

Inspection of Bury St Edmunds County Upper School

Beetons Way, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, IP32 6RF

Inspection dates: 15 and 17 March 2022

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Requires improvement
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Sixth-form provision	Good
Previous inspection grade	Inadequate

What is it like to attend this school?

School life at Bury St Edmunds County Upper school has improved for many pupils. Pupils, across the school, feel safe and well-looked after. There is a renewed trust in staff to deal with derogatory language and bullying. Leaders deal with these incidents robustly when they occur.

Despite pupils' new confidence in leaders, there are concerns about pupils' behaviour. Many of the pupils across the school, particularly in the sixth form, are well behaved. A significant minority of pupils, however, do not behave well around the school and, sometimes, in lessons. Their behaviour is spoiling the school experience for everyone else and remains an issue.

Pupils, and students in sixth form, access a high-quality education. A range of carefully chosen subjects supports an ambitious curriculum for all pupils, regardless of their ability or background. Additionally, there is a vibrant programme of enrichment experiences, clubs and societies available for all year groups. Sixth-form students act as excellent role models for younger pupils by, for example, leading charity weeks and participating in competitions, trips, and visits with younger year groups.

Pupils, of all ages benefit from a well-planned personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum called 'beliefs and values'. The 'beliefs and values' curriculum covers a range of topics and supports pupils well to debate complex issues in a mature and respectful way.

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

Much of the school has changed since the previous inspection. Some aspects of the school have improved at a faster pace than others. School leaders have worked determinedly to review the school's curriculum and improve the school for everyone. They have a clear understanding about where further work is needed to continue to improve the curriculum.

There is a vision, shared by all staff, to provide a high-quality curriculum for all pupils, including in the sixth form. Curriculum leaders carefully consider the important knowledge they want pupils to know. This content is laid out in a clear way from Year 9 into Year 11 and beyond into the sixth form. Teachers take time to work out what pupils in Year 9 already know. This informs their curriculum thinking and new learning builds up step-by-step. This means that pupils have the knowledge for the next stage of their course. For example, in mathematics, Year 10 pupils apply their knowledge of probability from earlier years to construct 'tree diagrams'.

Teachers have good subject knowledge. They choose appropriate activities in class that support pupils' learning well. Teachers' checks in class quickly spot gaps in

knowledge or address any misconceptions that pupils may have. Pupils quickly build their confidence and knowledge. As a result, they achieve well.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) access the same curriculum as their friends. In class, teachers make careful changes to lessons, so that pupils with SEND are not disadvantaged in any way and make similar progress to their peers. There are well-thought-out systems in place to identify pupils who find reading tricky. Staff support these pupils well to catch up and read as confidently as their peers. For these pupils, reading is not a barrier in accessing the high-quality curriculum.

Leaders recognise that pupils' behaviour is not as good as it needs to be. Some pupils struggled to readjust to school life when returning from the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of term in September 2021, swift changes were made to counter the increase in pupils finding good behaviour tricky. While small improvements in behaviour have been noticed, pupils and parents report that this is not enough. Behaviour systems and processes are not used consistently by all staff. Not enough pupils behave well.

Pupils' attendance, while improving, remains a focus for leaders. Even when taking into account the context of the pandemic, persistent absence remains high for the most vulnerable groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. While leaders have made small steps in improving the attendance for some pupils, too many pupils are not attending regularly.

The 'beliefs and values' programme is carefully considered and comprehensive. The topics teach pupils and sixth-form students how to stay safe and develop an age-appropriate understanding of healthy relationships. There is a renewed high-quality careers programme across the school, including in the sixth form. Pupils get effective, impartial advice about their next steps, whether to university, apprenticeships, or the workplace.

Leaders and the trust have an accurate view about what is now more effective and what needs to improve in the school. They are mindful of how their changes impact on staff workload and well-being. While leaders and the trust have been strengthening the school's provision, the pandemic and changes in leadership have hindered effective collaborative working with parents. Leaders have tried hard to communicate with parents. However, a number of parents are not fully onboard with the changes being made and would not recommend the school to others. Some parents remain unhappy with the provision their children receive.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders have established a positive safeguarding culture across the school. Staff are well trained to spot if a pupil is at risk of harm. Staff, across the school, know and

use the clear safeguarding systems to report concerns about pupils. Detailed safeguarding records show how leaders quickly follow up any worries about pupils.

A comprehensive, well-considered set of lessons, assemblies and external visitors teach pupils, and students in the sixth form, how to keep safe in the community and online.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The new behaviour systems are not well established and, equally, are not always applied consistently and fairly. Consequently, a significant minority of pupils in some year groups are not behaving well and are disrupting the learning of others around the school. Leaders need to review the work they have done to manage behaviour, evaluate what is working and then ensure staff implement the policy consistently and fairly.
- Persistent absence remains high, particularly for groups of vulnerable pupils, for example, disadvantaged and pupils with SEND. These pupils are missing learning. Leaders need to work with pupils and their families to ensure all pupils attend school regularly.
- Despite their efforts, leaders have not successfully re-established effective, positive working relationships with the parental community. This means that a minority of parents do not see and have a secure knowledge of the good work leaders are doing and, consequently, feel their voices and concerns are not heard. Leaders need to work more closely with parents, taking their concerns into account, so the school re-establishes itself as an important part of the local community.

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 information from Ofsted Parent View 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 school and you are 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

Unique reference number	136990
Local authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	10211955
Type of school	Secondary Comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	13 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	850
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	230
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Christine Quinn
Headteacher	Sally Kennedy
Website	http://www.buryedu.org/
Date of previous inspection	30 June – 1 July 2021, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school joined the Unity Schools Partnership in July 2020.
- The headteacher joined the school in September 2021.
- An interim board (IB) has been in place since October 2021.
- The school uses alternative provision for a small number of pupils.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

In accordance with section 13(5) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with school leaders and have taken that into account in his evaluation of the school.

- Due to exceptional circumstances communicated with the leaders, the inspection was paused for 24 hours to allow for transition between one lead and another. Damian Loneragan, Her Majesty's Inspector, led day one of the inspection and Tracy Fielding, Senior Her Majesty's Inspector, led day two.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in the following subjects: English, mathematics, science, geography and art. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke with teachers and pupils about learning and looked at a sample of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also viewed curriculum plans in PSHE and religious education.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors looked closely at safeguarding records, procedures and processes. They talked to leaders, trustees, other staff, and pupils about safeguarding in the school.
- Across both days, inspectors met with a wide range of pupils from different age groups to talk about their experiences of the school.
- Inspectors met with trustees, the chief executive officer, and members of the IB.
- Inspectors considered the 69 responses made by parents to Ofsted Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, including 68 free text responses. Inspectors also considered the 60 responses to Ofsted's online staff questionnaire and 177 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire.

Inspection team

Damian Loneragan, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Tracy Fielding, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Jason Carey	Ofsted Inspector
Shan Oswald	Ofsted Inspector
Georgina Atkinson	Ofsted Inspector
Adam Cooke	Her Majesty's Inspector
John Mitcheson	Her Majesty's Inspector

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