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Mr Martin Bell
Headteacher
Willow Tree Primary School
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Dear Mr Bell

Short inspection of Willow Tree Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 21 March 2017, 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 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. There is a friendly welcome as you enter your school. Since your appointment, you have correctly identified the priorities needed to improve the school further and have implemented the necessary actions quickly. Members of your leadership team share your drive and commitment and are enthusiastic about the recent positive changes within school which are improving standards.

You are working effectively to improve the attendance of pupils in school, especially that of the disadvantaged pupils. The well-attended breakfast club, certificates, badges and the imaginative strategies you have introduced to promote good attendance are very popular. Younger pupils love the fact that 'Reggy the giant bear' visits their class when they achieve the highest attendance rates for the week. The opportunity to win tickets to a St Helens rugby match, and shopping vouchers, are an added incentive for the parents and carers too. You know your families well and you are committed to ensuring that the most vulnerable pupils are supported. Attendance is improving but is still lower than other pupils' attendance nationally.

Following the last inspection, you were given a number of areas for improvement. The vast majority have been tackled very effectively. Staff have high expectations and are benefiting from the opportunity to share skills and knowledge. Activities

match the needs and interest of the pupils. Teachers challenge pupils, especially the most able, so that an increased number of pupils are working at a greater depth. Pupils know what they need to do to improve. You have rightly identified that the additional support for individual pupils needs to be more focused to diminish gaps in learning more rapidly.

The vast majority of parents I spoke to are happy with the school. They appreciate the time you give each morning to greet them as they arrive. Parents are pleased with the progress their children are making, especially in reading. They feel that any issues are dealt with quickly and the fact that you listen to any concerns is applauded. A very small number of parents commented about the poor behaviour of individuals. I did not see any poor behaviour during my visit. The pupils I spoke to said that incidents of poor behaviour are rare and they are always sorted out.

Pupils enjoy coming to school and speak very enthusiastically about the reward systems and the 'strive for five' incentive to encourage reading. They would like everyone to have a quiet corner where they can go to and read books. Pupils are proud of their achievements and can see the progress that they are making. One pupil commented 'it's much better now' when showing me his mathematics work. Pupils told me that they enjoy all the after-school clubs and, when asked what the best thing about Willow Tree Primary was, they simply replied: 'The people in it!'

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Records are detailed and of a high quality. Pupils spoken to during the inspection said that they know how to keep themselves safe, especially when using the internet. They enjoy coming to school. Pupils know whom to go to if they have any worries and they are confident that their concerns will be taken seriously and dealt with quickly.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have refined the processes to identify those pupils who need additional support for their special educational needs. Records are accurate and focused on pupils' specific areas of need. You have built strong links with specialist providers to support pupils who have an education, health and care plan. As a result, transition into school and onto the next stage of a pupil's education is supported well. Termly progress meetings enable the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) to discuss individual pupils' needs and assess the impact of the support that they are receiving. The strong relationships you have with parents and carers benefit the pupils and the progress that they make. You are proactive in accessing advice and training for staff which result in pupils being well supported. As a result of this strong work, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make strong progress from their starting points.
- You and other leaders have accurately identified the barriers to learning for disadvantaged pupils. Quick action is diminishing the gap in progress and attainment for this group when compared to others nationally. Pupils attend

school more regularly, which contributes to their stronger gains in learning. You provide practical support for the most vulnerable families and work closely with a range of other agencies. The governors monitor the impact of the actions that have been taken and have an accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement.

- Leaders have made changes to the teaching of guided reading. Activities challenge pupils' understanding and the majority of pupils are making better progress from their starting points than previously. They are becoming confident and competent readers. In mathematics, pupils are challenged throughout the lesson with the initial 'hook' into the main activity and then the problem to be solved. Pupils apply their skills and knowledge and are able to talk through the way they have worked out the answers. The school's assessment information and work in books clearly show that the disadvantaged pupils are making good progress in reading and mathematics.
- Outcomes in 2016 for the Year 1 phonics screening check show improvement compared with previous years but they remain below average. Leaders have ensured that adults have a good understanding of how to teach phonics and, as a result, teaching is consistently effective and accurate. Misconceptions are quickly addressed to ensure clear pronunciation and correct letter formation. Pupils are challenged to apply their skills in a variety of activities and use their knowledge of phonics to help them with reading and writing tasks. Adults use assessments effectively so that they know how to support and challenge the pupils further. As a result, pupils now make better progress.
- The results for key stage 1 pupils in 2016 were below those expected for pupils of a similar age nationally. You identified that teachers would need support to ensure that the pupils made rapid progress and that the gaps in their learning were addressed quickly. As a result of the actions taken by you and your leaders, the quality of teaching has improved. Teachers share good examples of how to teach mathematics, guided reading and writing. Teachers work together to discuss ideas and activities to challenge pupils further. Work in pupils' books shows that pupils have made considerable progress since you began this work. The most able pupils are challenged well, especially in mathematics. Their extended writing is also of a high quality. An increased number of pupils is on track to reach the expectations appropriate for their age by the end of the year.
- You have been relentless in your drive to improve punctuality and attendance, particularly for the disadvantaged pupils in school. There are a small number of pupils whose complex needs have resulted in them having considerable absences due to health-related issues. This is acknowledged by the school and the pupils and their families work closely with your family support staff. You have introduced a number of imaginative incentives that are having a positive impact on improving attendance. There has been an improvement across the school and attendance is now just 0.2% below that of other schools nationally. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils has increased and the number of pupils who are persistently absent has halved. This is having a direct impact on progress for pupils. You work closely with the education welfare officer to support the most vulnerable families. Leaders robustly follow up when pupils are absent and parents are held to account. You are raising expectations and, as a result, pupils

are making steady progress.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they tackle the remaining persistent absence of a small number of disadvantaged pupils so that they attend school as regularly as other pupils nationally
- they challenge pupils so that an increased number of pupils are working at a greater depth
- additional support to meet individual pupils' needs is more focused to diminish gaps in learning more rapidly.

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

Yours sincerely

Amanda Stringer
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I met with you, your deputy headteacher, assistant headteacher and three other senior leaders. I also met with the chair of governors and two members of the governing body. I conducted a learning walk with you and visited classes, where I had the opportunity to speak to pupils and see their work. I also listened to a number of pupils read. I met with a group of pupils during the day, spoke with a number of parents at the school gates and took account of four free-text comments. There were five responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online questionnaire for parents. I scrutinised your assessment information, your self-evaluation, school improvement planning, the single central record and other safeguarding procedures and practices.