 **Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Schools Award (ATSSA)**

*A framework of support and understanding for schools and other educational establishments within which children and young people who have experienced adversity, can heal, thrive, play, and learn.*

18th April 2024

Dear Frances and Claire,

Thank you for registering for the Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Schools Award (ATSSA) at Bronze Level, and for providing comprehensive evidence in support of your application. Thanks also for inviting me to conduct the verification for the Award today. I should like to extend my thanks to you, your senior team and other staff for making the virtual visit so purposeful and enjoyable.

I should like to warmly congratulate you and the rest of the staff on achieving the Award, which is an external sign of recognition of your commitment to the steps you have taken at **St Joseph’s Primary School** to develop a culture of compassion and nurture. This, as you well know, plays a pivotal role in getting your children into a state of ‘learning readiness’. The Award is valid for two years and will run from April 2024 to April 2026.

All the criteria have been evidenced adequately, and in most cases, more than adequately. The evidence you have submitted comes from a broad variety of sources: case studies; extracts and examples of key documents and policies provided by you; from your website; and from interviews with a range of staff, including you and other members of the team. You provided me with much evidence to further support my own data gathered today and previously, and this has added depth and context to the completed evidence folders.

There are a number of significant points that are worthy of special mention:

* Quality staff care and emotional support to protect mental health and well-being is multi-levelled and provided through the leadership team and outside agencies. The staff group itself provides a strong and effective circle of support around individual members. There is great staff cohesion and shared social events facilitate not just working relationships, but strong bonds of friendship. Leaders are aware of the multiple risk factors to staff mental health and well-being and are proactive in providing support to cope with the psychological and emotional demands of the job. There is an extensive range of processes and strategies to protect staff from ‘overwhelm’ or burnout, including referral to external services. There is regular access to Your Space Counselling which provides opportunities for personal development and capacity for self-care. Staff members interviewed shared that leaders are approachable, flexible and empathic. They are fully aware of many avenues of support to which staff can be referred, formal and informal, in-house and external. This is a particular strength of the school.
* You have a range of strategies in place for supporting parents and carers in understanding child development and attachment relationships. Strategies are largely informal in nature, and particularly engage parents who may find it difficult to trust service providers, including educators. Staff demonstrated a depth of understanding and empathy about why some families may be described as ‘hard to reach’, recognising that their relationship to ‘help’ may not have always have been positive in the past. Staff also spoke about how they try to make meetings and conversations with parents and carers as informal as possible in order to strengthen trust and support. Stay and Play sessions for parents and carers have been invaluable in modelling and supporting play, and helping parents to understand the importance of play for healthy development in all domains. Evidence about the support you offer to children and families was compelling and moving. You demonstrate deep empathy in relation to the daily struggles that families face. Connection with and care for families is a particular strength of the school.
* Staff are skilled in monitoring excitement and anxiety, and they have a deep understanding of survival behaviours. They make appropriate interventions to provide coregulation, using a ‘connection before correction’ approach, so physiological and emotional comfort is restored as part of the coregulation process, and reflection and restorative dialogue only takes place once a child is regulated in their body and emotions. Children are protected from, and given significant support with potentially explosive situations. Staff frequently mentioned the importance of supporting children to stay within their window of stress tolerance through recognising and minimising triggers. They described a wide range of grounding strategies and spoke of the importance of having a deep knowledge of each child as an individual; there is no ‘cookie-cutter’ approach to meeting needs and all support is individualised and personal. Exit plans, where required, are developmentally appropriate and enable children to ask for help and support when becoming uncomfortable or overwhelmed. Managing anxiety and dysregulation is a particular strength of the school.
* Methods for eliciting, hearing and responding to children’s voices are broad and extensive. You described numerous strategies to ensure that no pupil is denied participation and all pupils, including the most vulnerable are enabled to communicate. Eliciting pupil voice at St Joseph’s Primary School is not limited to formal methods; every opportunity is taken to have meaningful encounters, which can take place at any time: in the playground; having lunch; in the classroom; during lessons and interventions. Staff have numerous methods and skills for helping children to communicate uncomfortable, even painful emotions, and provide them with a broad range of strategies and resources to elicit their voices. Children are actively encouraged to be authentic in their communications. All approaches are individualised and truly personal to meet each child’s needs. There is an authentic drive to truly ‘hear’ and ‘see’ children and staff are genuinely curious about what matters to the pupils. This is a particular strength of the school.

I hope that you will celebrate your achievement with pupils, staff, parents, carers and other stakeholders to celebrate the school’s commitment to its children, successfully removing barriers to learning and participation in the life of the school. I have felt particularly privileged to share your journey. I am thrilled that you intend to register for the Silver Award – Attachment and Trauma Friendly and I already look forward to continuing to support you through the next steps!

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jennifer A Nock, CPsychol, AFBPsS, PhD, BSc (Hons) Bridie White LLB MA