

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Shirley Austin
Headteacher
The Forest School
Robin Hood Lane
Winnersh
Wokingham
RG41 5NE

Dear Ms Austin

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of The Forest School

Following my remote inspection with Louise Walker, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 30 March 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken to provide education to all pupils during the current circumstances.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 (2) of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for visiting schools while routine inspections remain temporarily suspended. It was additional to the usual monitoring process for schools that are judged to require improvement.

This monitoring inspection was carried out remotely. As such, the range of evidence available to inspectors was narrower than would normally be the case during an on-site inspection. As a result, this letter provides a more limited level of assurance than our usual monitoring reports.

The inspection took place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in May 2018.

Having considered all the evidence and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 (coronavirus) on the school, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances.

Leaders and those responsible for governance should take further action to:

- improve the progress of the weakest readers and develop all pupils' vocabulary range.

Context

- Since the last inspection a new deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher have been appointed.
- Approximately 95% of pupils were educated at home during the period of partial closure in the spring term. Just under half of all pupils with education, health and care plans were attending on site. The majority of vulnerable pupils were educated remotely.
- At the time of this inspection, almost all pupils were attending on site.

Main findings

- Leaders have been proactive in developing curriculum content over the past two years. This process has continued unabated during the partial closures of schools. The headteacher has been assiduous in the drive to improve the quality of education. She and the governors have appointed new middle leaders across the curriculum. They have also made a range of new appointments to the subject teams.
- Each department now has a clear rationale for what they teach. It is firmly based on the values and vision of the school. Staff are enthusiastically implementing the improved curriculum. They are very much focused on ensuring pupils remember what they learn. In addition, teachers have organised the sequence of what they teach, to allow for common topics to be taught at the same time across subjects. For instance, history covers World War 1 while pupils learn about the poetry of the period. This helps pupils to make richer connections in their learning.
- Leaders have also reduced key stage 3 to two years and extended key stage 4 to three years. Leaders believe this means they are offering a broad and balanced curriculum. However, a few subjects currently receive only one session a fortnight at key stage 3. Leaders are aware of this. They plan to check carefully the coverage of curriculum content as the year progresses.
- Senior leaders made sure that all pupils had access to the remote learning offer. They provided pupils with devices and internet access where required. Teachers offered the usual curriculum through live lessons. Pupils were very pleased with the rapid feedback that they received about their work while learning remotely. They say they have been able to keep up with their studies well.

- There has been a high level of pupils' engagement with their learning during this period. Now that pupils have returned to school, teachers have prioritised postponed practical work. If any pupil has to learn from home again, systems are in place for them to access the curriculum remotely.
- Y11 and Y13 are pleased to be back at school and teachers report that they are working hard. Staff have largely been able to continue with the usual curriculum. This is because the vast majority engaged well with remote learning and retained well what they have learned over the past few months. Teachers continue to check for any gaps, ready to adapt what they are teaching if the need arises.
- Leaders have checked on all pupils' reading ability through the course of the year. They are aware that this has declined somewhat. Leaders have introduced several strategies, but more is needed. Pupils need to improve the range of their vocabulary across all subjects.
- Vulnerable pupils and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities have been well supported throughout the partial closure. They have been as engaged as other pupils and have made progress in their learning. Some, indeed, with the benefit of additional adult support, have made even better than expected progress in some areas. However, the weakest readers have not significantly improved their fluency and understanding. These pupils need extra support to help them quickly become better readers.
- Governors are well informed about the school. They know what advances the school has made over the past few years. They also know what challenges remain. Governors have established the values and vision of the school. This forms the basis for the school's long-term strategy. Through their assurance processes they check on what progress the school is making. They have prioritised building the capacity of leadership in the school. They have also concentrated on strengthening the school's financial position.
- The headteacher and governors have sought out external support. The school is an active participant in the local secondary schools' federation. This partnership has provided helpful professional development for their middle leaders. The local authority has also provided useful information briefings for senior leaders, as well as school improvement advice to the school.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, other senior leaders, pupils, staff, representatives of those responsible for governance and a representative of the local authority to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also considered documentation provided by the school. We looked at 144 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 109 free-text responses, and 66 replies to the staff questionnaire.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Wokingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Yasmin Maskatiya
Her Majesty's Inspector