

Inspection of Coombe House School

Dorset Centre of Excellence, Donhead St Mary, Shaftesbury, Dorset SP7 9LP

Inspection dates: 20 to 22 June 2023

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils like their new school. Some have made friends within their class groups. They have formed trusting relationships with staff who have a detailed understanding of their needs. The attendance and motivation of most pupils improve over time. Pupils are increasingly able to engage with the curriculum, although this does not yet provide the academic rigour that they need to achieve well in the future.

The school is set in a rural location with ample outdoor space. At lunchtime, pupils and staff enjoy a game of football together. Swimming is a routine activity. The school has its own swimming pool and sports hall. Pupils learn useful skills in a wooded, forest school area. Pupils learn how to cook and about eating healthily. The school's onsite caterers make the school a welcoming place, for example by celebrating 'Pride'.

Pupils feel safe in school. They see that staff want the best for them. Most pupils are accepting of the school's rules and boundaries. Staff think carefully about how and when to challenge any poor behaviour. They are watchful of the dynamics between groups of pupils. They get to the root causes of any conflict and support pupils to work through these.

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

Leaders, including the proprietor, have acted decisively and effectively to stabilise the school following some challenging first months. Behaviour around the school is typically settled. The vast majority of pupils have moved out of part-time arrangements and now attend school full time. Relationships have developed to such a degree that pupils now enjoy day trips with their classmates. Parents describe their children's improving attitudes towards school.

When pupils first join the school, they spend time in a curriculum phase called 'overcoming barriers'. The purpose of this is to re-engage pupils with education. During this time, some elements of the curriculum, such as mathematics and early reading, follow a clear sequence. However, the curriculum in some other subjects is presented to pupils in a disorderly way. This makes it hard for pupils to connect and remember ideas or experience success.

Pupils in the primary phase catch up where they have fallen behind with their reading. Assessment is used to identify any gaps in their knowledge of phonics. There are pupils in the secondary phase who may also benefit from a phonics curriculum. However, leaders have not yet assessed each pupil to confirm this. Staff do not have the expertise to teach phonics to pupils across the full age range.

Leaders have identified a series of texts to share with pupils as part of a new curriculum for reading. Staff are optimistic about the new plans which leaders intend to use from September 2023. However, pupils' engagement with reading is currently low. They are reliant on staff to draw out details and insights. Although the school

benefits from a well-stocked library, pupils' use of this is limited. Leaders have not yet established a culture which promotes pupils' enjoyment of reading.

There is some effective teaching informed by ongoing assessment of pupils' needs. Where this is the case, pupils are given relevant targets and plenty of practice. This fosters a work ethic in pupils, and they begin to see improvements, for example in handwriting or speech and language. However, this is not achieved consistently across the school. Leaders have brought in a new assessment framework to support a systematic approach, but it is too early to see the impact.

Many pupils have improved their behaviour since joining the school. Occasionally, the heightened behaviour of pupils with particular needs has an impact on the atmosphere around the school. However, such incidents are much reduced. Pupils are well supervised. Building works that were underway at the time of the last inspection have been completed. The proprietor has secured the site, striking an appropriate balance between ensuring pupils' safety and encouraging them to enjoy and grow in the setting.

Despite these successes, there remains a small minority of pupils whose attitudes towards learning are not yet positive. These pupils do not learn the curriculum in enough depth because they resist the opportunities offered to them. Leaders have not yet adapted the environment or the curriculum to meet the needs of these pupils effectively. There is more to do to secure their self-belief and engagement with the curriculum.

Pupils develop an understanding of mental health. As part of the primary-phase curriculum and in therapeutic sessions, pupils learn ways to calm themselves down when in a heightened state. They are tolerant and supportive of one another. When necessary, pupils are taught to repair their relationships and apologise. This supports their social and moral development. It also promotes their understanding of healthy relationships.

Leaders have developed a curriculum to prepare pupils for careers and work. They have identified pupils' interests and ideas about the future. The careers resources in school have been adapted to meet pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities. Pupils learn to look after themselves and about life in modern Britain. Leaders intend to teach an even wider range of independent living skills from September.

Since the last inspection, the proprietor has considerably strengthened the leadership of the school and the arrangements for governance. Leaders have the confidence of staff, parents and pupils. They recognise that there is more to do to secure a good standard of education. Nevertheless, they have significantly improved the school in a short time. There is now a strong understanding among leaders as to the requirements of the independent school standards (the standards). These are now met in full. Leaders have ensured that the school complies with the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Safeguarding underpins every aspect of school life. Staff receive daily updates and signposting to useful resources. Leaders are mindful of a wide range of possible risks. They assess risk sensibly, and staff are guided by their advice.

Staff use the school's system for reporting concerns confidently. Leaders review the concerns raised regularly and take appropriate action. They work in partnership with fellow professionals, such as social workers, staff in children's homes and the police.

Leaders have established a healthy culture in which staff are comfortable sharing any misgivings about practices in the school. They ensure that lessons are learned from any incidents. They keep meticulous records and use these to continually strengthen their procedures.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- The curriculum is not sufficiently rigorous. In some subjects and classes, pupils gain knowledge incrementally, following a well-designed sequence of learning, but this is not consistent. The work given to pupils does not help them to secure necessary foundational knowledge reliably. Leaders should ensure that the curriculum helps pupils to build and remember useful knowledge so that they are able to do more in the future.
- In the primary phase, reading attainment is assessed and the gaps in pupils' knowledge are addressed. This is not the case in the secondary phase, where gaps in pupils' knowledge of phonics are not identified. Consequently, some pupils do not read as confidently or as well as they could. Leaders should develop the expertise in the school to support the teaching of a phonics curriculum to all who need this.
- Most pupils develop positive attitudes towards their learning while at the school. However, there remains a small minority of pupils who do not engage with the curriculum as well as they should. This inhibits their learning and accreditation prospects. Leaders should encourage these pupils to take pride in their achievements and to rise to the school's high expectations.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	149019
DfE registration number	865/6059
Local authority	Wiltshire
Inspection number	10267714
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	37
Number of part-time pupils	5
Proprietor	Dorset Centre of Excellence
Chair	Ian Comfort
Headteacher	Darren Harte
Annual fees (day pupils)	£42,394
Telephone number	01747 449 820
Website	coombehouseschool.org.uk
Email address	office@coombehouseschool.org.uk

Information about this school

- The school was registered by the Department for Education on 6 May 2022. This was the school's first standard inspection.
- The proprietor conducted an emergency closure of the school one week after it opened. The school reopened on 23 June 2022 and then closed early for the summer break on 9 July 2022. The proprietor delayed opening the school to pupils until 13 September 2022.
- An emergency inspection took place in October 2022 at the request of the Department for Education.
- In November 2022, the managing director joined the school and acted as an interim headteacher. In January 2023, the headteacher joined the school.
- Dorset County Council is the principal stakeholder in the proprietor body, Dorset Centre of Excellence. The school is in Wiltshire, close to the border of Dorset. The vast majority of pupil placements are funded by Dorset local authority. The proprietor intends to admit pupils from other local authorities in the future.
- All pupils have education, health and care plans. Pupils have social, emotional or mental health needs and/or autism.
- Although the school is able to admit students of sixth-form age, there were no sixth-form students on roll at the time of the inspection.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- A progress monitoring inspection was carried out at the same time as this first standard inspection. The inspection was conducted with no notice.
- Inspectors met with the managing director, the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team and the chair of the proprietor body. Inspectors held telephone discussions with the member of the proprietor body responsible for safeguarding and, separately, two representatives of Dorset County Council.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: art, English (with a focus on early reading), mathematics and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited

a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.

- Inspectors also scrutinised curriculum plans and spoke to leaders about pupils' learning in some other subjects.
- To inspect safeguarding, the lead inspector met with the school's safeguarding team, including the designated safeguarding lead. She scrutinised the school's records, including the single central record of adults working in the school. Inspectors spoke with staff about their training and their use of the school's safeguarding systems. They also held discussions with pupils to consider whether they felt safe in school.
- Inspectors checked the premises, including the arrangements for fire safety, health and safety and site maintenance.
- Inspectors considered comments from parents submitted via Ofsted's online survey for parents, Ofsted Parent View. They also took into account the responses to the surveys for pupils and staff.

The school's progress in meeting previously failed standards

During the inspection we checked whether the school now meets the independent school standards that it was judged to have failed at its previous emergency inspection on 18 October 2022.

- The outcome of this part of the inspection is: **the school now meets the previously failed standards**
- The previous inspection identified weaknesses in safeguarding culture. The safeguarding policy contained inaccurate information. Staff did not apply agreed procedures for reporting safeguarding incidents. Some staff did not understand the procedures for managing allegations about other members of staff. Staff have since been retrained. They use the school's systems for reporting concerns diligently. Allegations about staff are managed effectively. The vast majority of pupils now attend school well.
- Leaders did not have sufficient oversight of the well-being of pupils who were not attending well. The vast majority of pupils now attend school regularly. Where this is not the case, leaders uphold their responsibilities for the safeguarding of pupils.
- Immediately after the school's unplanned closure in May 2022, the proprietor reviewed the school's behaviour policy. At this time, the proprietor found that the policy was fit for purpose, but its implementation was poor. Staff teams now take a consistent approach to the review of behaviour incidents. Pupils' risk assessments are working documents to which staff make regular reference. Staff interactions with pupils are now aligned with leaders' clear expectations of them.
- Risks assessments did not include precise information. When serious incidents occurred, not all risk assessments were amended sufficiently well. Leaders were supporting staff to strengthen the effectiveness of risk assessment for off-site activities. Risk assessments are now detailed and updates are demarcated clearly. Leaders apply appropriate caution when taking pupils beyond the immediate

school grounds. A comprehensive set of risk assessments covers the full range of school activities.

- At the time of the previous inspection, recruitment for a substantive headteacher was underway. Although the proprietor was developing the school's therapeutic provision, many pupils were attending part time and, therefore, not in receipt of a full-time education with these benefits. The proprietor has secured permanent leadership of the school through the appointment of a managing director and substantive headteacher. Few pupils now attend part time; therefore, most access the school's curriculum in full.
- Members of the proprietor board and some school leaders were still developing their knowledge of the standards. The standards were not met in full. Members are now trained in the standards. The standards are met in full.

The school now meets the following standards

- 7 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 7(a) arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and
 - 7(b) such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State.
- 9 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor promotes good behaviour amongst pupils by ensuring that–
 - 9(b) the policy is implemented effectively;
- 16 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 16 (a) the welfare of pupils at the school is safeguarded and promoted by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written risk assessment policy; and
 - 16(b) appropriate action is taken to reduce risks that are identified.
- 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–
 - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently; and
 - 34(1)(c) actively promote the well-being of pupils.

Information about the progress monitoring inspection

- In addition to the previously failed standards, the inspection focused on part 3, paragraphs 11 and 14, and part 5, paragraph 25. These standards relate to the health, safety and supervision of pupils and the extent to which the premises are maintained to a reasonable standard. These standards are met.

Inspection team

Lydia Pride, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Martin Greenwood

Ofsted Inspector

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