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Annette Sowden
Headteacher
St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Newton Aycliffe
Central Avenue
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County Durham
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Dear Mrs Sowden

No formal designation monitoring inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Newton Aycliffe

Following my visit to your school on 20–21 September 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements and aspects of the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, at the school.

Evidence

The inspector met with the headteacher, a member of the senior leadership team, teachers and support staff, governors including the chair of the governing body, a representative of the local authority and a representative from the Roman Catholic diocese of Newcastle and Hexham. Meetings were also held with a group of pupils and the inspector spoke to pupils informally during playtimes and lunchtimes. The inspector met with parents on the playground at the end of day one of the inspection, and with a group of parents who were representative of pupils across the school at the start of day two. The 42 responses to Ofsted's online parent survey, Parent View, were considered along with three letters sent to the inspector by parents. The inspector scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. The school's behaviour and incident logs were also scrutinised as well as attendance records and arrangements for following up absence. Minutes of governing body meetings, school policies, health and safety checks and risk assessments were reviewed.

Having considered the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Safeguarding is effective.

Context

There are 194 pupils at St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School and the vast majority are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is above the national average. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, including those who have a statement or an education, health and care plan, is above the national average. The number of pupils who join the school other than in Reception is higher than that found nationally. The school does not meet requirements on the publication of information about the physical education and sport funding premium, pupil premium strategy, key stage 1 reading and phonics schemes and an annually updated special educational needs report.

In September 2015, a federation with another local school was dissolved. This reduced the availability of a school business manager leader. Furthermore, recent turbulence in staff has required changes in arrangements for the leadership of special educational needs and senior leadership. The governance arrangements have also changed. The school has had its own governing body since the federation ceased. Currently, governors are reorganising committee arrangements, with one committee having a clearer focus on pupils' outcomes.

Findings

While many parents hold positive views about the school, some parents expressed concerns about the school's speed of response to the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school's management of bullying and effective communication were other areas of concern for some parents.

Together with staff and governors, you demonstrate an appropriate understanding of how to keep pupils safe and have put in place suitable systems to ensure their safety and well-being. Your recent review of how you record safeguarding concerns has improved the way you organise child protection information, enabling you to have all the relevant information in one place. This system is well understood by staff, who all have a readily available recording file which is standardised across the school. However, you accept that further embedding of this approach is needed to ensure that any historic information is added to the electronic central recording sheet and to ensure ready access for other safeguarding leaders.

Processes to check the suitability of staff to be employed in school are appropriate. You now have in place an updated single central record to record this information. Senior leaders and governors recognise that they have not checked this record regularly enough in the past to ensure that all required information is recorded.

Staff have benefited from appropriate safeguarding training and understand the school's systems for reporting safeguarding concerns. Senior staff have received the required training as designated safeguarding leaders and arrangements are in place to ensure that there is always at least one designated safeguarding leader in school. Visitors to the school are clearly informed of the school's safeguarding procedures. The results from the Parent View survey indicate that, of those who responded, the overwhelming majority of parents believe that their child feels safe in school. Recently staff have received the latest update of 'Keeping Children Safe In Education' (September 2016). While this document was available for staff to read, systems to confirm that all staff had read this information have not been sharp enough.

Governors have a broad overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. They provide some challenge to the headteacher and senior leaders, including on safeguarding and welfare, as well as pupils' outcomes. However, they have sometimes not acted promptly enough when there was evidence that senior leaders were not addressing identified priorities with sufficient rigour.

You have recently reviewed a wide range of safeguarding policies. The policies now take into account the most current national guidance, including protecting children from radicalisation and extremism. These are currently being considered by both staff and governors for refinement and ratification.

There are systems in place to record bullying, racist incidents and behaviour concerns. The relevant information on these incidents is reported to both the governors and the local authority. You have recently developed your approach to recording bullying. However, you recognise that the systems for recording both racist incidents and behaviour could benefit from refinements to readily identify patterns of behaviour and formalise the recording of the school's actions to address these.

Pupils have a clear understanding of the school's behaviour systems. Pupils behave well around school, in lessons and on the playground. Pupils understand the different forms that bullying can take. They report that bullying incidents are rare, but feel confident that they will be dealt with by staff if they occur. The majority of parents believe that the school deals effectively with bullying.

You have worked hard to improve the attendance and punctuality of pupils. Leaders, office staff and the parent support adviser carefully check on pupils who are absent from school and analyse of patterns of poor attendance. The parent support adviser also provides suitable support and guidance to help improve levels of pupils' attendance where this is a concern. This is helping to improve overall attendance and reducing the levels of absence for pupils who do not attend regularly. Effective checks are in place to ensure that pupils moving into and out of school do not go 'missing from education'.

The 2015 health and safety audit identified areas where action was required. Leaders and governors regularly check that progress is made to address any shortcomings. Appropriate risk assessments are in place for educational visits, making effective use of the online recording system. Risk assessments for other relevant school areas and activities, including in the early years, are in place.

The safeguarding audit completed in 2015–16 identifies where the school has appropriate systems and processes, along with some areas for further improvement. Leaders have begun to work through these, but as yet not all areas have been fully addressed. Leaders and governors recognise the need to ensure that actions are taken promptly to complete these.

Leaders and governors recognised in 2015–16 that the leadership of provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities was an area that needed improvement. A new leader was appointed formally in September 2016. This leader has taken swift action to improve systems for identifying pupils' needs and to create a systematic recording approach. Communication with the parents of these pupils has also been more regular. While this work is still at a very early stage of development, it is showing evidence of improving practice to support these pupils. Relevant training and support are in place to further enhance the new leader's skills.

Other staff, including teaching assistants, have received some training in aspects of supporting pupils who have special educational needs. However, given that the school has higher proportions of pupils who have special educational needs than that found nationally, a more structured training approach is needed to ensure that staff have all the required skills to meet pupils' needs.

The school's recent approaches of using text messages and the website, along with more traditional newsletters, are helping to improve overall communication with parents. You recognise that there is still more to do to further develop communication with parents.

External support

The school has benefited from a local authority review of pupil premium spending. Part of this review has focused upon the impact of the parent support adviser who has a key role in the school's safeguarding arrangements and in improving pupils' attendance. Support from the local authority has also helped the school to develop the quality of its safeguarding recording, including specific risk assessments.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that senior leaders and governors regularly check that all school safeguarding policies, processes and training, including the single central record, are up to date and reflect current national guidance.
- Embed the recently developed approaches to meeting the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and provide appropriate training for the new leader and other staff as required.
- Ensure that senior leaders and governors receive support and development to fulfil the requirements of their current roles and responsibilities effectively.
- Update the school's website so that it meets requirements.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Roman Catholic diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children and adult services for Durham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Michael Reeves

Her Majesty's Inspector