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22 October 2025

Lisa Ashton
Acting Executive Headteacher
Our Lady Star of the Sea Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary
Thorpe Road
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County Durham
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Dear Mrs Ashton,

Special measures monitoring inspection of Our Lady Star of the Sea Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 23 and 24 September 2025, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in November 2024.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's key and (where applicable) provision judgements, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, Georgina Chinaka, His Majesty's Inspector (HMI), and I met with you and other senior leaders, other staff, governors and the local authority to evaluate the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We also considered the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of the inspection, we conducted lesson visits, reviewed pupils' work and spoke with pupils about their learning and experiences of school. We also gathered views from parents and carers, scrutinised a range of documents, including those related to the curriculum and safeguarding, and checked the school's single central record. We also reviewed responses to Parent View, the online survey for parents and carers, and the staff survey. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to no longer be judged as requiring special measures.

The school may not appoint early career teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

The position regarding the appointment of early career teachers will be considered again during any monitoring inspection we carry out.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Since the most recent graded inspection in November 2024, there have been some significant changes at the school. You began your role of acting executive headteacher at the end of May 2025. The school is due to join a multi-academy trust in November 2025. Since June 2025, the school has received substantial support from leaders at two other schools from this trust. There have been other staffing changes, such as a teacher being seconded from another school in the trust.

The monitoring visit focused primarily on actions taken to improve the quality of education, with particular attention to reading and writing, including the effectiveness of the teaching of phonics and assessment strategies. We also considered the provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and those who are disadvantaged.

A new approach to teaching early reading, including phonics and spelling, has recently been introduced. Staff are currently completing training so that they can deliver this effectively. This is also being supported by an English 'hub'. While children in the early years have begun to make better progress, significant gaps remain in their vocabulary and in their ability to apply phonic knowledge to their reading and writing. A love of reading is now being promoted through initiatives, such as the introduction of a class reading book, an online reading scheme and investment in quality books. The school's new English curriculum gives pupils the time to rehearse grammar skills, broaden their vocabulary and write more descriptively. You are keen for this to enable pupils to build some of the essential skills previously missed.

A wider curriculum has very recently been introduced across the school. With support from trust leaders, teachers are delivering this with more confidence. Leaders are beginning to identify gaps in existing knowledge and skills. Opportunities to check pupils' understanding are being woven into lessons. As a result, pupils are beginning to articulate their learning more clearly. Many enjoy the new activities that are designed to deepen their understanding. You rightly acknowledge the importance of monitoring how well this new curriculum embeds.

With the support from trust leaders, the school has reviewed its approaches to meeting the needs of pupils with SEND. Pupils are now assessed more quickly and their specific needs identified more accurately. A sharper focus on pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs is evident and a range of strategies are used to help address these. Teaching staff are receiving training to support pupils with SEND more effectively. However, while pupil support plans have been reviewed, some remain overly complex. At times this makes it difficult for staff to implement them consistently. Despite this, most parents now feel their children's needs are being met. Much of this work is at the early stage of development and needs time to embed.

You, along with other leaders, have an accurate view of the school's current position and the priorities that must be addressed. Since your arrival, you have instilled a strong, positive ethos and a 'can-do' attitude that pervades throughout the staff and pupils. You are both ambitious for the school and realistic about the scale of the challenge. Staff morale has been transformed. Staff have increasingly high expectations of what pupils can achieve. You are mindful of staff workload, for example, by introducing a new marking and feedback policy. Teachers say that this is more manageable. In a very short space of time, you have united staff behind a shared vision of high aspirations for pupils. Your determination and drive to improve the school are evident. Staff at all levels feel known, valued and empowered to contribute to the school's ongoing improvement.

School improvement plans are clear, well structured, with planned oversight. Trust leaders also know the school well and have a clear plan to check on progress made. You and other leaders have rightly focused on improving historically low pupil outcomes. The new curriculum, combined with higher expectations of what pupils can achieve, is designed to ensure that more of them are ready for their next stage of education. Plans are in place to develop leadership at all levels. This work is intended to improve how effectively leaders check curriculum delivery, assessment, pupils' work and the progress they make.

At the time of the previous inspection, in November 2024, it was noted that governance needed strengthening. While training has now begun and governors are gaining a better understanding of the actions required, further work is still needed to ensure that governors are able to challenge school leaders, set high expectations for pupil outcomes and provide greater strategic direction.

Support from the trust, particularly through links with the other two schools you lead, has enabled the swift introduction of the new curriculum and improved approaches to teaching. You are working closely with the diocese, which is helping to strengthen governance.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of governors, the director of education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Durham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Nicky White
His Majesty's Inspector