

Inspection of Thames Valley School

2 Conwy Close, Tilehurst, Reading, Berkshire RG30 4BZ

Inspection dates:

7 and 8 December 2021

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Requires improvement

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Previous inspection grade

Good

What is it like to attend this school?

Dedicated and patient staff welcome and help pupils to flourish at Thames Valley School. For some pupils, it is the first time that they have felt comfortable in school and able to learn. Pupils trust adults to look after them and most feel safe and secure. However, the school has been through a very difficult time. Changes to leadership and staffing have unsettled pupils and staff. Expectations of pupils declined while leaders coped with change and staff absence.

Fortunately, the current principal and her team have stabilised the school. Pupils' welfare is at the heart of their work. Leaders are raising aspirations, improving what is taught and helping staff to support pupils more successfully. However, the school's curriculum is not being consistently implemented. Occasionally, challenging behaviour interrupts learning and causes anxiety for staff and pupils.

Pupils and staff genuinely respect each other and celebrate diversity. Some pupils felt bullied and isolated in their previous schools. At this school, they are accepted and their autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is understood well. Leaders work effectively to identify whether friendship issues are confused with deliberate bullying behaviour. Nearly all pupils are confident that bullying is dealt with well.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders have introduced an ambitious curriculum which, in time, should raise aspirations and prepare pupils well for life beyond school. Teachers' planning includes ASD-friendly strategies to help pupils remember more of what they have learned.

However, planning does not always reflect what pupils already know, understand and can do. Some pupils have gaps in their knowledge because of time lost before joining this school. A well-planned transition programme helps pupils to make the move from primary to secondary. However, secondary subject teachers do not work closely enough with staff in the primary phase when planning topics.

Improving reading is a top priority. Opportunities to encourage reading abound throughout the school. A library, packed with interesting fiction, non-fiction, graphic novels and magazines, is used regularly and is an attractive resource.

Skilled learning mentors help pupils regulate their behaviour in and out of lessons. However, learning mentors have not had enough training to support pupils' learning of the curriculum. Sometimes, learning mentors are too quick to write up work for pupils, who then do not focus on learning as well as they should.

Recent changes, including a closure due to COVID-19 and staff absence, have affected the usual calm and purposeful atmosphere in the school. Some pupils are more anxious than usual, which affects their behaviour. Staff are getting used to the

new ways of managing behaviour and a few feel isolated when managing difficult situations.

Nevertheless, there is real strength in the care pupils receive. Pupils are inspired by famous and historical figures with ASD, as well as those staff who have ASD themselves. Staff are very much in tune with pupils and rightly value their different personalities and interests. Pupils have a real stake in school life and feel that they belong. The school's 'quality of life' curriculum gives pupils authentic opportunities to prepare for the future and learn about careers and further education.

Some pupils join the school with additional social, emotional and mental health needs. Some need to join lessons online from home or attend alternative provision to learn and be safe. School leaders assiduously ensure that no pupils are left behind or forgotten.

Governors provide high levels of support for the leadership of the school, particularly during recent difficult times. They have provided stringent challenge where needed, especially when serious safeguarding incidents have needed to be investigated, working closely with the trust and the local authority.

The drive to raise standards has created more work for staff. Some feel overwhelmed in spite of support or any extra time given. However, most staff can see the light at the end of the tunnel. They are looking forward to a more stable and settled time and all their hard work paying off.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

All staff are thoroughly trained and alert to the smallest changes in pupils' behaviour that may mean they are at risk of harm. Safeguarding leaders have a purposeful and professional working relationship with other agencies that protect children. They are not afraid to insist on more help if needed. Concerns about pupils' welfare are recorded in detail and overseen carefully to ascertain any patterns. When serious incidents happen, leaders, governors and the trust rightly take the time to review and improve their practice.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Since the last inspection, the quality of education declined. Not enough was expected of pupils and the curriculum was not appropriate for them. Ambitious plans are now in place across the school, but the content has not been sequenced carefully enough. Nor does it take enough account of what pupils may have missed in their past education. Leaders and staff must ensure that long-term and

medium-term planning reflects what pupils have learned or not learned previously.

- Secondary subject teachers do not know enough about what is being covered in the primary phase. Staff must work more closely together to ensure that curriculum content and skills in the secondary phase are built on pupils' primary experience.
- Teachers and learning mentors do not all work closely enough together to promote pupils' learning of the curriculum. Learning mentors have not been supported to guide pupils more effectively with their learning. Leaders must ensure that learning mentors are trained effectively in specific subject knowledge and how to implement pupils' personal plans.
- The school has gone through an unsettled period. Some serious behaviour incidents have increased anxiety for staff and for pupils. The school's new approach to managing pupils' self-regulation is not embedded yet. Leaders must ensure that all staff fully understand the revised positive behaviour policy and are supported with its implementation.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you are the school and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	139728
Local authority	Reading
Inspection number	10201347
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy free school
Age range of pupils	4 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	52
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Janet Corcoran
Principal	Amanda Makoka
Website	www.thamesvalleyschool.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	5 and 6 November 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Thames Valley School opened in 2013 as a free school. It is part of the National Autistic Society Academies Trust, which operates three free schools. The school caters for pupils with ASD.
- Since the last inspection, the executive principal and interim head of school left. The current principal was appointed in April 2020.
- The school uses the following alternative providers: Reading Football Club Community Trust, Trax, Upper Lodge Farming Project, Path Hill Outdoors, and Berkshire College of Agriculture.
- All pupils attending the school have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).
- The school meets the requirements of the Baker Clause, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with school leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation.
- Inspectors met with the principal, members of the senior leadership team, staff, governors, the chair, and representatives of the trust.
- The lead inspector spoke to the Reading designated officer on the telephone.
- Inspectors had telephone conversations with a selection of leaders from the alternative providers used by the school.
- An inspector spoke to some parents on the telephone and took into consideration nine responses to Ofsted Parent View, eight of which included free-text comments.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives into English, history, physical education, and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leads, looked at planning, visited lessons, spoke to pupils and looked at samples of their work.
- Inspectors also reviewed curriculum planning for a range of other subjects, including in the primary phase of the school. They visited lessons and reviewed pupils' work in other subjects.
- A sample of pupils' EHC plans was scrutinised, together with other personalised planning. Where appropriate, some therapy sessions were visited.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils informally and a pupil took one inspector on a tour of the school to show them examples of what the school was doing to promote their personal development.
- Inspectors reviewed the school's arrangements for safeguarding, including the checks made on adults working in the school, records of concerns about child protection, and training for staff in safeguarding. Inspectors also spoke to staff and pupils about safety and child protection.
- Inspectors scrutinised the school's systems and records for managing pupils' behaviour and serious incidents, including those involving restrictive physical intervention. They also checked pupils' attendance rates, including those pupils who are currently educated away from the school site.

Inspection team

Janet Pearce, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Jo Petch

Ofsted Inspector

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