

Inspection of a good school: Watermill School

Turnhurst Road, Chell, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire ST6 6JZ

Inspection dates: 14 and 15 November 2023

Outcome

Watermill School continues to be a good school.

The headteacher of this school is Jonathon May. This school is part of Orchard Community Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the senior executive leader, Rob Johnstone, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Gill Howell.

What is it like to attend this school?

Staff cherish and value their time with pupils at Watermill School. Staff are quietly determined that every lesson will help pupils develop the skills and knowledge they need to thrive. Recent changes to the curriculum are improving outcomes for pupils. Leaders are determined to make further changes to make sure every moment counts.

Pupils have various special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) needs that could affect how well they learn. Staff and families work together to provide the right support pupils need to overcome any barriers to learning and life. Staff meet pupils' sensory, physical, medical and learning needs well.

The school ensures that each child believes in themselves and their ability to make their own choices. Pupils are supported to consider alternative ways of dealing with negative feelings and emotions. Consequently, pupils behave well in lessons, and at breaktime and lunchtime, because they feel safe and valued.

Pupils make the most of the opportunities to develop their own interests and hobbies and thrive. An impressive range of school clubs, such as music, dance and sports, enrich pupils' time at Watermill. Positive mental health is prioritised through opportunities to engage with nature, talk and build lasting friendships.

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

The school is ambitious about what pupils will learn while at Watermill. Across all subjects, the school has developed a demanding curriculum that sets out the important knowledge that pupils should know and remember. There are many good examples of

how the school has sequenced this knowledge so that pupils' learning builds over time. This helps pupils learn and remember more. However, within the same subjects, some series of lessons are not as well sequenced. In these instances, the school has not thought carefully enough about how pupils' learning fits together over time. This sometimes makes learning and remembering harder for pupils.

The school understands pupils' varying SEND and works tirelessly to put the right support in place. The provision and support for pupils with sensory processing needs is a strength. Carefully considered support helps pupils to sort and interpret sensations from their bodies, the environment and the world around them. For example, some pupils use sensory play with paint or sand to develop how to use tactile touch senses to regulate their feelings.

The school has put in place the right communication systems for pupils who need help, which are used throughout the school day. For example, inspectors observed some staff using picture or symbol exchange for pupils to request different food during snack times. Some staff are skilled at carefully considering how pupils understand language, and do not overload pupils' listening and processing skills. However, in some cases, staff use too many words, which confuses pupils and makes it harder for them to learn.

Reading is a priority. From the early years, all staff enthuse about the joy and wonder of reading and endeavour to help all pupils become confident readers. Daily whole-class reading sessions are well supported by signing, symbols and appropriate communication systems. These help pupils develop an awareness of phonics and broaden their vocabulary. A well-used school library provides opportunities to develop reading skills and a chance to find books to enrich pupils' knowledge of other subjects.

Calmness and care permeate all classes. A welcome smile and cheerful 'Good morning' await the pupils as they arrive each morning. Staff spend time talking with pupils and helping them when times are tough. Staff work with parents so that pupils attend as often as possible. Consequently, attendance is improving over time.

At Watermill, pupils are confident, happy and have real strength of character. Inspirational visitors with their own SEND are a source of inspiration. These share the message that it is 'okay to be different' and have a unique personality. The school has prioritised pupils' mental health and well-being. For instance, pupils regularly visit local country parks and are encouraged to get involved with nature and the natural world. Inspectors observed pupils caring for rescued hedgehogs from a local charity.

Staff are overwhelmingly positive about the school. They feel that they work in an environment that cares for them just as much as the pupils. Parents and carers with whom inspectors spoke often felt relieved that they had found a school that cared for their children in the way they always hoped for. One parent, whose views were echoed by others, said they no longer needed to fight for their child; they had found a school that would strive for the best for their child.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school's curriculum is not always coherently planned and sequenced towards cumulatively sufficient knowledge for future learning. In some units, there is a lack of clarity about what knowledge should be taught. The school needs to ensure that the planned curriculum in all subjects and for all pupils clearly defines, in a logical sequence, the subject knowledge that leaders intend pupils to gain over time.
- Some staff do not always ensure that their own speaking, interactions and communications support pupils' understanding of what is being taught. In those cases, well-intentioned interactions between staff and pupils are based on too many words, which confuses some pupils. The school needs to ensure that all staff carefully and precisely use language to make instructions and communication clear for all pupils, including those with complex speech, language and communication needs.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. 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.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the predecessor school to be good in May 2013.

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' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	146503
Local authority	Stoke-on-Trent
Inspection number	10290656
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	3 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	237
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Gill Howell
Headteacher	Jonathon May
Website	www.watermillschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Since the last inspection, the school joined the Orchard Community Trust, in July 2019.
- The school is currently going through significant expansion to the current school with the development of a new additional build at the former Middlehurst school site.
- The school does not currently use any form of alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.

- During the inspection, inspectors completed deep dives in the following subjects: reading, mathematics, physical development and personal, social, health and economic education. In these subjects, they visited lessons, looked at pupils' work and talked with pupils and staff about how these subjects were taught. Inspectors also looked at other subjects in less detail to check how they were planned and taught.
- Inspectors observed informal times to evaluate safeguarding and pupils' behaviour.
- During the inspection, the inspectors had formal meetings with the headteacher, senior leaders, subject teachers, the chair of governors and pupils. They also talked informally with parents, carers, pupils and staff to gather general information about school life.
- An inspector spoke with a representative of the local authority.
- An inspector also spoke with representatives of the multi-academy trust.
- An inspector met with the school council members to talk about their role and how they have been involved in developments at the school.
- An inspector joined the parents' craft group to talk about their experiences of Watermill School and the progress that their children were making.

Inspection team

Chris Pollitt, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Sarahjane Cuncannon Edwards

Ofsted Inspector

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