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12 February 2018

Ms Neena Lall  
Headteacher  
St Stephen's Primary School  
Whitfield Road  
London  
E6 1AS

Dear Ms Lall

### **No formal designation inspection of St Stephen's Primary School**

Following my visit with John Kennedy, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 31 January 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for inspecting schools with no formal designation. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector was concerned about the effectiveness of leadership and management at the school. This concern arose from press reports and social media activity which suggested a potential breakdown in trust between school leaders and parents following a report in the national press about the school's policies on uniform and fasting.

### **Context**

St Stephen's is a larger than average primary school. It is federated with St Stephen's Nursery School and Children's Centre. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is broadly average. The percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups and the number who speak English as an additional language are well above average.

### **Evidence**

Inspectors scrutinised a range of documents including: governors' minutes; newsletters; correspondence to, from and about the school; minutes from parents' meetings; and other relevant school documentation. Inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, teachers and support staff, pupils, parents and governors. Inspectors also had telephone conversations with a representative of the local authority and the local Member of Parliament. Inspectors, accompanied by the headteacher, made some brief visits to classrooms.

Inspectors considered the effectiveness of leaders' decision-making and the appropriateness of their communication with parents and other stakeholders. While inspectors focused on gathering evidence about these competencies generally, they also spent some time considering the specific circumstances which led to the current discord, which has been reported widely in national and local media.

## **Main findings**

Having considered the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time leadership and management are effective. The leaders of St Stephen's continue to run an outstanding school.

Teachers and leaders have created a calm and purposeful school environment where children thrive in a culture of high expectation and positive affirmation. Pupils throughout the school are extremely enthusiastic about their learning and overwhelmingly positive about their school.

Teachers and leaders are visible and welcoming around school. Parents say that leaders are very approachable and listen carefully to their views. There is a culture of trust which exists between parents and school staff. Typically, where parents hold a different view to the school, the school works hard to explain why a policy is as it is, clarifying reasons for policy changes where appropriate. The negative comments and abusive postings found in some recent social media about the school's uniform policy and position on children fasting for religious observance are in complete contrast to the atmosphere within the school and appear to be largely instigated by people from outside the parental body. It is worth noting that the decision to remove the hijab from the key stage 1 uniform was communicated to parents in June 2017 and implemented with little fuss in September 2017, following careful consideration by governors.

Typically, leaders and teachers are reflective and regularly consider how they can improve their practice, both in relation to the delivery of the curriculum and the way the school works with its community. Staff are actively encouraged to make suggestions; they report that their views are taken seriously and lead to improvement.

School leaders and governors have not been afraid to object when community leaders potentially interfere with curriculum delivery and school leadership. For example, the school took decisive action when an individual within the local mosque wrote to parents stating that children would likely be removed from the madrasa if they missed evening classes to take part in a planned school residential activity. The school rightly challenged this and, as a result, children who otherwise would not have benefited from the residential trip were able to attend without negative consequence.

Parents and carers have regular opportunities to ask questions and give their views to school leaders. For example, parents are invited to question and answer sessions where leaders present ideas and take feedback. These meetings are held for small groups of parents so that they are conducive to open discussion. Parents who spoke with inspectors said that the tone of a report in the national press upset them, but that school leaders have acted to reassure them and they continue to trust the headteacher and other leaders. With hindsight, the school recognises the need to consider communications more carefully, including those through local and national media.

School leaders, and in particular the headteacher, have faced bullying and harassment, and there is evidence that this has been coordinated by some people outside the school community. Parents said that they just want the 'noise' from these people to stop so they can get back to being a great school community without distracting interference.

### **External support**

The local authority has provided some support to the school in managing the manipulative and sometimes abusive correspondence and comments made by email and across social media. However, considering the position the school found itself in, and the fact that some correspondence appears to have been coordinated, the local authority's approach has been perfunctory at best, stopping short of supporting the school in its policy position. Instead, the local authority has positioned itself as a moderator to manage relationships between the school, councillors and community groups. The expected level of emotional care and public support for school staff from the local authority has been too limited and, as a result, ineffective.

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- Ensure that communications, both from the school and through the press, are carefully managed so that messages cannot easily be misinterpreted, particularly by those outside the school's community who seek to undermine decision-making in the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Sheridan  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**