

Inspection of The Levels School

7 Bath Road, Ashcott, Somerset TA7 9QS

Inspection dates: 3 to 5 November 2021

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

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?

Pupils do not make the same progress in all subjects or phases of the school. Inconsistencies in the design of the curriculum prevent pupils from achieving as well as they could. Other weaknesses include the school's approach to reading. A few pupils find reading too difficult, which 'puts them off'. While the school promotes reading, it does not have an agreed approach to teaching early reading or phonics, which holds some pupils back.

Nevertheless, pupils enjoy coming to The Levels School. Most settle quickly and make new friends easily. Pupils say that they feel reassured and are supported well, including in their social and emotional well-being. The school is calm and orderly. This is particularly important as many pupils arrive having experienced problems or difficulties in previous schools. Pupils say that bullying is rare. If this does happen, pupils have confidence that staff will resolve this swiftly and sensitively.

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

Leaders have not ensured that the curriculum is strong enough in all subjects. The lack of small steps in some curriculum plans means that there are weaknesses in how learning is constructed for pupils, and this creates gaps in their knowledge. They do not develop a fluent or coherent body of knowledge. For example, field skills in geography are not yet broken down into incremental steps in order to enable high-quality learning.

Leaders do not ensure that there is a consistently strong approach to reading across the school. As a result, some pupils find reading to be extremely challenging, particularly when this is coupled with their special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) needs. Early reading, including the provision of high-quality phonics, is not well developed. Pupils do not always have reading books that are well matched to their reading ability. Teachers use a range of different approaches and techniques, which sometimes cause further confusion for a few pupils.

Since the school opened, leaders have faced several challenges, including getting the school up and running during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mostly, leaders have managed this well, so that pupils, many of whom have vulnerabilities and complex SEND, have been able to attend and receive the pastoral care and therapeutic support they need. Pupils and parents are appreciative of the helpful ways in which the leaders and staff work to create a welcoming and inclusive school. The proprietor ensures that the independent school standards (ISS) are fully met.

Leaders and managers are dedicated. They are passionate about fulfilling the school's vision for the pupils. However, there has been a significant challenge seen in the continued growth and rapidly increasing number of pupils who attend the school. This has brought increased demands and stresses on a small leadership team, whose current systems are still developing to match the rapid growth and

expansion of the school. Middle leadership roles and responsibilities are not fully developed. Some leaders, including the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) and curriculum leaders, have not been able to check the quality of education provided in the areas they lead. Consequently, they have not identified some weaknesses as quickly as they could, which slows the rate of improvement.

Leaders ensure that the school's curriculum is sufficiently broad to meet the ISS. Pupils learn through a range of subjects to develop their linguistic, mathematical, scientific, human and social, physical and creative aspects of learning. This supports some pupils to be successful in relevant examinations. Leaders ensure that a strong personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education curriculum is in place. This enables pupils to learn about themselves and understand the importance of relationships. Pupils show great empathy and are tolerant of those around them. The school's work to promote equalities and British values is effective, and it complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010. Pupils and staff work harmoniously to ensure that all are valued and feel respected. Pupils know right from wrong and are keen to make contributions to the school, and to the wider world.

Leaders responsible for the school's careers guidance ensure that this is up to date and effective. Older pupils enjoy work placements and experiences which are often uniquely tailored and designed to meet their interests and aspirations. Staff help pupils to find courses and sometimes accompany them to find out more about college courses and vocational next steps. Pupils benefit hugely and are effusive in their praise of staff who make this happen.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The proprietor ensures that safeguarding information is readily available, including publishing the safeguarding policy on the school's website.

Leaders, including the proprietors and governors, fully understand the vulnerable nature of many of the pupils in the school. As a result, they ensure that safeguarding procedures, including staff training, pre-employment checks and arrangements for reporting concerns, are appropriate and implemented diligently. Staff are tenacious in undertaking their safeguarding duties to keep pupils safe, including understanding the need to safeguard vulnerable pupils from unacceptable peer-on-peer sexual harassment or abuse.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- The curriculum is not planned well enough. This leads to gaps in pupils' knowledge in some subjects and phases of the school. Leaders should ensure that

the curriculum is well sequenced with coherent steps to help pupils acquire appropriate knowledge throughout their time in the school.

- The reading curriculum, including for those in the earliest stages of reading, is not good enough. As a result, some pupils do not enjoy reading and find it too difficult, which compounds the difficulties that many pupils already face. Leaders must introduce a high-quality reading programme to promote a love of reading, as well as an effective model for teaching phonics.
- Middle leadership is underdeveloped. Consequently, too much responsibility falls to too few in implementing, checking for, or securing improvement. This weakens the school's rates of improvement. Senior leaders should ensure that middle leaders develop the capacity to support curriculum development.

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.

If you are the provider and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

School details

Unique reference number	147989
DfE registration number	933/6014
Local authority	Somerset
Inspection number	10201925
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	8 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	51
Number of part-time pupils	1
Proprietor	The Levels School Limited
Chair	Bradley Middleton
Headteacher	Caroline Cook
Annual fees (day pupils)	£19,500 to £28,500
Telephone number	01458 211 014
Website	www.thelevelsschool.co.uk
Email address	office@thelevelsschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- The Levels School opened on 4 January 2021, following its pre-registration inspection on 12 November 2020.
- The school is registered for a maximum of 65 pupils.
- Most pupils who attend have an education, health and care plan. Many have diagnosed co-occurring conditions or diagnoses, including specific learning difficulties and autistic spectrum disorder.
- Several different local authorities, including Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset, Devon, Cornwall and Dorset, place pupils in the school.

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

- Inspectors met with the proprietors, the headteacher, the senior teacher and curriculum leaders.
- The lead inspector met with members of the governing board, including the chair of the governing board.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics, PSHE and history. The lead inspector also looked at plans and undertook some lesson visits in geography.
- Inspectors looked at the single central register (SCR) and checked the school's systems for monitoring and reporting safeguarding concerns. The lead inspector met with the designated safeguarding lead and the school's administrative leader for maintaining the SCR.
- An inspector also met with the SENCo and head of therapy to help evaluate SEND provision and practice in the school.
- Inspectors spoke with a range of staff and met with groups of pupils to find out what it is like to be a pupil, or to work, in this school.
- The lead inspector reviewed key documentation, including the school's self-evaluation form, pupils' learning plans, governors' minutes and monitoring records.
- In making their judgements, inspectors looked at the survey responses, including those from pupils, staff and parents. This included taking the 27 free-text responses to Parent View into account.

Inspection team

Stewart Gale, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Paula Marsh

Ofsted Inspector

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