienced coordinators. Personal learning plans and children's work show that parents, as well as children's key workers, are fully involved in each child's learning journey. Leaders and staff meet regularly to discuss these children's progress. They consult with parents, offering a range of opportunities for them to be partners in their child's learning. There are, for example, several formal meetings each year to discuss children's learning and progress. Staff also make themselves available on a daily, informal basis and actively encourage parents to share and discuss their hopes and wishes for their child, as well as any concerns. Children with SEND make excellent progress over time because they get the correct support and challenge that they need, in a timely manner.
- You and the governors work vigorously to serve the needs of children, families and the local community effectively. You command the highest, willing commitment from staff. Governance has strengthened greatly over time. This is demonstrated in governing body minutes and records of monitoring visits.
- A feeling of harmony and partnership between home and school is tangible. One parent's view captured those of others when they said: 'My child is well-educated in a safe environment where her interests are always at the forefront of leaders' and teachers' thinking'. You do not, however, rest on your laurels. During the inspection, you were already discussing and reflecting upon every small issue raised by the inspection with your leadership team, including how and where improvement plans could be fine-tuned. A system for better capturing the progress of children in writing was being shaped as we spoke. It is such conscientious diligence and your continuous strive for betterment that ensures the outstanding quality of the school is sustained.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- plans are tweaked to more fully reflect the precise improvement priorities for three- and four-year-olds here at Houghton
- the progress of each child in writing is captured even more meticulously.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Sunderland. This letter will

be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, senior leaders, your school improvement adviser and governors, including the chair of the governing body. I spoke with children, staff and parents across the day and took account of parents' written communications and their views expressed in Ofsted's survey. I scrutinised the school's website and safeguarding and child protection information. Together, we observed the quality of teaching and learning across the setting in the morning. I also observed afternoon sessions. I scrutinised the work in children's learning journals and examined information about children's progress. I examined a wide range of documentation, including monitoring records for the quality of teaching and learning, governors' minutes and school policies.

At Houghton Le Spring Nursery School, you have a separately registered early years provision for zero- to three-year-olds, which did not form part of this inspection. You secured a hard federation with Mill Hill Nursery school in April 2018, which caters for zero- to five-year-olds. The governing body serves both sites. You offer a breakfast club for children. You also provide an after-school club for children and primary-age pupils.