

Inspection of a school judged good for overall effectiveness before September 2024: Portal House School

Sea Street, St Margaret's-At-Cliffe, Dover, Kent CT15 6SS

Inspection dates:

7 and 8 January 2025

Outcome

Portal House School has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at the previous inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils enjoy coming to this well-organised and friendly school. Though many have been out of education for long periods of time or had poor experiences in previous settings, most settle quickly on arrival. When pupils struggle to attend for whatever reason, everybody works tirelessly to find the right solution, including through the use of an impressive online learning programme.

Expectations of behaviour and academic success are high at Portal House. Staff strive for pupils to be successful in all they do. A key feature of the school is an overt drive to motivate and build pupils' confidence and resilience. As a result, they display positive attitudes to their studies and achieve increasingly well over time.

Pupils feel safe here, including feeling that they are safe to make mistakes. They know that staff are there for them when things get tough, or anxieties build. This ethos was summed up particularly eloquently by one older pupil. His view that, 'The creative liberty in the way we work is a bonus, because there is not an insanely strict mandate in lessons, just as long as we do not disturb other pupils' learning', describes the school's positive learning culture well.

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

Much has improved here since the last inspection. The school has an open and reflective culture when it comes to analysing what is working well and what needs to be developed further. Those in positions of governance also have close oversight of evaluating how the school is performing. Because of this, key priorities for improvement are the right ones and staff are highly motivated to move the school even further forward.

Focussed work has been put into ensuring that the curriculum meets the needs and future aspirations of pupils. This has resulted in improved achievement at the end of Year 11. Pupils gain meaningful qualifications to ensure that they leave to take up places at colleges, sixth forms or other educational establishments. Older pupils are particularly positive about the advice and guidance they receive linked to their next steps on leaving the school.

Classroom visits showed pupils to be enjoying learning and working hard to contribute to discussions or answer questions posed by staff. Reading has a high priority with additional support available for those who need it. This is the case across the school, where there is a largely consistent approach to how lessons are structured and how learning is adapted and tailored for individual needs. Despite this, staff occasionally design tasks that do not fully support pupils' needs closely enough. The school knows this and has already started meaningful work to share best practice in this key aspect of teaching.

The pastoral care, personal development and enrichment of pupils' life experiences are a strength of the school. This aspect of provision is also evolving over time to ensure that pupils enjoy a highly bespoke package, including residential trips and educational visits into the local community or further afield.

The school's life-skills programme is a particular favourite of many pupils. Others talk keenly about opportunities in sport or art. They enjoy learning about different cultures and taking part in sessions that focus on a view of the wider world. A bespoke relationships and sex education and health education programme is in place.

Despite the school's ongoing efforts, the attendance of some pupils is too low. In many cases there are mitigating circumstances around pupil absence, but leaders at all levels continue to make this a high priority. They know that more needs to be done, but pleasingly, some improvement is now showing over time.

Parents who either spoke to inspectors or responded to the Ofsted Parent View survey were overwhelmingly positive about the school. Staff are equally positive about their work. They appreciate the opportunities they have to develop professionally through the sharing of best practice and educational research. As a result, pupils enjoy and celebrate their many successes and thrive at this school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In some lessons, teachers do not design learning that supports pupils' needs well enough. When this is the case, some pupils are less confident in completing the tasks that teachers have set, and their learning slows. Leaders are aware of this. The school

should continue to develop the knowledge and expertise of staff to design learning opportunities that more closely meet the needs of all pupils.

- Pupils' rates of absence are too high. The school is aware that some pupils are missing important learning and development opportunities. Work in this area is beginning to have a positive impact. However, the school needs to redouble its efforts to improve attendance, so that all pupils fully benefit from the excellent curriculum the school offers.

Background

Until September 2024, on a graded (section 5) inspection we gave schools an overall effectiveness grade, in addition to the key and provision judgements. Overall effectiveness grades given before September 2024 will continue to be visible on school inspection reports and on Ofsted's website. From September 2024, graded inspections will not include an overall effectiveness grade. This school was, before September 2024, judged good for its overall effectiveness.

We have now inspected the school to determine whether it has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at that previous inspection. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school's work has improved significantly or that it may not be as strong as it was at the last inspection, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection. A graded inspection is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good for overall effectiveness in June 2015.

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.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and](#)

[protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	119062
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10341535
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number of pupils on the school roll	74
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Tricia Sherling
Headteacher	Rosemary Bradley
Website	www.portal-house.kent.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	15 May 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- This is a special school for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. All pupils who attend the school have an education, health and care plan.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.
- The school does not currently use alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors held a wide range of meetings with leaders at all levels, as well as teaching and support staff. The lead inspector met with the chair and five other members of the governing body. He also talked to a representative of the local authority on the telephone.
- Inspectors visited a sample of lessons across the school, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of parents, leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- Inspectors met and talked to pupils throughout the inspection to gain their views about their school. The lead inspector also met formally with two representative groups of pupils.
- Inspectors considered the views of parents and carers submitted through Ofsted Parent View. The views of staff were considered through Ofsted's staff survey.

Inspection team

Clive Close, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Caroline Clarke

Ofsted Inspector

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