

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



12 April 2017

Mrs Anne Sanderson
Headteacher
The Willows School
Locksley Drive
Thurcroft
Rotherham
South Yorkshire
S66 9NT

Dear Mrs Sanderson

Short inspection of The Willows School

Following my visit to the school on 16 March 2017 with Belita Scott, Her Majesty's Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in February 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection and has worked hard to bring about improvement to both the quality of teaching and the measurement of pupils' progress. You have built a strong leadership team who share your vision and values. You have also put in place effective plans which are ensuring that the leadership of the school remains strong as you make the transition towards retirement at the end of the school year.

The governing body have worked with you to bring about improvement. Through their close monitoring of teaching and learning and their focus on ensuring that pupils' outcomes continue to improve, governors have offered you and senior leaders both support and challenge.

Pupils and parents told the inspection team what a happy and welcoming place school is. Older pupils told us that they particularly enjoyed the opportunities to make things such as clocks and bird boxes. The knowledge they gain in these classes was evident when they were quick to point out to the inspector the difference between 'undercoat' and 'primer' when painting wood. Pupils in the lower part of school told the inspection team that they enjoyed learning just as much. They enthusiastically explained how much they enjoyed visiting the local library 'because there [were] so many books to choose from'.

Since the previous inspection the deputy headteacher and other senior leaders have

put in place a comprehensive and well organised system for measuring the small steps of progress that pupils make. An analysis of the data collected from this system demonstrated that pupils were making strong progress in mathematics and English. School leaders felt that this showed some groups needed to have more challenging targets in order to maximise their progress. This year, two sets of targets are set, one expected and one inspirational. School data shows that pupils are already making good progress towards these higher targets in mathematics and English.

Your thoughtful approach to designing an engaging and relevant curriculum enables pupils to leave with a wide range of accreditations which prepare them well for college, apprenticeships and the world of work. This is clearly evidenced by last year's Year 11 pupils who all left to take up places at college or as apprentices. Recent information shows that nearly all of them are making good progress at their chosen destinations.

As a leadership team you have put much thought into developing pupils' independence skills. Classes undertaken in the purpose-built bungalow ensure that pupils are able to cook a meal, wash and dry their own clothes and socialise with others. Cleaning duties are undertaken by pupils who are taught skills such as which cleaning products to use when cleaning a bathroom and which to avoid mixing when cleaning the toilet. Life skills such as these enable pupils to work towards gaining independence in their lives. When competency levels are reached they are recorded in pupils' life skills passports which are highly valued by pupils and parents.

A meeting was held with staff at the end of the school day in which the vast majority expressed the view that it was a pleasure to work at the school and they felt supported and respected by senior leaders. This view was also expressed by the majority of staff who completed the online questionnaire.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils spoken to during the inspection were very clear that they felt safe and secure in school. You, senior leaders and the staff team have ensured that safeguarding is a key priority which is woven through every aspect of school life. Pupils are made aware of the need to keep themselves safe in a variety of different ways. For example the school's internet safety policy helps pupils to understand how to access the internet safely, and a risk assessment displayed outside the food technology room reminds pupils of possible hazards in the kitchen.

You ensure that all staff regularly attend safeguarding training which ensures that they have an understanding of current requirements. Recording of safeguarding incidents is thorough and meticulously carried out by all staff. You and other members of the safeguarding team regularly attend multidisciplinary team meetings and records show that you make a robust contribution on behalf of pupils.

Safeguarding checks including those relating to staff recruitment and the keeping of

the single central record meet requirements.

Inspection findings

- As part of the work I undertook before arriving at school I reviewed the previous inspection report. I noted that you had been asked to improve the quality of teaching and learning by ensuring that work set met pupils' needs more accurately by ensuring that teachers had a clear idea of their starting points. I also noted that you had been asked to increase the role played by support assistants in supporting pupils' learning. During the inspection the team observed learning across the school with yourself and other members of the leadership team. In nearly all areas planned learning matched the needs of pupils well. This enabled pupils to make good progress across the school.
- Teaching assistants observed in most classrooms were highly effective and supported pupils' learning well, often taking responsibility for the learning of individuals or small groups of pupils. Occasionally, they were observed giving a little too much help to pupils, which reduced opportunities to develop independent learning.
- I noted, when analysing the school's national data that the number of occasions that pupils were excluded from school in both 2014 and 2015 was higher than that expected nationally for similar schools. My key question was whether the exclusions had dropped. Discussions with key staff and analysis of school data showed that the numbers of fixed-term exclusions dropped in 2016 and no pupil has been excluded this year. The previous higher levels of exclusions were due, you explained, to the very difficult behaviour of a very small number of pupils with high levels of need who have since left the school.
- Data analysed during the inspection showed that levels of pupils' attendance have dipped this year. Further discussion with you and other staff showed that the dip has been caused by a combination of pupils' illness and holidays taken in term time. While you realise this needs to be addressed and have not authorised any holidays asked for in term time you also recognise that more needs to be done to reduce the number of days pupils are absent.
- While pupils across the school are making good progress in mathematics and English, a small number of older pupils have not made sufficient progress in science. This is because of a lack of consistency in the quality of teaching due to staff absence. While pupils are making better progress currently and a new member of staff has been appointed to start in April, not enough progress has been made by the group of Year 11 pupils to ensure that they gain an accreditation in science at the end of the year.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- improve the consistency in the quality of teaching in science in order to ensure that pupils leave with the level of accreditation of which they are capable

- work more closely with parents in order to reduce the number of days pupils are absent from school due to term-time holidays.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Rotherham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Marian Thomas
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, the inspection team held meetings with you, senior leaders, school staff and four members of the governing body. Inspectors also met informally with five parents and carers at the beginning of the school day and spoke with pupils both inside and outside the classroom. The inspection team also scrutinised a range of documents including safeguarding documents, behaviour and attendance files and the school's system for measuring pupils' progress. They also took into account the views of 20 members of staff who completed an online questionnaire.