

Inspection of an outstanding school: Abbey Court Foundation Special School

Rede Court Road, Strood, Rochester, Kent ME2 3SP

Inspection dates:

7 and 8 March 2023

Outcome

Abbey Court Foundation Special School continues to be an outstanding school.

What is it like to attend this school?

Abbey Court provides an inspirational physical and emotional environment in which pupils thrive and enjoy their education. A safe, nurturing atmosphere is combined with a sense of ambition and determination that every pupil should benefit from a rich, broad learning experience – and they do.

Communication, personal development, and safety sit at the heart of the curriculum. Staff expertly use diverse communication methods and are persistent in finding an approach that works for everyone. Pupils learn to communicate, starting with 'stop' and 'more', to make choices and to engage positively in their personalised curriculum.

Wherever needed, pupils receive effective support to manage their own emotions. Some pupils respond well to frequent small rewards, others to movement breaks or a change of environment. Learning continues uninterrupted and pupils treat each other kindly.

Larkin Farm, the school's farm, provides a wealth of opportunities for pupils to extend their communication and independence skills as well as to learn first hand about science topics, such as 'water'. A range of farm animals frequently greet pupils at the start of the school day and visit at breaktimes. 'Tonto', the much-loved horse simulator, enables pupils to extend physical, social and linguistic skills within a familiar, supported environment.

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

Changes in leadership and major building works have not slowed the drive for continuous improvement. The curriculum on offer at Abbey Court School is exceptional. Leaders have undertaken research and have considered the experiences of staff, pupils, and families. The collective school community's ambition for pupils is reflected in a curriculum that more than mirrors the breadth of a mainstream curriculum. The content of each subject has been considered, and planned, in the finest detail. Consequently, the school offers a unique curriculum, that enables pupils to acquire new knowledge while respecting their

ages and specific needs. For example, literature texts, for older pupils, include a Shakespeare play with adaptations to make this accessible.

The curriculum is implemented, as designed, with unique modifications for every pupil from the early years to sixth form. Staff, including those at the early stages of their careers, are highly skilled. They benefit from frequent training and highly effective support. Staff seamlessly use augmentative and alternative communication devices, systems, and tools in all lessons. For example, many pupils learn to use eye transfer boards to make a choice. Some learn to use eye gaze and computer assisted technologies, leading to more complex communication. Voice output aids are used by pupils from Reception onwards and other systems, such as objects of reference, signing, picture exchange, comment boards and communication books are used widely, as well as speech, to develop and extend pupils' communication skills.

A love of literature and a culture for reading are apparent throughout the school. Reading is taught daily, and pupils take books home to share with families. Pupils learn to identify letters and sounds in a systematic way and enjoy the routines of combining sounds to make a word. Reading books are accurately matched to sounds that pupils know. Texts, for all year groups are carefully selected to support learning topics, such as 'The weather', as well as to ensure that pupils access literature of different styles and genres. Adults read aloud to pupils, individually or in groups, every day. Pupils access the school and town libraries regularly. Signs and symbols used consistently throughout the school, contribute to the immersive environment of communication and literacy.

Pupils' highly specialist learning needs are refined into termly individual education plans. These plans identify '3 important things to learn' and then set out the learning and support strategies required. Evidence of progress towards these individual targets is captured across the breadth of the curriculum and used to inform next steps. Staff are adept at 'minute by minute' assessment, swiftly adapting learning activities, or supporting behaviour, in response to pupils' engagement and progress. Staff know pupils very well. They judge sensitively when to persist in seeking a particular response. Time is used well, and a positive air of learning and purpose pervades each classroom.

All pupils benefit from extensive, considered wider learning experiences. For example, a residential trip is worked towards over time, starting with younger pupils staying at school for tea and then a sleepover, eventually culminating in longer residential trips. Other experiences, such as a visit to the Royal Opera House, and participating in a community singing event, contribute strongly to social and cultural development. The school farm offers diverse opportunities, including developing independence, taking responsibility and extensive work-related skills.

Staff enjoy working at Abbey Court. They feel respected and supported. Staff know that leaders and governors consider the impact of any changes before they are introduced. For example, recent changes to annual review paperwork have reduced workload and have provided families with helpful information.

The school governing body holds a clear strategic role. Governors provide effective challenge and support to school leaders and act as strong ambassadors for the school.

Most parents who spoke with inspectors or who took part in Ofsted's Parent View survey, expressed highly positive views. Parents praised staff and the school facilities and commented on their child's happiness and progress. In the words of one parent: 'Abbey Court is a fantastic school. They offer so much to the children....the sensory area, Tonto the horse simulator, the hydro pool and the farm are outstanding.....all of the staff work as one collective team in meeting the school's vision and values all of the time.'

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Safeguarding is integral to all that the school does. A focus on safeguarding is ongoing, through training, updates, and staff briefings. Leaders and staff are alert to risks and raise concerns quickly, so that pupils and families receive support exactly when needed. When required, leaders work well with health professionals, social workers, and other agencies.

Safety runs visibly through the taught curriculum and pupils are given a strong voice in their own care and safeguarding. For example, pupils able to express a preference, select which adult provides their intimate care. Enabling pupils to communicate 'stop' is a shared school priority.

Background

When we have judged a school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. This is called an ungraded inspection and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

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.

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	119052
Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	10242150
Type of school	All-through
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	199
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	20
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Jane Heyes
Headteacher	Vicky Aspin
Website	http://www.abbeycourt.medway.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	14 September 2017 under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Following the retirement of the previous headteacher, the former deputy headteacher was appointed as headteacher. She commenced the role in January 2023.
- Abbey Court is a special school for pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties. Some pupils have additional needs such as autistic spectrum disorder, physical disability, sensory impairment, and medical needs. Some pupils have life limiting and/or life-threatening medical conditions. All pupils at the school have an education, health, and care plan.
- The school has been undergoing major rebuilding works to bring the early years foundation stage to key stage 4 pupils together on one site. Building works are due for completion shortly. Currently the school operates from two sites. A second site is located at Rede Court Road, about one mile away. This site will cater for key stage 5 pupils, with further development to support the curriculum hoped for.
- The school has its own farm, Larkin Farm, located on the same site as the main school.

- The school does not use alternative provision.
- The school meets the requirements of the Baker Clause.
- Inspectors were aware during this inspection of a serious incident involving a child who used to attend this school that had occurred since the previous inspection. While Ofsted does not have the power to investigate incidents of this kind, actions taken by the school in response to this incident were considered alongside the other evidence available at the time of the inspection to inform inspectors' judgements. The serious incident did not happen at school.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school 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.
- During the inspection, inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, subject leaders and class teachers. Inspectors spoke to pupils as they visited classes and throughout the school day. The lead inspector spoke with a representative from Medway local authority.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including the single central record of recruitment checks. Inspectors spoke with leaders and staff about training and their understanding of safeguarding. Leaders spoke to pupils and observed them closely to assess their feelings of safety.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: communication and early reading, science including the farm curriculum, personal, social, health and citizenship education, computing and art. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, reviewed curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, met with teachers, spoke to pupils about their learning and reviewed samples of pupils' work. The lead inspector observed different methods of communication, including eye gaze technology, comment boards, voice output communication aids and signing. The lead inspector listened to pupils reading aloud to members of school staff.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour at the start of the school day, during lessons and as they moved around the school throughout the day. Inspectors spoke to leaders, staff and pupils about expectations for behaviour.
- Inspectors reviewed a wide range of the school's documentation, including self-evaluation and school improvement documentation and minutes of governing body meetings. Inspectors also reviewed planning for curriculum subjects, pupils' individual education plans and reviews of education, health and care plans.
- Inspectors considered the views of parents who they spoke with during the inspection as well as views expressed through the confidential questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View. Inspectors evaluated the views of staff, through meetings and via the Ofsted online questionnaires.

Inspection team

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His Majesty's Inspector

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