

**Catholic Diocese of Northampton
Interim Monitoring Visit
1 February 2016**

St. Thomas More, Bedford [URN 139517]

Since the last full Section 48 inspection in March 2011, there have been significant changes in leadership at St Thomas More. The headteacher took up a substantive post in September 2014 and the deputy headteacher responsible for the Catholic life of the School joined in September 2015. The head of religious education is currently on maternity leave. An acting head of department is currently leading the team. The school chaplain has been in post since April 2015. Strong and confident leadership, imaginative chaplaincy and excellent teaching have had a significant impact on the Catholic character of the school and on the quality of religious education. Leaders, teachers and pupils celebrate the diversity evident within St Thomas More and recognise the shared values that underpin the life of the community. This creates a real sense of richness coupled with an authentic acknowledgement that individuals are on a personal journey of faith. Pupils are extremely appreciative of the excellent relationships that exist within the school and feel nurtured and supported at all times. The school's capacity to sustain current progress is secure because of the shared understanding and commitment of all staff.

The school has addressed all of the areas highlighted in the last inspection report. The leadership team is currently undertaking a strategic review of the KS3 curriculum and staffing in order to enable the allocation of more time to religious education. Year 9 will be prioritised in this review. The school chaplain has worked extremely hard to develop a creative retreat programme. There are many examples of how retreat, in the broadest sense, has been encouraged in day to day school life. Firm partnerships have been established with higher education establishments, most notably St. Mary's University. The development of creativity within lessons has been a focus across the whole school. The religious education department has responded extremely positively to this initiative.

The very strong sense of community within St Thomas More is actively nurtured by staff and pupils alike. Prayer is a central to the life of the school and is supported by a dedicated chaplain who is very creative in her approach. A particular strength is the way that other faiths and cultural traditions are welcomed and celebrated. Whole school masses and liturgies regularly feature prayers and readings in a variety of languages, thus promoting a real sense of inclusion. An act of collective worship observed was engaging, focused on core values and provided opportunities for prayer, reflection and an appreciation of silence. The school environment and display celebrates the Catholic life of the school. The school prayer room is a very special space that is central and easily accessible to pupils at all times. It is regularly used in imaginative ways. The chaplain is, for instance, developing the use of the space for parental prayer groups. The school has also embraced the key themes associated with the Year of Mercy. This is celebrated through display and promoted through assemblies. The school has a clear strategic plan for how members of the community will actively engage with the Year of Mercy. Pupils, especially sixth form ambassadors, take responsibility for planning opportunities for prayer and reflection on a regular basis.

The religious education department provides high quality education and spiritual development. The quality of teaching in religious education is extremely high and lessons are engaging and stimulate thinking at a high level. Lessons are planned collaboratively and then adapted and differentiated by teachers to suit the specific needs of individual classes. A particular strength of teaching in the department is the quality of

questioning. Teachers scaffold thinking time and opportunities to talk so that outcomes are of a higher quality. Discussion framework tools and thinking routines are used imaginatively by teachers to enable pupils to build on their prior knowledge and to challenge the views of others in a positive way. The development of pupils' literacy skills is also a key feature of lessons and teachers' marking. Subject specific key words are much more than display, providing an active learning resource for pupils. Marking is extremely thorough and is dialogic in nature. Pupils respond to the challenging questions posed by their teachers and are active participants in the marking and feedback process. An additional strength of the department is the care of vulnerable pupils. Intervention is planned strategically in order to address any underachievement of vulnerable groups swiftly. Overall achievement in religious education, including that of vulnerable pupils, remains high and well above national expectations. The head of department is enthusiastic in her approach and has a clear vision for this key subject within the school. The department has worked collaboratively to plan a strategic response to curriculum change and the future direction is clear. The department's line manager provides regular informal and formal challenge and support and this is enhanced by the school's link governor who has a detailed knowledge of both the Catholic nature of the school and the work of the religious education department.

Areas for sustaining improvement should include:

- the identification of pupils who are active within their own churches. Once identified, these pupils should be encouraged to use their talents for the good of the school
- finding ways to enable some Year 9 pupils to make the link between their half termly tracking report and their current working grade in religious education. This will enable them to be clear about where they are in their learning and what their next steps should be.

The inspector would like to thank members of staff and pupils for the very warm welcome and the hospitality accorded throughout the visit.

Jo-Anne Hoarty on behalf of the Diocese of Northampton.