

Inspection report

Thornhill Park School

Independent special school

DfES ref no: 394/6015

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 6 – 9 March 2006

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

Thornhill Park School, in the City of Sunderland, is an independent day and residential special school for children with autistic spectrum disorder and Asperger Syndrome. It was originally set up in 1980 by a small group of parents, concerned at the lack of appropriate provision for their children. The school is accredited by the National Autistic Society.

Thornhill Park admits learners between the ages of 4 - 19 years, all of whom have statements of special educational need. The school seeks to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, which follows the principles of the National Curriculum. This is adjusted because the span of attainment of the learners is very broad. Learners also study the school's *Essential Curriculum* and *Alternative Curriculum*. Post-16 students study the school's *Curriculum for Life*. A 24-hour programme is provided to ensure consistency of management across learning and living.

The school draws from a wide area, with learners coming from as far afield as the Shetland Islands and Lincolnshire. It occupies four separate sites situated across the city. On three sites the accommodation includes both education and residential provision. These sites are also registered as children's homes with the Commission for Social Care Inspection. The fourth site is a day school.

The school aims '*To provide skills for life for children and young people with autistic spectrum disorder and Asperger Syndrome through inclusive programmes in education, care, social and vocational training*'.

Summary of main findings

Thornhill Park School is an effective school with several significant strengths. It meets all the requirements for registration. The school has a calm and positive ethos in which skilled and dedicated staff work very hard on behalf of learners. It fully achieves its stated aims. The provision for safeguarding learners is outstanding. Teaching is good and impacts well on learners' achievements and their capability to manage change in their lives. The provision for personal and social development is good and enables learners to be well prepared for their next phase of life. The curriculum is effective and makes good provision for individual needs. Monitoring of its implementation needs further development to ensure progression in learning. The assessment of learning and personal development is good. Learners are enthusiastic about what they do and this impacts well on their achievements and understanding. The school provides outstanding standards of care and welfare in which the needs of learners are to the fore.

What the school does well:

- it provides consistent management of behaviour through skilled and considered approaches by staff;
- it effectively implements outstandingly well-planned procedures which ensure health and safety;
- it makes good provision for learners' personal development and care;
- it fully includes parents in their children's education through good provision of information and regular contact;
- it consistently recognises learners' achievements and thus increases their confidence and self-esteem; and
- it provides good training for staff which brings a common approach and purpose to their work.

What the school must do to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002

In order to comply with the requirements of the DDA, the school should:

- devise a three-year plan to improve the accessibility of the premises.

Next Steps

Whilst not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- put in place more effective measures to monitor and co-ordinate the curriculum; and
- further improve the quality of learning through the use of more age-appropriate resources.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The school provides a curriculum that is appropriate to the needs of learners. Most have very low attainment levels and some have additional physical and learning disabilities. The curriculum effectively encompasses the academic and social needs of boarders because it involves 24-hour learning. The good links between the academic and social curriculum impact well on learners' personal development.

The curriculum up to Year 11 is broadly based on the requirements of the National Curriculum and is appropriately modified to take account of individual needs. In the post-16 department students follow a *Curriculum for Life*; this too is entirely appropriate for their needs. Their achievements are accredited through the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network.

The planning of the curriculum is good and is strengthened further by appropriate schemes of work for each subject or area of learning. Some of the planning is outstanding in its detail and progression in learning is assured. This, however, is not always the case and better monitoring of curriculum planning would encourage conformity to this same high standard.

Individual education plans (IEPs) are provided for each learner and are generally effective. These are compiled following appropriate assessments. Learners are supported by individual staff members who implement the IEP objectives. The skill and expertise with which this is done adds considerably to the achievements of each learner. Where individuals have particular needs the curriculum is skilfully attuned to meet them. Where statements indicate the need for particular therapies, such as speech therapy or massage therapy, these too are provided.

Literacy and numeracy are taught well as separate subjects. Where curriculum planning is more secure, these skills are also consolidated within other subjects. All areas of learning have appropriate schemes of work. These provide good structure to what is learned but the best examples, such as those for some Key Stage 4 learners, are outstanding in the detail they provide.

The provision for personal, social and health education (PSHE) is good. The school pays close regard to current recommendations and requirements. Learners are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles. Information about sexual health and relationships is provided according to the maturity of learners. The food technology curriculum encourages awareness of healthy eating and introduces them to dishes from other cultures.

Links between homes and the school are good and enhance the quality of what is provided. Frequent reports and other contacts ensure that parents are kept fully informed of the progress made by their children.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is generally good and in some lessons it is outstanding. Where teaching is outstanding the lessons are planned in careful detail, support staff are briefed well, learning objectives are challenging and teaching methods are fine-tuned to support the needs of individuals. All sessions provide good opportunities for success and learners are fully engaged in what they do. The best of these include small steps for each learner as well as effective means to ensure that learning is consolidated. Tasks are well matched to individual needs.

The school has adopted the form of communication known as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). This is used to support those learners who are non-verbal or who have limited skills of communication. The system is used consistently and it has a positive impact on learners' abilities to make choices and increase their understanding. An outstanding example of this occurred in a Year 11 circle time. Learners were challenged to take a full part in setting the scene for their day. The teacher and assistants ensured that all learners contributed. Communication skills are further enhanced through the expertise provided by speech therapists.

A common feature of teaching is that all staff have high expectations that learners will make progress. Staff work as small teams within each age phase. These teams have accrued specialist skills and expertise, which they use to benefit learners and provide challenges appropriate to their needs. Some behaviour is exceptionally challenging. When outbursts occur each team responds appropriately to defuse the situation and re-focus the learning. A characteristic of all such events is the quiet approach used by staff, which enables learners to feel secure and quickly return to their task.

In a very few lessons learning is not as effective as it could be. In such sessions time is not used efficiently and activities do not always provide opportunities for new learning. Occasionally, resources are used which are not age-appropriate. The latter is a particular issue for the oldest learners. The school is aware of this and intends to extend both the range and quality of resources for teaching and learning.

The initiative to support work-related learning is particularly successful and enables learners to use their knowledge and understanding within real contexts. The enterprise by Class 9, in which they set up '*Café Ravenous*', was particularly successful. This small '*company*' provided break-time food for other learners and through this they learned to work as a team, to allocate responsibilities and to shop for items, which they then sold.

The assessment and recording of learning is effective and enables teachers to provide evidence of the good progress made by learners. The procedures include use of 'P' levels (performance descriptors used to identify attainment of those learners working toward the first level of the National Curriculum). Milestones in learning are recorded and, where appropriate, samples of learners' achievements are retained. Achievements within individual sessions are recorded and this enables subsequent teaching to build on earlier attainments. The school has decided to review its method of tracking progress with the aim of bringing a still sharper focus to

assessment procedures. Older learners have achievements recognised through certificates awarded by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) Award Scheme.

Learners make good progress, taking into account their starting points. The strongest aspects of this are their gains in personal development and social skills. By the time students leave the school they are well prepared to face their next phase of life.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of learners

The provision for learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is very good and impacts well on their personal development. The school aims to *'teach the whole child'* and considers successful participation in school and community life as one of its key objectives. It fully achieves these aims.

Religious education (RE) is taught as a subject to post-16 students and as part of the PSHE programme to others. RE and weekly assemblies help to develop religious understanding and respect for self and others. Through lessons, visits to local facilities and assemblies, learners are made aware of the beauty of the natural world and encouraged to appreciate it.

The school successfully increases learners' awareness of the need to behave appropriately. Their behaviour in lessons and within the school is good. This enables the school to make full use of visits to the local area. These give learners an insight into the wider world. The majority of physical education activities are also conducted away from the school site. This too, enables learners to gain an awareness of the community in which they live. Older learners have participated in an annual residential activity course in the Lake District. This indicates their good social progress.

Learners' personal development is nurtured through the provision of well-planned activities. They are encouraged to make choices and take responsibility for their own actions where possible. Staff encourage them to distinguish between right and wrong. Staff also use good role-modelling techniques to demonstrate how the school values and respects individuals. Relationships between learners and staff are outstanding. Achievements are recognised through postings on class notice boards and in the presentation of awards at the weekly assembly. Parents are invited to attend these assemblies where possible.

A positive attitude to other cultures and religions is consistently fostered. Through work in art, RE, geography, music and history topics learners gain an understanding of their own and other cultures and traditions. There are many organised trips to places of interest such as farms and museums. The school makes good use of visitors who are invited in order to demonstrate their skills and share their knowledge.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the learners

Thornhill Park School ensures that the interests and welfare of learners are safeguarded and supported extremely well. All appropriate policies are in place and these are implemented meticulously. Learners are supervised very closely. Where possible this supervision is unobtrusive, allowing older students, particularly, to have appropriate personal freedom. The commitment and considerable expertise of staff make a highly effective contribution to the development of communication and social skills. Staff use very effective strategies to manage occasional aggressive and challenging behaviour. This ensures that learners feel safe and secure and are happy in school.

There are effective policies to deal with bullying and intimidation. Any bullying is generally inadvertent and learners do not always have an understanding of its effects. Parents believe that the school takes firm action where any evidence of this is found. Incidents are recorded properly. Excellent child protection training is provided for all staff so that learners' interests are safeguarded and protected within the 24-hour curriculum. All staff are highly trained in the use of calming strategies to manage aggressive and challenging behaviour. These are used sensitively and successfully. Where rare breaches of discipline occur, sanctions are recorded appropriately. These procedures are consistently implemented across the whole school.

There is an effective First Aid policy with designated First Aiders on all sites. The school has made effective provision for fire safety. There are detailed records of fire drills. The school implements well-considered emergency procedures, which take full account of the needs of all learners. Admission and attendance registers are kept according to requirements

The school has yet to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

What does the school need to do to comply with the DDA?

In order to comply with the requirements of the DDA the school should:

- *devise a three-year plan to improve the accessibility of the premises.*

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

There are thorough and rigorous selection and recruitment procedures. Required checks are made on all staff. These include enhanced checks with the Criminal Records Bureau.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

The school occupies four sites within the city. Two of the sites are premises formerly operated by the local authority and two are large Victorian former residences. All are well maintained. These provide satisfactory accommodation, which supports the academic and social curriculum. The school has plans to improve the residential provision through the purchase of smaller residential units.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

There is a range of good quality information for parents and prospective parents. The prospectus contains complete and helpful information about the school's ethos, aims and organisation. It also includes a list of key policies, which parents may request. Regular newsletters keep parents informed about life in the school. Parents indicated in the questionnaire that they are generally pleased with the information they receive and that the school keeps them well informed about their children's progress. In so doing, the school is being faithful to its roots as a parent-led organisation.

Parents have regular opportunities, both formal and informal, to meet with staff to discuss their children's progress. For non-resident learners the home/school notebook is a useful mechanism, which conveys information to parents, especially for those learners with restricted communication skills. Parents receive good quality written reports and information about their children for annual review meetings. These clearly indicate the progress made.

All parents have two planned opportunities to meet with staff during the course of the year. In their responses to the questionnaire issued before the inspection parents made comments such as '*The school have been fantastic, their understanding of autism and all its associated difficulties is excellent*' and '*My son is a different boy now, much more settled and looks forward to going to school now which I never thought I would see.*'

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints

The school has appropriate procedures for handling both formal and informal complaints. The majority of parents indicated, through the pre-inspection questionnaire, that they understood these.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	Thornhill Park School
DfES Number:	394/6015
Type of school:	Special school for learners with autistic spectrum disorder
Status:	Independent
Age range of learners:	4 – 19 years
Gender of learners:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time learners):	Boys: 63 Girls: 17 Total: 80
Number of boarders:	Boys: 21 Girls: 9 Total: 30
Number of learners with a statement of special educational need:	Boys: 63 Girls: 17 Total: 80
Annual fees (day learners):	£30,282 – £41,097* (see note)
Annual fees (boarders):	£105,360 – £183,913* (see note)
Address of school:	Thornhill Park School 21 Thornhill Park Sunderland SR2 7LA
Telephone number:	0191 5140659
Fax number:	0191 5108242
Email address:	clare.mathieson@tawas.org.uk
Headteacher:	Mr David Walke
Proprietor:	Tyne and Wear Autistic Society
Reporting Inspector:	Mr Tom Smith
Date of inspection:	6 – 9 March 2006

* Fees are banded according to the number of weeks of residence or daily attendance and also the severity of the learner's needs. The figures quoted are for 52 -week provision.

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