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Mrs Wendy Aitken  
Executive Headteacher  
St Mary's Cockerton Church of England Primary School  
Newton Lane  
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County Durham  
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Dear Mrs Aitken

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

Following my visit to the school on 9 May 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in October 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

The school became an academy in October 2016 and is now part of the Dove Academy Trust. Changes in senior leadership since the inspection of your predecessor school include your appointment as executive headteacher of both schools within the trust. A head of school and deputy head of school have also been appointed.

You have prioritised the care, well-being and happiness of staff and pupils. The effects of your work in this regard are evident from the moment you enter the well-maintained, extremely attractive site. As one parent put it, 'school constantly has a warm, welcoming and positive feel'. Pupils I spoke with during the inspection said that they enjoy school. Those who responded to Ofsted's survey said that they respect people from other backgrounds and treat others equally. This means that pupils contribute well to the friendly atmosphere. Staff enjoy working here and feel valued. Your desire to treat people with dignity and kindness is tangible.

Following your predecessor school's last inspection, leaders were asked to raise standards in reading, writing and mathematics to above national averages. You have purchased new reading materials for pupils, secured support and training for staff in each subject and introduced mathematics and writing initiatives to address

issues that persist within each subject. Your efforts are beginning to bear fruit. In 2018, in key stage 2, pupils' outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics rose substantially compared with those in 2017. This picture of steady improvement over time is also evident in current pupils' progress and work.

You and your senior leadership team recognise, however, that there is further, crucial work to do to ensure that the previous report's recommendation is fully met. Systems for assessing pupils' progress and attainment, for example, currently lack accuracy. Leaders therefore do not have all the information they need to inform their strategic decisions, to pinpoint staff development requirements or to plan for the needs of pupil groups, with precision. Teachers are also hampered in planning accurately to meet pupils' needs. Though improving, key stage 2 pupils' attainment in writing and mathematics in 2018 remained in the lowest 20% of schools nationally.

Disadvantaged pupils' progress and attainment across subjects by the end of key stage 2 remain particularly disappointing. Although leaders correctly make sure that pupil premium funding is spent directly on disadvantaged pupils, their evaluation of the effect these additional funds have on pupils is not yet meticulous enough. Differences in terms of outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and others are not diminishing over time.

Together with senior leaders, you create long-term and annual school improvement plans, using an electronic tool to manage these. The 2018/19 development plan pays appropriate heed to some of the most pressing issues, such as writing and mathematics. Leaders currently find the online tool unwieldy, however, feeling that it hinders their ability to get directly to the heart of matters needing their attention. Consequently, you aim to review systems and development plans. Greater detail, clearer timescales and more precise success criteria are needed to ensure that everyone is clear about their roles and leaders' expectations.

You actively draw on external support from within the trust partnership and beyond. For example, the diocese has offered advice and guidance on strengthening the effectiveness of the early years. The proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception has been variable recently. Currently, children are making strong progress in their personal, social and emotional development. They engage with phonics on a daily basis and really enjoy listening to stories read to them by enthusiastic staff. Not all children, however, read books frequently to and with skilled adults in school.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

All staff take their responsibilities for keeping pupils safe and free from harm seriously. They have a strong understanding of potential risks for pupils and know what to look out for in terms of signs of abuse or neglect. This is because you make sure that regular, up-to-date training takes place. Safeguarding is a standing agenda item within staff meetings.

Pupils who spoke with me during the inspection said that they feel safe in school. You offer frequent opportunities for pupils to learn about the benefits and dangers of social media and working or playing games online. As a result, pupils' confidence and understanding to manage technology safely grow as they move through school.

Your work in terms of recruitment and to ensure that adults are fit to work with pupils is rightly thorough. Records are appropriately detailed and fit for purpose.

### **Inspection findings**

- Since the inspection of the predecessor school, you have worked tirelessly to secure a positive ethos and to improve communication between leaders, staff, parents and carers. Staff are proud to work here. They are appreciative of your belief in them and the training and development opportunities that you have provided. Parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, feel that 'staff are approachable and always there for parents', 'any concerns are resolved effectively' and 'communication is good'. Strengthened home and school partnerships are noticeably blossoming; 92% of parents would recommend the school to others, according to responses made via Ofsted's survey.
- Current pupils' books and your own assessment information show that further work is needed to improve pupils' outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics in each key stage. In 2018, for example, the proportion of key stage 1 pupils reaching the expected standards in reading and writing remained lower than national averages. Few pupils over time reach a greater depth of learning in core subjects in key stage 1. Current pupils' work demonstrates that not all pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, are making strong progress across each subject.
- Children in the early years are bubbly, cheerful and well looked after by caring staff. They are inquisitive and thoroughly enjoy exploring the range of stimulating resources on offer. The chicks are an especially exciting addition to the classroom at present, prompting much discussion between adults and children. Staff understand the importance of developing pupils' basic skills in reading, writing and number. They play counting games and make sure that there are daily opportunities to learn about letter names and phonics. Nonetheless, not all children read books to and with adults frequently. For some children, this slows the rates of progress that they make in reading.
- As mentioned earlier, your efforts and work with staff led to better outcomes at the end of key stage 2 in 2018 in each subject compared with previous years. You are, however, reflective and understand the need to raise standards more rapidly. During the inspection, you and your head of school discussed your growing dissatisfaction with current assessment systems and the online tool that sets out your strategic direction and improvement aims. Together, you identified where development plans lack the detail needed to drive improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. As senior leaders, you are keen to ensure that such barriers are rectified. You have tentative plans in place to address such issues moving forward. It is too soon, however, to determine the effectiveness of your intention to secure better accuracy in assessment procedures and to

sharpen improvement planning.

- You make sure that pupil premium funding is directed appropriately to bring benefits for disadvantaged pupils. For example, you have a strong understanding of the links between good mental health and success in later life. To this end, you have used additional funds effectively to build pupils' emotional resilience and to support their development in terms of confidence and self-belief. This said, leaders do not meticulously evaluate the effect that funding has on disadvantaged pupils' progress and attainment across the curriculum. In this regard, differences between disadvantaged pupils and their within-school and national peers remain stark.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- improvement and development plans are sharpened and linked precisely to the correct priorities
- effective, accurate assessment systems are put in place to better inform teachers' planning for pupils and leaders' strategic aims
- leaders evaluate disadvantaged pupils' progress more meticulously and act successfully to diminish the differences between this group and others across subjects
- all children in Reception read books with increased frequency to and with staff
- recent initiatives in writing are embedded in each key stage and improved rates of progress for all pupils are secured
- pupils develop greater fluency in their basic number skills and have regular opportunities to reason mathematically and solve increasingly sophisticated problems.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer or equivalent of the multi academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Durham, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Darlington. 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, your head of school, subject leaders, a governor from the local academy council and trustees, including the vice-chair of the board. I spoke with a representative from the diocese by telephone. You and I, along with your head of school, jointly observed teaching, learning and assessment in classes across key stages. I scrutinised work in pupils' books, listened to some pupils read during observations and

spoke with pupils from each key stage. I took account of the 15 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for pupils. I reviewed school information, including your self-evaluation document, policies, assessment information and your improvement plans. I considered 37 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, and the 35 free-text comments made by parents. I spoke with staff during the inspection and took note of the views of 20 members of staff who completed Ofsted's online survey.