

Inspection of Priory Woods School

Tothill Avenue, Netherfields, Middlesbrough TS3 0RH

Inspection dates: 10 and 11 December 2024

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Good
Early years provision	Outstanding
Sixth-form provision	Outstanding
Previous inspection grade	Outstanding

What is it like to attend this school?

At Priory Woods, pupils experience an environment filled with warmth and care. Pupils and staff bring the school's motto of 'a special place' to life. Pupils are polite and kind. They hold doors open for one another. Pupils empathise with their peers' needs. They also take on important roles. Students enjoy serving the community in the sixth-form café. This helps them to learn vital life skills.

Pupils thrive in a school where there are no limits to what they can achieve. The school ensures their special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are not a barrier. Pupils experience a wide range of trips, visits and other educational experiences. This begins expertly in early years. Children flourish in an environment where everything is possible and accessible. Throughout the school, pupils are happy. They recall their experiences and education with infectious enthusiasm.

Due to the high expectations of the school, pupils achieve well. At the end of school, they move on to ambitious and well-suited destinations. The curriculum skilfully blends personal development and academic learning. Pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plan targets sit at the heart of this. Learning is highly personalised to support everyone to achieve their goals. Staff know pupils exceptionally well.

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

Since the last inspection, the school has made positive changes to the curriculum. Subjects are carefully mapped to the national curriculum. The school is ambitious about the range of subjects that pupils should study. This includes an academic core of English and mathematics. Across the curriculum, the school brings learning to life. The school does this through thoughtfully constructed immersive experiences. For example, the school teaches history through drama. When learning about land girls in World War Two, pupils experience a blackout. They explore feelings and develop empathy for people at the time. They also use resistance bands to mimic pulling vegetables from the ground. These practical experiences bring learning to life and enhance pupils' understanding well.

The school places a high priority on reading. Pupils who are ready for phonics learn to read well. Skilful adaptations ensure that pupils with SEND progress well with this important skill. As a result, pupils enjoy reading. They recognise how it unlocks opportunities for them in life. Staff are experts in phonics. They help pupils to grow in confidence. Across the school, reading underpins the wider curriculum. From sensory stories to whole-class texts, pupils learn to love reading over time.

Pupils learn important skills for life. Mathematics spreads throughout the whole curriculum. In the early years, children use rhymes and songs to develop their knowledge of numbers. In the sixth form, students confidently discuss money. They explore essential items they will need to buy in the future. They also link this to income and how they should prioritise their spending. Some aspects of the curriculum are in an early stage of development. In some cases, particularly for pupils on the 'challenge' pathway, learning is not well matched to what pupils already know.

The learning environment supports pupils' development exceptionally well. In the early years, children enjoy learning outdoors. Using the play equipment, they invent games. Expert staff narrate the games for children who cannot communicate verbally. Children rapidly learn key words and follow instructions from staff. They thrive in this purposeful setting. Older pupils use the 'Independent Living Centre'. Here, a converted property allows them to develop important skills to use in the home. They learn to cook in a typical kitchen. Across all parts of the school, the focus on pupils' wider personal development is exceptional.

Pupils learn how to live in modern Britain. Staff teach them how to stay safe, including when online. Pupils' ability to recall this learning is impressive. Pupils experience exceptional careers education. This begins with helping children to develop a sense of responsibility in the early years. Older pupils enjoy work experience. If this is not possible in the community, the school brings the experience to them. For example, students in the sixth form run their own enterprise business. They fulfil paid orders, creating a range of quality craft items. Pupils also access a rich and varied extra-curricular offer. For example, they play musical instruments, dance and play boccia. The school encourages pupils to take part in as much as they can. This means every pupil has a role to play in the end-of-term show.

Staff are exceptionally proud of the school. They know leaders consider their workload and well-being. All leaders and staff commit to ensuring pupils with SEND achieve the best outcomes they can. However, in some areas the school, including within governance, the school does not have a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the impact of its work. Parents are positive about the educational experience the school provides. One parent spoke for many when praising the 'immersive enjoyable learning environment'.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Some learning, particularly for those on the 'challenge' pathway, is not well matched to what pupils already know and can do. This means that some pupils do not achieve as highly as they could. The school should continue its work to improve the curriculum, including how learning is checked, to ensure pupils on all pathways learn well over time.
- The school's approach to evaluating its work is not as developed as it could be. This limits the understanding the school has of the impact of the curriculum. The school, including those responsible for governance, should ensure there are stronger systems in place to accurately identify any gaps in provision that it needs to address.

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	131425
Local authority	Middlesbrough
Inspection number	10346381
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	201
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	43
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Jennifer Dalby
Headteacher	Emma Fox
Website	www.priorywoods.middlesbrough.sch.uk
Dates of previous inspection	13 and 14 September 2023, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Priory Woods School is a special school, catering for pupils aged 4 to 19 with severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties and a range of other SEND. All pupils have EHC plans.
- The sixth form, 'Priory 16', is located at another address. The address is Fulford Road, Middlesbrough TS3 0RN.
- The school does not currently use any alternative provision.
- 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

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher and other senior leaders over the course of the inspection.
- The lead inspector met with five members of the local governing body. They reviewed documentation relating to governance, including minutes from governor meetings.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives in the following curriculum areas: English, mathematics, personal social and health education, and humanities. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work where appropriate.
- The inspectors met with the leader responsible for early years. The inspectors also spent time in the early years provision.
- The inspectors met with the leader responsible for sixth form. The inspectors also spent time in the sixth-form provision.
- Inspectors met with the leaders responsible for personal development, including careers education.
- The lead inspector met with a local authority school representative.
- 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.
- The inspectors met with groups of pupils and staff formally throughout the inspection and spoke with them informally at social times and in lessons.
- A range of school documents were reviewed, including the school's improvement plan and self-evaluation document.
- Inspectors considered the responses to the online survey, Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. Inspectors also considered the responses to Ofsted's online surveys for staff and for pupils.

Inspection team

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His Majesty's Inspector

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