

Thames Valley School

Conwy Close, Reading, Berkshire RG30 4BZ

Inspection dates	4–5 May 2016
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
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The principal has successfully created a culture of high aspiration, in which equality of opportunity and diversity underpin the work of staff. He is fully supported by other leaders, governors and staff to make his vision of a high-quality education for pupils with autism a reality. Together, they ensure that teaching meets the needs of their pupils very well.
- The quality of teaching is good. Teachers have very good relationships with pupils and know each individual very well. Teachers capture the interest of pupils effectively and so lessons are calm and purposeful.
- Many pupils join after years of failure in previous schools. They make rapid progress towards fulfilling their academic and social potential.
- Pupils achieve well, particularly in English and in the progress they make towards their individual targets. No groups do less well than any other. The most-able pupils are challenged effectively in lessons and over time.
- Governors are effective. They hold leaders to account robustly.
- The curriculum at the school has many strengths. Leaders ensure that pupils benefit from regular experiences beyond the classroom. Pupils rightly believe this helps them to learn better and strengthen their self-esteem.
- Life skills are taught and promoted very effectively. Consequently, pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding is very well developed. Pupils learn to respect each other's differences and to challenge discrimination in all its forms. This helps to ensure they are very well prepared for life in modern Britain.
- Pupils' behaviour is good. They conduct themselves very well around the school and look after one another. There is a strong sense of community. They celebrate each other's successes.
- Pupils feel safe at the school. Leaders ensure that systems for safeguarding pupils are robust and effective.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Leaders do not always analyse the impact of their work against the impact it has on pupils' outcomes. This means, at times, leaders focus too much on what adults are doing and not enough on whether it is making a difference.
- There are not always enough opportunities in the curriculum for pupils to develop their creativity.
- Due to historic weaknesses in the teaching of mathematics, pupils' achievement in mathematics is not as strong as in other subjects.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that leaders consistently analyse their work according to the difference it makes to pupils' outcomes.
- Develop wider opportunities for pupils to experience the creative arts.
- Continue to improve the quality of teaching and learning to ensure that pupils achieve as well in mathematics as they do in other subjects.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The principal, through his clear vision and calm sense of purpose, provides effective leadership at the school. He has successfully established a culture where everyone is working together to achieve the best outcomes possible for the pupils. Senior leaders complement each other very well. They are highly focused on improving provision and support the work of the principal very well. As a result, leaders are continually improving teaching and learning and there is a strong family ethos running through the school.
- Leaders undertake a number of useful activities to monitor the performance of the school. For example, the principal, deputy principal and assistant principal with responsibility for teaching and learning all observe teaching regularly. This leads to clear feedback to staff on how to improve their practice. Leaders do not analyse some aspects of the school's work as closely. For example, they do not always look closely enough at the difference their work is having on pupils' wider outcomes, such as in meeting the targets in their education, health and care plans.
- Performance management is carefully linked to the checks made on learning. Targets are set which are ambitious and measurable. Leaders do not tolerate poor performance. There are well-developed and effective systems for supporting teachers if they are not making the expected difference to pupils' progress. The leadership of teaching is, therefore, robust. Consequently, leaders have already tackled a number of historic weaknesses so that there is clear evidence of their impact on improving provision, such as in the teaching of mathematics.
- Leaders' plans for improvement are very effective. Leaders make good use of what they know about the school to plan precisely where they need to put the most effort. Their plans have clear, measurable success criteria through which governors can challenge leaders about their implementation. There is a strong link between leaders' evaluations, the plan and the opportunities given for staff to develop their practice.
- The school's curriculum meets the needs of the pupils very well. Leaders ensure that pupils have access to relevant therapies to help them make progress towards their individual targets. Life skills are taught very effectively. Lessons cover complex issues and encourage pupils to make a wider contribution. For example, pupils explore diversity and equality and what this means for them as autistic people. In a very effective lesson about discrimination, teachers challenged pupils to consider the implications on equality for men and women of the armed forces who have been wounded in battle. Through effective questioning, pupils deepened their understanding of the difference between discrimination and fair treatment. As a result of this and other similar experiences, pupils develop a strong sense of how to be a positive member of British society.
- Pupils also benefit from well-planned and ambitious outdoor learning opportunities. They rightly believe that these sessions help them to improve their self-confidence and self-esteem by experiencing success when facing some of their fears. The blend of these experiences helps pupils to develop their confidence and learn to love being learners. They are very well prepared for life in modern Britain.
- Some aspects of the curriculum are less well developed. Leaders have rightly identified that pupils would benefit from wider experiences and learning in the creative arts.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding is developed effectively. This is supported by the strong sense of community throughout the school. Leaders, with the support of staff, have successfully established whole-school assemblies where all members of the school community come together. The inspector saw the effectiveness of this first hand in an assembly about bullying. Four pupils from key stages 3 and 4 led a role play with the support of one of the assistant principals. This covered some sensitive areas about bullying and what is acceptable or not to do and say to others. The messages shared by the four pupils reflected the strong moral code that underpins the ethos of the school. Other pupils responded warmly to their peers and listened to what they had to say. At the end of the assembly they acknowledged awards for learning warmly, sharing the success of their peers with genuine appreciation.
- Leaders' use of the pupil premium grant has been effective. Each pupil benefits from an individualised curriculum. For pupils who are disadvantaged, the grant has been used to fund specific resources to support the delivery of this bespoke and targeted approach. For example, some pupils have been funded for musical instrument lessons and others have been bought laptops to support the way that they learn. This has effectively removed the barriers of being disadvantaged for these pupils, who are now making accelerated progress, often after years of not accessing education prior to being admitted to this school. Therefore, leaders have effectively started to narrow the gap in attainment of these pupils.

- Leaders make good use of the sports funding. Pupils receive useful physical education lessons from specialist coaches. Teachers benefit from working alongside these coaches to help them to develop their own expertise.
- Leaders have made effective use of external support to help them successfully open the school and improve provision over time. They have received useful advice, challenge and support from educational advisers who work for the National Autistic Society Trust and from an adviser from the Department for Education. There are strong links between the trust and the local governing body. Collaborative opportunities for learning through work with the other trust free school and the many independent special schools are highly valued by leaders.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governors play a pivotal role in setting the strategic direction of the school. They have worked closely with the headteacher to create the guiding principles which are used to form and set policy. They hold leaders to account rigorously to ensure that the vision is realised. Minutes of governors' meetings demonstrate that they ask pertinent questions about the running of the school. In particular they use the structure of the improvement plan to keep abreast of how well leaders are implementing the plan and what difference it is making. Governors contribute effectively to a number of monitoring activities, for example by regularly visiting the school to see it at work.
 - Performance management policies and procedures are robust. Staff are held to account for the progress of pupils because leaders follow these procedures effectively. Any performance that does not meet the high expectations of the headteacher and governing board is challenged and tackled effectively.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The school's safeguarding policy is fully up to date and makes clear reference to the latest statutory guidance from the Department for Education. The policy usefully signposts key personnel, such as the designated safeguarding lead, on the front page. In particular, the policy recognises the rise in expectations of 'Keeping children safe in education 2015' in relation to safer recruitment practices. The rigour with which leaders have implemented their policies has ensured that safeguarding has the highest priority.
- All staff have received appropriate training and so are clear what to do if they are concerned about the welfare of any pupils. Leaders are clear about what they should do if they are managing an allegation about a member of staff and have successfully built a strong working relationship with the local authority designated safeguarding officer. Leaders have used this link to continuously review and improve their policies and systems when evaluations have suggested they have not been as strong as they could be. For example, leaders at the school rightly asked the local authority designated officer to come and review the amendments they had made to some of their safeguarding practices to ensure they were as strong as they needed to be.
- Leaders ensure that appropriate checks are made during recruitment processes and recorded accurately on the single central register. Appropriate references are sought from previous employers. Leaders usefully review how to improve the information that they ask for and so many recent changes have strengthened the effectiveness of their recruitment processes. The chair of the local governing board has overall responsibility for holding leaders to account for the safeguarding processes within the school. She undertakes this responsibility rigorously by checking that policies are being implemented effectively. She has provided useful reports to the local governing board about the impact of leaders' work.
- The school site is very secure and there are clear systems for signing in and for managing safeguarding for visitors and agency staff.

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

- Pupils benefit from teaching that is carefully planned to capture their enthusiasm, while delivered in an environment that allows pupils to flourish despite their needs. This is because staff are well qualified and have specific expertise in autistic spectrum conditions. Therefore, they understand how pupils with autism learn and benefit from the calm and purposeful environment that staff engender. As a result, pupils often make good progress from their starting points.
- Staff work for, and with, each other to very good effect. They all benefit from the tailored professional development opportunities they are offered by leaders through the National Autistic Society Trust. This helps ensure that all staff understand the needs of their pupils very well. Consequently, relationships between teachers, learning mentors and pupils are particularly positive. Pupils want to do well because staff help them to believe in themselves. Staff also have high expectations of what they want pupils to

achieve in lessons and over time.

- The use of assessment is well developed and ensures lessons help pupils to build on what they can already do. When pupils arrive at the school, leaders and teachers spend a significant amount of time assessing where pupils have strengths and what barriers there are for the pupils to make progress. Pupils' programmes of study help the vast majority make very good progress towards the targets set in their annual reviews of their education, health and care plans or statements of special educational needs.
- Teachers make good use of what they know about pupils to plan work that challenges pupils of all abilities. For example, the most-able pupils are regularly challenged because of the bespoke learning experiences they are given. Similarly, less-able pupils are supported very effectively by the highly skilled learning mentors who are employed to support teachers. They are often very well qualified. For example, some hold psychology degrees and use their skills exceptionally well to support learning and pupils' personal development.
- The teaching of English is excellent. School leaders have worked hard to improve how pupils are taught to use phonics (letters and the sounds that they make) to read. Some pupils are very strong readers. They have been helped to develop their skills through the carefully targeted support they are given.
- In response to what the school knows about how its pupils learn best, writing is taught at a completely different time than reading to help pupils focus on the different skills needed for each discipline more efficiently. Pupils enjoy what they are learning in English lessons and so they often show excellent attitudes to their learning at these times. For example, a key stage 3 lesson on poetry helped pupils explore their own creative writing skills. Through the well-planned session, strong use of questioning and excellent deployment of staff, pupils worked very hard to produce their own poems which were of a very high standard.
- The teaching of design and technology is also of a very high quality. Pupils respond well to the excellent facilities they benefit from at the school and the warm but ambitious style of the teacher. As a result, pupils work very hard to develop their design and practical skills. Similarly, the teaching of life skills is a crucial and effective part of the curriculum.
- The use of technology in teaching and learning is very effective. Pupils have regular access to various mediums to help them learn when in lessons and when working on their own.
- The teaching of mathematics has only recently improved and is not as strong as in other subjects. Leaders have taken effective action, having identified that pupils did not make as much progress in mathematics as they did in other subjects. Leaders have rightly identified that there is more to do in this area. For example, pupils do not get enough opportunities to use their reasoning skills or to truly master new concepts that they are taught.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good, including when they attend alternative provision placements.
- Leaders have ensured that each individual is valued for their differences. This is promoted through lessons, assemblies and the culture engendered at the school very well. This, along with the excellent relationships that pupils and staff enjoy, frequently leads to improved self-confidence in pupils. Leaders speak openly with pupils about their autism and help them to understand their own needs. This ensures that pupils develop new ways to regulate their own behaviour and their reactions to different situations.
- The curriculum promotes pupils' physical and emotional well-being effectively. Pupils particularly benefit from the weekly experiences they are offered to learn through adventurous outdoor activities. Through these, pupils have successfully broadened their interests and so are learning to lead more healthy lifestyles. Those who attend alternative provision are developing more positive attitudes to learning.
- Pupils demonstrate that they have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet. Through the regular life skills lessons they experience, they learn a number of skills that will be useful in everyday life. For example, pupils learn about the dangers of sharing personal information online and the risks of making friends through social media.
- Pupils report that there is no bullying at the school. They agree with their parents when they say they feel safe.
- Pupils' attendance has improved, including for those who attend alternative provision. The school has reduced persistent absence effectively. Leaders work proactively and successfully with families to help them improve the attendance of their children. There are a number of initiatives used by leaders to allow parents to learn more about what their children are doing and how they are doing. For example, during

inspection, several parents attended a 'coffee morning' as part of the school's work to develop the strong sense of community. These are regular and often have pupils giving presentations about new things that have been happening so that parents can feel clearly involved in the life of the school.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Many pupils present challenging behaviour because of their autism. They quickly learn to feel valued at the school and respond well to what is expected of them. As one pupil stated, 'staff really look after us and help us to understand our own autism so that we can cope better with the world around us'.
- Pupils' behaviour in and around the school is very good. There is a very strong sense of community at play, lunchtimes and the weekly assemblies in which all members of the school community come together.
- In the majority of classes and lessons, pupils demonstrate good attitudes to their learning, listen well to the teachers and persevere with their work. Relationships are particularly positive and pupils enjoy their learning. They show respect for the school, for other people's differences and for each other.
- Leaders track and analyse incidents of behaviour very effectively. They have used this information to reduce the level and frequency of incidents at the school successfully. Consequently, incidents of challenging behaviour are now infrequent and exclusions have been successfully reduced. Lessons are orderly and calm, and provide a sound environment for learning.
- Leaders rightly celebrate the very positive contribution pupils make to the school community. Pupils believe that behaviour has improved over the last two years.

Outcomes for pupils

are good

- Pupils start at the school at different ages and with different levels of attainment. Typically, they have come from either being educated at home or having struggled in mainstream education. From the moment they are admitted to the school, leaders undertake a thorough and comprehensive assessment of their personal, social and academic needs. This helps to ensure that the vast majority of pupils make good progress from their starting points, particularly towards meeting the targets in their statements of educational needs or education, health and care plans.
- Pupils' outcomes in English are particularly strong. Those who finish their primary education in the school often attain levels in reading that are far higher than is typical. Pupils attain levels at the end of Year 6 that are less impressive in mathematics and writing. This is because pupils enter the school in these areas working at levels that are much lower than would typically be expected.
- Pupils in all three key stages make good progress. This is particularly the case in writing, where all pupils have made at least expected progress since September and over half have made accelerated progress. Leaders' analysis of current assessment information shows that, until recently, pupils have not made as much progress in mathematics. The tackling of key weaknesses in the teaching of mathematics is already starting to have an impact. Pupils' progress has already accelerated and they are beginning to close the gap with the rates of progress seen in English.
- Pupils show pride in their work and make significant gains in their writing. Teachers help pupils to identify where they have done particularly well and where further improvement is needed. The opportunities to apply the skills they learn in English and mathematics are more established in some areas of the curriculum, such as science. Leaders have rightly identified the need to do more to ensure there are increased opportunities for the application of these skills in history and geography.
- Different groups in the school make similar progress as each other. For example, girls and boys make similar progress, despite there being very few girls in the school. Disadvantaged pupils make similar progress to their peers. They often attain levels that are higher because many of them have higher starting points.
- The most-able pupils often make very good progress. Staff have high expectations for what these pupils should achieve. Consequently, they receive lessons that often require them to think much more for themselves and so they deepen their understanding of more complex concepts.

School details

Unique reference number	139728
Inspection number	10011711

This inspection was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special
School category	Academy free school
Age range of pupils	5–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	44
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Helen Roberts
Principal	Mr Gary Simm
Telephone number	01189 424 750
Website	www.thamesvalleyschool.org.uk
Email address	thames.valley@nas.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Thames Valley School is a special school for pupils with an autistic spectrum condition. Pupils are often high functioning with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome.
- The school opened as a free school in September 2013, following a successful application by the National Autistic Society. The school is, therefore, sponsored by the National Autistic Society Trust. The trust oversees two special free schools, including Thames Valley, as well as a number of independent special schools.
- The school uses two alternative providers for a very small number of pupils. They are the Upper Lodge Farming Project and Path Hill Outdoors.
- The majority of the pupils at the school are White British and there are significantly more boys than girls.
- The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for support through the pupil premium, which is government funding provided for children looked after and those known to be eligible for free school meals, is well above average.
- All pupils attending the Thames Valley School have a statement of educational needs or an education, health and care plan.

Information about this inspection

- Her Majesty's Inspector observed eight lessons or parts of lessons across all departments, all jointly with a member of the senior leadership team. He observed pupils' behaviour in and around the school, and during lessons.
- Meetings were held with senior leaders, the designated lead for safeguarding, staff at the school, a group of governors, including the chair of the governing board, and a group of pupils. Her Majesty's Inspector also spoke to two representatives of the National Autistic Society Trust.
- Her Majesty's Inspector looked closely at school documentation, including minutes of governing body meetings, leaders' analysis of how well they believe the school is doing, their improvement plan and data and tracking information about pupils' achievement, attendance and exclusions. He also reviewed the school's safeguarding policies, procedures and arrangements.
- Her Majesty's Inspector considered 23 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. There were no responses from staff to the online questionnaire.

Inspection team

Matthew Barnes, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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