

# Inspection of VTSS

Oak View, Mayfield Flat, Cross-in-Hand, Heathfield, East Sussex TN21 0TU

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Inspection dates: 27 and 28 June 2023

**Overall effectiveness** **Good**

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The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Good**

Leadership and management **Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Not previously inspected

Does the school meet the independent school standards? **Yes**

## **What is it like to attend this school?**

VTSS provides a haven for pupils who have experienced trauma and who need to learn in a supportive and therapeutic environment. All pupils who attend the school live in the children's home, which is operated by the same proprietor.

The school has been designed to feel like an extension of home for the pupils who attend. Pupils learn in very small classes with high levels of adult support. Pupils follow an individual curriculum that incorporates both therapy and learning.

Pupils have often struggled at school in the past and they appreciate how teaching staff and therapeutic staff have supported them to re-engage with school life. They begin to develop a most positive attitude to learning.

Pupils enjoy the large garden and multi-use games area where their physical education takes place, but where they can also spend time socialising. Pupils particularly enjoy the opportunities they have to study art and to create their own artworks. Most recently, pupils have enjoyed working in clay. They designed and created their own ceramic tiles before moving on to create three-dimensional works such as bird feeders. Pupils feel very proud of their accomplishments in art.

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

When pupils arrive at the school, they have frequently not attended school for some time. It is not always known how long pupils will remain on the school roll. Though some will already have an education, health and care (EHC) plan when they arrive, pupils often have additional, undiagnosed special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Working to improve confidence and engagement is a key part of the initial education that pupils receive. Initially, much of this work comes through the therapeutic provision pupils receive. As they settle in and develop more readiness for learning, teachers begin to work with pupils to get to know their strengths and what they need to work on. This can be a challenging process. Pupils are often unwilling to engage in assessments that would give staff more precise information about pupils' SEND and the gaps in learning they arrive with.

Despite the difficulties in assessing pupils, staff are determined to find the right pathway for each pupil. They recognise that initially, there is an element of 'trial and error' in the creation of each pupil's bespoke curriculum.

Leaders recognise that in some subjects, including English, the planned curriculum is not yet working as well as they had hoped. Often, it proves easier to engage pupils in some subjects than in others. For example, pupils often enjoy mathematics, but find it harder to engage with English. This is sometimes because reading and writing are a particular barrier.

Leaders have made adaptations in the short term to ensure that older pupils are able to work towards appropriate qualifications, including in English. However, in the longer term, there are curriculum areas that need to be reviewed so that the planned curriculum better enables teachers to address gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding. There also needs to be greater clarity about what leaders want pupils to learn in each subject. Leaders recognise that teachers are teaching outside their subject expertise and will need ongoing training to develop their expertise across the subjects they teach.

When pupils are not yet fluent and confident readers, staff provide regular opportunities for those pupils to practise their reading with an adult. However, at present, not all staff have the expertise they need to provide precise and effective support. Leaders recognise that developing a consistent approach to the teaching of early reading is an urgent priority.

There are very clear approaches in place to support pupils' behaviour. All pupils have experienced trauma, and this underpins their presenting behaviours. Staff recognise that unless they create an environment in which pupils feel safe and positively connected to the adults around them, they will not be able to learn successfully. Over time, pupils learn to understand themselves better and to take responsibility for their actions.

There has been some turbulence in staffing and leadership. However, the chair of the proprietor body has taken swift and effective action to minimise the impact of this turbulence on the pupils. A director of education has been appointed and is currently the school's interim headteacher. Together, the chair of the proprietor body and the director of education have the knowledge and expertise to ensure that the independent school standards are consistently met, and that pupils continue to receive high levels of pastoral care and therapeutic support, alongside an effective education.

The turbulence in senior leadership has impacted on the precision of school improvement planning. Leaders and those responsible for governance need to ensure that their school improvement planning is tightly focused on those aspects of school performance that will make the biggest difference to pupils, and that progress against those targets is regularly reviewed. Leaders have ensured that they comply with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

When pupils join the school, there is a clear process for gathering and analysing all information known about each pupil, their prior experiences and any ongoing risks they face. Senior leaders ensure that they speak to the professionals who know each pupil best to build the clearest possible picture. Senior leaders create a detailed risk assessment for each pupil, and this is shared with teaching and therapeutic staff.

Staff are trained to recognise any new, emerging safeguarding risks, and ongoing observations of pupils are recorded on the school's safeguarding record-keeping system.

Senior leaders have a clear understanding of safer recruitment processes and make extensive checks on any applicant before appointing them to the school's staff. There is a clear process for staff to report any concerns about adults. Leaders refer appropriately to external safeguarding partners.

## **What does the school need to do to improve?**

### **(Information for the school and proprietor)**

- In some subjects, the planned curriculum does not have the impact that leaders intend. This is sometimes because the curriculum does not align closely enough with the gaps in pupils' knowledge, and because teachers do not have the subject knowledge they need across the subjects they teach to adapt the curriculum successfully for all pupils. Leaders need to review curriculum plans and ensure that these align with the starting points of pupils. They need to continue their work to develop teachers' expertise across the subjects that they teach so that teachers can better adapt their teaching to meet the needs of all pupils.
- School improvement planning does not address the key aspects of school performance that would make the biggest difference to pupils precisely enough. Senior leaders and those responsible for governance need to ensure that improvement plans are precise, and that progress towards improvement targets is carefully tracked.

## **How can I feed back my views?**

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The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	148888
<b>DfE registration number</b>	845/6069
<b>Local authority</b>	East Sussex
<b>Inspection number</b>	10267709
<b>Type of school</b>	Other independent special school
<b>School category</b>	Independent school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	9 to 18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Boys
<b>Proprietor</b>	Virtue Therapeutic Care & Education (East Sussex) Ltd
<b>Chair</b>	Matthew Wakeling
<b>Headteacher</b>	Richard Horton (interim)
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£50,000 to £80,000
<b>Telephone number</b>	07799 120339
<b>Email address</b>	admin@virtuechildren.co.uk
<b>Website</b>	<a href="https://virtuechildren.co.uk">https://virtuechildren.co.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected

## Information about this school

- The school caters for up to 12 male pupils between the ages of nine and 18 years with social, emotional and mental health needs. The school caters for pupils with EHC plans.
- Pupils are placed by local authorities.
- All pupils live in a children's home that is operated by the same proprietor.
- The school currently has an interim headteacher, who is otherwise employed by the proprietor as a director of education. A substantive headteacher has been appointed and is due to start in September 2023.

## 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.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspectors met with the interim headteacher and the chair of the proprietor body.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives in early reading, mathematics, art, and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors met with leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited lessons, spoke to the teachers, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. The inspectors also spoke to leaders about the quality of education provided in a range of other subjects.
- The lead inspector carried out other activities to check that the school meets the independent school standards. These included a check of the school premises and wider work to comply with health and safety laws (including fire safety). The lead inspector considered the school's approach to risk management. The lead inspector also checked the relevant policies and the school website.
- The inspectors judged the effectiveness of safeguarding by meeting with leaders, discussing records of concerns and subsequent actions, and speaking with pupils and staff about this aspect of the school's work. The lead inspector confirmed that the right checks are being made to ensure that all staff, supply staff and members of the proprietor body are suitable for the posts they occupy and also scrutinised a sample of personnel files.

## **Inspection team**

Alice Roberts, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Sue Bzikot

Ofsted Inspector

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