

The Hawthorns School

Address: Thornhurst Road, Chelmsford, CM1 2XT

Unique reference number (URN): 149335

Inspection report: 6 January 2026

Exceptional	
Strong standard	
Expected standard	
Needs attention	
Urgent improvement	

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.

Strong standard ●

Attendance and behaviour

Strong standard ●

Many pupils join the school after long periods away from education. The school has worked tirelessly alongside families and other agencies. Staff constantly monitor and refine strategies in place to support attendance. Consequently, the school's work has had a notable impact on the positive attendance of pupils, including for those where attendance is a particular barrier.

When attendance is a challenge, the school identifies pupils' barriers and takes effective action to overcome them. This includes providing transport when needed, adjusting timetables or offering tailored learning approaches. As a result, attendance is consistently high and often matches or exceeds national averages for special schools.

The school has created a calm and positive environment where pupils feel safe and supported. Pupils show highly positive attitudes to learning. Staff use their knowledge of pupils to provide the optimum learning environment for them. Pupils' ability to self- and co-regulate across the school is excellent. Bullying is very rare. When instances do occur, they are very well recorded, analysed and responded to by the school.

There is a tangible culture of care and respect that permeates the school. The expert support that staff provide, and clear routines and expectations, means that pupils can be positive members of the school community and thrive.

Inclusion

Strong standard ●

The school has established a welcoming and inclusive culture where every pupil is known, cared for and well supported. Pupils' needs are identified precisely from the moment they start, including any special educational needs and/or disabilities and whether they are known or previously known to social care. This clear identification of need ensures that effective, individualised support is in place for all pupils.

The support that staff provide to remove barriers to learning and engagement is expert. It helps pupils to learn and develop independence and confidence. As a result, pupils secure the knowledge and strategies needed to communicate and self-regulate well.

The school monitors the impact of its work regularly to ensure that pupils achieve as well as they can. Information from monitoring is used to make rapid and effective changes so that provision remains sharply focused on supporting pupils to achieve their next steps.

Alternative provision is used sparingly and appropriately. When required, it is carefully planned, monitored and reviewed in partnership with families and the local authority.

Funding is used effectively to support pupils' wider needs, including high-quality inclusion training for staff. Staff work well with families and external agencies, ensuring that pupils have the right support to thrive and achieve their goals and aspirations.

Leadership and governance

Strong standard 

The school has a clear and robust vision and ambition for what pupils will experience. Understanding pupils' needs well, the school has chosen the right actions to create a learning environment where pupils want to attend and where they can thrive. As the school has grown quickly, these actions have been put in place carefully so that staff get the training, guidance and support they need to succeed in their roles.

The trust provides rigorous and expertly informed support and challenge to the school. It makes sure resources are used effectively and prioritises the professional development of staff. Trustees and governors are experienced. They know a lot about education, and work closely with the school to make decisions in the best interests of pupils, particularly those who have additional barriers and/or are disadvantaged.

Staff feel highly valued and safe working at the school. They appreciate how well leaders consider their wellbeing and workload when making decisions about the school. Their knowledge and expertise are called upon to help the school make important decisions about the provision. The school provides a clear professional development programme, including for early career teachers. It is evidence-informed and focused on meeting pupils' complex needs. The school regularly monitors the impact of staff development to identify strengths, share best practice and make sure that training improves teaching and learning and, ultimately, outcomes for pupils.

Parents and carers are treated as vital partners in their child's educational journey. The school works well with parents and involves them in important decisions. The work completed by parent working groups, for example to support the transition of older pupils, demonstrates the notably positive impact the school's approach to parental engagement has.

Personal development and wellbeing

Strong standard 

The school places pupils' personal development and wellbeing at the heart of everything. Critical to this is the well-conceived 'LIFE' curriculum, which includes well-adapted personal, social and health education as well as relationships and sex education programmes. In addition, the 'LIFE' curriculum sets out vital areas of life skills, careers and personal development that pupils need to be ready for their next stage.

Pupils are well prepared for life beyond the school and in modern Britain. They are sensitively supported to explore the wider world around them. For some, this starts with just recognising the needs and views of others in their immediate vicinity. For some, this includes recognising the various cultural and religious differences among us all. Pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural learning is highly personalised to their stage of development.

Life skills are developed through practical learning. Weekly cookery sessions, community visits and travel training enable pupils to develop functional independence at home, at school and in the community. The careers offer is well considered. Pupils learn about the world of work at a stage-appropriate level. Enterprise projects and shadowing various professionals all provide pupils with meaningful work-based experience.

The school's pastoral and therapeutic support is comprehensive. Pupils' wider needs are met by expert therapeutic interventions which are closely monitored for impact by the school.

Pupils leave the school well prepared for the next stage. They develop essential life and interaction skills so they can be a positive contributor to both their community and to their family. Families are overwhelmingly positive about the work the school does to support both their own and their children's wellbeing. The school's personal development programme has a clear, lasting impact. Whether resulting in pupils having the skills to go on holidays, to local restaurants or just play in the park, the school's offer has given pupils and their families the tools to enjoy a happy, healthy and full life.

Expected standard

Achievement

Expected standard 

Pupils generally achieve well across the curriculum. The school is ambitious for what pupils can achieve. This is shown in how well pupils secure knowledge in important areas such as literacy, numeracy and phonics. Pupils' achievement goes beyond the academic. Due to the high-quality support in place, pupils, many of whom have previously struggled to be part of a school, now fully participate in lessons, interact positively with adults and peers, and communicate their needs confidently.

Pupils progress well from their individual starting points. They develop the knowledge, skills and learning behaviours that will prepare them for the next stage of their education and life. When learning is carefully matched to pupils' needs, achievement is strongest. On the small number of occasions that teaching is not as consistent, pupils do not learn as well as they could. Typically, the impact of the school's work is highly positive. Pupils leave school ready to continue learning and succeed.

Curriculum and teaching

Expected standard 

The school has a clear and carefully planned approach to its curriculum design. It uses the national curriculum, pupils' education, health and care plan targets and other important information to create precise, personalised learning pathways for each pupil. The curriculum is broad and ambitious, matched to each pupils' specific stage of learning. It is thoughtfully sequenced and designed to meet both the academic and personal needs of pupils. Foundation areas such as mathematics, literacy and phonics are well adapted to make sure that pupils secure this core knowledge well.

The school regularly and effectively checks how well pupils are learning throughout the entire curriculum. Information from these checks informs staff training and support. It also informs any changes that need to be made to learning and supports staff to fill any knowledge gaps pupils may have.

The school understands what high-quality teaching for autistic pupils looks like and makes sure that staff have the subject knowledge and skills they need to deliver it. Most lessons

are purposeful, well-sequenced and engaging for pupils. Where some staff are still gaining expertise and knowledge, delivery of the curriculum is, on a small number of occasions, less consistent. The school is aware of this and has clear training and coaching in place to address this.

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

Pupils thrive at this school. All pupils have complex special educational needs and/or disabilities, which often makes communication and working with others a challenge. Due to the high-quality inclusion work of the school, pupils are engaged and positive learners. Their needs are well-known and consistently met by the school.

Pupils' learning is well matched to their needs. The curriculum they experience has enabled them to build knowledge and skills in a range of academic and personal areas. Pupils secure important knowledge in literacy and numeracy, as well as in their personal skills. They enjoy a range of activities that are integrated into their 'LIFE' curriculum, which help them to build the social interaction, self-care and life skills needed for the future and to prepare them for adulthood. As a result, pupils are very well prepared for their next stage in life.

Pupils are well supported to become independent in their communication style. They are able to share their needs, views and wishes. This has meant that pupils are now able to work together positively and begin to make trusted and genuine connections with classmates and with staff. Pupils have very warm and purposeful relationships with the adults that help them in school. They demonstrate through their interactions with staff that they feel safe.

Pupils' attendance to school is excellent. This has been supported by the strategic work of leaders to ensure that any barriers to attendance are identified and removed. Pupils enjoy coming to school and are at the centre of the school community. They treat each other with respect and kindness and their conduct towards each other is consistently positive. Bullying is rare and well responded to by the school if it does occur. Most of the time, pupils are calm and relaxed. On some occasions, due to their complex sensory needs, pupils experience anxiety. When this happens, they are skilfully supported by expert staff.

Next steps

- Leaders should ensure high quality implementation of the curriculum across all phases and areas, so that pupils achieve consistently well.
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About this inspection

This school is part of the SEAX Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Ruth Sturdy, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Sally Lockyer.

Inspectors carried out this full inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

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

Inspectors spoke with the headteacher, other members of the senior leadership team, the chief executive officer for the trust, the chair of trustees and the chair of governors during the inspection.

The Hawthorns School is a special school which provides education for autistic pupils. All pupils who attend the school have an education, health and care plan.

At the time of the inspection, 70 pupils were attending the school.

The school makes use of one unregistered alternative provision.

This was the school's first inspection since opening in January 2023.

Headteacher: Hayley Kersey

Lead inspector:

Nina Marabese, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:

Susan Cox, Ofsted Inspector

Charlie Fordham, His Majesty's Inspector

Paul Wilson, His Majesty's Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

The data was used by the inspector(s) during the inspection. More recent data may have been published since the inspection took place.



This data is from 6 January 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

30

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils currently at this school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

School capacity

70

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils who can attend the school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

20.00%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years.

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

100.00%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan. This covers pupils with more support than is available through special educational needs support.

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

0.00%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with reported special educational support needs at the school.

Location deprivation

What does this mean?

Based on the English Indices of Deprivation (2019) and the school's location, we have calculated whether the school is located in a more or less deprived area.

Resourced Provision or SEND Unit (if applicable)

No resourced provision

What does this mean?

Whether school has Resourced Provision or SEND unit (if applicable).

Absence

Overall absence

The percentage of all possible mornings and afternoons missed due to absence from school (for whatever reason, whether authorised or unauthorised) across all pupils.

Year	This school
2024/25 (2 term)	9.7%
2023/24 (3 term)	5.3%
2022/23 (3 term)	3.6%

Persistent absence

The percentage of pupils missing 10% or more of their possible mornings and afternoons.

Year	This school
2024/25 (2 term)	20.8%
2023/24 (3 term)	8.0%
2022/23 (3 term)	14.3%

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.

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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