

# Thornhill Park School

Thornhill Park, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear SR2 7LA

**Inspection dates** 8–10 December 2015

**Overall effectiveness** **Good**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Early years provision	Good
Sixth form provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is a good school

- Leaders and managers have overseen the move to one site and have used staff training as an effective means of improving and maintaining the quality of teaching and outcomes for pupils.
- Pupils make good progress, from their different and typically low starting points, because of good teaching, learning and assessment.
- Pupils enjoy good relationships with the staff which contribute to pupils' good personal development and their behaviour. Pupils say that they feel safe and well cared for.
- Staff are patient and skilled at managing pupils' behaviour, often associated with their complex needs. Consequently, the school is calm and orderly.
- Communication between home and school is effective at sharing successes and concerns.
- Personalised learning programmes are a strong feature of the school's work to prepare pupils for their lives beyond school. Pupils benefit from much individual care and attention.
- Trustees have high aspirations for the school and its pupils. They are aware of the school's strengths and where improvement is needed, and have been instrumental in overseeing the development of the school on the one site.
- Children in the early years settle quickly and get a good start to their education.
- Sixth form pupils benefit from a broad curriculum that is based around developing both life and work-related skills. They make good progress and are provided with effective careers guidance and support.

### It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Sometimes staff do not use what they know about pupils to plan lessons that challenge all pupils, particularly the most able.
- On a small number of occasions, some staff are too quick to do things for pupils and this limits some pupils' progress.
- Leaders do not always ensure that all agreed systems and procedures are followed, including on occasion some curricular plans.

### Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

## Full report

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

- Improve the quality of teaching further by:
  - ensuring that teachers use what they know about pupils to plan activities that challenge all pupils, particularly the most able
  - ensuring that staff are more efficient at deciding when to allow pupils to complete tasks unaided and when to offer support.
- Ensure that leaders check more robustly that agreed policies, systems and schemes of work are implemented effectively.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- Good leadership and management ensure that pupils are well cared for and their needs are effectively met. The curriculum is well adapted to meet the needs of pupils with autism. Pupils, many of whom often enter the school with poor experiences of education or lack confidence, are welcomed into the school and benefit from a staff team who understand autism and provide a positive learning experience.
- Systems to manage the performance of both teachers and support staff are used well. Consequently, leaders know the school's strengths and areas for improvement, and provide teachers and support staff with additional guidance and support where required. Staff training is a strength and all staff have been trained in an appropriate range of areas, including autism.
- The good curriculum, and how it is adapted to the needs of pupils, ensures that there is a clear focus on the development of communication skills using a range of strategies appropriate to pupils' needs, such as a picture communication system and simplified sign language. The curriculum includes a good range of subjects, including, for example, art, science and food technology as well as English and mathematics. The early years curriculum is well resourced and effectively meets the needs of the very small number of children in this part of the school. The sixth form provision is based around the development of life skills and employability, where appropriate, so that pupils enjoy their learning. Good use is made of community facilities such as a local library and sports centres for physical education.
- Careers guidance is provided, as are opportunities for work experience, both within school and, for a small number of pupils, outside in the community. For example, some pupils talked about their experiences working at a local food bank.
- The school makes good provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils' spiritual development is promoted through assemblies and lessons which give them the opportunity to think about other people. For example, pupils said they had enjoyed a Children In Need assembly as part of their work to raise money for the charity. Older pupils were encouraged to think about similarities and differences as part of some work on Black History Month.
- The school's commitment to the promotion of equality and diversity is reflected in the way that pupils are prepared for life in modern Britain. For example, they are provided with opportunities to learn about a range of faiths and cultures. They learned about the Hindu festival of Diwali as well as learning about Christmas and Easter. Visits from police and fire officers help to provide pupils with a broad understanding of English institutions, and elections for representatives on the school council give them some understanding of democracy.
- Self-evaluation is largely accurate. However, on a small number of occasions, leaders have not ensured that all of the school's policies have been implemented fully. For example, although the procedures for the induction of new staff are clear, some visiting staff employed by the proprietor were not given all of the information they need to work on the site. Additionally, some schemes of work were not followed during the absence of a member of staff.
- **The governance of the school**
  - Trustees have high aspirations for the school and its pupils. They were instrumental in setting the strategic direction that led to the school consolidating onto one site.
  - Trustees are kept well informed by reports from the headteacher and the director of education and make regular visits to the school. Consequently, they are well informed about the school's strengths and weaknesses.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Recruitment and vetting procedures are robust. All staff have received the required training in safeguarding. The website includes the safeguarding policy along with information about recent changes to the policy to take account of national guidance. Staff work well with parents, carers and a wide range of professionals to ensure that pupils are kept safe.

### Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Good teaching leads to effective learning and good outcomes for pupils. The established daily routines are well understood by pupils who, because of their condition, require a high degree of routine. This is reinforced with visual timetables. Consequently, pupils are clear about what is expected of them and they respond well.

- Teaching spaces are well used to allow pupils to work in very small groups or on a one-to-one basis with adults. Consequently, pupils benefit from much individual attention and care.
- The good-quality resources are used well, as are the school grounds and the local community, and contribute to pupils' good progress.
- Teachers promote literacy and numeracy in most lessons and help pupils to understand the wider use of English and mathematics as a preparation for adult life. The sixth form curriculum provides good opportunities for these pupils to consolidate their learning and to improve their mathematics and English skills, alongside vocational courses. However, on some occasions, opportunities are missed to follow the school's policy of providing pupils with a real-life context for using literacy or numeracy skills.
- Teaching assistants make a strong contribution to the success of the school. They are very caring and have good relationships with pupils. However, on occasion, some staff are a tad too quick to intervene rather than letting pupils persevere to complete tasks unaided.
- Teachers plan activities that generally interest pupils and which meet pupils' needs. Teachers are aware of pupils' attainment and progress but in a small number of cases they do not always use what they know about each pupil to plan lessons that challenge all pupils, particularly the most able. In a minority of lessons, not enough is expected of the most-able pupils. Consequently, their progress is good rather than outstanding.

## Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

### Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils are encouraged to socialise at break and lunchtimes. This is particularly important for many pupils because their condition often means they have not established friendships at their previous schools. Relationships between staff and pupils are strong. Pupils appreciate the opportunities to sit with adults and, where appropriate, discuss their concerns.
- Pupils say that staff look after them very well and they are clear that bullying is not an issue at the school. The school provides appropriate levels of supervision at all times.
- Risk assessments are in place for the grounds and buildings. The site is generally well maintained and affords a safe and secure learning environment. However, although not presenting any safety issues, sometimes agreed policies associated with the building are not always followed.

### Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Many pupils join the school with a history of poor behaviour and poor school attendance. School records, along with discussions with parents and pupils, show that most pupils make significant improvements to their behaviour during their time at the school.
- Classrooms provide a calm learning environment where pupils' behaviour, associated with their condition, is managed well. Consequently, pupils have the opportunity to learn in an environment where their condition is well understood.
- The use of physical restraint is used judiciously and follows a suitably accredited scheme. Parents who spoke to the inspector about this understood that where restraint was used it was in the best interests of their child and for the safety of others.
- Although attendance is generally below the national average, almost all pupils' rates of attendance have improved.

## Outcomes for pupils are good

- Pupils learn well in lessons and during social times because teaching is effective. Where appropriate, pupils are entered for external examinations. Although the proportions securing GCSE qualifications are low, the school's assessment information demonstrates that pupils make good gains in their social, communication and academic skills. All groups of pupils make equally good progress from their starting points, including those looked after by local authorities.
- Teachers have a good understanding of pupils' individual needs and abilities, and ensure that they make good progress in lessons. Pupils' greatest gains tend to be in their personal, social and communication skills.

- Children in the early years settle quickly and make good gains in their reading, writing and mathematics skills, particularly in their knowledge of letters and sounds.
- Pupils in the pre-14 class make good progress in both English and mathematics as well as their social and emotional skills. They are presented with a range of interesting activities and tasks that meet their needs.
- Older pupils, and learners in the sixth form, can follow a vocational pathway, which includes courses in the school's workshops, the school grounds and off-site work to develop life skills. Consequently, pupils are well prepared for their next stage of education. A particular success is that, in the last two years, there have been no pupils who have left the school who have not gone on to education or training.

### Early years provision

**is good**

- This is the first time children have been admitted to the early years for at least five years. At the time of the inspection, these children had only been in school for five weeks. Nevertheless, the learning environment for the youngest children is well resourced and safe. Resources are appropriate to the age and interests of children. There are opportunities for children to learn outside, for example, using tricycles and the small amount of outdoor equipment.
- The small early years classroom is located within the pre-14 base where the children benefit from socialising with the older pupils. This helps both the pre-14 pupils and the early years children to develop valuable social skills with children of different ages, and is valued by children and their parents.
- Effective and very detailed assessments of children before they start at the school are undertaken by observing children in their previous settings, talking to parents and visiting homes. This ensures that the staff know children's individual needs very well before they join the school and plans are made to help children to settle. Consequently, children are given much individual attention and support which helps them to settle into routines very quickly. Consequently, they make good progress.
- The teaching of the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics are systematic. Children are taught about letters and sounds and this is helping to improve their reading skills. Picture books are used extensively and children value the opportunity to borrow books from a local public library.

### Sixth form provision

**is good**

- Learners generally achieve well in the sixth form because the activities provided are well adapted to their individual needs so that they are well prepared for when they leave the school. Vocational courses are used very effectively to promote learners' social, vocational and academic skills. Enterprise skills are fostered effectively, so that learners are able to talk about the products they are making and where they will be sold.
- The school grounds offer great potential for developing learners' gardening skills and some learners see this as a suitable choice of future employment. However, although there is evidence that schemes of work have been followed previously, recently, during some staff absence, some learners have not been taught the planned skills associated with growing plants. This has slowed their progress in this particular subject.
- Work is well planned and organised, with a good balance between supervision and independence, and learners can appreciate the purpose of their learning. For example, in a furniture 'up-cycling' lesson learners were clear about why they were sanding chairs, how they would be painted and that ultimately the furniture could be sold.
- Good-quality teaching over time underpins learners' good outcomes. Work is individualised, with some learning in very small groups, organised by ability, and some on a one-to-one basis. Good use of praise builds learners' self-esteem and creates a supportive environment for learning. Adults, including teaching assistants, provide sensitive support but, on occasion, are too quick to do too much for learners which can sometimes reduce the level of challenge.
- The behaviour and safety of learners are good. They show tolerance of difference and an interest in visitors. Those of different ethnicity and with highly individual needs accept each other and, in some cases, form good relationships. All those spoken with said that they feel safe in school. They move sensibly around the building safely and the oldest learners take on tasks with eagerness, such as delivering and collecting the attendance registers.

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	108877
<b>Inspection number</b>	10008894
<b>DfE registration number</b>	394/6015

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, 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 day school
<b>School status</b>	Independent school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	5–19 years
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Gender of pupils in the sixth form</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	26
<b>Of which, number on roll in sixth form</b>	16
<b>Number of part-time pupils</b>	1
<b>Proprietor</b>	North East Autism Society
<b>Chair</b>	Gavin Bestford
<b>Headteacher</b>	Christine Cave
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£39,000 to £79,000
<b>Telephone number</b>	0191 565 3965
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.ne-as.org.uk">www.ne-as.org.uk</a>
<b>Email address</b>	<a href="mailto:christine.cave@ne-as.org.uk">christine.cave@ne-as.org.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	3–4 July 2013

## Information about this school

- Thornhill Park School is an independent special day school for pupils with autism and Asperger syndrome located in central Sunderland, Tyne and Wear. Most pupils have associated learning difficulties or mental health conditions.
- There are currently 26 pupils on the roll, aged from five to 19 years, all of whom have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Some have other specific medical or communication needs. Almost all are White British, three quarters are male and 13 are looked after by a local authority. The pupils are referred and funded by seven local authorities in the north-east of England.
- Pupils are grouped into one class for those aged under 14 years, including the early years, and three classes for those over 14, including the sixth form.
- The school was opened in 1980 and is registered for pupils aged from four to 19 years of age. It is one of two schools owned by the North East Autism Society which also runs a number of residential homes in the area. The school aims to 'pursue a holistic approach to meeting the complex and individual needs of pupils with autism spectrum conditions and Asperger syndrome'.
- Since the last inspection, the school has consolidated onto one site. The number on roll has reduced because some pupils are now taught at the second school run by the North East Autism Society. At the time of the inspection there were 16 pupils in the sixth form and a very small number are in the early years. Almost all staff have changed since the last inspection.

- Four pupils also attend alternative off-site provision that is also provided by the North East Autism Society: Thornbeck College. A very small number of pupils are taught off-site on a full-time basis, by North East Autism Society staff, but are on the school roll and attend lessons on-site on a part-time basis.

## Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out with one day's notice.
- The inspector checked the school's compliance with the independent school standards, including scrutinising school policies and other documentation.
- The inspector observed learning across a range of subjects and classes, mostly accompanied by the headteacher.
- The inspector analysed the school's records of pupils' achievements and behaviour, and scrutinised samples of pupils' work during lesson observations.
- The inspector spoke to pupils, staff, the headteacher, a trustee and a representative of the proprietor.
- The inspector met three parents and conducted telephone interviews with a parent and a care home manager. There were insufficient responses to Ofsted's online survey on the Parent View website to generate a report. The inspector also took account of written comments from one parent.

## Inspection team

Amraz Ali, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector



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