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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
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Mrs Julia Graham
Headteacher
Beechdale Nursery School
Beechdale Road
Consett
County Durham
DH8 6AY

Dear Mrs Graham

Short inspection of Beechdale Nursery 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 outstanding in February 2013.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You, your deputy and the staff have not stood still since the last inspection, and have ensured an ethos of continuous improvement across all aspects of the nursery. You have also ensured that the recent federation with Consett Infant School has not watered this down; indeed, it has strengthened the nursery. Any areas identified for improvement flow from an astute analysis of data and observations of staff and children. They are clearly and concisely defined within the school's self-evaluation, and effectively addressed in the school improvement plan.

An area identified in the school improvement plan was to diminish the gap in attainment between boys and girls, particularly within boys' creativity. The strategies to address this have been effective. During the inspection, children, including boys, were observed totally absorbed in an adult-led session writing facts about chickens. The member of staff skilfully moved them into active learning, hunting for the toy character of 'Mr Croc'. This enabled the boys to develop their creative and writing skills while cape-making, and subsequently use these in their imaginative role play.

Parents and carers spoken with commented on the enjoyment their children get from learning because of the way you follow the interests of the children in planning activities. It is a strength of the practice in the nursery. You have exceptionally high expectations for the children in your care. This can be seen in the way staff are

always challenging children to think more deeply and reflect on their work. For instance, when painting a detailed portrait of a chicken, children are asked about what they have done and what could they do better; or when being asked to explain what a life cycle means. This really stretches the children and makes them think about their learning, and develop their communication skills.

You and the governors also have very high expectations of all the staff, with a wide range of training opportunities being accessed, promoting professional development linked to the priorities for the school. While you are expanding your skills through the management of the federation of two schools, your deputy is expanding hers by also working as an adviser for the local authority. Alongside this, your staff are extremely well supported to develop and enhance their skills and qualifications through external courses and in-house training sessions. You robustly check the impact all of this has on the quality of teaching and learning within the nursery, and the resulting outcomes for children. This has resulted in a high level of continuity of staffing with very few changes over the years. Staff say that Beechdale is 'a very happy place to work. We are here for each other and to give the children the rich education they deserve. We as a school are always looking to improve our nursery. The children are at the heart of our school and teaching is always based on their interests.' Parents and carers acknowledge the importance of this. Many attended the nursery themselves, and like the fact that they see the staff who taught them.

The governing body is highly effective in the delivery of their functions. They have taken steps, particularly since federation, to strengthen the way they fulfil their role and are continuing to do so. They know there is more to do. However, the role of governors has further developed since the last inspection to better support and challenge the senior management team within the new federation organisation. Each governor now has an area of responsibility and active involvement when visiting the nursery to collect evidence and support the senior managers with their judgements. Their knowledge of attainment and progress for all groups of children has improved, along with the impact of any additional support they may receive. This is because of the clarity of the data presented to the governors by the headteacher. A timetable for visits and committee meetings has been established. These now have a clear focus which advances governors' knowledge of the nursery. The records of each visit are stored and show evidence of challenge and intended improvements. The governing body minutes demonstrate effective, robust challenge around areas such as early intervention and attainment.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. There is a strong culture of safeguarding. Everyone sees this as a high priority. It is always on the staff meeting agenda for discussion, ensuring that staff are kept up to date. Files demonstrate how all safeguarding procedures are followed and any concerns reported immediately to the responsible person.

Partnership working with other agencies has recently been strengthened by the

creation of the parent support adviser post. The adviser has quickly built strong, trusting relationships with parents and carers. Through this work, families can more swiftly access additional services they or their children may need. There is a strong focus on outcomes for the children, for example in terms of improving individual pupils' attendance rates. Children's case records are always recorded in such a way that they present a coherent, accurate and easily accessible picture of the excellent work undertaken with the child, their family and partners.

Children are taught how to stay safe when taking risks. For example, when whittling sticks in the forest school, they know how to create a safe space so that they cannot injure anyone accidentally. They are shown how to use utensils safely.

Parents and carers comment on how the school focuses on the welfare and safety of their children. They put their trust in the staff because they know they care about the children.

Inspection findings

- Most children enter Beechdale Nursery with skills and abilities below those typical for their age. All children make rapid progress during their time here and most leave in line with or above what is typical for their age.
- Children are exceptionally well prepared for Reception class. They know how to behave to enable them to learn and have lively, enquiring minds. For example, when experimenting to see what is easier to roll down a ramp, they showed they understand that the roundness of a log assists rolling, compared to the wooden block. Many children know the sounds letters make and use this knowledge to write short sentences correctly. They can count forwards and back from 20 and recognise the number symbols.
- Interventions for disadvantaged children are extremely successful. These children benefit greatly from their access to the forest school and the additional small-group work they receive, which helps them to diminish any gaps in their knowledge and skills. Progress for them is exceptionally rapid, and any gaps in attainment are swiftly closing.
- Support and teaching for children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is very effective. Children are supported to join in activities and integrate with their peers. For example, when a small group were observed counting the number of children present in their group, the children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities wrote down numbers to 15. When the group were planning how to find 'Mr Croc', they joined in the hunt, excitedly running off and returning, having drawn a picture of the eggs they have found. Records of children's work include observations which are shared with parents and carers. These effectively demonstrate the partnership the school has with their parents and carers, with regular meaningful contributions and comments from them. Parents and carers state how their children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities thrive at Beechdale. They say they are always kept informed of their child's progress and challenges and are involved in writing the support plan for each term. Parents and carers firmly believe their

children are doing so well because of the hard work and exceptional care all staff at the nursery provide, particularly the individual support workers.

- Children are taught extremely well to understand and value similarities and differences. As well as aiming to enhance children's understanding of different faiths and beliefs by participating in a range of celebrations throughout the year, children can dress up in clothes and try different foods from other cultures. Treasure boxes are used to enable children to share their lives with their friends through discussing objects important to them. This is then used as a stimulus to teach about respecting differences at an appropriate level for their age. Each room has a toy character who children take in turn to look after. The room characters go away with the children and their families on 'adventures'. Records and photographs from these trips are regularly used to initiate discussions about valuing cultural differences.
- While governors now take individual responsibilities in monitoring the quality of provision, these new arrangements need time to develop further to be even more effective.
- Partnership with parents and carers is a strength. Parents and carers are overwhelmingly supportive of the school. Comments typically talk about how happy children are, and the caring nature of the staff. For example, one parent said:

'our child is extremely happy here. The staff are very helpful and caring and provide excellent learning opportunities. For example: forest school where they recently hunted for treasure and found fish and chips to eat and hot chocolate to drink; a visit from a train conductor; eggs hatching last week with a live internet stream so we could watch the chicks hatching at home. Our child comes home full of talk of what he has been doing. I cannot praise Beechdale Nursery enough. They have given my child an amazing start on their school journey...'

Another simply stated, 'Beechdale is a fantastic nursery with great facilities and wonderfully warm staff!'

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the new governance arrangements are enhanced and further embedded to maintain the continuing progress and development of the nursery.

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

Geoffrey Dorrity
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

The focus of the inspection was to check whether the high standards identified at the previous inspection had been maintained and to find out how well particular groups of children were progressing.

I held a variety of meetings with you, the deputy headteacher and other members of staff.

I observed learning jointly with you and the deputy headteacher, in both indoor and outdoor activities led by children. We also observed a writing and phonics session led by a member of staff. I undertook several further observations of activities by myself.

I considered a range of evidence, including the school's latest assessment information about children's learning and development, the school improvement plan, leaders' self-evaluation and children's work.

I met with five members of the governing body and spoke on the phone with a representative of the local authority.

I considered the 25 responses on Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and spoke with 12 parents. I took account of the 12 responses to the online staff questionnaire and spoke with staff.