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Ms Helen Wright  
Headteacher  
St Stephen's Church of England Primary School  
South Meadow Lane  
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Lancashire  
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Dear Ms Wright

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

Following my visit to the school on 31 October 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 October 2014.

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

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You, your fellow leaders, staff and governors recognise and celebrate the diverse and ever-changing make-up of the school community that St Stephen's serves. You have very successfully established a clear ambition for the school to make a positive difference in the lives of all its pupils, and particularly to provide high-quality support for potentially vulnerable pupils and their families. Most parents and carers are supportive and would recommend the school to other parents. One typically positive comment from a parent was, 'The staff are caring and passionate and will always go the extra mile.'

Pupils are polite and friendly and provide a warm welcome to visitors to the school. They have positive attitudes to learning and are happy to answer questions about things they have learned or to talk about their favourite books and authors. The school's curriculum provides pupils with a good breadth of learning across a wide range of subjects. Pupils' work shows that they are developing subject-specific skills and knowledge, such as in using grid references in geography, and pupils say that they particularly enjoy learning outdoors in the environmental area.

Pupils' conduct around school and on the playground is good, and staff ensure that extra support is provided to the small number of pupils who sometimes struggle to manage their own behaviour. Pupils have a keen sense of fairness and equality and show respect for the many different languages and religions that are represented in the school.

You have successfully addressed the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Teachers now make sure that pupils have plenty of chances to write at length and in a range of subjects, and the proportion of pupils writing at greater depth at the end of both key stage 1 and key stage 2 is increasing. You have also identified the importance of broadening pupils' vocabulary, so that they can draw upon and accurately use a wider range of words. There is, though, still more to be done to ensure that basic errors in pupils' writing do not detract from the overall effect of their written work.

Since taking on the headship two years ago, you have been keen to move the school forward. You have recognised that the school is now catering for more pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, or who speak English as an additional language. You are also aware of a rise in the number of pupils and families living in straitened circumstances. Therefore, much of your work has been to ensure that effective support is put in place for these different pupil groups and to improve engagement with parents and carers. The support of the large majority of parents, and improving rates of attendance, show that you have been successful in these endeavours. You and the other school leaders, including governors, are in no way complacent though. You know the school's strengths and weaknesses very well, and your clear plans for improvement confirm that you appreciate where further work is required, such as in raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and improving outcomes in phonics.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The leadership team has successfully established a strong safeguarding culture throughout the school. Staff and governors receive regular training to ensure that their knowledge of safeguarding is up to date. Detailed records confirm that staff know exactly what to do if they are worried about a pupil's welfare, and that leaders work well with other agencies to ensure that any such concerns are swiftly addressed. The members of the school's pastoral team work together as a cohesive and very effective unit, ensuring that high levels of care and support are put in place where they are most needed.

Leaders also ensure that appropriate checks are made on staff, governors, volunteers and regular visitors to the school to make sure that they are suitable people to work with children, and that records are detailed and of a high quality.

Pupils say that they feel safe in school and are confident that their teachers will look after them. They have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe, including fire and road safety and using the internet safely. For example, they know to take care when sharing personal information and not to meet up with someone they have befriended online.

### **Inspection findings**

- The inspection focused on a number of key lines of enquiry. The first of these looked at how effectively phonics and reading are being taught in early years and

key stage 1. Although the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics check has risen over time, it is still below the national average.

- The leaders for phonics and early years have a good overview of phonics provision and have started to implement changes focused on raising standards. They recognised that previous expectations of how quickly children in early years should develop their knowledge and understanding of phonics have been too low and are now more ambitious in this regard. Improved systems for assessing progress in phonics have been introduced, enabling staff to identify more precisely which phonics phase pupils are working at, and identifying specific gaps in their knowledge.
- Although phonics teaching is now planned so that it builds on pupils' prior learning more accurately, some inconsistencies remain. The resources used for teaching phonics are drawn from a range of sources. Not all of them are well designed, mixing learning from different phases, which confuses pupils. The lack of continuity in resources means that pupils' learning is not as straightforward and systematic as it could be. This slows the rate at which pupils' knowledge and understanding of phonics develop.
- My second line of enquiry focused on how well pupil premium funding was being used, following significant dips in the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in key stage 1 in 2017 and key stage 2 in 2018.
- The leader responsible for pupil premium keeps a very careful check on the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils, their individual barriers to learning and the additional support that each has received. This thorough tracking confirmed that the dips evident in published data were heavily influenced by factors peculiar to each cohort, such as the number of pupils with an education, health and care plan or who had joined the school mid-way through the key stage.
- The school provides excellent pastoral support for disadvantaged pupils, which has raised rates of attendance and ensured that these pupils are more settled in school and engaged with their learning. Provisional key stage 1 data for 2018 showed that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils in that year group and other pupils nationally was narrowing. Assessment information, supported by evidence in pupils' books, shows that the progress of the majority of disadvantaged pupils across the school is as strong as, and often better than, that of other pupils in the school. However, because many of the disadvantaged pupils have lower starting points when they enter the school, their overall attainment still typically lags behind that of their classmates.
- The final line of enquiry looked at how successful the school had been in raising standards in writing since the previous inspection. Pupils' books contained good examples of extended pieces of writing, including writing such as recounts and diary entries linked to work in other subjects. There is an upward trend in the proportion of pupils writing at greater depth at the end of key stages 1 and 2, and most-able pupils currently in the school write very effectively in a range of different styles.

- While there are many strengths in current pupils' written work, too often these are balanced by simple errors made in grammar, punctuation and spelling that detract from the overall quality of writing. For example, some pieces of writing contain complex sentences and powerful imagery, showing a high level of writing skill, but then also feature missing capital letters and incorrect spellings of common words. There is little consistency in the degree to which staff challenge these errors, and so some pupils continue to make these basic errors in their writing.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- resources used for teaching phonics in early years and key stage 1 are of a consistently high quality and provide greater continuity in pupils' learning
- staff enforce expectations of pupils' spelling, grammar and punctuation more consistently, so that basic errors do not detract from the overall quality of pupils' written work
- the impressive work to engage and motivate disadvantaged pupils is built upon effectively, so that more attain the expected standards at the end of key stages 1 and 2.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Blackburn, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Lancashire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Neil Dixon  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During this short inspection, I met with you and other school leaders. I also had meetings with seven members of the governing body and representatives of the local authority and diocese. I met one group of pupils to talk about school life and heard another group of pupils read. I considered 18 responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including free-text comments. I visited classes in early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2, and I looked at examples of pupils' work. I also studied a range of documentation covering different aspects of the school's work.