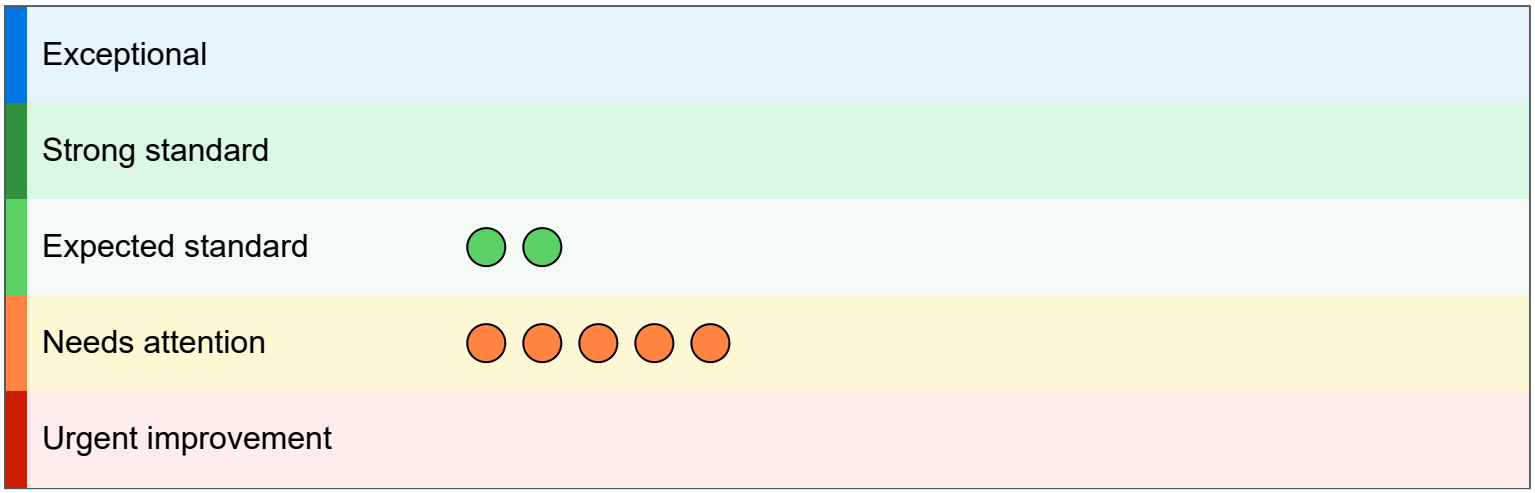
Thornhill Park School

Address: Portland Road, Plains Farm, Sunderland, SR3 1SS

Unique reference number (URN): 108877

Inspection report: 12 May 2026



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.
- Insufficient evidence: Inspectors were unable to gather sufficient evidence to judge whether safeguarding standards are met.

Expected standard

Personal development and wellbeing

Expected standard

Leaders demonstrate a purposeful commitment to providing a broad and inclusive personal development offer tailored to the needs of pupils. The curriculum carefully integrates aspects of personal, social and health education, alongside careers and fundamental British values. This is brought to life through formal and informal learning opportunities for pupils.

A notable strength is the school's highly individualised approach to this work. As well as experiences offered more broadly, there is purpose to how the school addresses the individual needs and interests of pupils. These are often brought to life through meaningful real-world experiences. Pupils who are interested in transport experience opportunities to meet with bus drivers and understand how buses work. Those wanting to develop skills in the workplace enjoy purposeful work experience for a local charity. Each opportunity is carefully supported by staff who know pupils well. Importantly, pupils and post-16 students talk with pride about the experiences they engage in. A rich range of off-site visits are available. Many complement each pupil's curriculum pathway and help them develop independent living skills in their local communities.

The school's careers offer is well integrated into the life of the school. Pupils benefit from practical experiences, employability activities and transition preparations that are ambitious and relevant. Leaders carefully plan opportunities for pupils to engage with employers such as florists and architects. This sits alongside practical activities such as writing and celebrating individual areas of strength and expertise to support job applications.

Pastoral support for pupils is ever-present. Pupils benefit from staff who care for them, celebrate their achievements and support them effectively. This contributes positively to pupils' wellbeing across the day. Pupils live out British values in the way in which they act with respect for each other and visitors. Pupils talk with understanding about how to keep themselves safe both online and in the community.

Post 16 provision

Expected standard

The school's post-16 offer is carefully tailored to the complex and diverse needs of students. The curriculum places a strong emphasis on preparation for adulthood, independence, employability and community participation. The provision is flexible and personalised. It enables students to access pathways and qualifications that are appropriate to their developmental stage and future aspirations. Leaders know its strengths and areas for development. This includes where refinement around the mathematics curriculum would further strengthen the offer.

The progress students make is individualised and enables them to gain the appropriate accreditations needed for their next steps. This is carefully balanced with practical life skills so that students develop their independence and wider employability skills well. Leaders maintain close oversight of pupil progress and provision through observations, work scrutiny and regular review processes. This is effective in ensuring that students are supported effectively to be ready for their next steps.

Careers education and transition is particularly effective. Students benefit from meaningful work-related learning, employer encounters, community experiences and personalised guidance. Leaders ensure that work experience is purposeful and safe. The personalised nature of enrichment opportunities and visits is effective. It helps students engage positively in the local area, its facilities and amenities.

Needs attention

Achievement

Needs attention

Pupils' achievement across the curriculum is variable. In some areas, such as progress in their emotional development, pupils build skills and strategies well. It is evident in their ability to engage with learning across the day. In other areas of the curriculum, pupils learning is limited because of the inconsistencies in the way in which the curriculum is taught.

Pupils on the schools' pathways for post-14 and post-16 learning gain relevant accreditation in key learning areas such as English and Mathematics. Pupils at the earlier stages of learning do not always progress as well as they could in their communication, reading and writing skills. Pupils also gain appropriate accreditations ready for their next steps in life, linked to employment skills and independent living.

Leaders ensure that older pupils and students have the relevant skills needed to be successful when they leave. Pupils benefit from clear guidance and support about the options they have which help them continue onwards to further training, work or independent living.

Attendance and behaviour

Needs attention

Many pupils attend school regularly. They are keen to get into school each morning. However, leaders have not ensured, over time, that pupils attendance codes are used consistently. Leaders make timely and effective checks on the welfare of pupils when not in school but the reasons for absence are not always recorded accurately in the attendance record. This means that the independent school standard linked to attendance registers is not met. Where pupils' attendance does not meet leaders' expectations, leaders take effective action to help and support pupils and their families. The carefully planned support helps pupils increase their time in school.

Pupils demonstrate an increased ability to regulate their behaviour in school. This is a strength of the school. Careful and considered support by adults is key to this success. Pupils develop important strategies to control their behaviours and are ably supported by staff to use these with increasing independence. Incidents of behaviour where pupils become anxious or upset are carefully monitored. Leaders take timely actions if such incidents increase. This further supports pupils in this area effectively. Leaders track any concerns linked to bullying. These incidents are rare, but where needed, support provided is effective.

Curriculum and teaching

Needs attention

The school's curriculum is suitably broad and ambitious. It is carefully planned across the school's different curriculum pathways. It is well matched to the progression that leaders intend pupils to make across a range of areas. These include emotional regulation, communication and language, and literacy, for example. There is variation in how well this curriculum is implemented. Teachers' use of assessment is not always precise and well matched to pupils' stages of learning. This results in some pupils engaging in tasks that are not effectively aligned to their stage of learning and development. For some pupils this means they do not have sufficient opportunities to practice and secure important skills before they move on.

Leaders have revisited gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills. This includes gaps in learning such as reading and mathematics. Pupils who are at the early stages of reading benefit from bespoke phonics teaching to support their early reading journey. Many pupils enjoy their daily reading time that enriches their literacy development.

Leaders are clear on where the school curriculum needs further development. Recent changes to the school's curriculum are purposeful and timely. However, much of this work is in its infancy.

Inclusion

Needs attention

The school supports pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Many pupils have a diagnosis of autism. Pupils arrive with a range of educational experiences before joining this school. The school carefully identifies barriers to learning linked to pupils' ability to stay calm when they join. This helps pupils make a typically positive start to their time in school. It supports with their sense of belonging.

More recently leaders have revisited the precision in which they identify other areas of pupils' needs, such as those linked to cognition and learning. This is an important development and one that is in the early stages of implementation. It means that some pupils' other learning needs are beginning to be more clearly identified. As a result, the right action is beginning to be taken to support pupils more effectively.

Leaders and staff identify other barriers to learning, such as economic disadvantage, appropriately. The school provides a range of support to remove such barriers through the work of dedicated staff. Pupils who are known to other services, such as social care, benefit from leaders who work together with other professionals to improve pupils' outcomes.

Older pupils, including students in the post-16 provision, benefit from carefully planned work experience opportunities that are well matched to their needs. This helps them to be ready for their next steps.

Leadership and governance

Needs attention

Since the previous inspection there have been a number of changes within the senior leadership of the school. The proprietor and wider leadership team have reviewed many

processes and procedures across the school. The resulting changes have enabled the school to make some rapid improvements to its offer. However, the work of leaders is at the early stages of implementation. It is too soon to determine the impact of these changes.

The proprietor has suitable checks in place to ensure that many of the independent school standards (the standards) are met. The appropriate checks are made on adults who work in the school and risk assessments are detailed and purposeful to the school and its activities. Also, the school complies with Schedule 10 of the Equality Act. However, over time, the proprietor has not ensured that all the standards are consistently met. Some needed additional work during the course of the inspection. While recent changes have been made to how the proprietor holds leaders to account, over time, the proprietor's work in this area has not been sufficiently rigorous.

The vision and difference the school can make to its pupils is understood and shared by leaders and many staff. Staff are proud to be part of large supportive staff team. There have been changes in staff and leaders' workload due to the work and improvements leaders have recently actioned. Leaders are aware that they need to consider staff workload further as the school continues on its journey of improvement. Parents and carers are positive about the support pupils get. They recognise the difference the school makes to its pupils.

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

Pupils enjoy coming to school. Some pupils have had negative experiences of school previously. All pupils have an education, health and care plan. Pupils are well supported by staff at Thornhill Park who care and understand their needs. This helps pupils feel safe. They build trust with key adults who work with them across the day. Staff quickly identify ways in which to engage pupils with school life and learning.

Pupils make a bright start to each day. Clear routines and expectations are in place. This provides pupils with familiarity and stability. Positive relationships between staff and pupils are ever present. Staff know and understand what makes pupils tick. In turn, pupils are well supported to understand and regulate their behaviour. This helps them to engage positively with their learning.

Pupils talk enthusiastically about what they enjoy in school. This includes that staff help them and the visits and opportunities in the community that they have. Some pupils share how this school is making a difference to them. They are proud to be part of the school. For pupils who are pre-verbal, this is shown in their interactions and communication with their key staff. Pupils are well supported in their preparation for adulthood. Pupils learn how to make healthy meals from scratch, budget and pay for important items as well as make the most of facilities in the local area and wider region.

The proprietor has not ensured the independent school standards are consistently met over time. Recently, there have been a number of changes at leadership level. These changes have enabled leaders to focus with some precision to improve the curriculum pupils receive. This work is in the early stages of development and some inconsistencies in teaching remain. This limits the progress and achievement some pupils make.

Next steps

- Leaders should continue to develop the curriculum so it is typically well matched to learners starting points and that tasks are well matched to learning intentions.
- Leaders should ensure that staff use assessment effectively to shape learning and make adaptations to the curriculum in a timely way.
- Leaders should ensure attendance registers are consistently maintained in line with statutory guidance.
- Leaders should ensure that planned monitoring enables effective oversight of the changes made to improve impact of the curriculum on pupils learning.
- Leaders should continue to develop approaches to supporting staff with their workload.
- The proprietor should continue to ensure that their work and oversight ensures that leaders are held to account effectively and independent school standards are met consistently

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About this inspection

The name of the chair of the proprietor body is Dr Rakesh Chopra.

The fees currently charged are £61,183 to £140,832 annually.

The email address for the school is thornhillparkschool@ne-as.org.uk.

Inspectors carried out this standard inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, and checked the school's compliance with the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

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

Inspectors spoke with the principal, other senior leaders including the director of education, the chair of the proprietor body and the chief executive during the inspection. Inspectors also spoke with pupils, staff and parents and carers. Inspectors spoke with other stakeholders such as representative from the local authority and a representative from a local authority who have commissioned places.

All pupils have an education, health and care plan. Most pupils have a diagnosis autism spectrum disorder and/or diagnoses associated with social, emotional and mental health.

The school uses one unregistered alternative provision.

The school also operates from another site. This site is at 10 Emsworth Road, Sunderland SR5 2QB.

The school has had change of principal and director of education since the last inspection. There are 2 new additional vice principals also now in role.

Principal: Helen Mitchell

Independent school standards

Independent school standards are either met or not met for each category.

1. Quality of education provided — Standards met

All standards have been met.

2. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils — Standards met

All standards have been met.

3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils — Standards not met

The following standards have not been met:

Paragraph 15

The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that an admission and attendance register is maintained in accordance with the School Attendance (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2024.

4. Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors — Standards met

All standards have been met.

5. Premises of and accommodation at schools — Standards met

All standards have been met.

6. Provision of information Standards met

All standards have been met.

7. Manner in which complaints are handled Standards met

All standards have been met.

8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools Standards not met

The following standards have not been met:

Paragraph 34(1)

The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school–

(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;

(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently; and

Lead inspector:
Emily Stevens, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:
Katie Spurr, Ofsted Inspector
Jessica McKay, His Majesty's Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

This data was available to the inspector at the time of the inspection.

This data is from 12 May 2026

Total pupils

65

School capacity

80

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

65

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

0

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.

Insufficient evidence

Inspectors were unable to gather reliable enough evidence to grade an evaluation area. This is rare and normally only happens if there are no pupils on roll at the school.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects services providing education and skills for children and learners of all ages, and inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

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