

Inspection of an outstanding school: St Thomas's Centre

Hawthorn Street, Blackburn BB1 9TH

Inspection dates: 11 and 12 June 2024

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of outstanding as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. The school's next inspection will be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are placed at this school having faced challenging experiences in their prior education. Some have been permanently excluded from other schools. Often, pupils arrive with large gaps in their learning due to previous absences. Some also struggle to manage their behaviour. Regardless of their previous difficulties, pupils are welcomed into a safe and nurturing environment. They are supported by staff who genuinely care about them. This helps pupils to regain trust in other people and to feel valued.

The school is determined for all pupils to achieve. For many pupils, this is reflected in a plan for them to return to a mainstream setting. The support that pupils receive prepares them well for this transition. Pupils are successfully rejoining mainstream schools in increasing numbers. Those who stay at St Thomas's Centre in the longer term typically gain the qualifications that they need to move on in their education, employment or training.

Recently, the school has raised its expectations of pupils' conduct. Following a period of adjustment, most pupils' behaviour is improving. That said, a minority of pupils are taking longer to live up to the school's expectations of their behaviour.

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

The school has designed an ambitious curriculum that is well suited to pupils' needs. Pupils study a broad range of national curriculum subjects, regardless of how long they are enrolled at the school. This enables pupils on short-term placements to keep up with their mainstream learning.

Many pupils have missed considerable periods of their education prior to joining St Thomas's. The school assesses their individual starting points as soon as they arrive. It

also identifies any additional needs or barriers to learning that pupils may have, including any special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Staff use information about these needs to set individual targets for pupils' social and emotional learning. However, at times, these targets are broad. The school has not thought enough about how to measure them. This makes it difficult for staff to be sure whether pupils are making progress towards their targets. Consequently, the school does not always know which aspects of its provision for pupils with SEND are effective.

In most subjects, the school has carefully ordered the content of the curriculum to align with the different times of year that pupils join. This curriculum design allows pupils to revisit learning often. This ensures that pupils can build new knowledge on top of what they already know. Most pupils learn what they need to in order to achieve well.

The school recognises the importance of pupils learning to read. Pupils at the early stages of reading follow a well-designed phonics programme. However, at times, this programme is not delivered as faithfully as the school intends. Some staff use unhelpful reading strategies which confuse pupils and hinder their ability to build secure phonics knowledge. Added to this, the school's work to identify and support older pupils who struggle to read is underdeveloped. Although many pupils at the school are fluent readers, some pupils do not get the help that they need to catch up to their peers.

Staff are well trained to help pupils to regulate their emotions. They swiftly spot occasions when pupils might struggle to behave as the school expects. Pupils respond well to staff's guidance. As a result, the school is typically calm and orderly.

The school recognises the barriers that some pupils have to their regular attendance. From low starting points, most pupils' rates of attendance, along with their typical conduct, improve while attending the school. That said, the school's analysis of these improvements is limited. This means that it does not know enough about which strategies are the most effective in raising attendance and improving behaviour over time.

The programme to support pupils' wider development has many successful elements. Pupils participate in a variety of activities designed to boost their confidence and self-esteem. They receive guidance about careers which is comprehensive and tailored to pupils' individual needs. Pupils also learn about forming safe and respectful relationships. However, the school does not keep track of all of the opportunities that pupils have received. Consequently, those pupils who have missed out on important personal, social, health and economic education do not receive the support that they need to catch up.

The management committee uphold a clear strategic vision for the school. Members draw on a wide range of expertise to support and challenge the school's work. Staff and members of the management committee are passionate advocates for pupils. Staff appreciate the ways in which the school considers their workload when making changes.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- At times, some staff do not implement the phonics programme as effectively as the school intends. Furthermore, some older pupils who have gaps in their reading knowledge do not receive the support that they need to catch up. This means that some pupils do not develop into accurate and fluent readers as quickly as they should. This hinders their achievement across other curriculum areas. The school should ensure that pupils in all key stages who struggle with reading receive effective support so that they catch up quickly.
- Some of the school's systems do not provide a useful evaluation of the impact of its work. At times, staff do not know how well the school's strategies are working. This includes strategies to improve behaviour and attendance, and the programme for pupils' wider social and emotional development. The school should strengthen its systems to monitor the quality of provision that pupils, including those with SEND, receive. This will ensure that pupils are supported in the most effective ways.

Background

When we have judged a school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding in June 2018.

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.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	132128
Local authority	Blackburn with Darwen
Inspection number	10290131
Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	5 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	182
Appropriate authority	Local authority
Headteacher	Angy Saaiman
Website	www.stthomasscentre.com
Dates of previous inspection	19 and 20 June 2018, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school admits pupils throughout the year. Most pupils have been permanently excluded or were at risk of exclusion from their mainstream schools. Some pupils at the school are dual-registered with their mainstream school, while others are on longer single-registration placements.
- The school also provides short-term education for pupils with medical needs. Most of these pupils attend the main school site. From time to time, the school also provides education to pupils who are inpatients at Blackburn Royal Hospital.
- The school operates at two different sites. Primary and some secondary pupils are educated from premises at Hawthorn Street, Blackburn BB1 9TH. Some other secondary pupils are educated from premises at Lambeth Street, Blackburn BB1 1NA.
- Since the previous inspection, the number of pupils on roll at the school has almost doubled.
- In recent years, there have been several changes to the leadership of the school. The current headteacher was appointed in 2022. There have also been a number of changes to the membership of the management committee, including the appointment of a new chair.
- The school makes use of three unregistered alternative providers for a small number of pupils.

- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors spoke with the headteacher, other leaders and members of staff. The lead inspector met with members of the management committee, including the chair. He also met with representatives of the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in early reading, science and art and design. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke with teachers, spoke with some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also discussed the curriculum in some other subjects.
- Inspectors spoke with groups of pupils about their experiences at school and their views of behaviour and bullying.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including leaders' improvement plans, minutes of management committee meetings and records of pupils' behaviour and attendance.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors reviewed the single central record, took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils, and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. They also considered the responses to Ofsted's online surveys for staff and pupils.
- An inspector visited the school's additional site and considered the education that pupils receive there.

Inspection team

Ben Hill, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Lindy Griffiths

Ofsted Inspector

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