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Mrs Carole Scott
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Dear Mrs Scott

Short inspection of Seaham Harbour Nursery School

Following my visit to the school on 6 March 2019, 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 outstanding in March 2015

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your deputy have shown yourselves to be reflective practitioners and have been relentless in your commitment to continue improving the quality of teaching and learning for the children in your care. Your clarity of vision is shared by your staff, parents and carers who speak highly of your leadership and management. One parent, sharing their view, stated: 'The headteacher is an inspirational professional who is the driving force behind this special nursery.'

You have created a school with a caring ethos and you know your families well. You provide high levels of support for children and their families with specific learning or pastoral needs. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make similar or better progress than other children. This is because they are well integrated into the school and well supported by individual staff who know and understand their needs well.

Teachers and assistants have high expectations of the children's behaviour. This is reflected in the exceptional standards of behaviour for such young children who conduct themselves with a remarkable level of self-control, mindful of their own safety and that of their peers.

There have been considerable changes since the school's previous inspection. The school now admits two-year-olds, known as the early learners, and has extended provision for children eligible for a 30-hour placement.

You have given careful consideration to the curriculum which is provided for all of the children at their different stages. The admission of the early learners has been very successful. They enjoy facilities in purpose-built accommodation with access to their own outside area. Provision for these children is specifically planned to meet the needs of these young learners. Very skilled staff demonstrate an excellent understanding of how to encourage the independence of young children, while at the same time providing the correct levels of support to ensure that they feel safe and secure. This results in confident children who show exceptional levels of concentration, focus and a willingness to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

Likewise, you have planned a curriculum to ensure that children eligible for 30 hours of provision have access to a wide range of stimulating activities as well as additional projects. For example, children have enjoyed the beach project where they explored their local environment as well as learning the skills of kite making. This well-considered planning means that children who access the school all day show high levels of engagement in their learning whether it is adult directed or chosen by them independently.

Following the previous inspection, you were tasked with regularly reviewing and updating policies and procedures so they reflect the current responsibilities of leaders in the school. These are in place, with the exception of procedures to ensure compliance with the nutritional guidance for the provision of lunches. This is in the process of being addressed through the recent appointment of a catering manager who has still to take up their post.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school provides a safe environment for its pupils. For their age they show a good understanding of safety. They showed respect when using simple tools to construct a wooden box, and talk about the safe use of knives to cut fruit and vegetables. When they are playing on the outside equipment or riding on the bikes and trikes they show due consideration for the safety of each other.

Leaders have created a safe culture to take care of its pupils and ensure that procedures are implemented to protect them. Staff and governors understand their obligations for safeguarding and take appropriate action when necessary. They work well with outside agencies and this provides pupils and families with the support they need. Governors ensure that an annual safeguarding audit is undertaken to ensure that all the procedures and policies are fit for purpose. All members of staff are checked for their suitability to work with children and you are updating training where it is required.

Although the children are not of statutory school age, you have systems in place to follow-up pupil absences on the first day. Where necessary, you involve external agencies to ensure that pupils are safe when not in school. You work well with local health visitors to identify any vulnerable children within the local community who may not be accessing early years provision.

Inspection findings

- Children start at the school with various stages of development. You have identified that a proportion of children have delayed communication and language skills. As a result, there is a strong emphasis on fostering children's language development. Teachers and assistants are skilled in allowing children time to process a verbal response and in ensuring they are not hindered by adult interruption. This means children are willing and confident to share their views without inhibition.
- The children's love of books is evident from their keenness to listen to a story as well as access the attractive book areas. During the inspection, two boys were observed happily sharing their enjoyment of reading a book, 'The Gruffalo'. They compared the monster's appearance with their own, turning the pages correctly and showing a clear understanding of the start and finish of the story.
- The teaching of phonics is currently under review in the school. A small number of teaching staff who deliver phonics have recently joined the school. They are yet to be trained fully in the implementation and teaching of the school's preferred scheme. This results in some slight inconsistency in approach and understanding as to how the scheme should be delivered.
- Together we observed children with high levels of motivation and engagement. Activities are well planned and teachers and assistants intuitively tap into children's interest to further their learning. For example, the sand art area provided children with an indoor beach experience as they walked and played in the sand. The 'hospital' area in the early learners unit provided children with an interesting view of a chest x-ray.
- The learning environment is vibrant and stimulating. Displays in both the early learners and school settings accurately reflect the richness of the curriculum across all areas of learning. These are well narrated with photographs of the children participating in their learning.
- Staff encourage children to ask challenging questions and answer them accurately or encourage the children to find out for themselves or from each other. Children's achievements and next steps are regularly assessed and recorded and include parent input as well as noting what the school calls, 'wow' moments.
- The outside area provides a seamless learning experience with the classroom activities and is an integral part of the learning environment. During the inspection, children had been planning in the classroom how they could raise funds to buy food to donate to the local foodbank. Their decision to wash cars to raise money was being practised outside. While children honed their car washing skills they did this with a real sense of purpose as they used sponges and water to clean the school's ride-on cars.
- Children who attend the school for 30 hours are provided with a mid-day meal. This provides a good opportunity for children to interact socially as well as learn about healthy eating and explore new food. While views of parents have been sought when compiling the lunch menus, this provision is not as well planned as

other areas of learning. Governors have not ensured compliance with the nutritional guidance for a maintained school.

- Governors are keen and actively involved in school life. Each term there is what the school calls a 'governors' week'; these visits are well focused on evaluating that the school is implementing the school development plan. Governors record these visits by evaluating their findings in a written report which is then used to inform further improvements.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure they:

- develop the knowledge of teachers and assistants in the teaching and delivery of phonics
- ensure that lunches provided to children comply with nutritional guidelines.

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

Yours sincerely

Karen Heath
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and your deputy headteacher to discuss aspects of the school's work. You shared your own evaluation of the effectiveness of the school and your improvement plans. Together, we observed several sessions in both the early learners unit and the school. I looked at children's learning journeys, which record children's achievements and identify their next learning steps.

I reviewed a range of documents, including those relating to the safety and welfare of pupils. I shared books with some children and discussed their enjoyment, and experience, of reading. I observed the provision in the school's breakfast club. I talked to parents and considered written comments from parents and the 17 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey for parents.

I met with the chair of the governing body and three other governors as well as speaking to a representative from the local authority. I considered the views of 11 staff who responded to Ofsted's staff survey.