

Hexham Priory School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	122386
Local Authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	340138
Inspection dates	9–10 December 2009
Reporting inspector	John Farrow

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	61
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	7
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Helen Milner
Headteacher	Mr Michael Thompson
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 11 lessons, and held meetings with governors, staff, pupils, parents and visiting professionals. They looked at pupils' work, school policies, governors' minutes, external reports and scrutinised pupil progress information and 31 parental questionnaires.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- how well pupils achieve
- how well assessment is used to extend the learning of all pupils
- the impact of the school's partnership activities in promoting the learning and well-being of its pupils.

Information about the school

Hexham Priory School is a community special school for pupils aged 3 to 19 years with severe learning difficulties; often in association with medical or other complex needs. All pupils have a statement of special educational need. The school serves a vast rural catchment area within Northumberland and has undergone a steady increase in numbers over the past decade. There are currently 61 pupils on roll, a significant proportion of these are dual registered and also attend their local mainstream school on a part-time basis. The school moved into new purpose built premises in September 2009. The new accommodation provides an impressive high quality and spacious learning environment for the pupils. The school has achieved a number of nationally recognised awards including Activemark, Sportsmark, Healthy Schools Award and Investors in People.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

Hexham Priory is an outstanding school. It lives up to the school motto, 'never underestimate a child's ability', remarkably well. Parents and carers unanimously endorse the positive impact the school has on their children's development. One parent's comment typified those of many when they wrote, 'I can't praise the school enough. They do so much to maximise my daughter's potential, she can do things now that we never dared hope she could.' The inspection findings confirm these sentiments without reservation.

Pupils of all ages and with many different needs are supported, cared for and guided exceptionally well. Pupils thrive as contributing members of this vibrant and cohesive school community. They show, by their actions, that they feel safe and valued. Behaviour in and around school is excellent and makes a strong contribution to pupils' good learning and progress in lessons.

The school goes to extraordinary lengths to make sure as many of its pupils as possible can successfully attend their local mainstream schools on a flexible part-time basis. These pupils are able to learn alongside other children from their home community and maintain contacts or friendships with a wider group of peers. Convincing evidence of the mutual social and academic benefits of these links was seen during the inspection; as one parent said, 'the dual placement is allowing our child to experience the best of both worlds.' This is an area of outstanding practice.

Almost all pupils achieve well because teachers' and other adults know them extremely well and use day-to-day assessment effectively to match the level of challenge in their work to their individual needs and the next steps in their learning. However, the school is not complacent. Staff are working extremely hard to ensure that pupils' learning and progress continue to improve. School leaders recognise that their use of pupil progress data is an area for further development and that they need to ensure that the individual learning targets set and the results achieved are always as aspirational as possible.

Senior leaders and governors are justifiably proud of their school and remain determined to overcome the last few remaining challenges to realising outstanding levels of achievement for the pupils. They have securely maintained and built on previously good or outstanding performance in all areas and have an outstanding capacity to improve.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement further by ensuring the targets set to extend pupils' progress are based on the highest predictions of what similar pupils can achieve.

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Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

Pupils make good progress in their lessons and when measured against their individual starting points. Progress is nearly always better than might be expected, given their learning difficulties or in comparison to similar children with similar needs. Pupils show high levels of enthusiasm from the moment they arrive at school. Their positive attitudes carry on throughout the day into their lessons. Their enthusiasm and outstanding behaviour are key factors supporting their good learning and the effective consolidation and development of key skills. Pupils often show excellent concentration and perseverance over extended periods, needing only occasional support or direction from an adult to remain on task. In one outstanding media lesson, for example, older more able pupils worked enthusiastically to select, sort and assemble a sequence of video clips they had filmed earlier with confidence and skill. Pupils usually show very considerate behaviour towards each other and join in eagerly with adults to celebrate each other's successes.

Pupils, who can sometimes demonstrate challenging behaviour, including those on the autistic spectrum, also make good progress. Well trained and confident staff skilfully match tasks and levels of challenge to pupils' individual ability and underlying emotional states. If behaviour does become distressed or overexcited, good staffing levels allow adults to help pupils appropriately to calm down quickly and resume their work. Pupils say they feel safe at school. Parents and carers questionnaires strongly affirm this view. Pupils show a good sense of right or wrong and an understanding of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. For example, they talk knowledgeably about the importance of a balanced diet and regular exercise, while showing typical adolescent reserve when claiming to make such choices for themselves!

Pupils make outstanding contributions to their own and partner school communities. They participate in both fund-raising activities and performances that can challenge or confound the limited expectations often held of young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Pupils willingly accept such responsibilities. The school council has also developed a strong voice that regularly impacts on many aspects of the life and work of the school.

Attendance is above average and has improved steadily over the past three years. Older pupils are well prepared to apply their basic communication and interpersonal skills to the challenges and opportunities they will face beyond school. The school fosters pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development extremely well and this helps to maximise their underlying potential. For example, pupils are intensely curious about the world around them and embrace new learning experiences with enthusiasm and joy.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

* In some special schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations of the pupils' age.

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Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	*
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

Teaching is consistently good and often outstanding. Teachers and teaching assistants hold ambitious expectations on behalf of their pupils. They use accurate and detailed knowledge of pupils' individual needs effectively to ensure pupils remain well motivated and engaged almost all of the time. In the very best lessons teachers combine their impressive specialist and subject knowledge seamlessly to motivate and challenge pupils to strive and realise their best. Teachers routinely make excellent use of computers and interactive whiteboards in their day-to-day teaching to enhance or extend learning. Their innovative use of other forms of specialist sensory technology is at the forefront of empowering pupils with very limited means of communication to determine or influence the direction of their own interaction with others or their surroundings. Ongoing assessment, observation and questioning by teachers and adults are all used skilfully and flexibly to ensure pupils' learning proceeds successfully towards the intended learning outcomes of lessons. The school is rich in pupil assessment and comparative performance data. It is well placed to further improve its established approaches to setting individual pupil targets by combining these approaches with recent national guidance designed to ensure the planning, recording and reporting of each pupil's progress is as ambitious as possible.

The curriculum is good. It is well organised, imaginative and effective. Weaknesses identified in accreditation in the previous inspection have been fully tackled by well-focused actions to enhance the range of accredited courses available for older students. The school has embarked on further cutting-edge developments for sixth form pupils by recently launching a Creative and Media studies diploma, fully accessible to

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older learners with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Care, guidance and support are outstanding. The school has created a secure yet aspirational atmosphere that supports pupils' learning and enjoyment extremely successfully. These aspects of the school's work make sure the vast majority of pupils make the best of the opportunities provided by the school. This is evident in all aspects of the schools work on site, with other schools and agencies and with the pupils' families.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	1
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

School leaders, staff and governors are all highly ambitious and are succeeding in their determination to drive improvement to secure excellence for their pupils. Morale and commitment are exceptional and the school operates sophisticated monitoring and self-evaluation approaches. This means staff and governors have an accurate and well evidenced view of the schools' strengths and the few areas it still needs to improve. As a result of actions taken, the quality of teaching has continued to improve and the school's senior leadership team are tireless in their efforts to drive up its quality still further. Governors make a powerful and effective contribution to setting the direction of the schools' development. They act as a critical friend to the headteacher and hold him successfully to account. They have insightful first-hand knowledge and understanding of the schools work, and conscientiously discharge their statutory responsibilities. Consequently, safeguarding is addressed with rigour and statutory requirements are fully met. School leaders consider the safety of staff and pupils at all times and careful and effective risk assessments help keep accidents to a minimum.

Engagement with parents, other partnerships with local schools, health service professionals and the wider community are all outstanding. They make a major contribution to pupils' learning and well-being, as evidenced, for example, in the schools' pivotal role in successfully supporting and coordinating numerous dual placements in mainstream settings. Staff act as an essential conduit for managing communications and 'joining up' the work of external agencies around the needs of the children and their families.

A strong commitment to the individual 'rights of the child' lies at the heart of the schools' approach to securing outstanding equality of opportunity. Outcomes are carefully monitored to ensure they are equally positive for different groups of pupils. The school is already a very cohesive community but has identified a need to work

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closely with another local special school, with a more diverse intake, to develop pupils' confidence, experience and skills, living and working alongside other young people from different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. Staff are well deployed in support of pupils' needs and the school offers excellent value for money.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Early Years Foundation Stage

The Early Years Foundation Stage provides an exciting, vibrant and happy learning atmosphere. Children settle quickly, are exceptionally well looked after, feel secure and thrive. They make very good progress in all areas of learning because of the combination of good and sometimes outstanding teaching delivered alongside the high quality of support each child receives from other adults and school-based therapists. Staff are extremely skilful in using an effective range of communication strategies such as signing, symbols and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to encourage children to understand language and begin interacting. Children quickly develop an understanding of daily routines because of the consistent approach staff adopt when teaching individuals and groups and the imaginative use of visual timetables that ensure children understand what is expected of them.

Assessment is detailed and used well to match children's learning tasks to their individual needs and levels of understanding. It also informs the records of their achievements clearly, showing telling examples of small steps to improvement as children develop their skills, knowledge and understanding. Staff use this information well to provide a wide range of activities that challenge the children to make choices and that ensure their interest is maintained in the pursuit of achieving a particular objective,

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such as developing an understanding of taking turns. Relationships are excellent and resonate through the fun and laughter children share with each other and staff. Leadership is excellent and draws on a secure understanding of established strengths and those few minor areas in need of improvement. Links with parents are also excellent. Parents report they are extremely pleased with the help, advice and support they receive from staff on a wide range of matters.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1

Sixth form

In the sixth form students make at least good progress in their learning. Their personal development, behaviour and contribution to the school community are outstanding. This is because teaching is often inspiring and highly effective. Activities are sharply focused on individual students' learning needs. The curriculum successfully supports students to develop their basic skills, such as communication and literacy, as well as their interpersonal and life skills. The same outstanding care, guidance and support are as evident in the sixth form as in the main school. This is highly successful in helping students to transfer smoothly to new placements beyond school, and to adjust to these quickly and successfully. The success of the sixth form is underpinned by the ambition and high expectations of its leadership and is driven by a passionate commitment to achieve excellence.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	1
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

A high proportion of parents/carers returned questionnaires. Those who did were overwhelmingly supportive of the schools' provision and the outcomes it achieves. All responses were positive, most expressing strong agreement with almost every aspect of

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the parental questionnaire. Safeguarding, the quality of teaching and the leadership and management of the school were all rated particularly highly along with the extent to which children enjoy school and the overall satisfaction rating. One typical comment said, 'Superb school! The staff are very dedicated and really try to get the best out of each child.' One return felt the school could do more to help parents support their child's learning but the inspectors judged that relationships with parents/carers were tremendously constructive, and endorsed the positive views.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Hexham Priory School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 31 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 61 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	29	94	2	6	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	26	84	5	16	0	0	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	24	77	7	23	0	0	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	21	68	10	32	0	0	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	25	81	6	19	0	0	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	22	71	7	23	1	3	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	18	58	12	39	0	0	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	14	45	13	42	0	0	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	26	84	5	16	0	0	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	23	74	7	23	0	0	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	23	74	8	26	0	0	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	27	87	4	13	0	0	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	28	90	3	10	0	0	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



11 December 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Hexham Priory School, Hexham, NE46 1UY

Thank you for the welcome you gave us when we came to inspect your school. In particular, I would like to thank the members of the school council who met me to talk about the life and work of your school.

This is what we found out.

- Your school gives you an outstanding education and is helping you all to learn well and to develop as confident young people; you are right to be proud to go there.
- Those of you who are also able to spend time in your local school for part of each week get good opportunities to experience two different types of school.
- You say you feel very safe and happy because of the outstanding care and support you get from both staff and other pupils.
- Your teachers and teaching assistants do a really good job teaching you so you enjoy lessons and learn well.
- The staff work hard to help you do as well as you can, but they also really care about you and you get along with them very well.
- The headteacher and those who lead the school do an excellent job and work very hard to give you the best education they can.

We have asked the school to make sure they set your work at just the right level for each of you, so that you all do as well as you possibly can.

We wish you all the very best for the future.

Yours sincerely

John Farrow

Lead inspector

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