Report of a Primary Inspection

St Mary's Primary School and Nursery Unit, Newcastle

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Education and Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

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1. Introduction

A. Background information

St Mary's Primary School and Nursery Unit is a co-educational, Catholic-maintained primary school situated in the town of Newcastle. The school serves children from the town and surrounding rural areas.

The current enrolment stands at 358 children, comprising 306 children in the primary classes and 52 children across two part-time nursery classes. The proportion of children with free school meal entitlement has decreased over the last five years from 31% to 23%. Fifteen percent of the children have special educational needs (SEN), including 33 children with a statement of special educational needs. Just under 2% of the school population are newcomer children.

At the time of the inspection, an acting vice-principal had been in post since October 2025, and there were two temporary full-time teachers employed in the school.

The school has been approved for a significant capital enhancement programme, which will provide two specialist provision classes.

The school has a long-established Shared Education partnership with All Children's Integrated Primary School, supported through a combination of Shared Education and PEACEPLUS funding. More recently, the school has developed a partnership with Newcastle Primary School and Nursery Unit through funding provided under the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy. The school is also an active participant in the Mourne Area Learning Community.

B. Views of children, parents and staff

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to the children in year 7, parents and staff in advance of the inspection. The responses to the questionnaires are referenced, where relevant, within the main body of the report. A high-level summary of the questionnaire responses, including any concerns raised, was shared with the principal and two representatives of the board of governors.

C. The process of inspection

The ETI worked alongside St Mary's Primary School and Nursery Unit to consider how well the school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;

- monitors and reviews progression to define, celebrate and embed success; and

- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. Main Report

A. Setting the vision

The school's value of **togetherness** is reflected in the highly collaborative and inclusive process used to develop its vision, mission and core values. Consultation on these began in 2023, with the children, staff, parents and the wider school community provided with meaningful opportunities to contribute to shaping the school's future direction. As a result, the vision, mission and values of **faith**, **fairness**, **excellence**, **inspiring**, **nurturing** and **togetherness** reflect authentically the aspirations and priorities of the community and are evident across all aspects of school life. The senior leaders are highly visible within the school community and play a pivotal role in bringing the school's vision and values to life, modelling them consistently and fostering a strong sense of trust, belonging and shared purpose among the children, staff and wider community.

The School Development Plan (SDP) is rooted firmly in the school's vision and values and provides a clear strategic direction for improvement. The school is currently in the second year of its three-year SDP. The identified priorities, including computational thinking and coding, mathematical language and problem-solving, reading retrieval skills and SEN, align well with the school's context and identified needs. Additional priorities centred on curriculum leadership, outdoor learning, Shared Education and pupil leadership support further the school's strategic direction.

The associated action plans provide a strong foundation for sustaining and strengthening improvement. The success criteria would benefit from greater precision and measurability, with a stronger focus on the intended impact on the children's learning and outcomes.

The governors play a significant role in supporting and advancing school improvement. Through regular reports from the principal, including evaluations of school development initiatives, they are well informed about the school's priorities and progress. As a result, they articulate clearly the positive impact of recent development initiatives, particularly in strengthening the school's vision, mission and values and in improving the children's outcomes in digital learning. Drawing on a diverse range of professional expertise and experience, the governors provide an effective balance of support and constructive challenge to the school leaders. They are highly committed to the school and are proud of the achievements of the children, staff and wider school community.

B. Implementing and improving to achieve the vision

Monitoring of learning, teaching and the children's outcomes includes classroom observations by the principal, collegial reviews of planning and children's work, learning conversations with the children, and the analysis of assessment information. The resulting evidence informs school improvement effectively. There is some variability in the quality and evaluative focus of a small number of co-ordinator reports. The school development plan identifies appropriately the further development of middle leaders' capacity as a means of improving the consistency and quality of self-evaluation across the school.

Planning across the school is detailed and mostly effective in supporting progression in learning. In the most effective lessons, teachers use high-quality questioning, active learning approaches and well-matched learning intentions to create **inspiring** learning experiences that engage and motivate the children. The teachers revisit success criteria effectively and provide purposeful opportunities for the children to explain and compare their thinking, deepening their understanding of learning. Sharing this effective practice more widely would promote greater consistency in learning and teaching across the school.

The children benefit from a coherent literacy programme which is developing well their competence as readers and writers. Greater consistency in whole-school approaches to spelling, writing, editing, redrafting and self-assessment would strengthen further the quality and accuracy of the children's written work. In mathematics, the school has introduced recently a commercially produced whole-school programme, which is supporting greater consistency in learning and teaching approaches from year 1 to year 7. Continuing to monitor and evaluate its impact will be important in ensuring an appropriate level of challenge for all of the children and improving further their outcomes.

The planning and provision for the development of the children's digital skills is highly effective and reflects a strategic whole-school approach. The children's digital skills are developed progressively and purposefully from nursery to year 7, enabling them to apply technology confidently across their learning. The high-quality provision reflects the school's commitment to **excellence** and results in high levels of engagement, achievement and digital competence.

The children experience rich historical, geographical and scientific learning that deepens their knowledge, understanding and skills while making meaningful connections across the curriculum. The school's distinctive location is used effectively to enhance learning, with the local area providing a rich context for geographical enquiry and environmental studies. Through learning experiences linked to local heritage and innovation, the children explore the achievements of influential figures such as the Wright Brothers and Harry Ferguson, developing their understanding of science, engineering and invention. Educational visits, cultural events, sporting opportunities, after-school activities and engagement with local businesses, visitors, artists, authors and musicians enrich the curriculum further. Collectively, these experiences broaden the children's horizons and contribute significantly to their personal development.

The children in the nursery unit are settled, confident and increasingly independent learners. Well-planned indoor and outdoor learning experiences provide rich opportunities for the children to develop early mathematical language and physical skills. The staff model language skilfully and use purposeful open-ended questioning to extend the children's thinking, curiosity and problem-solving skills. The staff continue to refine their approaches to observation and assessment to identify more effectively the children's achievements and next steps in learning.

Outdoor learning across the school is an appropriate priority for development. To build on the well-established play-based approaches within the nursery unit, planning for play across the foundation stage should be strengthened to ensure greater progression, continuity and consistency in the children's learning experiences.

Positive relationships, calm learning environments and a consistent, empathetic approach support the children's wellbeing and readiness to learn. An effective preventative curriculum supports the children to stay safe and make informed choices, while the respect and kindness evident across the school foster a strong sense of belonging. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment Digital for Life and Work programme supports the development of the children's knowledge and understanding of online safety, digital wellbeing and responsible digital citizenship, preparing them to engage safely and confidently in an increasingly digital world. Healthy lifestyles are promoted effectively through healthy eating initiatives and a wide range of sporting and physical activities. In discussions with inspectors in classrooms and on the playground, and through the year 7 responses to the ETI questionnaires, the children spoke positively about the extensive range of sporting opportunities and extra-curricular clubs available to them, recognising the beneficial impact these have on their physical health, wellbeing and enjoyment of school life.

C. Building equity

A deeply child-centred ethos underpins the life and work of the school and reflects a clear commitment to **fairness**, equity and **inclusion**. Respectful relationships and a strong child-centred culture ensure that the children feel valued, included and supported. Effective partnerships with parents and external agencies, including the St Vincent de Paul Society, provide sensitive and discreet support for families and help to remove financial barriers, enabling all children to participate fully in school life.

The school responds very effectively to the children's individual needs and barriers to learning, promoting independence, wellbeing and achievement, particularly for those with SEN. Consistent whole-school approaches, including clear routines and the use of colour-coordinated exercise books, enhance accessibility and support inclusive participation in learning.

The staff know the children and their families exceptionally well and use assessment information effectively, including language and communication assessments within the nursery unit, alongside their professional knowledge to identify and respond proactively to emerging needs. Teachers and classroom assistants employ a wide

range of effective strategies, including visual schedules, sensory circuits and appropriately adapted learning activities, to support participation and progress. The sensory room is used effectively to develop the children's emotional regulation and readiness to learn. As a result, children with SEN participate fully in learning and make good progress.

Well-planned literacy interventions, including the Reading Partnership programme delivered by trained classroom assistants, are enhancing the literacy development and outcomes of children requiring targeted support. Additional social, emotional and cognitive support contributes positively to their engagement, readiness to learn and overall progress. Well-established partnerships with external agencies, including the Educational Psychology Service, Local Impact Teams and Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland (RISE NI), enhance and extend this support.

The staff are increasingly incorporating the views of children and their parents into the development of personalised learning plans. These plans are concise and purposeful, identifying appropriate strategies and measurable success criteria to support learning and progression.

The classroom assistants make a valuable contribution to learning, inclusion and the monitoring of children's progress. Home-school communication books for children with SEN are an effective resource, strengthening partnerships with parents by providing regular updates on the children's progress and wellbeing.

Attendance, at 94.31%, is above the Northern Ireland average of 93.8% for 2024/25 and is monitored closely by the school.

D. Defining, celebrating and embedding success

The children are friendly, respectful learners who are excellent ambassadors for the school. They demonstrate exemplary behaviour, high levels of respect for others and a strong sense of responsibility. They engage thoughtfully in discussions, collaborate effectively with their peers and articulate their views clearly.

The school promotes a broad and inclusive culture of success in which academic, spiritual, social, emotional and personal achievements are recognised and celebrated. There are meaningful opportunities for the children to develop and express their **faith** through, for example, the Start of Year Mass, the Spirit of Catholic Education Award and other charitable initiatives. Achievement is celebrated regularly through assemblies, displays, digital platforms and whole-school reward systems. Child-designed achievement icons, such as 'Toto the Turtle' for **togetherness**, reinforce the school's values effectively and are well understood by the children.

Most of the children achieve good standards in literacy and numeracy, as evidenced by the school's internal assessment information and the work in their books. They use an increasingly rich vocabulary and speak enthusiastically about reading and their favourite authors. The school's focus on higher-order comprehension skills is enhancing the children's engagement with texts. Their written work is presented to a

very high standard. In mathematics, the children respond positively to practical approaches, explain their reasoning with increasing confidence and apply their learning effectively in problem-solving activities. The staff have identified appropriately the need to increase opportunities for challenge, particularly in literacy and numeracy, to improve outcomes further. This reflects the responses of 17.5% (10) of the year 7 children who completed the ETI questionnaire and indicated that they did not agree that their lessons are challenging.

The children are confident and discerning users of digital technology who select appropriate tools independently to investigate, communicate, collaborate and present their learning across a wide range of contexts.

E. Growing a community of learning

The school has established a positive culture of professional learning that reflects its commitment to continuous improvement. Teachers and classroom assistants engage in a wide range of relevant professional learning opportunities that are enhancing the provision, particularly in special educational needs and inclusive practice. Through the recently established Mourne Area Learning Community, middle leaders are beginning to engage in collaborative learning and curriculum-focused discussions with colleagues from other schools. These emerging opportunities provide a useful forum through which expertise can be shared and professional practice enriched. As identified appropriately by the school, closer alignment between professional learning priorities and school development plan targets would support greater consistency and sustainability of improvement.

Through discussions with us, a selection of children from years 4 to 7 spoke very positively about their experiences of Shared Education. They described a range of collaborative learning opportunities, including visits to Tollymore Forest Park, beach-based learning activities and creative team-building tasks. The children valued the opportunities to develop new friendships, work collaboratively with others and learn alongside children from partner schools. These experiences promote effectively the development of communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills, while fostering mutual respect and appreciation of diversity. The school evaluates regularly the impact of the Shared Education programme through consultation with children and staff and uses the findings to inform future planning and provision.

The children play an active role in school life through leadership opportunities, including the student council, Digital Leaders, anti-bullying ambassadors and Friendship Fridays. They speak confidently about how their views are listened to and can influence positive change, as shown by the student council's successful transformation of an unused outdoor area into a sensory space. The anti-bullying ambassadors show a strong commitment to promoting inclusion and wellbeing through initiatives such as the buddy bench. They spoke positively about their partnership with the anti-bullying ambassadors from St Malachy's High School, which involved reciprocal visits to both schools, along with workshops and assemblies led by the high school pupils to reinforce anti-bullying messages. Through these collaborative experiences, the children have developed their confidence, leadership skills and understanding of the importance of positive relationships in creating a supportive and inclusive school community.

Beyond the school, the children contribute meaningfully to the wider community through intergenerational initiatives, including Grandparents' Day and pen-pal links with local care-home residents. As a result, they have a well-developed sense of social responsibility and understand that their contributions can make a positive difference within their school and the wider community.

The school benefits from significant community support, with local businesses and organisations contributing generously to fundraising events and providing resources, which enhance the learning environment and extend opportunities for the children.

The school is held in high regard locally, as evidenced by the highly positive parental responses to the ETI questionnaires. Almost all of the parents (96.6%) reported that they would recommend the school to other parents/carers, reflecting the strong confidence of the parents in the quality of the school's provision and care for the children.

F. Child protection

The arrangements for child protection align with current statutory guidance.

A strong culture of safeguarding is embedded across the school, with the safeguarding team, staff and governors prioritising the safety and wellbeing of all the children. Robust governance arrangements, including regular safeguarding reviews and systematic policy monitoring, provide effective oversight and support continuous improvement. The recent inclusion of guidance on the use of generative Artificial Intelligence within the staff code of conduct demonstrates a proactive approach to responding to emerging contemporary safeguarding issues.

The children who spoke with inspectors, and all of the year 7 children who responded to the ETI questionnaire, said that they feel safe in school. All the parents who responded to the ETI questionnaire agreed that they know how to report a safeguarding concern and that their child is treated with care and respect by teachers and other adults in the school, as well as by the other children.

3. Next steps

St Mary's Primary School and Nursery Unit is realising its vision, mission and values through the inclusive, nurturing and collaborative culture that permeates all aspects of school life. Guided by its core values, the school has created a vibrant learning community in which high-quality relationships, effective learning experiences and strong community partnerships support the children to flourish, achieve and make a positive contribution to the school and wider community.

As set out within the school's current development priorities, the next steps for the school are to take forward the following area for action: to develop further the capacity of middle leaders to evaluate rigorously the impact of improvement work on the quality of teaching and the outcomes for the children.

Inspectors identified an aspect of highly effective practice from which others may learn, namely:

- the planning and provision for the development of the children's digital skills.

The District Inspector will monitor the school's progress in addressing the area for action, as part of ETI's routine monitoring processes.

4. Appendix

Appendix 1: Quantitative Terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10

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