

# Inspection of Prior's Court School

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

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Inspection dates: 22 to 24 March 2022

## **Overall effectiveness**

## **Outstanding**

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The quality of education

**Outstanding**

Behaviour and attitudes

**Outstanding**

Personal development

**Outstanding**

Leadership and management

**Outstanding**

Sixth-form provision

**Outstanding**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Outstanding

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

**Yes**

## **What is it like to attend this school?**

Prior's Court is an exceptional school that serves some very special pupils outstandingly well. Through its intensive support, the school gives a voice to its pupils, many of whom have struggled for years to be heard. Pupils here learn to communicate their thinking, wants and needs in a range of efficient and innovative ways. As their vocabulary grows, so do their horizons. Pupils here achieve things of which they and their parents and carers could previously only have dreamed.

Pupils feel safe at the school because they know that staff will support them every step of the way. They trust adults to look after them, and they know that adults will help them to overcome challenges when these arise. Pupils experience joy in school and love exploring the extensive grounds: potting plants, playing on the swings and relaxing in the sensory spaces.

Staff pick up on the smallest indicators that pupils may be struggling and quickly address any issues they have. Pupils learn to share and interact with each other incredibly well. Close staff supervision ensures that incidents of poor behaviour are rare, and bullying is non-existent.

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

Leaders have developed a curriculum that focuses on the knowledge, skills and attributes that are most important to the pupils at the school. They gently guide pupils to manage their emotions, increase their independence and refine their communication at a pace that suits them. Every step that pupils take through the curriculum is meticulously planned and carefully assessed. Staff know exactly when to repeat prior learning and when to push pupils on to their next target. This approach prepares pupils exceptionally well to stay safe, look after their bodies and, when appropriate, to enter the world of work.

Staff at the school are extremely well trained to understand and follow the school's systems and processes. They use language and prompts that are immediately familiar to pupils. This helps pupils to concentrate on the key information that they need without any unnecessary distraction. Constant coaching and support from skilled specialists help staff to continually refine and develop their skills and understanding.

Pupils study a broad curriculum. They explore the arts and enjoy the extensive opportunities to paint, draw and sculpt. Pupils relish exercise and physical education in the gym and extensive grounds. They learn to look after their personal needs and diet, as well as how to maintain their own hygiene. Pupils learn to cook and follow recipes. Inspectors were impressed that pupils never shy away from the washing-up.

Pupils learn to recognise and understand the key words that will help them navigate the world. Some pupils are able to recognise and pronounce phonic sounds, the building blocks of reading. Staff capitalise on this, helping pupils to understand the

basics of reading. These pupils learn to identify and blend sounds and read well. For other pupils, their vocabulary is developed through pictures and symbols. Pupils navigate their pictorial 'core boards' with efficiency and ease, following the instructions their teachers set and explaining their understanding to staff.

Older students benefit greatly from the extensive and considered vocational opportunities the school provides. They learn to work in an industrial kitchen, baking bread and bakery products that are sold locally. Students learn to manage and tend to animals on the farm and nurture the trees in the orchard. These opportunities to experience genuine work are underpinned by an extensive curriculum that gradually builds students' knowledge of these professions and their independence. Well-established links with local businesses mean that many students take their first steps in employment with ongoing support from the school.

Pupils benefit from a range of activities that help to broaden their interests and prepare them for new experiences. Pupils learn to dine socially and enjoy trips with staff and family members to local restaurants. They love to use the virtual reality suite to experience different places and cultures. The swimming pool is a favourite of many. The warm water and colourful lighting provide a wonderful, multi-sensory experience that pupils find both relaxing and exciting.

Therapeutic and education staff work closely together to identify pupils' emerging strengths, ambitions and interests. They cater for these in school and feed these into planning discussions with external agencies and families. Specialist staff help families navigate the different agencies that will help them in the future. The school is a key partner when developing pupils' plans and provides extensive support to help prepare pupils for adulthood.

Staff at the school feel well supported. They appreciate the extensive training and career opportunities that the school affords them, and many are promoted into more senior posts during their time here. Staff have given 100% during the pandemic and are, understandably, feeling the strain. Leaders are aware of this and are busy recruiting new staff to bolster their ranks. Importantly, staff believe in the vital work of the school, with one member of staff telling inspectors, 'I always wanted to do something that makes a difference – here we get to celebrate the incredible things these children can achieve.'

Leaders, trustees and the chief executive officer understand their roles and keep a sharp focus on maintaining and improving the quality of the school. They have ambitious plans for the future and know that they have to recruit, train and retain the right staff to achieve their goals. They are outward looking and work well with other schools in the sector to share their own strengths and to learn from others.

The site is well maintained and managed. Health and safety issues are quickly picked up and addressed. Policies are well designed, fit for purpose and communicated clearly and efficiently with those who need them.

## Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff receive extensive training to help them identify concerns, particularly when pupils struggle to articulate these themselves. They quickly and efficiently pass on information to leaders, which helps them to protect pupils and support families. Leaders' work with a range of local authorities is particularly impressive. They know exactly whom to contact when pupils need help and record their conversations and actions in detail.

Pupils learn to keep themselves safe. They are able to communicate their worries in efficient ways. Specialist staff are always on hand to help pupils to communicate and unpick their concerns, should they need a little more help.

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

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	132003
<b>DfE registration number</b>	869/6014
<b>Local authority</b>	West Berkshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	10214653
<b>Type of school</b>	Other independent special school
<b>School category</b>	Independent special school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	5 to 20
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Gender of pupils in the sixth form</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	63
<b>Of which, number on roll in the sixth form</b>	17
<b>Number of part-time pupils</b>	0
<b>Proprietor</b>	Priors Court Foundation
<b>Chair</b>	Chris Barrett
<b>Headteacher</b>	Sue Piper
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£95,315
<b>Telephone number</b>	01635 247 202
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.priorscourt.org.uk">www.priorscourt.org.uk</a>
<b>Email address</b>	<a href="mailto:mail@priorscourt.org.uk">mail@priorscourt.org.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	21 to 23 November 2017

## Information about this school

- Prior's Court is an independent special school for pupils with autism spectrum disorder and complex social and communication needs. All of the pupils at the school have an education, health and care plan.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

## Information about this inspection

Inspectors 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.

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

- The inspectors met with the headteacher, senior leaders and representatives of the proprietary body.
- Inspectors did deep dives in these subjects: reading, communication, physical development and personal, social, health and economic education. Inspectors talked to subject leaders, staff and pupils, visited lessons, and looked at pupils' work. Inspectors then considered a wider range of evidence to explore the effectiveness of the curriculum.
- The inspectors reviewed the arrangements for safeguarding by scrutinising safeguarding records and interviewing staff and through discussions with pupils.
- The inspectors considered the views of parents through the Ofsted survey, Parent View. They gathered the views of pupils and staff through their respective surveys, and interviews and discussions conducted throughout the inspection.

## Inspection team

Daniel Lambert, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Alan Johnson

Ofsted Inspector

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