

Visit to Cockfield CofE Primary School

2/07/2024.

Notes from visit by the Diocesan School Effectiveness Officer.

I was warmly welcomed by Marc Gilbert, who is approaching the end of his first academic year as Headteacher of the school. I was the representative of the Diocese who was involved in the appointment of Marc Gilbert as Headteacher of Cockfield CofE Primary School, it was an honour to be invited in to discuss the position of the school as a church school, walk the school with Marc and discuss the many changes in the year since he joined the school.

The school's move into the All-Saints Trust and Marc's appointment have been the catalyst for change that the school needed.

Marc's vision, energy and commitment continues apace, as does his enthusiasm for his role. The school continues its transformation under his leadership, in turn under the watchful eye of the All-Saints Schools Trust, who are sufficiently impressed with Marc's first year in-post to appoint him to become the Executive Headteacher over Cockfield and the nearby Great Whelnetham CofE Primary, which has also experienced significant change and success since joining the MAT. Marc will take over as Executive Head of both schools from September 2024.

An interesting approach to evidencing aspects of this change for the better is Marc's use of 'Implementation Books.' These record progress with each project, using photos and other means. Progress on each area of focus as these books take shape is self-evident. There are Implementation Books to record developments in curriculum areas as well as projects to improve various aspects of the learning environment, including the Library and adjoining learning space.

Marc and I walked the school together as he talked me through some of the changes and we visited classrooms and spoke to children and staff.

The 'culture of happiness' that was already established when I last visited, a short while after Marc took up post, is now very much a part of the school's current culture of positive changes. Children and staff were open, friendly and welcoming throughout my visit; there were lots of smiling faces! Marc explained his wish to nurture staff and to try to bring the best out in them, rather than fuel a culture where they feel constantly criticised and judged. This is not to say that poor performance is treated as acceptable - rigour and high expectation are known to be part of the All Saints philosophy.

Similarly, the approach to teaching that we saw while in classrooms, although gentle in style, is clearly based upon a deep knowledge of each child. Whilst time and space is given for the good work and achievements of each child, there is also a gentle yet purposeful 'nudge' from the teacher as to how children might make their work even better.

From the moment a visitor enters the school, they will be struck by the displays on the walls, not simply the quality and range that is on display, but how they all interrelate and reflect each other. Marc described the intention that these are all 'living displays,' as such there are displays that inspired the work that is on display on other boards. There are

displays that highlight the progress that children make during the time they are at the school and there are displays that focus on church school aspects. Marc explained that some of these are in response to the recent 'SIAMS Deep Dive' that was carried out by the Trust. The 'SIAMS Deep Dive,' as it is known by All Saints, is similar to the Diocese's 'SIAMS Support Visit.' As such, the Trust uses this as a mechanism for ensuring that its schools are 'SIAMS ready.' The Diocese still has a duty to support and advise all of its schools, however, and Marc explained that he valued my perspective as someone independent of the school.

On the subject of the recent 'Deep Dive,' Marc explained that the next steps that were identified are to develop spirituality and spiritual experiences at Cockfield and to develop Courageous Advocacy. These are both important areas of focus currently in SIAMS inspections. With regard to spirituality, Marc asked for advice on where to start. My advice was to start with a conversation amongst staff, asking the question: 'What do we mean by 'spirituality' at Cockfield and where do we feel we already provide experiences that develop children's spirituality through the curriculum or via extra-curricular activities?' An interesting point for this discussion will be how the reflection areas that have been established or are planned contribute to children's spirituality. Once we have a shared understanding of spirituality at Cockfield, we can start to increase the number of opportunities to develop children's spirituality through curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Perhaps the most exciting change to the school's learning environment is the project to improve the Library and adjoining learning space. This project is well underway and Marc has a clear idea of timescales and how to complete it, enlisting friends and working at weekends or days in the holiday in order for disruption to the usual working day to be kept to a minimum. This is very exciting indeed as it will transform the children's learning experience in this part of the building and provide an additional calm space for interventions, etc. As with other projects, Marc has found ways of raising money to help fund the project via various grants and donations; it seems as though his enthusiasm is catching! The new library has been designed. Professional mock-ups have been drawn up. There will be new shelving, furniture and resources. These were already beginning to arrive at the time of my visit.

Back in the autumn term when I visited, Marc enthusiastically spoke of the many plans he had to improve the school, including the curriculum offer and learning environment. Ten months later, it was wonderful to see how many of these had either come to fruition or are underway. These included:

- Changing /updating the school emblem and updating the school's 'branding.' This has been carried through into a refreshed new version of the school's website.
- The heightened priority that has been given to the church dimension of the school.
- Teachers whose practice is valued, nurtured and developed in a supportive and collegiate way.
- Improvements to the curriculum and teaching and learning.
- The way that it is communicated that the all in community of Cockfield CofE Primary are valued. This seems particularly evident where teachers and staff are concerned. There is a renewed sense of pride and worth in all that people do and achieve as we walked the school.
- The Library overhaul. Marc explained that the completion of the project was expected the following week, once the library had been decorated.

In conclusion, there have been many changes and improvements at Cockfield CofE Primary this year. There is a sense that this wonderful village church school has entered a new era due to the vision and commitment of Marc Gilbert and ASST. The significant impact of this is already evident.

As Marc enthusiastically takes on the next challenge of his career, as Executive Head of Cockfield CofE and Great Whelnetham CofE, it will be interesting to see this impact spread across both schools.

Phil Knowles, Diocesan SEO
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