Inspection of Thornhill Park School

Portland Road, Plains Farm, Sunderland SR3 1SS

Inspection dates:	20 to 22 June 2023

Overall effectiveness	**Good**
The quality of education	**Good**
Behaviour and attitudes	**Outstanding**
Personal development	**Good**
Leadership and management	**Good**
Sixth-form provision	**Good**
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good
Does the school meet the independent school standards?	**Yes**

What is it like to attend this school?

Many pupils at Thornhill Park School require specialist support to manage complex, challenging behaviours. Some pupils are supported by up to three adults. Staff have detailed knowledge of pupils' needs. This, combined with an engaging curriculum that teaches pupils to self-regulate their emotions, results in exemplary behaviour across the school.

Pupils are kind, respectful and considerate. This contributes to a warm, welcoming atmosphere across both sites. Pupils know what bullying is but are adamant that it is not something that happens at school. One pupil commented, 'Bullying does not even get a chance to take root here, because staff do not tolerate it.' Pupils feel well supported by staff.

Pupils are happy and enjoy coming to school. They have positive relationships with staff, and teachers make learning fun. High staff–pupil ratios and small class sizes help pupils to cope with anxiety. Pupils have access to a range of adults whom they can talk to if they have any worries.

Highly effective support from adults is enhanced by a learning environment that is supportive of pupils' sensory needs. Some classrooms are set up with minimal distraction, and resources are precisely matched to what is being taught. Pupils receive a bespoke curriculum and personalised emotional support.

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

Leaders put pupils' needs at the heart of the curriculum. All pupils have an initial six-week assessment. This enables leaders to decide which aspect of the school's provision will meet their academic, behavioural and emotional needs. Pupils access a variety of learning pathways. Some follow an education pathway, whereas others, who need more support to develop communication and social skills, follow a sensory and communication pathway. Pupils who are post-14 have access to an independent living pathway through which they are taught how to look after themselves and develop independence skills.

Throughout each pathway, leaders ensure that subjects such as English, science and mathematics are prioritised. Teachers skilfully adapt the curriculum so that pupils can access appropriate content based on their developmental needs. For example, younger pupils who are learning to read might access phonics while bouncing on a gym ball as this helps them to regulate their behaviours. Pupils often use support cards with symbols to help develop language and vocabulary. Adults who work with pupils know their needs and use individualised support to help pupils achieve well.

Leaders have successfully opened an additional site in Sunderland. Pupils at key stages 3 to 5 have quickly adapted to life in these new premises. Post-16 pupils on the education pathway receive a high-quality curriculum. English and mathematics are taught daily and enable many pupils to achieve functional skills accreditations.

Leaders prioritise pupils' preparation for adulthood. The personal, social, health and education curriculum helps pupils to develop an understanding of positive relationships, healthy lifestyles and how to stay safe when online and in the community. Other opportunities, such as bicycle training, swimming and trampolining, support pupils' physical health. Older pupils develop their social interaction skills by working at the Sunderland Minster café every week. Here, pupils prepare food, take orders and manage cash flow. Leaders are aspirational for all pupils and continue to develop work placements, further education and training opportunities to meet individual needs.

Individual support plans include detailed information about pupils' behaviour. These plans are shared with staff so that consistent strategies are employed when a pupil is in distress. Staff are skilled at knowing when to intervene and when to give a pupil time and space. A combination of a more engaging curriculum and whole-school behaviour management training has resulted in a significant reduction in the use of physical restraint.

Leaders, including those at director level, are determined that all pupils will be given every opportunity to succeed in life. Senior school leaders and directors regularly check on the quality of education and provision for pupils. They analyse what is working well and what needs to be improved. Further work is required to develop subject and middle leaders, particularly once subject specialism is introduced at the Emsworth site from September 2023. Leaders have created a positive environment where staff feel valued and supported. Staff enjoy working at the school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders rightly recognise the additional vulnerabilities many pupils face. As a result, they have designed a curriculum that explicitly teaches pupils how to keep themselves safe. For example, pre-verbal pupils are taught how to communicate with the two key symbols for 'no' and 'help'. Ongoing training for staff includes vital information regarding support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders keep detailed notes of any concerns that have been shared by staff. They analyse patterns of behaviour that may suggest that a pupil needs additional support. Leaders quickly seek further guidance or refer to appropriate agencies when required.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Middle and subject leadership is not distributed effectively across the school. As a result, some staff take on many areas of responsibilities, and others are not given the opportunity to develop leadership skills. Senior leaders should support staff to develop their roles in school, particularly with the changes for subject specialism that are due to be introduced at the Emsworth site.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	108877
DfE registration number	394/6015
Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	10267597
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	4 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	47
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	7
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	North East Autism Society
Chair	Rakesh Chopra
Headteacher	Nadine Horton
Annual fees (day pupils)	£56,557 to £130,197
Telephone number	0191 565 3965
Website	www.ne-as.org.uk
Email address	info@ne.as.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	13 to 15 November 2018

Information about this school

- This is an independent special school for pupils aged four to 19 years old with autism spectrum disorder. Some pupils have additional neurodevelopmental needs.
- All pupils have an education, health and care plan, and this is a requirement for admission to the school.
- The school has capacity for 80 pupils.
- There were no early years children on roll at the time of the inspection.
- The school's previous standard inspection took place from 13 to 15 November 2018. The headteacher took up post in September 2021.
- The school has no religious affiliation.
- The school has two sites. In February 2023, it opened a new site in Sunderland. This site caters for pupils in key stages 3, 4 and 5.
- The school does not use any alternative education provision.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors did deep dives in English, mathematics, personal, social and health education, and science. Inspectors spoke to leaders about the curriculum and met with teachers from the lessons visited. Inspectors looked at pupils' work and spoke to pupils about the curriculum, behaviour and what it is like to attend this school.
- Inspectors looked at curriculum documents from a range of subjects.
- Inspectors listened to a range of pupils from different year groups reading aloud.
- The lead inspector met with the director of education from the North East Autism Society.
- Inspectors looked at the single central record and spoke to leaders, teachers, governors and pupils about safeguarding.
- Inspectors observed pupils at breaktime and lunchtime.
- Inspectors considered the responses made by parents and carers to Ofsted Parent View, including free-text comments. A number of parents were also spoken to.

- Inspectors visited both sites. The lead inspector also visited Sunderland Minster café.

Inspection team

David Milligan, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Stephanie Innes-Taylor	His Majesty's Inspector

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