

The Willows School

Address: Locksley Drive, Thurcroft, Rotherham, South Yorkshire, S66 9NT

Unique reference number (URN): 149642

Inspection report: 25 November 2025

Exceptional	
Strong standard	● ●
Expected standard	● ● ● ●
Needs attention	●
Urgent improvement	

✔ **Safeguarding standards met**

The safeguarding standards are met. This means that leaders and/or those responsible for governance and oversight fulfil their specific responsibilities and have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and concerns are actively identified, acted upon and managed. As a result, pupils are made safer and feel safe.

How we evaluate safeguarding

When we inspect schools for safeguarding, they can have the following outcomes:

- **Met:** The school has an open and positive culture of safeguarding. All legal requirements are met.
- **Not met:** The school has not created an open and positive culture of safeguarding. Not all legal requirements are met.

Strong standard ●

Attendance and behaviour

Strong standard ●

Leaders have very high expectations around attendance. Their actions identify and remove barriers to attendance at considerable pace. Well-trained staff act quickly to engage with families when attendance causes concern. Pupils eagerly strive to achieve the 'golden egg' award, which encourages them to attend regularly. Leaders have forged positive relationships with families, which has helped to rectify any previous difficulties pupils may have had with attendance before joining the school. This has all contributed to attendance being above the national average for a number of years. This includes those pupils who are disadvantaged.

Pupils are motivated to learn, and enjoy school because they thrive in an environment where expectations for behaviour are high. They are kept safe and behave very well. Staff respond effectively to pupils' individual needs. For example, when pupils struggle to manage their emotions, staff are extremely successful in helping them to manage their feelings and regulate their behaviour. Incidents of poor behaviour or bullying are rare. When they do occur, staff deal with them promptly, which ensures minimal impact on learning. Pupils develop resilience and show respect for others. Older pupils, including those in the post-16 provision, act as excellent role models, showing consideration for others and pride in their school.

Personal development and wellbeing

Strong standard ●

The school places pupils' personal development at the centre of its work. Staff expertly support pupils to become reflective, confident individuals. The curriculum promotes health, wellbeing and essential life skills. As pupils move through the school, they grow into increasingly independent young people, who take an active role in their local community. The school identifies barriers to pupils accessing the school's personal development and wellbeing offer. Staff take effective action to remove them. This includes highly effective key workers, who liaise with individual families.

Staff skilfully prepare pupils for adulthood by providing a wide range of opportunities that build their interests and support their wellbeing. Pupils take part in outdoor education, horticulture, carpentry, bricklaying and broadcasting on the school radio station. These experiences help them socialise confidently and communicate effectively with others. The school takes pride in its 'learning in the community' programme. Pupils volunteer locally, learn to travel independently and, as they get older, mentor younger pupils. A suitable careers programme prepares pupils for further education, employment or training. Pupils have meaningful work experience placements that match their aspirations and interests.

The school plans the personal, social and health education curriculum carefully. Pupils learn age-appropriate content for relationships and sex education. Staff revisit key themes to keep pupils safe, including consent and online safety. Pupils develop awareness of diversity and the importance of treating others with respect. They explore different religions and topics that promote fundamental British values. For example, pupils recently enjoyed a visit from the local mayor, which helped them to learn about the role of local government.

The school encourages pupils to contribute to decision-making through the pupil parliament. Pupils enjoy a broad range of extra-curricular activities, including street dance, art and sports. These extend learning and nurture their talents. Residential experiences develop resilience, independence and self-care skills.

Expected standard

Achievement

Expected standard 

Pupils are generally well prepared for the next stage of their education, employment or training. They acquire secure knowledge and skills across much of the curriculum by the end of their time at the school. Overall, pupils achieve well from their individual starting points and in line with their education, health and care plan related targets. Pupils' communication and language skills develop well from their starting points. They develop essential knowledge in reading and mathematics. The school's structured approaches to the teaching of mathematics and phonics enable pupils to build their knowledge and skills effectively. Staff provide extra support when necessary to help pupils to become fluent readers and confident mathematicians.

Pupils study academic and vocational courses. They gain a range of accreditations by the end of their time at the school. Staff support pupils to master important life skills, such as how to manage money and how to plan to travel safely. Pupils are proud of these achievements that help them become more independent. By the end of post-16 provision, pupils achieve increasing confidence to socialise and be ready to enter the world of work.

Inclusion

Expected standard 

The school's 'I can' ethos drives its ambition to give pupils equal opportunities and the best possible start in life. Staff use pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans to shape learning and personalise support. The school collaborates purposefully with external professionals, including the virtual school, speech and language therapists and social workers. This ensures that pupils and families receive the right support.

Leaders' actions ensure that the individual needs of pupils are quickly identified and well supported. As a result, pupils are keen to participate in learning. Staff benefit from training that helps them to make learning accessible. This includes effective consideration of pupils' sensory needs and a focus on developing their communication. Staff in the 'pupil support team' provide pupils with skilled and effective support for their mental health and welfare. Clear routines and warm staff interactions build pupils' confidence and independence.

Staff check closely that pupils make positive progress towards their EHC plan requirements. This includes disadvantaged pupils and looked-after children. When additional help is required, staff respond with well-judged support or extra teaching. The school uses funding, such as the pupil premium, effectively to enhance learning, broaden pupils' experiences and equip them for adulthood.

Leadership and governance

Expected standard 

Governors and trustees provide appropriate direction and support for the school. They have a secure understanding of the school's priorities and strengths. For example, they are justifiably proud of the school's success in ensuring high attendance. They work purposefully with leaders and staff to shape change inclusively and make decisions in the best interests of pupils. The right policies, procedures and resources are in place to keep pupils safe and to help them learn. Leaders ensure that pupils, staff and families feel heard, included and valued. Leaders carefully consider statutory documentation, such as education, health and care plans and personal education plans to remove barriers and inform teaching.

Leaders are taking appropriate steps to ensure sustained improvements. Staff benefit from continued opportunities to improve their expertise. This includes support and training within the trust, external professional guidance and coaching from colleagues. These have a positive impact on the education and care that pupils receive. Leaders establish positive relationships with parents and carers, as well as external agencies. Parents typically praise the way the school makes a significant and positive difference to their children's lives. Staff are a close-knit team; they are dedicated and proud to work at the school.

Post 16 provision

Expected standard 

The school provides an inclusive post-16 provision, where students enjoy studying in new on-site accommodation. Staff create a well-designed environment that nurtures students to become independent, polite young adults. They prepare students effectively for adulthood and independent living. Students feel valued and respected as part of the school community. Those who have experienced difficulties in previous schools receive skilled guidance and support, enabling them to succeed.

Students, including disadvantaged students, progress well from their starting points through personalised teaching and support. Staff meet students' individual needs well. Learning aligns closely with the outcomes in students' education, health and care plans. In mathematics, for example, students access 3 curriculum pathways, including options to gain qualifications.

The school offers a broad range of subjects, including vocational courses, such as horticulture, food hygiene and bricklaying. Students can gain a range of qualifications, which the school is looking to expand. Residential experiences and access to The Duke of Edinburgh's Award programme strengthen students' personal development. Students also benefit from volunteering and work experience. These experiences help them to develop confidence in accessing local amenities and interacting with others. They are well prepared for their next steps in life. Most students move on to suitable destinations.

Needs attention

Curriculum and teaching

Needs attention 

All pupils attending the school have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Over recent years, the individual needs of some younger pupils joining the school have changed significantly. Leaders have not always ensured that aspects of the curriculum content have adapted quickly enough to meet some of these pupils' needs. Leaders are addressing this through a revised curriculum, but this has only recently been introduced. This revised curriculum is sequenced to build knowledge and skills effectively across different subjects. However, in some subjects, the approaches to identifying where pupils have gaps in knowledge are variable. Where this is the case, staff do not address these gaps as well as they could.

In reading and mathematics, the school has effective systems that identify any gaps in knowledge, when pupils join the school. Staff use this information well to design lessons that help pupils quickly catch up. Leaders rightly identify that some pupils do not catch up as quickly as they could in writing. Here, the curriculum content and how it is organised are being developed to help address this. This work is in its infancy. Therefore, it is too early to judge its impact.

What it's like to be a pupil at this school

Pupils eagerly attend this inclusive and nurturing school. Staff welcome them warmly each morning. Pupils' high attendance reflects their enthusiasm. A calm, friendly atmosphere helps pupils, including those in the post-16 provision, feel happy, settled and ready to learn. Pupils benefit from classrooms and outdoor spaces that are thoughtfully designed to promote their wellbeing. Staff know pupils well. They build trusting relationships that remove barriers to attendance and learning. Parents and carers value the school's significant, positive impact on their children's happiness and achievements. Pupils feel respected and cared for. They trust adults to support them with any concerns.

The school prepares pupils effectively for adulthood and life beyond school by providing a rich range of experiences. Staff place each pupil's education, health and care plan at the heart of their learning journey, using it to guide teaching and wider support. Staff are highly adept in meeting pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs. This helps pupils to engage in learning, enjoy school and thrive.

Pupils respond positively to the school's high expectations. They are eager to succeed and behave well. They feel safe and show positive attitudes. Most pupils achieve well during their time at the school. Leaders have recently refined the curriculum to meet pupils' needs more precisely. While well considered, this revised approach is at an early stage. The school's plans to check how effectively pupils learn and remember the new content are not fully developed.

A wide range of extra-curricular clubs, local area visits, curriculum-linked trips and visitors support pupils' personal development effectively. Staff design residential experiences with

great care. Pupils value these highly. Older pupils, including post-16 students, deepen their skills and aspirations through work experience, volunteering and participation in The Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

Next steps

- Leaders should ensure that the revised curriculum is implemented effectively and meets the needs of all pupils.
 - Leaders should ensure that staff consistently identify gaps in pupils' knowledge and act swiftly to address them.
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About this inspection

This school is part of Nexus Multi Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Warren Carratt, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Rachel Potts.

Inspectors carried out this full inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Following our renewed inspection framework, all inspections are now led by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) or by Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) who have previously served as HMIs.

Inspectors spoke with members of the school's senior leadership team, several curriculum leaders, designated safeguarding leads, the school's resource manager, 4 members of the academy council, including the chair of the academy council, the chair and vice-chair of the trust board and the CEO of the trust during the inspection.

The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

The inspectors confirmed the following information about the school:

All pupils have an education, health and care plan. The school caters for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and those with speech, language and communication needs.

The school does not currently make use of alternative provision.

The school joined the trust in September 2023.

The school offers post-16 provision for students up to the age of 19.

The number of pupils attending the school has increased significantly since the previous inspection.

Lead inspector:

Stephanie Innes-Taylor, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:


Mary Cook, His Majesty's Inspector

Daniel Short, His Majesty's Inspector

Nathan Lowe, His Majesty's Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

The data was used by the inspector(s) during the inspection. More recent data may have been published since the inspection took place.

 This data is from 25 November 2025

School and pupil context

Total pupils

190

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils currently at this school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

School capacity

150

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils who can attend the school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

55.97%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years.

Pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan

100.00%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan. This covers pupils with more support than is available through special educational needs support.

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

0.00%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with reported special educational support needs at the school.

Location deprivation

Well above average

What does this mean?

Based on the English Indices of Deprivation (2019) and the school's location, we have calculated whether the school is located in a more or less deprived area.

Resourced Provision or SEND Unit (if applicable)

No resourced provision

What does this mean?

Whether school has Resourced Provision or SEND unit (if applicable).

Type of specialist provision (if applicable)

SLCN - Speech, language and Communication, MLD - Moderate Learning Difficulty

What does this mean?

The type of Special Educational Needs provision provided at the school (if applicable).

Destinations after 16

Destinations after 16

Percentage of pupils staying in education or employment for at least 2 terms after the end of secondary school (key stage 4).

Year	This school
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2022 leavers (revised)	100%
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Absence

Overall absence

The percentage of all possible mornings and afternoons missed due to absence from school (for whatever reason, whether authorised or unauthorised) across all pupils.

Year	This school
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2024/25 (1 term)	6.0%
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2023/24 (3 term)	6.5%
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Persistent absence

The percentage of pupils missing 10% or more of their possible mornings and afternoons.

Year	This school
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2024/25 (1 term)	14.9%
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2023/24 (3 term)	14.5%
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Our grades explained

Exceptional 

Practice is exceptional: of the highest standard nationally. Other schools can learn from it.

Strong standard 

The school reaches a strong standard. Leaders are working above the standard expected of them.

Expected standard ●

The school is fulfilling the expected standard of education and/or care. This means they are following the standard set out in statutory and non-statutory legislation and the professional standards expected of them.

Needs attention ●

The expected standards are not met but leaders are likely able to make the necessary improvements.

Urgent improvement ●

The school needs to make urgent improvements to provide the expected standard of education and/or care.

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