

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Kay Dimelow
Headteacher
Huntingdon Nursery School
Ambury Road
Huntingdon
Cambridgeshire
PE29 1AD

Dear Mrs Dimelow

Short inspection of Huntingdon Nursery School

Following my visit to the school on 8 December 2016, 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 2013.

This school continues to be outstanding.

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection. As a result of your excellent leadership, underpinned by your passion for early years education, the school continues to provide a caring and nurturing environment where children flourish. Children receive the best possible start to their education. You and the assistant headteacher provide highly effective, insightful leadership. Together, with the astute governing body, you always find ways to continually refine, reflect upon and improve the school. As a result, Huntingdon Nursery School is an exceptional school that does not rest on its laurels, and one where children make outstanding progress.

The school is at the core of the local community. You know and support your families' needs exceptionally well. Working closely as part of the leadership team of the on-site children's centre, you create strong, trusting relationships with families that provide them with invaluable support. Parents describe you and the staff as, 'caring', 'passionate' and 'very approachable'. They also speak effusively about their children's experiences at your school. Parents say the nursery is 'amazing', 'fantastic' and 'an incredible place for children to learn and be the best they can from a very young age'.

You and all your staff team are very secure about what effective practice in the early years looks like. You and the assistant headteacher role model high standards and expectations, and staff and children follow your lead commendably. You articulate this well when working with staff undertaking the school's chosen

'supervision' model. This serves to develop staff, celebrate their strengths and provide appropriate professional development. All staff know that while they are fully supported, they also receive challenge to develop even more, refining their own skills to secure excellence in their daily practice. This has enabled you to build on the success of the previous inspection, and sustain outstanding teaching and learning for the children.

Since the previous inspection, you have worked successfully on the area to build on existing strengths concerning partnership working with parents, ensuring that parents contribute more to the ongoing record of their children's learning. Your school offers many opportunities for parents to be an integral part of their child's school life right from the start. For example, children become familiar with the school before they start during 'taster 2s' sessions, and parents write notes to include in their child's individual profile. As a result of your actions to do this, parents feel involved in their child's education, they know the school well and are fully informed about the school's work. One parent said, 'I am fully aware of my child's next steps and have regular communication with my child's key worker. Parents are warmly welcomed and the school tell us everything we need to know to help our children at home. I feel involved in my child's education.'

You are constantly evaluating the quality of teaching and learning, taking on board any advice given. At the previous inspection, a suggested improvement was 'continuing to develop the room for two-year-olds by providing "treasure baskets" that include objects of various shapes and textures for children to explore.' The school has far exceeded this recommendation, and as such, has successfully incorporated many ways for the children to explore and investigate in their learning. This has contributed to the quality of teaching and learning being developed even further to continue to meet the various needs of all the children in your care well.

At Easter 2017, there are notable changes going to be taking place in leadership, as you will be retiring. You are preparing effectively for the transition. Governors have included leaders and staff in the appointment for your replacement and have been rigorous in the recruitment process to secure the next headteacher. In order for the management of the change to be fully effective, you and leaders recognise the need to plan carefully over the next few months, to involve all staff and explain decisions and changes as they occur. Governors are very determined to ensure that the school's outstanding work will not weaken during the leadership transition, and the school will continue to go from strength to strength.

Safeguarding is effective.

You, along with the governing body, make sure that the highest priority is placed on keeping children safe. Communication between all staff, including support staff, such as in the administration team, is very good. As a result, all adults are vigilant and alert to safeguarding children, and the culture of safeguarding very much underpins the work of the school.

All staff training is undertaken regularly and the latest statutory guidance is referenced in the current policy and procedures leaders have put in place. You and governors ensure that all adults are suitable to work with children and the necessary checks are undertaken prior to employment at the school.

Entrances and exits are very secure. The recent changes you have been making to the outside environment prioritise highly keeping the children safe. Supervision of children is appropriate and meets the statutory requirements in each area for the age group of the children. Children skilfully balance and travel with agility when using different play equipment. Through their regular communication and adult-to-child interactions, staff effectively encourage children to be friendly and to be gentle. As a result of this expectation, children undertake their play carefully, safely and with awareness of the presence of others around them. For example, no child ventured onto the path where bikes were being used, four children played in close proximity on the roundabout, holding onto each other for support, and children took turns to climb the frame, waiting patiently for the child in front to complete what they were doing. The high expectations of adults and their consistent approach successfully promote an environment where children feel safe and secure and where they care for each other and behave very well.

From the start of their education at Huntingdon Nursery, you instil in the children that they should learn to take responsibility for their decisions and actions. In line with this, you ensure that risk assessments and thoughtful planning are in place. This encourages staff to take opportunities for children to do the best they can and to extend, deepen and apply their skills and understanding through 'finding out' and independent exploration, safely.

Parents overwhelmingly view the school as a safe place for their children. In addition to parents feeling confident that their child will be physically cared for well, parents also hold the opinion that their children's emotional and personal needs are exceptionally well provided for. As one parent said, 'we love this nursery. My child feels safe, happy and confident to achieve anything he wants to. It is like an extension to our family because they care for the children in so many ways, as if they were their own.'

Inspection findings

- Children get off to an excellent start at Huntingdon Nursery School. You assess their starting points precisely, taking into account information from parents and any observations you make. Upon the children's entry to school, you and your staff ensure that all children develop essential basic skills. Staff ensure that children understand routines that enable them to use the areas of learning effectively to learn better and faster. You make clear your expectations of all the children during this time and they rise to meet these as part of their day-to-day routines. Prior to the children's start at school, staff set to work to build parents' trust and effective working relationships. This all contributes towards the children settling well, and consequently accessing activities rapidly. This secures good progress, from very often lower starting points than is typical for their age group, from the outset.
- Teachers and key workers form close and effective relationships with children quickly. This helps children to feel secure and become independent swiftly. As a result, children immediately are willing to try out new things and confidently contribute to group discussions, putting across their point of view in their own way. Staff are adept at promoting children's language development, choosing the right level of communication for each child, demonstrating how well they know the children. For example, when a group of two-year-olds were routinely going through their visual timetable for the day, adults expertly adapted their choice of words to communicate effectively with all children, including those children who speak English as an additional language.
- Teaching provides children with plenty of opportunities to secure essential skills and knowledge to succeed. Teachers plan effectively to offer open-ended activities. This allows children to take their learning as far as they are able and they have the confidence to do this. When children work independently, adults skilfully sit back, listen and appropriately intervene to either provide support or extend and deepen the children's learning experience. For example, in the construction area room, children were given the chance to explore different settings. Children undertook this with a sense of purpose in their work. Meanwhile, the adult incorporated some problem-solving skills by responding to a child who said that the wall was too short by asking, 'what could you do to make it longer?'. Following a response from the child, the adult then questioned further, saying, 'is there another way you can do it so that you can have more animals in there?'.
Meanwhile, the adult incorporated some problem-solving skills by responding to a child who said that the wall was too short by asking, 'what could you do to make it longer?'. Following a response from the child, the adult then questioned further, saying, 'is there another way you can do it so that you can have more animals in there?'.
- One of the many strengths observed during the inspection was the perceptive way that adults routinely observe and record children's progress. Staff support high-quality interactions, model effective speech and language, and give children time to apply their skills in their activities. During these tasks, adults succinctly and accurately assess children's levels of independence, knowledge and understanding. From this, adults plan careful next steps for each child, based on rigorous assessment. This has ensured that during their two years at the school, children continue to make outstanding progress. This is the same for all children, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, disadvantaged children and the most able children.

- The quality of the provision for two-year-olds exudes excellence in all aspects. All adults working with this group of children have an in-depth knowledge of how these younger children learn. Progress is rigorously monitored. The activities on offer totally capture and sustain children's interest and effectively promote their learning. Parents are in full agreement that their children have made 'fantastic progress' since starting at the nursery.
- Three- and four-year-olds receive equally effective and purposeful provision as the younger children. Scrutiny of children's individual profiles shows that adults capture each child's achievements meticulously because they plan and set up activities that develop children's awe, wonder, curiosity and personal interests well. This contributes greatly to children being fully prepared for the next stage of their education.
- Children develop their independence skills very quickly and apply them effectively in all they do with due care for those around them. For example, children use the 'find, use and return' policy naturally to make sure that they access resources and return them once they have finished with them. Additionally, during the inspection, one child built a high tower of blocks that fell. Many children came running over to help the child pick up the blocks and rebuild the tower together. This is as a result of effective role modelling and high expectations of young children by all adults in the nursery.
- Governors are extremely committed to the school's success. They visit regularly and use their skills and expertise well to contribute to the accomplishments of the school. They share your relentless ambition when working on priorities and planning for the next developments to further enhance the work of the school. As a result, governors are able to effectively support and provide challenge to leaders to ensure that the school's outstanding provision is sustained.
- You are a great believer in shared working with other early years providers in order to support and challenge each other. This is achieved in a number of ways, for example, through your work as lead school in the early years teaching alliance, supporting other settings where you provide training. You also model effective early years practice within the local authority. Although you have positive relationships with the primary school next door, you recognise that there are still some missed opportunities to share effective practice and support each other on your continual improvement journey.
- The school has faced significant challenges and continues to do so with regards to changing funding arrangements. However, you and the governors have been judicious in your forward planning to ensure that this is not detrimental to the work that the school does. Owing to this awareness and wise approach, the school's capacity to provide an outstanding education at Huntingdon Nursery School has not been affected.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- plans for the change in leadership fully involve all staff so that the transition is seamless, and outstanding provision for the children is continually sustained
- the positive working relationship that exists with the neighbouring primary school is developed further to work together and share expertise for the benefit of all.

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

Yours sincerely

Tracy Fielding
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the visit, I met with you, your assistant headteacher and your receptionist. I also met with four governors, including the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. Visits were made during the morning and afternoon sessions to the indoor and outdoor environments to observe children's learning. I considered the 30 responses from parents to Ofsted's online text service and the school's recent parent surveys. I reviewed a range of nursery documentation, including the school's self-evaluation and school development plan. I also scrutinised records of your checks to safeguard children, and records of children's progress and attainment.

This short inspection focused on:

- how leaders are sustaining the outstanding provision to continue to secure exceptional outcomes for young children
- exploring capacity of leadership with change on the horizon
- assessing how children's needs are being met, considering the typical expected development, developing independence, communication and interaction with other children
- how the development of teaching and learning is ensuring that there are abundant opportunities for children to explore and investigate independently.