

Inspection of The Outdoors School

West Town Farm, West Town Road, Ide, Exeter, Devon EX2 9TG

Inspection dates: 10–12 March 2020

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Requires improvement

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

At the Outdoors School, the countryside is the classroom. The school uses two sites, a farm and an adventure playground. At both locations, pupils learn in the open air. Leaders understand the increased risks associated with outdoor learning. The safety of pupils has the highest priority.

Pupils told us they enjoy learning outdoors – even when the weather is terrible! Pupils said that staff look after them and they feel safe. Staff deal with any incidents of bullying quickly. Parents said they see the benefits for their children in learning in a different environment.

The social and emotional development of pupils is a top priority at the school. Leaders have high expectations that pupils will engage in learning. Skilled staff build pupils' self-confidence to overcome previous negative experiences of school.

Pupils study an academic curriculum based on the national curriculum. Staff deliver this through core learning sessions. This curriculum is not well sequenced. It does not ensure that pupils can achieve their full academic potential.

During core learning sessions, pupils behave well. However, during free-play sessions some pupils find it hard to control their behaviour. This can unsettle other pupils and result in disrupted learning.

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

Although the school requires improvement, leaders have ensured all the independent school standards are met. The school meets the requirements of schedule 10 of The Equality Act 2010. However, the school's curriculum is not well planned and sequenced. Pupils do not develop skills and knowledge as quickly as they should.

The proprietor has a clear vision for the school. Staff understand and share these aims. The well-being of staff is a priority for the proprietor. However, there is uncertainty among staff about the future leadership of the school. The acting principal has been in place for a short time. This is affecting the ability of leaders to make strategic decisions. There is also uncertainty among staff about the future leadership of the school.

The school's specialist forest skills curriculum supports pupils' personal and social development. Pupils respond positively to the opportunity of using a range of tools to make wooden items. They show self-control in conducting activities safely. Pupils also show perseverance to achieve success in these tasks. In carrying out these activities, pupils learn essential life skills. Pupils take responsibility for their health and safety. This is possible because of a carefully sequenced curriculum.

Learning in reading and mathematics is not as well sequenced. Leaders have a strong commitment to providing a child-led, project-based, experiential education. Sometimes this results in pupils experiencing disconnected activities, and they do not build on what they already know. This reduces pupils' progress in these subjects.

Pupils join the school following periods of disrupted education. As a result, pupils have gaps in their knowledge of reading. The design of the curriculum is not supporting pupils in addressing these gaps and leaders have not given enough priority to reading. Staff use books to help pupils settle but do not carefully match these books to the reading ability of individual pupils. Staff have not had sufficient training in phonics. They lack expertise in how to provide effective support so that pupils can catch up quickly with their reading.

In mathematics, curriculum plans are not ambitious enough and do not build effectively on what pupils already know. Leaders have not given enough thought to how the curriculum will support pupils' progress.

Leaders and staff share a desire to support pupils' social and emotional development. The organisation of the start of the day supports this. Pupils and staff eat breakfast together, which promotes social skills. A period of reflection follows this. Staff and pupils share how they are feeling, emotionally and physically. This develops pupils' awareness of people's feelings and emotions.

The school makes effective use of a range of regular off-site visits as rewards. These visits give pupils a variety of different experiences which help them to understand the wider community. However, because leaders offer these visits as rewards, not all pupils access them.

Pupils like coming to school. There are strong relationships between staff and pupils. All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders identify the additional needs of pupils effectively. Leaders share this information with staff. Staff know the pupils well and are effective at meeting their individual needs.

Pupils enjoy having access to so much outdoor space and the freedom to move around. Behaviour in structured sessions is generally good. Pupils pay attention to staff and engage in learning. However, during free-play sessions at the West Town Farm site, the behaviour of some pupils is disruptive. This affects other pupils and unsettles them. As a result, they are not ready for the next core learning session. This leads to disrupted learning for some pupils.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff understand their safeguarding responsibilities and receive regular training. They know what to do if there is a concern. Leaders keep accurate records and deal with issues promptly. Leaders carry out the required checks to ensure that all adults

working in the school are suitable to work with children. The record of these checks is accurate and well maintained.

The school operates in the open countryside and an adventure playground. Leaders have carefully considered the safety of pupils given the unique nature of the sites used for education. There are clear procedures for keeping pupils safe, which staff follow carefully.

What does the school need to do to improve? (Information for the school and proprietor)

- The current principal is employed on an interim basis. This limits the ability of leaders to make strategic decisions, particularly around the curriculum. It has also created uncertainty for staff and pupils. The proprietors need to ensure that there is stable leadership at the school.
- Forest skills has a well-sequenced curriculum. In this subject, pupils develop knowledge and skills in a coherently sequenced way. In other subjects, this is not the case. As a result, pupils' knowledge and skills do not develop as quickly as they should. Leaders need to take the approach used to sequence the forest skills curriculum and apply it across all subjects.
- Reading does not have a high enough priority within the school. Most pupils join the school with gaps in their reading skills and knowledge. This limits their ability to access the full curriculum. Leaders must take action to prioritise reading across the school. Staff must ensure that pupils can read well.
- During free-play sessions at the West Town Farm site, some pupils struggle to regulate their behaviour. This adversely affects other pupils and leads to disruption in subsequent core learning sessions. At the West Town Farm site, the free-play sessions need to be as well organised as the core learning sessions.
- A central aspect of the school's work is to help pupils learn to engage with the wider world. Currently, pupils only access learning in the wider community as a reward. This limits some pupils' development of essential skills. Leaders should ensure that these opportunities are a core part of the curriculum.

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 are the provider and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

School details

Unique reference number	146200
DfE registration number	878/6075
Local authority	Devon
Inspection number	10121026
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	7 to 14
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	24
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	The Outdoors Group
Chair	Shevek Pring
Headteacher	Robyn Vincent
Annual fees (day pupils)	£42,000 to £64,000
Telephone number	01392 811907
Website	www.outdoorsgroup.co.uk/outdoorsschool
Email address	hello@outdoorsgroup.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- The Outdoors School is an independent special school. It specialises in supporting pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs and autism spectrum disorder.
- The principal left the school in February 2019. The school is currently led by an acting principal.
- The school caters for pupils between the ages of seven and 14. There are currently 24 pupils on the school's roll.
- Most pupils have had disrupted schooling prior to joining the school.
- Currently, all pupils have an education, health and care plan funded by Devon County Council.
- This was the school's first standard inspection since opening in July 2019.

Information about this inspection

We carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- During the inspection, we worked with two representatives of the proprietor and the acting principal. We also met with a range of staff, these included curriculum tutors, the inclusion lead, the school administrator, the HR officer and estates manager.
- We carried out deep dives in reading, mathematics, the school's specialist curriculum in forest skills and personal, social and health education. We conducted visits to see learning at West Town Farm and the Tiverton Adventure Playground and spoke to staff and pupils and looked at pupils' work.
- We also met with staff to evaluate how well they are being supported by senior leaders and the proprietor.
- We took into account 21 responses to Ofsted's staff survey and six text responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.
- We also scrutinised safeguarding information, including the single central record. Further evaluations were made of the implementation of health and safety policies. These were also checked during an inspection of the site and premises.

Inspection team

Mark Burgess, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Martin Bragg

Ofsted Inspector

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