

# Inspection of St Mary's Catholic First School, Hexham

Hencotes, Hexham, Northumberland NE46 2EE

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Inspection dates: 11 and 12 July 2023

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>Good</b>
The quality of education	<b>Good</b>
Behaviour and attitudes	<b>Good</b>
Personal development	<b>Good</b>
Leadership and management	<b>Good</b>
Early years provision	<b>Good</b>
Previous inspection grade	Not previously inspected under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

## **What is it like to attend this school?**

St Mary's Catholic First School is happy and welcoming. Pupils are considerate of the feelings of others. Those who are new to the school settle quickly and make friends. Pupils are eager to help those who are less fortunate. They value opportunities to raise funds for the homeless and those without clean water.

Staff know pupils well in this small school. Relationships are strong and pupils feel safe. Pupils know that if they are worried, staff will listen and help them. Bullying is rare. Staff are quick to deal with incidents if they occur.

Leaders are determined that every pupil will succeed. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) keep up with their peers. Older pupils have lots of opportunities to get to know the middle school. They are well prepared for the next stage of their learning.

Pupils behave well in lessons and around school. There has been a lot of change in the school and much of the curriculum is new. Pupils enjoy their learning. They work hard and achieve well. Pupils have lots of opportunities to develop broader interests. They enjoy activities such as eco club and gardening club. Most pupils value their education and attend school regularly.

## **What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?**

Leaders, including governors, have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They provide clear vision and direction. This has brought about considerable improvement after a lot of staff turbulence. Staff are enthusiastic about the journey the school is on and the training they receive. They feel well supported by leaders.

Leaders have introduced a new curriculum that is broad and sequenced. They have identified key learning and vocabulary for each year group. Pupils demonstrate strong understanding of key content. For example, from their studies about the stone age, pupils understand the decline of nomadic lifestyles and the importance of Skara Brae. Teachers provide immediate support to pupils who are at risk of falling behind. This support is needed because in some subjects, such as science and history, pupils sometimes struggle with activities. This is because teachers sometimes do not focus well enough on the key learning. Leaders know that staff need more training on the delivery of the new curriculum. They are working with the trust to provide this.

Pupils with SEND achieve well. Leaders work closely with staff, parents and external agencies. They develop effective support plans and make regular checks on provision. In lessons, pupils benefit from specialist equipment. Staff provide reassurance and extra advice. This allows pupils with SEND to access learning and keep up with their peers.

Leaders prioritise reading. They have implemented a phonics programme that starts in Reception class. Staff are well trained in its use. Pupils read books that match the sounds they know. Those at risk of falling behind receive extra phonics sessions that help them catch up. Pupils enjoy a wide range of challenging texts in their lessons. Most are fluent readers by the time they leave key stage 1. Writing lessons for younger pupils do not match the phonics programme. As a result, some pupils do not apply their phonics knowledge to their writing. They struggle with basic spelling and punctuation. Leaders are working with the trust to improve this.

Pupils gain a strong understanding of mathematical concepts. Teachers have secure subject knowledge and introduce new learning clearly. They provide regular opportunities for pupils to apply their knowledge through solving problems. Pupils use mathematical vocabulary to explain their thinking. They achieve well.

Leaders ensure an effective curriculum for pupils' personal development. Pupils learn about potential local dangers, such as the railway and the river. They learn how to protect their privacy online. Pupils learn how to be active citizens. They take part in charity events, such as the Lent walk, to support people in need. Pupils understand the diversity of modern Britain. They welcome pupils from different backgrounds and cultures.

Children make a strong start to their learning in Reception class. Leaders have designed a sequenced curriculum. The environment has lots of opportunities for children to learn and talk. Children enjoy stories and reading. Adults are skilled at extending children's vocabulary through conversation. For example, they encourage the use of the words 'share, equal' and 'groups' in counting activities. Children are quick to learn routines. They listen to each other, take turns and help tidy up. Leaders work closely with parents to identify children's needs. Children are well prepared for the move to Year 1.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders ensure strong safeguarding processes. They provide regular training to all staff. They provide weekly updates to parents about online risks. Systems for checks on staff and visitors are strong. Processes for reporting and recording concerns are robust. Leaders work closely with parents and with external agencies in the event of any concerns.

Governors know the school well. They make regular checks on safeguarding procedures, including on attendance and behaviour. They visit the school regularly and listen to the views of staff. As a result, governors provide effective oversight of safeguarding.

## What does the school need to do to improve?

### (Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The quality of the curriculum for writing does not match the school's phonics programme. Pupils in key stage 1 do not get enough opportunities to write sentences using the words and sounds that they know. They move to extended pieces of writing without sufficient prior knowledge. Consequently, the spelling and punctuation in their extended writing is weaker than the standard of their reading. Leaders should continue to work with the trust to align the early reading and early writing curriculums.
- The newly designed curriculum identifies key content and vocabulary. However, in some lessons teachers do not focus sufficiently on key content. In these lessons, pupils struggle to complete their work independently. Their understanding of the important content is not secure without additional support from staff. Leaders should continue to implement their training programme for staff, so that the delivery of the new curriculum is consistently focused on the intended learning.

## How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

## Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	148261
<b>Local authority</b>	Northumberland
<b>Inspection number</b>	10269208
<b>Type of school</b>	First
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	4 to 9
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	107
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	Board of trustees
<b>Chair of governing body</b>	John McArdle
<b>Headteacher</b>	Sarah Oakes
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.hexhamstmarys.uk">www.hexhamstmarys.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected

## Information about this school

- The school is part of the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. The last inspection of its religious character (section 48 inspection) was in January 2016. The school's next section 48 inspection is due within eight years of its previous section 48 inspection.
- The school joined the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust on 1 December 2020.
- The headteacher took up post in September 2022.
- The school makes use of one registered alternative provider.

## Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors met with the headteacher and with governors. The lead inspector also held conversations with a representative of the diocese, with a trustee of the school and with a representative of the Bishop Wilkinson Catholic Education Trust.
- Inspectors spoke with leaders about provision for pupils with SEND and considered relevant documentation and practice.
- Inspectors spoke with teaching and support staff and considered responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.
- Inspectors met with pupils throughout the inspection, both formally and informally, during breaktimes and in lessons.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics, history and science. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, visited lessons, listened to pupils read, talked with pupils and looked at pupils' work. Inspectors also spoke to pupils about their learning in other subjects.
- Inspectors considered the content of governing body minutes and other documentation, including reports from external partners.
- To evaluate the school's management of safeguarding, inspectors considered a range of relevant school policies, examined the single central record and the school's procedure for the safer recruitment of staff. Inspectors spoke with leaders about safeguarding procedures. They also spoke with staff, governors and pupils to check their views and understanding of safeguarding.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and spoke with parents during the school's sports day.
- Inspectors considered pupils' behaviour in and outside lessons. Inspectors also considered school behaviour records and spoke to pupils about behaviour.

## **Inspection team**

Ian Dawson, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Chris Story

Ofsted Inspector

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