

# Prior's Court School

Prior's Court, Hermitage, Thatcham, Berkshire, RG18 9NU

**Inspection dates** 9–11 October 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>2</b>
Pupils' achievement	Good	2
Pupils' behaviour and personal development	Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching	Good	2
Quality of curriculum	Outstanding	1
Pupils' welfare, health and safety	Outstanding	1
Leadership and management	Good	2

## Summary of key findings

### This school is good because

- The trustees and senior leaders are ambitious for the school and have driven significant improvements since the last inspection. They have ensured that achievement and teaching are at least good and have clear plans to further improve the school.
- Achievement over time is good as a result of good teaching, an outstanding curriculum, and excellent therapeutic and pastoral care. Pupils make good progress in their communication, literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills.
- The outstanding curriculum is highly personalised. It provides rich opportunities for high-quality learning and promotes pupils' personal development extremely well.
- Pupils' behaviour and personal development are outstanding and make a significant contribution to pupils' learning.
- The provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is outstanding as a result of extensive staff training and close collaboration between multi-disciplinary teams.

### It is not yet outstanding because

- Teaching is not yet outstanding owing to a few inconsistencies that slow pupils' progress.
- The senior leaders have more action to take to secure outstanding achievement for pupils.

### Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets schedule 1 of The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, as amended by The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

## Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out with one day's notice.
- The inspector observed 10 lessons jointly with the director of education and lifelong learning and the assistant headteacher. Lessons observed were taught by 10 different teachers and included a reading session. Meetings were held with trustees, senior leaders, teaching staff and pupils. Documentation relating to pupils' welfare and academic progress was also scrutinised.
- The inspector considered 22 responses to Ofsted's online Parent View survey, 37 responses to staff questionnaires, and the views of four local authorities placing pupils at this school.
- At the time of this inspection, there was also an inspection of care provision at the children's home. A separate report has been written which is available on the Ofsted website.

## Inspection team

Michèle Messaoudi, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- Prior's Court School is a special school that opened in September 1999 and is registered to admit up to 76 pupils aged from five to 19 years who have an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). The school offers day, weekly and termly places with 38-, 44- and 52-week options and is also registered as a children's home. It is owned by a charitable trust, the Prior's Court Foundation. It was last inspected by Ofsted in September 2010.
- There are currently 54 pupils on roll, aged between seven and 19 years. Most are over the age of 16 years. Most are boys. The vast majority are pre-verbal communicators and a minority have verbal language. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs and 25 are in the care of their local authorities. As well as experiencing difficulty with communication, all pupils have moderate to severe learning difficulties and complex needs. Most exhibit challenging behaviour. Currently, pupils are funded by 31 local authorities across England. The school gained the Inclusion Quality Mark in 2012 and the Investors in People award in 2013.
- It uses alternative provision for a wide range of sports activities when appropriate in addition to its own extensive facilities for physical exercise.
- The chief executive officer (CEO)/Principal has been in post since January 2011, and the director of education and lifelong learning and assistant headteacher since November 2011.
- The school aims to 'enable pupils to access their individual strengths and achieve as independent a life as possible'. To achieve these aims, there is a focus on providing an individualised curriculum and structure throughout the waking day with regular opportunities for physical exercise.

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen teaching in order that pupils may make outstanding progress by:
  - ensuring that pupils' individual targets are always focused on skills to be developed and not on tasks to be worked through
  - consistently extending pupils' literacy and numeracy skills in all subjects
  - ensuring that pupils always have a clear understanding of targets to be achieved and progress made
  - ensuring that teaching assistants always have a clear understanding of the best way to support pupils' learning, challenge them and promote their independence.
- Implement senior leaders' plans to secure pupils' outstanding achievement by:
  - further developing the skills of teaching assistants to ensure that they are always fully effective in supporting and challenging learners
  - developing the skills of senior teachers to share the responsibilities of monitoring the quality of the curriculum, teaching and achievement
  - embedding the recently introduced systems to measure pupils' progress against ambitious targets
  - developing systems to capture more accurately the progress made by pupils in their listening and in their pre-verbal and verbal communication skills.

## Inspection judgements

### Pupils' achievement

#### Good

Pupils' achievement is good as a result of the combination of good teaching, an outstanding curriculum, and excellent therapeutic and pastoral care. Pupils join the school with levels of skills that are typically low or very low for their age and a few have been out of education for some time. Their individual starting points and needs are thoroughly assessed on entry by multi-disciplinary teams whose expertise is used to draw up comprehensive individual learning and behaviour plans of exceptionally high quality. These plans indicate the most effective teaching and behaviour management strategies to employ and targets for improvement in all areas of learning, and they are reviewed termly or sooner to secure good achievement. The high adult-to-pupil ratio ensures that pupils are extremely well supported to engage in learning and develop social skills, initially on a one-to-one basis. Owing to a strong emphasis on developing their basic skills, most pupils achieve well over time in literacy, numeracy and science. Some pupils make outstanding progress in relation to their varying starting points, for example in Key Stage 2. Many pupils make excellent progress in reading and in ICT throughout the school. Achievement is not yet outstanding because, as recognised by the school, there are pockets of adequate progress from Key Stage 3 onwards, particularly in writing and in the areas of mathematics relating to space, shape and measures, and using and applying numeracy skills. The school has already implemented clear plans to tackle these issues. Also, the school has only recently introduced ambitious targets against which pupil progress is to be measured and this system is not yet fully established.

In lessons, pupils make good progress in their verbal and pre-verbal communication skills through targeted questioning, signing, visual schedules, and physical, gestural and verbal prompts. Pre-verbal communicators are consistently encouraged to use a range of communication methods to supplement or replace speech or writing and, owing to very effective support from staff, they participate fully in lessons. In most lessons, pupils make links between subject areas, consolidating their understanding of concepts and applying their basic skills in various contexts. Reading skills are taught particularly successfully when staff make reading resources that are specifically relevant to pupils' experiences and needs. Pupils' ICT skills are developed regularly in most subjects. Pupils who complete their education at the school leave with a wide range of Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) accreditations that prepare them well for their future beyond school. They move on to a specialist college of further education, an adult residential placement or a supported living placement.

### Pupils' behaviour and personal development

#### Outstanding

Pupils' behaviour and personal development are outstanding and make a significant contribution to their academic learning. Initial assessments by a team of psychologists inform the school of the most effective strategies to manage each pupil's behaviour positively. Staff and pupils are extremely well supported by individual behaviour plans of exceptional quality. As a result, with the additional help of consistent praise and motivational rewards, pupils learn to substitute challenging or inappropriate behaviour with appropriate behaviour. Their behaviour is exemplary most of the time and learning occurs in a calm and orderly atmosphere. The organisation of the day, layout of classrooms and ready access to the outdoor areas and sensory room also play a key part in reducing pupils' levels of anxiety and helping them to calm down. Staff skilfully use de-escalating strategies and pre-empt incidents before they occur. Consequently, pupils thrive within this structure and enjoy learning. Their enjoyment is reflected in their good attendance and in their eagerness to achieve well in lessons. Where incidents do occur, they have reduced rapidly for individual pupils since joining the school. Pupils feel safe and incidents of bullying are very rare.

The outstanding provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is underpinned by the outstanding curriculum and a consistent focus on pupils' personal, social and

health education. Through the rich and varied programme of curricular and extra-curricular activities, all pupils have opportunities to find something at which they can excel. As a result, their self-confidence and self-esteem improve strongly. Their ability to empathise with others, their social skills and sense of belonging to a community are all promoted extremely well through group work, assemblies, lunch breaks, responsibilities around the school, and participation in outdoor learning and educational visits. Pupils form very positive relationships with peers and show a strong sense of right and wrong. They display good manners and use socially acceptable language. Pupils learn first-hand about public institutions from public services officers and by visiting local shops, garden centres, museums, theatres, churches, zoos and the forest. They have planned opportunities to learn about a wide range of cultures through art, music, dancing, geography, festivals and food. The proprietors ensure that where contentious issues are discussed with pupils, they are presented in a balanced way.

### Quality of teaching

### Good

Teaching is good and enables pupils to achieve well over time. Teachers have a good knowledge of autism and a thorough understanding of pupils' individual needs, current attainment and next steps, informed by high-quality individual pupil learning plans that are shared with all staff. Some teaching assistants use these plans to support pupils very effectively. However, others do not. This weakness results in slower pupil progress where the teacher does not step in to direct the assistants. Teachers and assistants manage pupils' behaviour extremely well, principally by focusing on very effective communication. They refer pupils to visual schedules that sequence activities, helping pupils to understand each stage of the lesson and events in their day, reduce their anxiety and develop independence. They use the layout of the classroom very effectively to alternate between group work and individual work as appropriate, and provide some pupils with the privacy they need to focus on learning.

Teachers generally plan tasks and prepare resources that match pupils' needs exactly. However, they do not always maximise opportunities to extend literacy and numeracy skills in all subjects, resulting in some pupils making slower progress in writing, understanding space, shapes and measures and using and applying numeracy skills. Teachers know their pupils well and help them to improve through the use of praise, rewards, constructive feedback and the setting of curricular targets. Pupils are helped to understand what progress is expected of them in most lessons where the staff share their individual targets with them at the onset and check whether targets have been met at the end. However, this good practice is not consistent and, occasionally, the targets focus on tasks to be worked through rather than skills to acquire. Consequently, pupils do not always have a sufficiently clear picture of what to do to improve. There are good systems to assess pupils' learning and track their progress in most areas. Ongoing assessments are meticulously recorded, and moderated internally and externally to ensure accuracy. However, the system used to track pupils' progress in their listening and pre-verbal and verbal communication skills does not capture their small steps of progress accurately.

### Quality of curriculum

### Outstanding

The curriculum is outstanding. It is highly personalised to meet pupils' individual needs closely and promote their outstanding personal development and good achievement. It provides rich opportunities for high-quality learning. Exceptionally well-written individual learning and behaviour plans, based on thorough assessments of pupils' needs and starting points, support the teaching and pupils' learning extremely effectively. The expertise of therapeutic teams ensures that all the requirements of pupils' statements of special educational needs are met, including pupils' sensory needs, their fine and gross motor skills and visual perceptual skills. Consequently, pupils' verbal and non-verbal communication skills, emotional development, social interaction and independence are promoted extremely well. Physical education forms integral part of the therapeutic curriculum and a remarkably wide range of physical activities supports pupils' sensory needs, and successfully helps them to increase their attention, reduce their anxieties, learn to calm down and develop

social skills. The physical education curriculum is extremely well resourced by excellent on-site facilities, supplemented as needed by the use of local facilities. Collaborative planning between the education and care teams ensures continuity of the 'waking day curriculum'. The curriculum is monitored closely by senior leaders and subject coordinators.

The breadth of the curriculum covers all the required areas of learning and, throughout the school, there is a great emphasis on promoting pupils' reading, writing, numeracy and ICT skills. Pupils' individual interests in specific areas of learning are encouraged, particularly through physical education, art, pottery and horticulture, developing lifelong skills and interests over time. The curriculum is very well balanced between its academic, life skills and vocational strands. Personal, social and health education (PSHE) lies at the core of the curriculum and is taught in every lesson. The countryside learning centre is an invaluable resource that enables pupils to develop vocational animal care and land-based skills, while developing life skills when working in the outdoor environment. The post-16 curriculum is built around ASDAN qualifications, mini-enterprise projects, good career education and well-considered work placements. It prepares pupils extremely well for their future. The curriculum is enriched extremely well by a wealth of educational visits and a good range of clubs that have a high take-up.

### **Pupils' welfare, health and safety**

### **Outstanding**

The provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is outstanding. It is underpinned by extensive staff training, close collaboration between multi-disciplinary teams and rigorous monitoring of the consistency of approach throughout the school. As a result, pupils are extremely well cared for and feel safe and all regulations are met. Parents and carers have full confidence in the school's ability to keep their children safe and happy. Robust recruitment procedures ensure that all the required checks are carried out on the proprietors, staff and volunteers. These checks are meticulously recorded in a single central register. The policies and procedures for anti-bullying, behaviour, child protection, first aid and health and safety are up to date and implemented consistently. All staff receive training in child protection that exceeds requirements. There are a high number of staff trained in first aid, and all staff are trained in behaviour management and the use of physical restraint. Thorough individual risk assessments are carried out for on-site and off-site activities. All the regulatory fire safety and health and safety checks are completed at timely intervals. Pupils' immediate health needs are supported by access to on-site nurses who keep meticulous records of medication taken. Pupils are taught how to keep safe when crossing the road, swimming, using tools and equipment, and looking after the animals in the countryside learning centre. Safety education is extremely well customised to respond to the specific needs of families and individual pupils. Pupils gain a good awareness of healthy lifestyles through the curriculum and well-balanced meals provided by the school. They enjoy a very wide range of physical activities that include swimming, horse riding, cycling, trampolining, running and outdoor games.

### **Leadership and management**

### **Good**

Leadership and management are good and secure pupils' good achievement. The trustees ensure that all the regulations for independent schools are met. They have an ambitious vision for the school which they successfully communicate to the senior leaders and other staff. Between them, the trustees bring a wide range of expertise and experience to their work, and participate actively in self-evaluation and planning for improvement. They have robust arrangements to hold the school accountable for its performance. They ensure that the school ethos supports pupils' needs as autistic learners and promotes their outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The senior leaders are knowledgeable and experienced and have significantly improved the provision since the last inspection. They have driven a change of culture aimed at equipping teachers with the confidence and skills to be leaders and managers of their own classes. The management of the curriculum, pupils' behaviour and personal development and pupils' welfare, health and safety, are outstanding. The premises are well maintained and utilised extremely well to support pupils' learning.

Partnerships with placing authorities, parents and carers are very strong and result in a high level of satisfaction with the school. All parties receive the full range of information to which they are entitled. Procedures for managing complaints are clear and implemented very effectively. Regular monitoring activities result in consistently good teaching, accurate self-evaluation, and clear plans to bring about the improvements required to enable pupils to make outstanding progress. The senior leaders have recently introduced systems, not fully established as yet, to measure pupils' progress against ambitious targets. They have rightly identified the need to further develop the skills of teaching assistants to ensure that they are always fully effective in supporting and challenging learners; and the skills of recently appointed senior teachers to share the responsibilities of monitoring the quality of the curriculum, teaching and achievement. They recognise that the system used to track pupils' progress in their listening and in their pre-verbal and verbal communication skills does not capture pupils' small steps of progress accurately. All these are reasons why leadership and management are not yet outstanding.

## What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	A school which provides an exceptional quality of education and significantly exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 2	Good	A school which provides a high quality of education that exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 3	Adequate	A school which meets minimum requirements but needs to improve the quality of education it provides.
Grade 4	Inadequate	A school where minimum requirements are not met and/or the quality of education has serious weaknesses.



## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	132003
<b>Social care unique reference number</b>	SC069336
<b>Inspection number</b>	422740
<b>DfE registration number</b>	869/6014

This inspection was carried out 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.

<b>Type of school</b>	Special school for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)
<b>School status</b>	Independent school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	5–19 years
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	54
<b>Number of part time pupils</b>	0
<b>Proprietor</b>	Prior's Court Foundation
<b>Chair</b>	Phil Williams, Chair of Trustees
<b>Headteachers</b>	Stephen Bajdala-Brown (CEO/Principal),
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	29–30 September 2010
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£77,163
<b>Telephone number</b>	01635 247202
<b>Fax number</b>	01635 247203
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