

Inspection of Alder Bridge School

Bridge House, Mill Lane, Padworth, Reading, Berkshire RG7 4JU

Inspection dates: 21 to 23 September 2022

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Early years provision

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Inadequate

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

The whole Alder Bridge School community looks after each other with increasing levels of care and attention. Pupils learn the values of hard work, respect, and tolerance. They take pride in the close friendships that they form with each other. Although bullying is rare, pupils know that it will be dealt with quickly. Typically, pupils behave well in lessons. Any minor silliness is quickly and calmly dealt with. Consequently, pupils feel happy and safe in school.

Leaders and staff are ambitious for all pupils' achievement, right from when they join in Kindergarten, to when they leave to start their GCSE studies at secondary school. Pupils' character is typically well developed. Pupils learn to persevere as they follow their interests and explore new ideas in the projects they undertake. They especially like learning about the outdoor environment in the woodland that forms part of the school's grounds. However, there are gaps in what pupils learn about when studying personal, social and health education (PSHE), including when learning about careers.

Although there has been considerable recent change in the school, leaders are doing much to stabilise the school's systems and processes, so that they are more effective than in the past. However, there is still some work to do to ensure these work securely well.

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

Leaders and teachers have raised their expectations of pupils' achievement. In particular, ambition and provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is much improved. New procedures for assessing pupils' individual needs have led to a sharper understanding of what each pupil can do, and what a pupil may be struggling with. The educational needs coordinator (ENCO) has made sure that each child gets the right help they need to succeed. Parents noted that this work has made a positive difference to how well pupils settle and achieve in school.

Pupils' learning covers a broad range of traditional subjects, as well as specialist subjects that are associated with the Steiner Waldorf philosophy of education. Primarily, pupils are taught through cross-curricular projects as part of their daily 'main lesson'. Teachers value using the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship's curriculum and resources to help structure what they teach. Pupils are encouraged to extend their knowledge further in subjects that they are particularly interested in. Consequently, pupils develop knowledge in a broad range of subjects that deepens over their time in school.

The curriculum is typically well organised and sequenced so that it becomes progressively harder over time. For example, in 'handwork', each project requires pupils to master a more complex knitting stitch or sewing technique. Pupils take great pride in the beautiful creations they make. In mathematics, children in the Kindergarten are introduced to basic mathematical concepts through practical

activities such as weighing vegetables, before they learn about mathematical calculations higher up the school.

Teachers typically have good subject knowledge. Subject leaders in some subjects help other teachers to know how best to teach and assess pupils' knowledge. Teachers adapt what they teach to make sure that pupils embed their knowledge before moving on to harder work. This is especially making a positive difference to pupils' understanding in mathematics.

Over time, pupils develop a love of reading. In the Kindergarten, pupils are able to explore books. Leaders have introduced a new phonics scheme. They are starting to check that adults teach this well. Most pupils learn to read with fluency and expression by the end of key stage 2.

The school prioritises developing pupils' character. There is a strong culture and tradition of talking and discussing that starts in the Kindergarten. During 'ring time', teachers use rhymes, songs and movement to help younger children develop routines and work together as part of a community. Older pupils love participating in sporting activities with other Steiner communities in the annual 'Olympics'. Pupils enjoy practical activities such as learning to play a musical instrument and playing in the school orchestra. Pupils develop a wider understanding of community, for example through supporting a local food bank charity and learning about refugees in assemblies.

Some aspects of pupils' personal development are less well developed. Although pupils do have some careers education, they do not have enough access to information about different types of careers. In addition, leaders have not checked that all of the PSHE curriculum is taught sufficiently well, particularly relationships and sex education.

Trustees are determined that the school succeeds. Changes to how the school runs, for example by adding in a 'school leader' to oversee the strategic leadership and management of the school, have led to improvements. However, there has been some change in staffing and several staff are new to the school, including the school leader. Some monitoring procedures are in their early stages and not yet sufficiently embedded, such as how leaders monitor teachers' work.

Trustees have worked hard to make sure that their duties as proprietors are fulfilled. This includes that the site is well maintained and safe, and that all statutory duties, including financial requirements, are met. Some record-keeping, including records relating to health and safety, is disorganised.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Well-trained and knowledgeable safeguarding leaders make sure that there is a culture of safeguarding in the school. They liaise with external agencies when necessary. Recruitment procedures are secure.

Staff know the signs to look out for that might indicate that a pupil is at risk. They use early help forms to record small concerns. Staff understand that this contributes to the school's collective responsibility to keep pupils safe. In addition, new procedures include using pupil progress discussions to routinely consider pupils' safety and well-being.

While the school's approach to safeguarding is more organised than in the past, some records are not well enough coordinated, which means that information about a pupils' well-being or safety could potentially be missed.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Information about pupils is kept in different places. This potentially makes it hard for leaders to identify any patterns of concern. Leaders and trustees should ensure that recorded information about pupils' well-being and safety is well-coordinated.
- The school's approach to ensuring that each pupil receives their full entitlement to PSHE, in particular to relationships and sex education, is not well established. Consequently, some pupils cannot recall being taught about sex and relationships in an age-appropriate way. Leaders need to ensure that pupils are taught all aspects of the PSHE curriculum that they have planned.
- Leaders' approach to careers education is still being developed. Although pupils have some access to careers advice, the information they have receive about different careers is not wide enough. Leaders need to continue to refine their approach to teaching about careers so that pupils are well informed about the different choices they will have in the future.

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.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 110175 |
| DfE registration number | 869/6013 |
| Local authority | West Berkshire |
| Inspection number | 10232294 |
| Type of school | Other independent school |
| School category | Independent school |
| Age range of pupils | 3 to 14 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 47 |
| Number of part-time pupils | 16 |
| Proprietor | Alder Bridge Association for Steiner-Waldorf Education |
| Chair | Paul Jenkins |
| Headteacher | Simon Birch |
| Annual fees (day pupils) | £7,320 to £10,830 |
| Telephone number | 01189 714471 |
| Website | www.alderbridge.org.uk |
| Email address | office@alderbridge.org.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 26–28 February 2019 |

Information about this school

- Alder Bridge School adheres to the International Waldorf Steiner curriculum developed by the Austrian philosopher Dr Rudolf Steiner.
- The school has an exemption from the literacy, mathematics and assessment aspects of the learning and development requirements of the early years foundation stage. This applies to the younger children within the school's Kindergarten.
- Some younger pupils attend part time. Parents and carers have decided to electively home educate these children for part of the week.
- The school has a school leader rather than a headteacher. In keeping with Steiner tradition, there is also a 'college of teachers'. The current school leader was appointed in September 2022 on a temporary interim basis.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The school's most recent inspection took place on 26 to 28 February 2019. Two subsequent progress monitoring inspections were conducted on 26 November 2019 and 17 March 2022.

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.

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 their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors met with the interim school leader, the ENCO and the Kindergarten leader. The lead inspector met with a group of trustees, including the chair of trustees. She also held a telephone conversation with the chief executive officer of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship, who have provided some external support to the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: reading, mathematics and 'handwork'. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders to discuss the curriculum organisation, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. The lead inspector also discussed the wider curriculum with staff and pupils, and explored a wider sample of pupils' work.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors checked the single central register, and health and safety and safeguarding records. Inspectors discussed the school's safeguarding procedures with leaders and staff. Inspectors spoke to pupils about their knowledge and understanding of keeping safe.

- Inspectors took account of the responses to Ofsted’s online surveys for staff and parents. Inspectors spoke to some parents as they dropped off their children in the morning.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of additional documentation relating to pupils’ behaviour and attendance, leadership and management of the school and the independent school standards.

Inspection team

Catherine Old, lead inspector

His Majesty’s Inspector

Hilary Macdonald

His Majesty’s Inspector

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