

# Inspection of a good school: Thames Valley School

2 Conwy Close, Tilehurst, Reading, Berkshire RG30 4BZ

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Inspection dates:

5–6 November 2019

## Outcome

Thames Valley School continues to be a good school.

However, inspectors have some concerns that standards may be declining, as set out below.

## What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils thoroughly enjoy their time here. They work collectively and help one another out. Peer-to-peer support is strong. 'It's like a family' was a comment from a pupil, reflecting the views of many. This enthusiasm is shared by other pupils, including those who have had a negative experience of education in the past. Some pupils told inspectors that the school had simply transformed their lives. They are particularly reassured by adults, saying that whenever they need it, emotional support is always on hand. Pupils feel safe.

Pupils feel that bullying is dealt with very effectively, describing the support of staff as 'amazing'. They are proud that everyone is made to feel welcome. Pupils enjoy learning beyond lesson time. They can choose to take part in a variety of activities, including football and dungeons and dragons board game club, to broaden their experiences.

Staff want pupils to be independent and succeed. Most think carefully about how to support all pupils. However, variability exists. As a result, in some subjects, pupils do not always achieve as well as they could. Nevertheless, pupils are generally well prepared for the next stage in their education. Most leave and take up college placements.

## What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Since the last inspection there have been multiple changes to the leadership of the school. Staff turnover at all levels has also been high. The school has undergone a period of turmoil and standards have declined.

New leaders are providing staff with clear direction. Parents and carers, too, say that the school is beginning to 'slowly get back on its feet'. Although some parents are concerned about high staff turnover, they also praise the leadership team for doing all they can to preserve some consistency. Under the executive principal's leadership, the team is addressing the right things at the right time. For instance, leaders have rightly prioritised

keeping pupils safe. Systems in this regard are now much stronger.

Leaders are right to be redirecting their efforts now. They are beginning to establish a whole-school curriculum that fits purpose. The school's curriculum is designed to ensure that pupils gain qualifications and succeed. Leaders have thought about the subjects that pupils follow. However, this work is at an early stage. All are determined to provide an ambitious curriculum that meets the needs of pupils with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) well.

In some subjects, pupils do not perform as well as leaders intend. Although pupils are ready to learn, teachers are not well versed in what to teach when. In many subjects, staff do not have the guidance they need to teach effectively. Where previous strengths existed, such as in art, due to staff leaving these have not been maintained. Nevertheless, teaching in some subjects is better than in others. For instance, in science pupils make good gains in their understanding of technical, subject-specific vocabulary.

There is no clear plan for developing pupils' reading skills. Subject leaders are beginning to identify gaps, such as the bridge between primary and secondary. However, this work is at an early stage. Many of the school's subject leaders are very new and still getting to grips with what is expected. New resources and published schemes are adding some value but a lack of coherence across the age ranges is sometimes counterproductive. Staff, who have not had training, do not pronounce sounds accurately or clearly. They are too slow to address pupils' mistakes.

Since the trust appointed both a managing and deputy director, support for the school has strengthened. There is now a clear handle on what needs to happen and by when. Accountability has strengthened considerably. However, those responsible know that over time the school's performance has declined and much more is needed to strengthen the implementation of the curriculum and the impact on pupils' outcomes.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The school's designated safeguarding lead oversees pupils' well-being meticulously. Staff know how to record any concerns. These are then checked thoroughly, and the appropriate course of action followed.

New leaders have made significant strides in overhauling the school's approach to safeguarding. New arrangements are robust. For instance, leaders identified that too many pupils were absconding. Clearer policies and procedures have contributed strongly to significantly reducing the number of incidents. Furthermore, risk assessments for individual pupils are first class. As systems have strengthened, staff, too, have become better decision makers. The risk of absconding is managed very well.

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

## **(Information for the school and appropriate authority)**

- Leaders have established clear curriculum priorities by making good use of external support. Leaders now need to ensure that the school's approach is underpinned by appropriate curriculum schemes of work that build pupils' skills progressively. Teachers should plan appropriate activities that are well matched to pupils' starting points.
- In recent times the school has endured very changeable teaching and subject leadership arrangements. Some key players have left. Leaders now need to build the expertise of staff, including in subject leadership, and further improve their knowledge of the subjects they teach.
- Leaders have begun to make appropriate changes to the teaching of reading. However, this work is at a very early stage. Staff, including those in the primary department, have not yet had sufficient training. Pupils need to develop their reading skills more rapidly and become more familiar with a wider range of high-quality literature.

## **Background**

When we have judged a school to be good we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called a section 8 inspection of a good school or non-exempt outstanding school. We do not give graded judgements on a section 8 inspection. However, if we find some evidence that the school could now be better than good or that standards may be declining, then the next inspection will be a section 5 inspection. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the section 8 inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will convert the section 8 inspection to a section 5 inspection immediately.

This is the first section 8 inspection since we judged the school to be good on 4–5 May 2016.

## **How can I feed back my views?**

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use Ofsted Parent View information when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you're not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

## **Further information**

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil

premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	139728
<b>Local authority</b>	Reading
<b>Inspection number</b>	10111394
<b>Type of school</b>	Special
<b>School category</b>	Academy free school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	4 to 16
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	54
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	Board of trustees
<b>Chair of trust</b>	Mrs Janet Corcoran
<b>Principal</b>	Mrs Jo Galloway (Executive Principal), Mr James Power (Interim Headteacher)
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.thamesvalleyschool.org.uk">www.thamesvalleyschool.org.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	4–5 May 2016

## Information about this school

- Since the previous inspection, there have been four different principals. The current executive principal and interim headteacher joined in February 2019. Several teaching staff left in July 2019. Some staff are in temporary positions.
- Thames Valley School is a special school for pupils with ASD. Pupils are often high functioning.
- The school opened as a free school in September 2013, on behalf of the National Autistic Society. Thames Valley School is part of the National Autistic Society Academies Trust (NASAT). The Trust is responsible for three free schools.
- The school uses one alternative provider to provide horse riding.
- All pupils attending the Thames Valley School have an education, health and care plan.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspectors met with the executive principal, interim headteacher, other staff who hold significant responsibilities and all teaching staff who were present during the inspection.
- A meeting was held with the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. The lead

inspector also spoke to the chair of trustees for NASAT on the telephone.

- Meetings were held with an external curriculum consultant and both the managing and deputy director of NASAT.
- We did deep dives in these subjects: reading, mathematics and science. Inspectors met with subject leaders, visited lessons, talked to pupils about their work and discussed the school's approach to curriculum delivery with teaching staff. Some pupils read to an inspector.
- The lead inspector met with a group of pupils from both the primary and secondary departments.
- The school's safeguarding arrangements were reviewed. Inspectors met with the school's designated safeguarding lead, scrutinised the school's single central record and talked to pupils about safety. The inspection team also considered how well adults in the school act on emerging concerns about pupils' welfare. Inspectors looked carefully at how the school manages the risks associated with absconding from the school site.
- During the inspection, survey responses from 37 members of staff, 20 pupils and 31 parents were considered.

### **Inspection team**

Elizabeth Farr, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Hilary Goddard

Ofsted Inspector

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