A report on

Priory Talocher School

Date of inspection: February 2020

by

Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

About Priory Talocher School

Priory Talocher is an independent special school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and associated needs. It is located on the outskirts of Monmouth, and is administered by Priory Education Services, which has over 30 schools and specialist colleges across England and Wales.

The school is registered for up to 55 pupils aged 7 to 19 years. There are currently 49 pupils on roll, each of whom has a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Many pupils are placed by Welsh local authorities; a few are placed by English local authorities. Around one-quarter of pupils are looked after by their local authority.

It is not appropriate to compare the standards pupils achieve at the school with national averages or to analyse trends in performance over time because of the individual needs of the pupils.

Since the last inspection in June 2013, the number of pupils on roll has increased steadily from 22 to 49. The school now employs its own therapeutic team that includes an assistant psychologist, an art therapist, a music therapist and a counsellor, to support the work of the education team. In July 2019, the school made a material change to its registration to admit pupils with ASD as their primary area of need.

The headteacher has been in post since September 2018.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website at the link below.
http://mylocalschool.wales.gov.uk/Schools/SchoolSearch?lang=en

Summary

Many pupils make suitable progress in their learning and against the targets on their personal plans during their time at the school. In particular, many make valuable progress in improving their behaviour, attendance and attitudes to learning. This progress means that by the time they leave the school, nearly all pupils achieve a worthwhile range of accreditation that helps them to move on successfully to further education courses, training providers or employment. However, a few pupils do not attend regularly enough or respond positively to the behaviour management strategies of staff. As a result, a minority of pupils overall do not make enough progress in their learning.

Teaching staff build positive working relationships with pupils and provide a high degree of care, support and guidance for them. The school reviews its curriculum carefully to meet the needs of pupils. However, its provision for personal and social education lacks coherence. This means that pupils do not develop fully their understanding of important issues that relate to their future wellbeing.

The headteacher provides strong leadership for the school and has a clear understanding of how to move the school forward. However, many recent initiatives are at an early stage of development.

The school meets almost all of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

Inspection area	Judgement
Standards	**Adequate and needs improvement**
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	**Good**
Teaching and learning experiences	**Adequate and needs improvement**
Care, support and guidance	**Adequate and needs improvement**
Leadership and management	**Adequate and needs improvement**

Compliance with the regulations for registration

Independent school inspections are governed by the Education Act 2002 and related regulations: the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. These regulations require an independent school to meet an appropriate standard in the following areas:

The quality of education provided by the school

The school does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Although the school meets almost all of the regulatory requirements for this standard, in order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards Regulations (Wales) 2003 the school should:
- Ensure it has a curriculum policy set out in writing and supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, and implement it effectively [1(2)]
- Provide personal, social and health education which reflects its aims and ethos [1(2)(f)]
- Ensure lessons are well planned, teaching methods effective and suitable activities used; ensure class time is managed wisely [1(3)(d)]

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The suitability of proprietors and staff

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Premises of and boarding accommodation at schools

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The provision of information

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Recommendations

R1 Comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003

R2 Strengthen the quality of leadership and management at all levels

R3 Improve pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning

R4 Improve the planning for the development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills

What happens next

Since the school does not meet the standards required for registration, the National Assembly for Wales will require the proprietor to submit an action plan within a specified period of time. This plan will set out the steps that the school will take to meet the standards, and the timescale within which it will complete each step.

Estyn advises the proprietor to amend its current development plan to show what actions the school intends to take in response to the recommendations. It is also advisable to circulate this plan, or a summary of it, to all parents/carers at the school.

Main findings

Standards: Adequate and needs improvement

Many pupils make suitable progress in their learning during their time at the school because of the consistent support and encouragement they receive from staff. They develop their wider skills and abilities appropriately in relation to the targets on their personal plans. This secure progress means that by the time they leave the school, nearly all achieve a worthwhile range of qualifications or units of accreditation in a wide range of subjects, including English, maths and science, as well as in vocational areas such as construction and hair and beauty. These achievements help to ensure that over the last three years, all pupils who leave the school at the end of their education progress successfully to further education courses, training providers or into employment.

In lessons, many pupils recall prior learning well. They consolidate their understanding of subject content suitably in relation to the lesson objectives. They listen carefully to teaching staff and respond appropriately to instructions and guidance. The majority respond to questions confidently and contribute independently to discussion. Generally, they use subject specific key words accurately, for example to describe the property of cells in biology. However, in a few lessons, pupils do not listen well enough to instruction or respond positively to what they are asked to do. As a result, a minority of pupils do not make enough progress in their learning.

Over time, many pupils make appropriate progress in developing their literacy skills. These pupils read successfully to identify key information from short texts, for example, to identify the impact of volcanic eruptions on those who live close by. A few pupils, when they have the opportunity, read aloud confidently and clearly. Many pupils improve their understanding of spelling and grammar suitably in line with their age and ability to write for a relevant variety of audiences and purposes. For example, pupils in key stage 3 structure short and interesting biographies of famous painters. Primary-aged pupils explain their understanding of the solar system and write narrative poems relating to firework night. They structure their work carefully and accurately, and use expressive language creatively in their poetry. However, teachers' reliance on worksheets means that many pupils across the school do not have sufficient opportunities to extend and develop their writing skills.

Many pupils develop secure basic numeracy skills in relation to the four rules of number. In turn, these skills support the development of pupils' independence skills well. For example, pupils in key stage 3 apply their knowledge of long division competently to solve simple problems. They tell the time using a digital and analogue clock and use money to calculate the cost of items and how much change they should receive in a shop. Older pupils recall accurately how to calculate the circumference of a circle. However, opportunities for pupils to develop and apply their numeracy skills across the curriculum are underdeveloped. In addition, a few pupils who attend most or all of their provision off-site miss opportunities to develop their literacy and numeracy skills in a planned or co-ordinated way.

Many pupils develop their physical skills well through regular timetabled activities such as football and swimming, as well as valuable opportunities to participate in off-site fitness and assault course sessions with local training providers. Older pupils build their confidence and develop their problem-solving skills well through activities such as repairing hand-tools, woodwork skills, outdoor cooking and fire building. They develop beneficial work-related skills through valuable placements with training providers and third-sector organisations, in areas such as tractor driving, hedge trimming and construction. This prepares them well for their transition to further education, training or employment.

Most pupils use information and communication technology (ICT) effectively to fulfil simple functions to support their learning such as researching and drafting their written work. However, overall, pupils make limited progress in developing their ICT skills during their time at the school.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Good

Many pupils value the school and build constructive and trusting relationships with staff which support their learning effectively. Pupils at the school have a wide range of primary and secondary needs including social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and those associated with ASD. As a result nearly all pupils find changes to routine challenging but many manage these successfully through working co-operatively with teaching staff.

In lessons, many pupils across the school concentrate appropriately and sustain their engagement to complete tasks set. These pupils take pride in their achievements and progress in lessons. They recognise that since being at the school they have made improvements in their attitudes to learning and attendance. Many respond well to staff instruction and guidance, and with the skilful encouragement of teaching staff, respond confidently when provided with challenging opportunities to extend their learning. Around half of pupils collaborate successfully to develop their learning. For example, older pupils develop valuable teamwork skills through courses such as a motivational programme that they access through a local training provider.

Many pupils respond well when given responsibilities. They help with break-time activities, for example, giving out and collecting sport equipment, tidying up after themselves at mealtimes, and recycling. Pupils who attend vocational courses or work experience increase their independence suitably. Learner voice activities enable pupils to provide helpful feedback to school leaders on areas such as staff appointments and the rewards process. However, few pupils understand how these contributions influence the work of the school.

The majority of pupils feel safe in the school and many improve their behaviour over time. Generally, they welcome visitors to the school, respond to their questions appropriately and engage well when discussing their work. Where routines are clear, pupils follow routines sensibly without support and become more independent over time. However, a few pupils demonstrate poor attitudes to learning and inappropriate behaviour in lessons and around the site. These pupils do not respond well to the behaviour management strategies of staff.

Many pupils improve their attendance significantly over time. However, the poor attendance of the few pupils who do not attend regularly limits the progress they make in their learning and wellbeing.

Many pupils develop their social skills well. For example, when in the school canteen they socialise appropriately with their peers and adults. Many show a suitable understanding of the benefits of healthy eating and regular exercise. A majority of pupils take advantage of regular opportunities to exercise at lunch times and during physical exercise lessons and all primary pupils take part in the morning routine of breakfast and 'wake and shake' sessions.

Teaching and learning experiences: Adequate and needs improvement

School leaders and teaching staff have a clear vision for a broad curriculum that responds well to the needs of each individual learner. For example, the school provides a wide range of vocational learning opportunities to support older pupils' aspirations and pathways to further education or employment when they leave school. These include accredited courses that are well matched to pupils' interests and abilities and that develop their practical, personal and social skills effectively.

The school regularly reviews its curriculum arrangements to meet the needs of pupils. For example, it has implemented suitable arrangements to support the transition of primary pupils to the secondary phase through the development of a thematic curriculum, and has recently added a specialist provision for pupils with ASD that meets their sensory and learning needs well. The school makes creative use of the outdoor learning environment to promote opportunities for pupils to develop their physical, collaborative and social skills. This includes visits to the Big Pit, local castles and leisure centres to support pupils' topic work.

The school's planning for skills is developing. For example, teachers are beginning to use ongoing assessment data to set personalised targets for each individual, and inform their planning more appropriately. Reading assessments now identify the reading ages of all pupils and this data is shared suitably with staff. The school has resourced a library with books, well matched to pupils' different abilities; however, only a minority of classes promote regular opportunities for pupils to read.

Staff teams work together suitably in order to create a wider range of experiences to enable pupils to apply their skills in meaningful contexts. However, the recent appointment of key members of staff to co-ordinate the progressive planning of pupils' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills means that this work is at an early stage of development.

Positive working relationships between staff and pupils are a strong feature of the school. Teaching staff work together well to provide valuable support for pupils. They intervene skilfully to promote effective engagement and concentration for many pupils, and in a few cases, independent learning. As a result, learning environments are generally calm and stimulating.

In nearly all lessons, staff provide regular verbal feedback to encourage pupils to sustain their engagement and complete tasks set.   However, in a majority of lessons, teachers' oral and written feedback does not help pupils effectively enough to assess their progress against their current targets or identify what they need to do next to improve their work.

Overall, there is too much variation in the quality of teaching, and in a minority of lessons, this limits the progress pupils make. Teachers' short-term planning follows a consistent approach and identifies suitable opportunities to match work to pupils' individual needs. Where planning is developing well, teachers ensure activities inspire pupils to collaborate, take risks, and learn from their own and others' mistakes in productive ways. In these lessons, staff have high expectations of pupils' behaviour and learning, and use a broad range of teaching strategies to ensure that activities are purposeful and include a suitable element of challenge. However, curriculum planning that builds systematically on individual pupils' progress is in the early stages of development. For example, schemes of work do not identify learning experiences or plan assessment opportunities well enough. This means that a minority of pupils do not make sufficient progress. As a result, the quality of the curriculum does not fully meet the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

Care, support and guidance: Adequate and needs improvement

The school provides pupils with a caring and supportive environment that helps to improve pupils' confidence and engagement in learning and promote positive outcomes for many pupils. Teaching staff know pupils well and take time to build trusting working relationships with pupils that support the development of their self-esteem and wellbeing effectively.

Pupils benefit significantly from the therapeutic support provided by the school's multi-disciplinary team. This team provides valuable advice and guidance for education staff and parents, for example by contributing to the development of pupils' personal support plans and developing strategies for teaching staff to work with pupils in the classroom. This work is helping to strengthen staff's understanding of the complex issues that underlie the challenges that many pupils face in their learning. However, overall, behaviour management strategies are not deployed consistently enough across the school.

The school has effective processes to assess pupils on entry to the school and ensure it has a secure understanding of their emotional and social needs, as well as their academic starting points. As they move through the school, leaders track and monitor pupils' attendance and incidents relating to challenging behaviour carefully. They use this information to plan suitable interventions, for example by adapting and modifying the curriculum where required to respond to pupils' interests and aspirations. This thoughtful approach helps many pupils to improve their behaviour and attendance successfully over time.

The school has recently reviewed its approach to tracking pupils' progress over time to include a greater focus on the progress pupils make in developing their wider skills, including the development of their communication, independence and self-management skills. Although at an early stage of development, this approach is beginning to provide the school with additional useful information about the progress that pupils make in areas that support their learning.

Leaders have strengthened the school's system to capture the progress pupils make across the main areas of curriculum. This database identifies clearly pupils' progress in their school-based learning. Regular reports home share this information suitably

with parents and carers. However, these arrangements do not include well enough the progress pupils make who complete part or all of their learning off-site, and reports include little detail for this important aspect of their provision.

The school has worthwhile arrangements to develop pupils' understanding of healthy lifestyle choices in relation to healthy eating and drinking. They improve their understanding of the benefits of physical exercise through regular timetabled opportunities for sport and exercise both in school and off-site. In addition, around half the pupils benefit from one-to-one support from members of the multi-disciplinary team. This valuable work helps many pupils to develop their understanding of the experiences that have impacted on their wellbeing, and provides them with strategies to cope with these. However, currently, the school's programme of personal and social education lacks coherence. In particular, there is not a strategic approach to the teaching of important issues relating to equality and diversity, or those that relate to domestic violence, discrimination, identity-based bullying and extremism in relation to individual pupils' needs.

The school plans suitably to develop pupils' understanding of work-related education as they move through the school. This includes regular timetabled on-site enterprise activities, as well as work experience placements for secondary-aged pupils with a wide range of local employers, including the fire service, a tree surgeon and an apiary. A few older pupils, where this is appropriate, access part of their education off-site. These placements provide pupils with relevant and stimulating experiences that build their self-esteem, independence and social skills effectively.

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Leadership and management: Adequate and needs improvement

Senior leaders communicate a clear strategic vision for the school based on providing 'high quality, unique, individual and inspiring learning opportunities in a caring, fun and therapeutic environment'. Staff support this vision well and work together effectively to meet pupils' social, emotional and learning needs.

The headteacher provides strong leadership for the school. She has high expectations of staff and pupils' performance and a clear understanding of how to move the school forward. In a relatively short time, she has strengthened the senior leadership team by reviewing and refreshing the roles of the senior leaders and by making new appointments to middle management positions. This has increased the capacity of leadership across the school. Senior leaders provide a high level of mentoring support for staff who are new to these roles. However, many of these appointments are very newly in place and it is not possible to evaluate their impact on pupils' standards, the quality of teaching and learning, or pupil wellbeing.

The proprietor provides a high level of challenge and beneficial support for the leadership team through the organisation's well-established governance arrangements and quality assurance procedures. The proprietors have well-defined roles and carry out their line management responsibilities for important aspects of the school's provision diligently.

The proprietor and senior leaders have reviewed the work of the school and have set clear priorities for development. These include increasing the school's capacity to meet the needs of pupils with ASD and improving the provision for pupils who have had adverse childhood experiences including poor attachments and trauma.

The school's improvement planning process sets clear targets, timescales and resources to address each of the school's priorities for improvement. However, over the current academic year to date, the impact of staff absence and changes in the staff team has had an unsettling effect on the smooth running of the school and on pupil behaviour. To address this, senior leaders have taken on increased teaching commitments but as a result, have not been able to drive forward school improvement initiatives at the pace originally intended. As a result, important initiatives are not yet embedded in day-to-day practice across the school.

Staff work together well in their respective teams and benefit from regular training opportunities that provide strong support the school's vision, the priorities for development and individual professional development needs. The staff team has a broad range of subject specialisms and skills that provide effective support for the curriculum and pupils' identified needs. Staff know and understand their roles and responsibilities well and are deployed effectively to ensure that pupils' social and emotional needs are supported suitably.

The school has recently invested in improving the learning facilities on site. New developments include a dedicated learning area for pupils with ASD, a food technology room and improved provision for pupils to develop artistic, creative and practical skills. Most classrooms are well maintained and support the delivery of the curriculum well.

The school meets almost all of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from parent and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teaching and support staff through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- meet proprietors, school leaders and individual members of teaching and support staff to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- visit lessons and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school had taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' wellbeing, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Estyn evaluates a provider's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

The report was produced in accordance with section 163 of the Education Act 2002. The main purpose of inspection under this section is to report on compliance with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003. In schools that provide non-maintained nursery education, this report also satisfies the requirements of Schedule 26 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.