

Thornhill Park School

Independent school standard inspection report

DfE registration number	394/6015
Unique Reference Number (URN)	108877
Inspection number	393318
Inspection dates	3–4 July 2012
Reporting inspector	Michael Glickman

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090070.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

No. 090070

© Crown copyright 2012



Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.^{1, 2}

Information about the school

Thornhill Park School is an independent special day school for students with autism and Asperger syndrome located in central Sunderland, Tyne and Wear. Most students have associated learning difficulties or mental health conditions. There are currently 65 students on the roll, aged from nine to 19 years. All students have a statement of special educational needs and 31 are looked after by a local authority. Almost all are White British and three quarters are male. Most are from the north-east of England.

The school was opened in 1980 and is registered for students aged from four to 19 years of age. It is owned by the North East Autism Society which also runs a number of residential homes in the area. The school occupies two sites, with the administration and students over the age of 16 at the main building and students under 16 at a facility three miles away. The school aims to 'pursue a holistic approach to meeting the complex and individual needs of pupils with autism spectrum conditions and Asperger syndrome' in order to 'prepare learners for adult life in a multicultural society and provide equal opportunities for all'. An acting headteacher, formerly the deputy headteacher, has been in post since March 2012. The school was last inspected in 2009.

Evaluation of the school

Thornhill Park School provides a good standard of education and meets its aims. Teaching and learning are good and, as a result of the efforts the school has made in developing an individualised curriculum for each student, students make good progress. The provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is outstanding having improved since the last inspection and the school has developed an effective behaviour management system with the result that behaviour is outstanding. The provision for students' welfare, health and safety is good. Safeguarding requirements are met. The school meets all the regulations.

Quality of education

The quality of the curriculum is good. Because of the highly individual requirements of the students, the school uses a range of approaches so that students receive a curriculum particularly tailored to their needs and abilities. For example, although all

¹ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents.

² www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents.

students study elements of the National Curriculum and cover the required areas of learning, students with communication difficulties use symbols to complete sentences or are assisted in pointing at pictures to answer questions in numeracy lessons. In order to develop their confidence in other settings, students have regular opportunities for activities outside the school in local leisure centres, in the countryside or at adventure camps. For older students who are more capable, the school has developed a curriculum known as 'SECAS' - Specialised Education College for people on the Autistic Spectrum. They follow vocational courses in addition to working towards GCSEs and some attend the local further education college. Work placements allow them to gain experience of employment and build their confidence and independence. The curriculum ensures that physical therapies are integrated into lessons wherever possible, for example, students experimenting with textures of paint in art lessons to further develop their sensory skills.

The quality of teaching and assessment is good. The school works hard to enable students to function independently. A system known as 'Hierarchy of Cues' is used to inform teachers of the degree of support a student requires, with the aim of gradually reducing their dependence on external help. Teachers challenge students to complete tasks on their own and refrain from assisting them or correcting their mistakes. As a result, students gain confidence, an outcome commented on by both parents and carers and the students themselves.

Classes are very small, with high ratios of staff to students and the school groups students by ability rather than age alone, while maintaining flexibility in the event of social problems. The school has recently introduced individualised lesson plans with desired learning outcomes identified for each student. This allows the progress that students make to be tracked with great accuracy and for the information gathered to be used to inform further planning. Although this process is still in process of development, staff are enthusiastic about it and it has had a positive impact on students' progress. Students appreciate the system; one commented, 'It's all about what *you* can do – they don't compare you to other people.'

Teachers have an excellent knowledge of their students and are able to present each student with appropriate learning opportunities at their level of ability and need. They make extensive use of praise for even small successes, and the pride that students, even those unable to communicate verbally, take in their work is clearly evident. For example, students were proud to show off pizzas they had made themselves or tee-shirts they had decorated.

Staff are very patient, sometimes working for long periods to help a student to engage with the lesson, and they are prepared to try alternative approaches or different locations if students will learn better there. Students who are unable to access school are taught within their residential provision or have individual off-site programmes arranged for them. The school is currently piloting a full-time, off-site curriculum leading to recognised qualifications. The school has recently introduced a new method of tracking students' progress. This has produced large quantities of data which the school is not yet fully analysing, although it clearly indicates that students are making good progress.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is outstanding. The ethos of respect and understanding in the school gives students a clear model of what is right and wrong. The school provides excellent opportunities for students to prove to themselves that they can achieve success, which boosts their self-esteem and self-confidence. For example, individual students have recently planned trips to a nearby museum and to London, taking considerable responsibility for planning from a student's perspective.

Due to the nature of their condition, the school places great emphasis on students' social development. Although students can be moved to other classes if necessary, the preferred approach is to encourage mutual tolerance and cooperation within the established groups. Staff lead by example by treating one another and every student with respect. As a result, students collaborate and support one another; for example, in food technology, they ask classmates for their opinions and praise their work. Some students are aware of potential conflict situations and have learned to take steps to avoid them.

By allowing students to take responsibility for their own responses and participation in an activity, staff enhance their self-respect and dignity and this has a significant impact on students' personal development. Because they are not rushed into making choices, the small steps students take towards independent thought and action usually result in a calm outcome.

Students have opportunities to learn about different faiths and cultures through wall displays and a good range of activities and they are respectful to classmates from different minority ethnic heritages. They are helped to become aware of public institutions and community facilities through trips out of school and visitors from the police and fire services as well as in class, for example, by preparing a Jubilee celebration. Their use of leisure centres and other public facilities helps students to become more confident in public and tolerant of the diversity in society.

Behaviour is outstanding, given the nature of the student body. The school is calm and orderly and students are focused on their work. Staff are extremely patient, understanding that incidents of inappropriate behaviour may arise because of the special needs of a student and their difficulty in understanding or assimilating a social situation. The school introduced a positive behaviour management programme two years ago and every incident is recorded and analysed to identify the cause and how it can be avoided in future. The result is that the school can demonstrate a clear reduction in instances of disruptive or potentially harmful behaviour. There is no evidence of malicious damage on either site and displays around the school are respected. Students say that they trust staff and know that they can turn to them for help.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Provision for the welfare, health and safety of students is good. The school has prepared detailed risk assessments for all aspects of the learning environment and as a result can develop students' independence by allowing them to participate in what might otherwise be hazardous activities such as food preparation or rock climbing. Students are well supervised at all times and where necessary appropriate precautions are taken to prevent them harming themselves or others. They say that they feel safe in school.

A range of medical and developmental therapies are delivered on the school premises and these make a positive contribution to the well-being of students. The school has a clear child protection policy which complies with regulations and staff have proved confident in its use. All members of the senior leadership team have been trained as designated child protection officers and all staff are trained to the required level. The school has a suitable policy on the safe recruitment of staff and implements this effectively. The first aid policy meets all requirements and there are sufficient trained first aiders. A fire safety inspection has recently been carried out and all the required precautions are in place.

The school has a healthy eating policy and students learn about healthy eating in food technology. They are served healthy lunches and the school kitchen is able to cater for a variety of specialised diets without making it apparent that students are not receiving the standard meal, thus ensuring that they eat properly. The school has prepared a suitable access improvement plan to fulfil its duties under the Equalities Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

The school has carried out the required checks on staff and the proprietor and maintains a single central register which complies with regulations.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The premises promote safe and effective teaching and learning. The school occupies two sites. The administration and classrooms for students over the age of 16 are at the Thornholme Unit, a large 19th century house. This has been adapted to create offices, a number of appropriately sized classrooms and several dining rooms. The SECAS unit occupies a former coach house. There are sizeable grounds which are used for outdoor activities, including grassed and wooded areas and an allotment garden. The Emsworth Unit, two miles away, houses students up to the age of 16. It is a former secure unit which has been converted to make it suitable for use as a school. There is an enclosed playground area which is an appropriate size for the number of students.

As there are only limited facilities for physical education and sports on both of the premises, students make extensive use of local leisure and outdoor facilities. Neither

building has a science laboratory, but science lessons are taught effectively in the classrooms. There are well-equipped food technology kitchens in both buildings as well as therapy and sensory rooms and quiet areas where students can withdraw when necessary.

Provision of information

The school provides parents and carers with all the required information through its prospectus. Parents, carers and local authorities who place students in the school receive written reports on students' progress as part of the annual review process.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school has a complaints policy which complies with regulations.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations').

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following point for development:

- further develop the use of assessment data to enable teachers to track more effectively the progress of students.

Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
-------------	------	--------------	------------

The quality of education

Overall quality of education		✓		
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils		✓		
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs		✓		
How well pupils make progress in their learning		✓		

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	✓			
The behaviour of pupils	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils		✓		
--	--	---	--	--

School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Special school for students with autism and Asperger syndrome		
Date school opened	1980		
Age range of pupils	4–19 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 51	Girls: 14	Total: 65
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 51	Girls: 14	Total: 65
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 26	Girls: 5	Total: 31
Annual fees (day pupils)	£33,000 to £45,000		
Address of school	24 Thornhill Park Sunderland Tyne and Wear SR2 7LA		
Telephone number	0191 514 0659		
Email address	christine.cave@ne-as.org.uk		
Headteacher	Mrs Christine Cave (Acting)		
Proprietor	North East Autism Society		

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



5 July 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Thornhill Park School SR2 7LA

Thank you for talking to my colleague and me and allowing us to observe your lessons when we visited your school this week. I particularly enjoyed my meeting with the SECAS students – thank you for sharing your opinions of the school with me.

You will be pleased to know that we felt that Thornhill Park is a good school and provides you with a good standard of education. We were impressed by how patient all the staff are and how hard they work to help you learn and prepare you for later life. They deliver interesting lessons in the classrooms and they give you the opportunity to visit the countryside and to take part in a range of sports and activities. They arrange college and work experience for older students. In fact, they do everything they can to help every student achieve his or her potential.

We also noticed how hard you work and how proud you are of what you have achieved. We were even more impressed by your good behaviour and how well you get on with one another – we thought that it was outstanding along with your personal development.

Your teachers know you very well and keep good records of what you do in every lesson, so that they can plan the next lesson. We suggested to them that they could use this information in better ways so that they can see exactly who needs more help.

Thank you once again for your cooperation during the inspection. It was a pleasure to meet you all and I wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Michael Glickman
Lead Inspector