

# Priors Court School

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

## Inspection dates

21–23 November 2017

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

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is an outstanding school

- Outstanding leadership enables pupils to make exceptional progress. Leaders continue to improve all aspects of the school. The independent school standards are fully met.
- Leaders and trustees provide very effective oversight and set a clear strategic direction for the school. They ensure that all pupils make excellent progress and acquire useful vocational and life skills.
- Pupils make outstanding progress in improving their communication skills. Many develop the ability to use pictures and symbols to express their views.
- Behaviour significantly improves once pupils can communicate better. Pupils also make strong progress in subjects such as English and mathematics.
- Safeguarding is effective. Staff are dedicated to making absolutely sure that pupils are kept safe and secure. Leaders take great care to ensure that pupils' personal development is outstanding.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is highly effective. Staff have an excellent understanding of autism and the needs of individual pupils.
- Students make outstanding progress in the sixth form. They benefit from excellent careers advice and develop vital life skills through their work experience. Students in the sixth form benefit from the same high level of caring support as others in the school.
- Parents are delighted with the school. They praise how dramatically their children have changed since being at the school. All who responded to Ofsted's survey would recommend the school to another parent.
- The curriculum is a major strength of the school. Staff make sure that pupils receive maximum benefit from using the school's exceptional facilities, such as the countryside learning and horticultural areas and those very well-equipped areas that support pupils' artistic and physical development.

### Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets 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?**

- Further develop pupils' vocational skills so that they are even better prepared for their future lives.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management

### Outstanding

- The committed headteacher, staff and trustees ensure that pupils at this school excel. Staff care passionately about the pupils in their care and have high ambitions for them. The school succeeds in its aim of 'helping pupils access their individual strengths and achieve as independent a life as possible'.
- The headteacher is tenacious in making sure that her high standards are invariably met. There is a continual focus on improvement. Senior and subject leaders work exceptionally well together to drive changes that benefit all pupils in the school. School documentation, including that found on the website, is reviewed meticulously. Leaders ensure that the independent school standards are fully met.
- Parents are delighted with the school. Those who were spoken to during the inspection said that they could not 'praise the school enough', and that it had lived up to all their expectations. All parents who responded to the Ofsted survey, Parent View, would recommend the school to other parents.
- The school benefits from an extensive range of specialist facilities which enables it to offer a full, rich and varied curriculum. The countryside learning area gives pupils the opportunity to develop their awareness of the natural world by giving them 'hands on' experiences. Pupils learn key skills in animal husbandry, such as feeding and tending the chickens, goats, pigs and sheep.
- Pupils make exceptional progress because the activities they carry out help to develop their skills in small, manageable steps. Once a pupil has accomplished a skill, such as counting to five, it is consolidated in other areas of their learning. For example, five scoops of food are shown in pictures and symbols when feeding the animals. Step by step the school builds pupils' belief in their own abilities.
- Building on the entrepreneurial philosophy of the school's founder, pupils take part in a range of small enterprise projects. These projects help to prepare pupils well for life in the wider community. For example, in the school's horticultural area, pupils grow flowers, herbs and vegetables which they sell at a local market. Another very popular project is the school's on-site tuck shop. With occasional help from staff, pupils learn to order supplies, manage money and cash up at the end of the day.
- Extra-curricular provision is expansive and has a positive impact on pupils' personal development and progress. Pupils benefit from a variety of clubs, such as walking, cinema, bowling, and pamper sessions. Pupils relish the opportunity to make their own choices when selecting the club they wish to attend.
- The arts are extremely well promoted. There are frequent visits by drama companies who use the school's theatre to present plays in ways that pupils can engage with. There are regular musical events, and pupils enjoy playing a range of instruments. Pupils' singing skills are developed carefully. Pupils from the school have recently released a single to challenge perceptions about autism. Entitled 'Accept me for who I am and let me shine', the song has already had over 1.6 million hits on the internet.

## Governance

- The highly committed trustees use their extensive knowledge and experience to provide clear strategic oversight. They monitor and review all aspects of the school carefully.
- Trustees are fully aware of the quality of teaching and of how effectively staff help pupils to progress. Trustees share leaders' relentless drive for continuous improvement.
- Trustees are fully committed to ensuring that pupils of all ages have ample opportunities to develop their vocational skills, for example at the recent building trades taster day. Trustees want to provide more vocational experiences and have just begun to convert some school buildings into an artisan bakery. This is to ensure that all pupils can further develop their skills in running a business.

## Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Staff and trustees are diligent in ensuring that pupils are kept safe from harm. They attend regular safeguarding training and ensure that close links are maintained with external agencies. Leaders are fully aware of the potential risks that pupils may encounter.
- The school is vigilant in looking after the safeguarding needs of these highly vulnerable young people, all of whom require one-to-one support throughout the school day. A few pupils with highly complex needs receive high-quality two-to-one support.
- Leaders conduct scrupulous checks on the suitability of adults to work with pupils.
- The school's safeguarding policy is compliant with statutory requirements and is published on the website.

## Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

## Outstanding

- The excellent quality of teaching results in outstanding learning. When pupils first arrive at the school, staff conduct lengthy checks to ascertain pupils' skills and abilities. They set challenging targets and plan carefully to help pupils achieve them.
- Staff are highly experienced and have excellent knowledge about the key features of autism. They use well-targeted teaching approaches that best suit each pupil's needs. These approaches are successful in helping pupils to make the best possible progress. Staff lose no opportunity to develop pupils' skills and abilities across a range of different subjects.
- Teaching assistants work effectively alongside teachers. They continually check pupils' responses to the activities that have been set. Staff are meticulous in recording pupils' achievements.
- Staff help pupils to enjoy and celebrate their learning. One example of this was seen in the video of their song, 'Let me shine', where pupils very much enjoyed singing and playing musical instruments.
- Therapists are a valued part of the team. They help pupils to make rapid progress in their social, physical and emotional skills, and they assist teachers in developing the right approach for each pupil.

- Displays in the corridors ensure that pupils always have interesting things to look at. Many are interactive and allow pupils to use pictures and symbols to express their views and opinions.

## Personal development, behaviour and welfare

## Outstanding

### Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Pupils are helped sensitively to understand their own needs and emotions and those of others. Pupils learn to praise each other's successes. They have a clear understanding of what it means to be a good friend. Pupils become more aware of the impact of their actions during their time at the school. For example, in the countryside learning area, all pupils carefully followed the instruction to be quiet when working near the rabbits.
- Pupils make excellent progress in their understanding of how to maintain an active life style and stay healthy. For example, the school's food technology department helps pupils to learn valuable food preparation skills. Pupils can make well-balanced meals, often with ingredients grown in the school's horticultural area.
- Some pupils have significant health needs, which are well managed by staff. They provide caring support while ensuring that pupils participate as much as possible in all the varied activities on offer. Specialist staff deliver a number of sessions, such as yoga, to relax pupils and prepare them for their learning throughout the day.
- The school is very aware of the specific aversions of some pupils. It works hard to ensure that the anxieties that pupils may face in future years are addressed in a safe and controlled environment. For example, 'dog therapy' has been introduced for those who feel anxious around dogs. Pupils are offered a range of other therapies, including speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. Pupils benefit immensely from the many facilities to help them with their specific and individual needs, such as the well-equipped multi-sensory area and occupational therapy room.
- Safety is a priority. Pupils know about staying safe when online. The school has painted a zebra crossing in its grounds so pupils can practise crossing a road safely.

### Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- The school has developed excellent approaches to promoting positive behaviour, much of which is based on the caring and encouraging relationships that staff have established with pupils. Initially, when pupils arrive at the school, they can be withdrawn or exhibit challenging behaviours. Through careful support, staff help pupils to take part in the school's many activities and, consequently, their behaviour improves. Records show that incidents of challenging behaviour decrease rapidly once a pupil has been at the school for a short time.
- Around the school, pupils typically conduct themselves well. They carry out useful jobs for the school community, such as serving food in the dining hall. These jobs help to develop pupils' skills in living independently.
- Staff are highly practised in recognising pupils' anxieties and the trigger signals that may

lead to challenging behaviour. Staff know how to de-escalate situations before they can have a negative impact on pupils' learning.

## Outcomes for pupils

## Outstanding

- Pupils make huge strides in improving their communication skills. Almost all have a clear understanding of the meaning of many pictures and symbols, which they use to indicate their likes and dislikes. Often for the first time in their lives, pupils develop the skills to make their own choices on a regular basis. This means that pupils can select the food they want to eat, the sports they want to play and the extra-curricular activities they want to enjoy. This has a marked impact on improving pupils' self-esteem because they no longer feel frustrated at being unable to make their views known. Staff help those pupils who have developed verbal skills to make strong progress in their understanding of a wider range of words.
- Pupils make particularly strong progress in developing muscle control. Therapists and staff provide numerous daily opportunities for pupils to strengthen muscle groups in the hand. Once pupils have more hand control, their early writing skills develop rapidly. Pupils learn to hold a pencil correctly and trace over letters. Many then go on to write their own names independently. A few pupils write short sentences. Stronger hand control also enables pupils to make rapid progress in other areas, such as planting seedlings.
- Pupils make excellent progress in developing their creative talents, for example when using the on-site theatre and the specialist food technology rooms. Pupils achieve well in art. They develop the skills to mix colours to make dramatic pictures and often gain recognition in national awards. Pupils quickly develop woodwork skills, such as drilling safely and sawing accurately. Many have made their own toolboxes which they aim to use in their future lives.
- The most able pupils are well supported in developing their skills further. For example, the school has recently hosted visits from artists who have taught pupils about different painting techniques. Some pupils have helped to create wooden noticeboards for the school's countryside learning centre. In pottery, pupils develop the skills to create intricately designed bowls. Pupils who show an interest in textiles make rapid progress, and some are very proficient weavers, creating hats and scarves.
- Pupils make strong progress in reading. Often when pupils arrive at the school they are unable to sit quietly and engage with a book. Through patient and effective support, staff help pupils to enjoy having books read to them. Some pupils make significant progress and start to recognise letters and words.
- Pupils make exceptional progress in their understanding of everyday numeracy problems. Activities such as helping to sell produce on the market give pupils a secure understanding of money and how to give the right amount of change. Most pupils learn to understand quantities, such as 'full' and 'empty'. Some have a good understanding of shapes.
- All pupils become more active during their time at the school. They make good use of the school's swimming pool, trim trails and gymnasium to strengthen muscle groups and develop balance. Some pupils make such strong progress that they complete ten-kilometre mud runs.

- Pupils take a range of external entry-level accreditations aimed at developing their independence and vocational and life skills to help them to prepare for their next steps. However, leaders recognise that they could provide more qualifications of this kind, so that pupils are even better prepared for their next steps.

### **Sixth form provision**

### **Outstanding**

- Post-16 learners make very strong progress due to the outstanding quality of teaching. Staff have high aspirations and constantly encourage students to try new experiences and 'have a go'. This has a positive impact on students' personal and social development.
- Teachers develop students' skills in English and mathematics, together with vocational and life skills, in a variety of creative and imaginative ways. For example, during the inspection, staff helped students to make healthy 'smoothies' using fruit and vegetables that some students had not tried before. Staff were successful in encouraging students, even those who were initially reticent, to taste new flavours and give their opinions.
- All secondary-age pupils and sixth-form students are given very effective careers education. Employability skills are further developed by the vocational courses offered in the sixth form. Because staff know the students so well they are able to set up work-experience opportunities that closely match their interests. Students have been successful in applying the skills they have learned in the school's countryside learning and horticultural areas to work on country estates and fisheries. Other students have been successful in developing their filing skills in the post room of a university.
- Some students continue on to supported living in specialist accommodation. Most gain accreditations across a range of vocational and academic subjects which help them to be well prepared for their future lives.
- Leaders ensure that the curriculum gives students many real-life opportunities. Students can practise their independent living skills in the large purpose-built sixth form. For example, they use the kitchen to make soups and cakes. The vocational rooms give students excellent opportunities to practise their woodwork, pottery and weaving skills.



## School details

Unique reference number	132003
DfE registration number	869/6014
Inspection number	10020923

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.

Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	58
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	24
Proprietor	Priors Court Foundation
Chair	Alison Bateson
Headteacher	Sue Piper
Annual fees (day pupils)	£76,973–£102,656
Telephone number	01635 247 202
Website	<a href="http://www.priorscourt.org.uk">www.priorscourt.org.uk</a>
Email address	<a href="mailto:mail@priorscourt.org.uk">mail@priorscourt.org.uk</a>
Date of previous inspection	9–11 October 2013

## Information about this school

- Priors Court School was established as an independent special school in September 1999. The school is run by Priors Court Foundation, a registered charity. The majority of the pupils who attend the school live in residential accommodation provided by the foundation.
- The school caters for pupils who have autistic spectrum disorder. All pupils have an education, health and care plan for their severe learning difficulties and associated challenging behaviours. Nearly half have involvement with child and adolescent mental



health services (CAMHS). Pupils often have additional medical and physical needs; for example, over a third of pupils have epilepsy. Approximately 80% of pupils are non-verbal and communicate through pictures and symbols. Approximately 30 local authorities use the school to place pupils.

- Prior to attending this school, pupils have often had some time out of education or have been excluded from their previous schools. A number of pupils enter at different times during the school year. The school is registered for up to 70 pupils. Currently there are 58 pupils on roll between the ages of seven and 19 years. There are 24 pupils in the sixth form.
- The school aims to 'enable pupils to access their individual strengths and achieve as independent a life as possible'.
- The headteacher took up her post in 2011 having worked at the school for the previous 10 years.
- The school works with several international institutions, including the University of North Carolina, to carry out research into specific aspects related to autism. Senior staff are also involved with national research groups. They have also been on visits to specialist autism centres and schools in New York State and Massachusetts. Research visitors have come to see the school from as far away as China.
- The school does not make use of alternative provision.

## Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed teaching and learning across the school with the headteacher. There was a meeting with a small group of pupils to gather their views about what it was like to be a pupil at the school. Pupils' folders and photographic records were also examined.
- There were conversations with four parents, and 15 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, were taken into account. Consideration was also given to 54 questionnaires completed by staff.
- The inspector scrutinised a range of school policies, procedures and records in order to check the school's compliance with the independent school standards.
- Conversations were held with the trustees, senior leaders and staff.

## Inspection team

Liz Bowes, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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