

# St Helen's CE Primary School

Greenhill, Alveston, Bristol, BS35 2QX



6<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Dear Parents and Carers,

It has been a challenging and eventful period for St Helen's since the last governors report, to say the least. This is the third version of the letter we had planned to send to you! The (excellent) Ofsted inspection in December of last year sent us back to the drawing board, and we were just about to send our revised letter when COVID-19 struck. Despite recent events we think it remains important to highlight the school's developments and achievements over the last 18 months.

## **Coronavirus**

COVID-19 has been an enormous challenge for the school. The staff and governors have had to deal with the sudden closure of the school and the need to quickly shift to home learning; the provision of care to children of key workers; changes in guidance and law which have sometimes been made with very little warning; the partial reopening of the school under strict health and safety guidelines and rules; balancing the learning and welfare needs of pupils in school and pupils at home; and the need to make longer-term plans heading into the next academic year. The fact that the school is currently up and running in line with government requirements and guidance is no mean feat.

The situation is not over yet, and arrangements could still change rapidly. The senior staff have worked closely with a small group of Governors at every stage and also kept the remaining Governors updated on their work and on key decisions throughout. They have had our support throughout this period, and leaders and Governors continue to try to address shortcomings and improve the situation for everyone. As you will know, there may still be some way to go before things are fully back to normal. We congratulate and thank the staff for their work during this very difficult period and we are grateful to parents for their understanding and patience. We are also immensely proud of the children who have demonstrated the school value of flying high, be that in tackling home learning or adapting to the new school environment.

## **Partnership with St Mary's Primary School**

Before COVID-19 struck, perhaps the most significant development in the life of the school was the creation of the partnership with St Mary's Church of England Primary School in Yate.

Before the schools closed in March, it was becoming apparent that the partnership was bringing benefits to both schools in their day-to-day lives; Mr Spens' partnership updates have provided some examples of this. The partnership has also provided some unexpected benefits during recent months, when the connection between the schools provided extra resilience and other opportunities for effective joint working; for example, you may have seen some of the joint Assemblies on the schools' You Tube channel.

The original intention was that the review of the partnership would by now be complete, and the Boards of Governors of both schools would be in the process of deciding whether to continue the partnership beyond its trial period of one year. Given the impact of COVID-19, however, both Boards decided to postpone making that decision until later this year. In September we will seek opinions from staff, pupils, and parents and carers in order to assist the Board of Governors when making decisions about the future of the partnership. As always, feedback from the whole school and wider community is an important factor when making these key decisions.

## **Ofsted Inspection**

It may seem a long time ago, but the school was, of course, inspected by Ofsted in December 2019, just as most schools were winding down for their Christmas break. The inspectors concluded, after a challenging and in-depth two-day inspection, that the school is "Outstanding" in every area. The Board of Governors is extremely proud of both the staff of the school, and most especially the children. We believe that this Ofsted rating reflects the energy, passion, focus and commitment shown across the school, at all levels. We were pleased that governance was noted to be extremely effective, and we extend our thanks and congratulations to staff, pupils, governors and volunteers, past and present, who have all contributed to the school's success.

Despite the challenges ahead, St. Helen's will not rest on its laurels; Ofsted noted the school's vision of "flying high" sits at the heart of the school, and that "leaders, staff and governors are highly ambitious for all pupils". That remains the case, and governors and staff are focused on looking for new ways to make the most of the partnership with St. Mary's; pushing forward the new curriculum; and moving on to the next stages of development and improvement for the school.

### **Membership of the Board of Governors**

There have been a number of changes to the membership of the Board of Governors. The current membership of the Board is set out on the governor pages of the school's website (along with a range of information about the Board and its work).

The Board would like to thank all governors who have moved on for their significant contributions to the work of the Board and the life of the school generally. The key recent changes are as follows:

- Sarah Brown and Jo Martin (parent governors) both stepped down from the Board, and Neil Martin and Kevin Hunt were appointed (also as parent governors).
- Miss Kitching is now the staff governor.
- Jim McLaren stepped down as Chair of the Governing Board, and is now an associate member of the Board, focusing on the partnership arrangements.
- Long-serving governor Anne Straw and new governor Neil Martin took over as Co-Chairs of the Governing Board, and this arrangement has worked well over the first half of this academic year. Kevin Hunt (parent governor) is serving as Vice-Chair.
- Anne, along with other long-serving governors Chris Casey and Ian Barnett, will step down at the end of this academic year, and we hope to appoint a number of new governors.

Our members bring relevant experience across a number of areas, including in education, law, management, finance, and governance; but new membership is very welcome. If you are interested in joining us, or know of someone in the community who might be interested (whether or not they are a parent or carer of children at the school), please let the school office know.

### **Functions of the Board of Governors**

The three core functions of the Board of Governors at St Helen's are:

- ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction;
- holding leaders to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils, and the performance management of staff;
- overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent.

The Board carries out its functions at termly Full Governing Board meetings, through its various committees (please see the Appendix for more detail on the activities of these committees), and in a number of other ways. Over the last year these included a governors' day once every two terms, regular visits and meetings with staff across the school, and engagement with pupils and parents and carers.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak the Board and its committees have met remotely, and remained in regular contact with each other and with staff. In line with local authority guidance, our primary focus in recent months has been on the response to COVID-19 by the school, and other urgent matters. As we move into the next academic year, we will look closely at how best to carry out our functions while health and safety restrictions remain in place.

### **Conclusion**

This is a time of great uncertainty, but the school's Senior Leadership Team and the rest of the staff have, in our view, very successfully responded to the situation.

Given recent events, it is not easy to look back at life before COVID-19, but we think it is important to recognise the achievements of the school during that period. Aside from the extremely positive Ofsted inspection and the grading of the school as Outstanding, we want to acknowledge the excellent academic results. A particularly important achievement in the school is that, as noted by Ofsted, pupils "are extremely happy and say they love their school". The Senior Leadership Team and governors, however, recognise the need to continue to strive to ensure that this is true for every child, especially in the current circumstances.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Martin and Anne Straw  
Co-Chairs of the Board of Governors



## APPENDIX

### More detail on the work of the Governing Board's Committees

#### Finance and Staffing

Finance and funding for schools across the country remained a challenging issue before COVID-19 struck, and it is more difficult than ever to know what the next year will bring. Against this background, the Finance and Staffing committee monitor all income and expenditure throughout the year, and have confirmed that spending for the year 2018-2019 was largely in line with our budget.

Unfortunately, due to errors outside of the school, it has become apparent that we will be carrying forward a smaller amount of money into the next financial year than anticipated, but we do not expect this to cause any significant problems.

We remain extremely grateful to the Friends of St Helen's (FOSH), who continue to put a lot of time and energy into fundraising. The money they have raised recently will primarily be spent on much needed new reading books. We also recognise that aside from fundraising, their work, and the events they organise, make a real contribution to the sense of community that underpins the school.

Unfortunately, several fundraising events have not taken place due to COVID-19; if you feel able to support the school, an Amazon wishlist has been set up here:

[www.sthelensprimaryalveston.org.uk/wishlists/](http://www.sthelensprimaryalveston.org.uk/wishlists/)

#### Curriculum and Standards

In 2018/19, St Helen's had another set of excellent academic performance across the school, achieving **some of the best results in South Gloucestershire**. 86% of last year's Year 6 students achieved the expected standard across reading, writing and maths (the national average is 65%), and 25% achieved the higher standard (the national average is 11%). We have also seen results from the Early Years Foundation Stage, Year 1 phonics and the assessment at Key Stage 1, which were all above the South Gloucestershire and national averages.

We are pleased to see that the school has built on its successes of recent years and continues to help its pupils succeed academically. We congratulate the staff and pupils for these results, but despite the challenges being faced by all schools at the moment, we must continue build on what has been the fourth straight year of improving attainment.

In particular, the school will maintain its focus on meeting the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with special educational needs and disabilities.

This academic year had seen a particular focus on developing and implementing the "connected curriculum". Staff were working closely with colleagues in St Mary's, and in January 2020 the final system was rolled out across both schools. This system links all of the topics studied by the children to a central theme, which in turn connects to our school values. The intention is to enable the children to become "brave change makers", understanding the world around them and their ability to make a difference.

#### Health and Safety, and Safeguarding

The governor-lead on health and safety continues to meet with Mr Chappell once a term and conducts a thorough inspection of the school. They have been busy recently, as the school moved towards reopening.

Aside from the changes required to meet the guidance on responding to COVID-19, recent work has seen improvements to the school's boundary fences, and various other improvements across the school. We have also been engaging with South Gloucestershire council to see what improvements can be made in terms of road safety around the school.

Safeguarding remains a priority, and the school has robust and effective systems in place for keeping children safe. Recently Mr Chappell formulated a new approach to safeguarding to deal with the reduced access to pupils caused by COVID-19. The safeguarding governor regularly discusses safeguarding matters with senior leadership in the school, and the Board and the senior leadership are committed to ensuring that safeguarding runs as a "golden thread" throughout school life.

#### Strategic Working Group

This group, which meets every three weeks through term-time, works closely with Mr Chappell and Mr Spens on the strategic direction of the school. As well as monitoring day-to-day issues, this group considers the school's three year strategic plan, and from that, the annual School Development Plan.

The Board and senior staff regard the Ofsted inspection as providing an opportunity to revisit the strategic plan, and look again at our vision of, and ambitions for, the school.