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Mrs Sarah Thursfield
Headteacher
The Willows Primary School
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Dear Mrs Thursfield

Short inspection of The Willows Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 8 June 2016, with Mrs Amarjit Cheema, Ofsted Inspector, 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 November 2010.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

In fact, the school has continued to improve. You and your team have tackled all the areas identified for improvement by the previous inspection with success and several aspects of the school's work are exceptionally strong. In particular, the quality of leadership and governance, the breadth of the curriculum, the attention to pupils' safety and well-being and pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning all stand out as significant strengths. Arguably, these aspects may well have been judged as outstanding had the school received a full section 5 inspection. However, this one-day inspection did not convert into a full two-day inspection because the overall quality of teaching and the academic outcomes for pupils are good rather than outstanding. In particular, pupils' progress across key stage 1 is not as strong as that seen in other parts of the school.

Since the previous inspection, the school has increased in size quite significantly. In part, this has been the result of a planned expansion programme but it is also due to the school's popularity and many pupils travel from out of the immediate catchment area to attend the school. In recent times, there has been an increase in the number of pupils who speak English as an additional language and who join the school mid-year.

The vast majority of parents and pupils express positive views about the school. Many of parents' written responses on Parent View praised the quality of leadership, the approachability and dedication of staff, the range of worthwhile activities, and the attention given to individual pupils' needs. Inspection evidence supports these positive views about the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

School staff and governors have an up-to-date understanding of safeguarding requirements and ensure that school policies are applied with consistency. At this school, staff make sure that pupils are kept safe but also teach them about everyday risks and how to manage these in a sensible way. Pupils of all ages have an appropriate understanding of online safety and any rare incidents of bullying are dealt with quickly and effectively. Rigorous procedures for checking on the suitability of staff and visitors are in place and staff know what to do if they have a concern about a child. All records relating to staff and pupils are kept properly and securely. The work of the school's pastoral team assists communication between home and school and ensures that all are alert to information concerning pupils' well-being, health or safety.

Inspection findings

- You exercise wise judgement and provide excellent leadership. It is clear that your vision is understood by staff and governors and that you have created a strong and united team that puts children's needs first. Your senior leaders are capable, ambitious, evaluative and efficient. The local authority rates the school and its leadership highly and calls on the leadership skills at your school to assist the work and development of other schools.

- You know where further developments are required but also make sure that the school's successes are known and celebrated. Across the broad and thoroughly worthwhile curriculum, there are many successes, such as pupils' participation and achievement in many different sports. Around the school numerous displays, trophies and photographs record the school's active and successful involvement in sport and local tournaments. Pupils taking part in sports day, which was being held on the day of this inspection, were clearly enjoying a healthy level of competition that enabled all to be involved, while also recognising talent and rewarding success.

- Learning outdoors, both in lesson time and during playtime are also notable features. In the school grounds, imaginative use has been made of woodland areas. In these areas, pupils have access to a variety of 'junk' material, such as rope, wooden boxes and tyres, and regularly make dens or invent adventures. They are given just the right amount of freedom to allow their imaginations to take flight, build resilience and independence, and also learn to manage risks in a proportionate, sensible and well-supervised way. Indeed, the school's motto of 'explore, dream, discover' is clearly being realised in these simple but thoughtful opportunities for creative play, as well as through art, music, drama, history and other subjects that make up the rich and varied curriculum on offer.

- Governance is highly effective. Indeed, the written evaluations produced by link governors after their school visits are second to none. These documents, informed by governors' conversations with pupils or staff, analysis of assessment information or general observations of the school at work, are enormously helpful in shaping school strategy and development planning. Governors are very well informed and, since the reorganisation and reduction in size of the governing body, communication between governors and between the school staff and governors has improved considerably. This has helped to sharpen governors' focus on standards without lessening their long-standing commitment to pupils' well-being, a broad curriculum, and caring, responsible values.
- When they first start in Nursery, the majority of children present with a level of knowledge and skill typical for their age, although a significant minority have a lower level of development, mainly in their early literacy and numeracy skills. Regardless of their different starting points, children do well in the Nursery and Reception classes. They are kept happy and safe and are taught well by a capable early years team. Year after year, there has been a steady improvement in the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of the early years. In the last school year, however, this steady upward trend accelerated rapidly and, in 2016, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development looks set to be some way above last year's national figure. This is a considerable improvement on previous years. There are several reasons for this: strong leadership, vibrant and well-organised learning environments and teaching that is creative and exciting, yet also calm and purposeful.
- Within the Reception year, there is some exemplary practice. During this inspection, for example, children were seen preparing for the Queen's 90th birthday party. In the outside areas, children practised addition skills and developed their hand-eye coordination by playing a throw-a-ball-in-a-bucket game or weighed out 'ingredients' as they baked cakes in a mud kitchen. Inside, they designed birthday cards, invitations and made hats. These simple party themed activities called on, and helped to develop, a range of important practical and academic skills. Adults were alert to each small step in children's learning, spurring them on with gentle, but ambitious encouragement. A buzz of calm excitement, productive chatter and activity appears to be the norm in these classes.
- Year after year, pupils in Year 1 have reached above-average standards in the phonics (letters and sounds) screening check. Across the school, the accuracy of pupils' spelling and their interest in reading are notable strengths. Indeed, throughout the building there are many prompts, displays and attractively set out areas that serve to promote a love of literature and encourage pupils to read. Library areas are kept neat and tidy with inviting displays and good-quality reading material. In addition, the school injects a degree of competition into several reading activities, awarding reward points or 'reading champion' status for completing reading tasks or book reviews, for instance. Pupils respond very positively to these incentives and are proud of their achievements. In one part of

the school a superb reading area has been constructed. It is called the Wimilly's Woodland Reading Area and it has been created in memory of a pupil who died. It is inspirational; a thought-provoking and evocative area in so many ways. Pupils of all ages are given cause to pause, think, reflect and wonder. There is no doubt that all get enormous benefit from the school's attention to the thoughtfulness and emotional response that reading, and this special space, can bring.

- Over time, the strongest progress in the school has been in Years 3 to 6. A significant factor in driving this has been the quality of teaching in key stage 2 which, historically, has been stronger than that provided in the younger classes. More recently, progress in the early years and key stage 1 has started to accelerate. Even so, pupils' progress in key stage 1 is still not as strong overall as that made in other parts of the school. While the quality of key stage 1 teaching is good, there is still more work to be done to ensure that teaching in Years 1 and 2 meets pupils' learning needs with the maximum possible precision. Inspectors' checks on books, conversations with pupils and short observations in class found that, at times, some pupils are confused by their work or are unsure of how to respond in class. This is more evident in mathematics than in other subjects. It is not commonplace but it does hamper the speed of progress. In key stage 2, however, the rate of pupils' progress cannot be faulted and, as standards coming up from the younger classes start to rise, there is every indication that standards at the end of key stage 2 could also rise higher. Already, some of the work produced by pupils, especially the most able, is excellent.
- Attendance is above average and has been for several years. Pupils report that they enjoy school and that bullying, unkind or poor behaviour of any sort is very rare. In fact, pupils' behaviour is often excellent. During this inspection, some of the Year 6 peer mediators explained the purpose of their roles, which is to sort out any problems and generally help out as needs be. All agreed that such roles were important and assisted the smooth and harmonious running of the school but, as one perceptive child observed, 'there isn't actually much for us to do in these roles because everyone gets on well and follows the rules.'
- The vast majority of parents who responded to Parent View and those who spoke with inspectors agree that problems are few and far between and those that do occur are sorted out quickly. Inspection evidence confirms that this is the case.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching and learning in key stage 1 enables pupils to capitalise fully on the higher standards now coming up from the early years.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the director of children's services for Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Martin Pye
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we met with you and other senior leaders, including the early years leader, the special educational needs leader, and subject leaders for English and mathematics. We carried out short observations of teaching and learning in most classes and looked at pupils' work in books and on display. We met with a group of governors, including the chair of the governing body, and had a meeting with a representative of the local authority and an independent educational consultant. We talked with pupils in lessons, on the playground and on the school field at lunchtime and during sports day. In addition, we spoke with parents at the beginning of the school day and a group of Year 3 pupils to gather their views about the school.

By the end of the inspection, there were 50 recent responses and 26 written comments on Parent View. We took account of these and noted the school's routines for communicating with parents and gathering their views. We looked at a number of documents, including: pupils' progress information, the school's own evaluation of its performance, information about the work of the governing body, records of leaders' checks on the quality of teaching and learning, and several school policy documents. We also checked the school's website and the procedures for keeping pupils safe. We talked with members of staff about safeguarding matters.