

Inspection of Three Bridges

Kea Downs Road, Blackwater, Truro, Cornwall TR4 8EG

Inspection dates: 29 November to 1 December 2022

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

No

What is it like to attend this school?

Three Bridges caters for pupils with autism spectrum disorder. All pupils have significant special educational needs and/or disabilities. Some are only able to communicate with others in a very limited way. Pupils have typically had unsuccessful experiences of schooling in either mainstream or specialist settings in the past.

Pupils enjoy a good standard of education. However, they are exposed to unnecessary risks because the management of safeguarding is weak. Those responsible for governance have not checked that the school meets the expected standards for the welfare, health and safety of pupils.

Each pupil is based in a personalised classroom. If it is appropriate to their social development, pupils share a space with a small peer group. Over time, with the support of staff, some pupils go on to develop friendships. Staff support pupils to interact successfully outside school, for example in shops and cafes.

Staff are positive role models for pupils. They help pupils to understand and value one another's differences. Pupils learn about the impact of unkind words. There is very little opportunity for bullying because interactions between pupils are carefully supported.

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

The proprietor of the school is a charitable trust. In recent years, the governance of the school provided by the board of trustees has been weak. Leaders have not been held to account for their work to make sure that the school meets the independent school standards. Consequently, leaders do not understand their responsibilities well enough. They are overly reliant on external monitoring to help them fulfil their statutory safeguarding duties set out in 'Keeping children safe in education'.

The way the school is governed has recently been reorganised following changes in the wider organisation. The board of trustees now directly oversees leaders' work. However, the trustees do not have the necessary knowledge to fulfil this role effectively. The trustees are in the process of reviewing their arrangements for monitoring the school. So far, their expectations of leaders have been too low. Leaders do not provide the trustees with the information they need to govern effectively. The trustees are not well informed about the arrangements for safeguarding, or the school's curriculum.

Leaders have designed a broad curriculum. They have thought carefully about what each pupil most needs and how the school can go beyond this to enrich pupils' lives. Books and stories are at the heart of the curriculum for every pupil. This appeals to pupils' sensory needs and leads into creative work. Leaders' first priority is to empower pupils to communicate their needs and preferences to others. Specialist

staff gain pupils' trust quickly and help them to communicate successfully. This opens up a world of other learning for pupils.

For pupils at the early stages of reading, leaders provide a phonics curriculum. Staff adapt the curriculum to meet pupils' needs, taking into account their capacity for learning on a day-to-day basis. Where pupils can already read fluently, staff make sure that there are plenty of books on hand to grab their attention. Some pupils enjoy taking on the different voices of characters when reading alongside staff.

Teachers get to know the pupils well. By trying different approaches, they learn what they can do to unlock the curriculum for each pupil. As much as possible, pupils spend time learning outdoors. There is a well-developed forest school area where curriculum activities take place throughout the day. Leaders slowly increase the degree of social challenge as pupils become comfortable with their surroundings. This supports pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence.

All staff contribute to the ongoing assessment of pupils' knowledge and development. Leaders break the curriculum down into achievable steps for pupils. These are set alongside pupils' personal targets, such as those in their education, health and care (EHC) plans. Teachers regularly review pupils' progress. This creates a strong, shared understanding among staff as to what each pupil needs to focus on next.

Staff pay careful attention to pupils' behaviour. They recognise when a pupil is becoming anxious and reassure them. Leaders build up records of pupils' behaviour over time. They discuss any patterns in behaviour with pupils, parents and carers. Leaders agree ways to adapt provision when needed. This often results in an improvement. Parents appreciate the difference the school makes to their children's behaviour. They report more settled behaviour at home and in the community as a result of the school's work. Leaders engage well with parents through the parent forum.

Pupils often join the school following a period of non-attendance or poor attendance elsewhere. Leaders work closely with parents and pupils to design a phased integration which is successful in almost all cases. Pupils build up to high attendance and then sustain that. Where attendance dips, leaders explore why and adapt the provision so that it improves.

Leaders think carefully about the personal, social and health education (PSHE) that each pupil needs. They provide well-considered real-life experiences to back up pupils' learning in school. Leaders know that the pupils need many opportunities to repeat learning and often do not make progress in a straightforward way. To this end, staff have the flexibility to adapt and repeat learning experiences that support pupils' personal development.

With the support of staff, pupils plan career pathways in the light of their interests and skills. They have meaningful opportunities to encounter the world of work. Where possible, older pupils study for qualifications in English and mathematics.

They also gain accreditation for some of the personal development challenges they take on. This helps them to prepare for further study at college.

Leaders place a high value on developing staff expertise. Staff are encouraged to undertake further training and to connect with other education professionals. Staff feel valued because leaders are considerate of their workload and well-being.

The trustees are developing their knowledge of safeguarding in schools. They have undertaken recent training. They recognise the need to improve the oversight of governance on safeguarding. They commission some additional services to support them in monitoring the school. Thus far, however, their approach has not served the school well. They have not identified ongoing weaknesses in risk assessment, safer recruitment practices and record-keeping.

The school complies with schedule 10 of the Equalities Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.

Leaders are too reliant on external monitoring to help them to follow guidance in 'Keeping children safe in education'. Record-keeping is not robust. Safeguarding records do not fully capture the nature of incidents, including any follow-up actions, decisions made and the outcomes. Leaders do not assess risks associated with pupils' different learning environments well enough.

The trustees do not understand safeguarding practice well enough to provide effective monitoring in the school. Over time, it has been possible for adults to work with pupils without the full range of vetting checks; while pupils have not been harmed, this is a failure of leadership. The trustees do not prioritise the review of their policy setting out the arrangements for the safeguarding of pupils. Therefore, the management of safeguarding is weak.

However, staff develop trusting relationships with pupils. This gives pupils the confidence to report any worries. Leaders liaise with, and support families well, securing help from other services where appropriate.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- The trustees do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities effectively. Consequently, they have not prioritised key safeguarding measures highly enough. This includes the review of associated policies and arrangements for the vetting of prospective staff. Trustees should develop their knowledge of essential practices in safeguarding in schools. This will help them to prioritise their activities more effectively.

- Leaders' understanding of the independent schools standards is weak. The trustees have not developed the necessary expertise within the school to ensure that the standards related to the welfare, health and safety of pupils are met consistently. Trustees should ensure that leaders have good knowledge of the independent schools standards so that they can fulfil their responsibilities effectively.
- Leaders are overly reliant on external monitoring to ensure that they meet the independent school standards related to the suitability of staff. They do not follow the guidance provided in 'Keeping children safe in education' consistently. This has resulted in periods of time where adults have worked with pupils without the proper vetting checks in place. Trustees should ensure that the school maintains an accurate single central record that meets requirements.
- Leaders do not identify and assess the potential risks to pupils' safety well enough. They do not fully consider the ways in which pupils' particular needs and personal circumstances may lead to their increased vulnerability. In some cases, there is a reliance on external agencies to assess risks on behalf of leaders. Leaders must take responsibility for identifying and assessing any risks associated with pupils' different learning environments.
- Leaders have clear expectations for how staff should record any safeguarding concerns or incidents. However, these procedures are not always followed in practice. Safeguarding records do not fully capture the nature of incidents, including any follow-up actions, decisions made and the outcomes. This makes it difficult to review and evaluate the impact of the school's work to safeguard pupils. Leaders should ensure that record-keeping practices contribute strongly to keeping pupils safe.

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	129252
DfE registration number	908/6095
Local authority	Cornwall
Inspection number	10257893
Type of school	Other Independent Special School
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	11
Number of part-time pupils	2
Proprietor	Spectrum
Chair	Nick Tostdevine
Headteacher	Lisa Smith
Annual fees (day pupils)	£84,000
Telephone number	01872 561010
Website	3bridges.co.uk
Email address	lisa.smith@spectrumasd.org
Dates of previous inspection	12 to 14 November 2019

Information about this school

- The last standard inspection took place in November 2019. Since then, a new headteacher has joined the school.
- Three Bridges is of part the Spectrum charitable trust. Spectrum is a working name for the Devon and Cornwall Autistic Communities Trust. The trust is governed by a board of trustees. The trust has recently reduced in size. There have been significant changes in the governance arrangements for the school arising from this process.
- Three Bridges is a specialist provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder. All pupils have EHC plans. Most placements are funded by Cornwall local authority.
- The school is included on the list of approved independent special schools, in accordance with Section 41 of the Children's and Families Act 2014.
- The school uses no alternative provision.

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 has failed to meet the independent school standards. These are the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- Inspectors met with the headteacher, the school improvement partner, who is also part of the school's management committee, the chair of the trust board and one other trustee. An inspector spoke with a representative of the local authority on the telephone.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, with a focus on communication and sensory learning, and reading, mathematics, physical education and PSHE. 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 checked the safety and suitability of the premises. They considered risk assessments and the policies and systems in place to promote the well-being of pupils.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors held discussions with the headteacher (who is also the designated safeguarding lead), the trustees and a wide range of staff. The lead inspector considered the single central record and the school's wider processes for safer recruitment. Inspectors held discussions with pupils to gather evidence as to their experiences.

- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted’s online questionnaire for parents, Ofsted Parent View. Inspectors also took into account the responses to the online surveys for pupils and staff.

Inspection team

Lydia Pride, lead inspector

His Majesty’s Inspector

Jane Dennis

His Majesty’s Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school failed to meet the following independent school standards

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 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.
- 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.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 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.

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