Inspection of a school judged good for overall effectiveness before September 2024: Merit Hospital School and Medical Pupil Referral Unit

Willeton Street, Bucknall, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire ST2 9JA

Inspection dates: 1 and 2 July 2025

Outcome

Merit Hospital School and Medical Pupil Referral Unit has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at the previous inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

At Merit Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), pupils who have been hurt by past experiences or face ongoing health and mental health challenges find something precious; a place that sees them, hears them, and believes in them. Here, education is not a demand but a gentle offering, woven with care into every moment. Merit PRU does not simply teach, it heals and restores.

Whether at the Willeton Street site or the Royal Stoke Hospital, belief and high expectations shape every lesson and ongoing support. Staff work with compassion and expertise to help pupils manage trauma, anxiety and other health needs. As a result, pupils begin to trust, engage and thrive. They leave as well-prepared learners, eager for growth and achievement.

From personalised timetables to therapeutic spaces, every detail is designed to promote emotional safety and mental well-being. Staff support pupils in managing their emotions and developing greater confidence and independence. This creates a nurturing and purposeful environment where positive behaviour is the norm.

Charity work and cultural outings to inclusive celebrations cultivate citizenship, respect and resilience. Pupils rediscover their confidence through trusting relationships and carefully crafted opportunities. Therapeutic timetables, leadership roles, clubs and student-led learning light the way to independence.

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

Since the last inspection, leaders have worked tirelessly to improve the quality of education. They introduced a new curriculum and increased support for pupils with complex needs. Staff and a caring management committee have built a strong, pupil-focused culture. However, some committee members lack sufficient knowledge of the school's operational aspects. This limits their understanding and decision-making.

Many pupils start with undiagnosed and/or unmet special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Some pupils face mental health challenges from past trauma. Others are receiving medical treatment. Staff quickly identify and respond to these issues. They use tailored support, custom learning paths and one-to-one help to remove barriers to learning. Staff work closely with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, so pupils get timely therapy to help with their emotions, behaviour and mental health.

The school has carefully constructed sequences of lessons that are ambitious and help prepare pupils for the next steps. Learning is carefully considered so pupils can build their knowledge over time. In reading, and particularly in the hospital provision, staff are skilled at understanding past learning, identifying gaps pupils might have and planning lessons to fill these gaps. However, in some other subjects, this does not always happen, and pupils are asked to tackle increasingly complex learning without the required prior knowledge.

Lessons are exciting and supportive. Staff are quick to act when pupils need a reassuring prompt or encouragement to overcome more challenging work. In subjects like mathematics, teachers help pupils build independence by exploring different ways to solve problems. Creative ideas, like using a Taylor Swift theme in geography, make learning more engaging and easier to understand.

Staff check how well pupils are learning and adjust lessons when needed. For example, they work hard to fill gaps in pupils' learning caused by absence or difficulty engaging in lessons. Regular reflection sessions help pupils review what they've learned and catch up. However, some pupils do not receive the support they need to catch up quickly enough after returning. Instead, this help may come days or weeks later, which makes their learning more difficult.

Reading is a priority at the school. Targeted interventions help pupils build confidence and fluency. Across subjects, teachers embed reading opportunities into lessons. Pupils visit the library to explore books, select their reading materials, or receive tailored support to overcome past reading anxieties.

Staff foster positive behaviour and engagement in education with trust and personalised kindness. The school tracks attendance with regular communication with carers and professionals to keep pupils engaged.

Safeguarding themes and local issues are integrated into the curriculum. Pupils are encouraged to share their voices within a nurturing and structured environment, helping them build awareness of healthy interactions and relationships. Careers guidance begins

in Year 7 and intensifies as pupils approach Year 11, ensuring they are well prepared for their next steps.

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 instances, the school does not consistently use the full range of assessment information collected when pupils first join to shape the next curriculum steps for pupils. As a result, some pupils begin lessons without the necessary prior knowledge or skills to succeed independently. The school should ensure that, across all subjects, teachers use assessment information effectively to plan well-sequenced lessons that quickly address gaps in pupils' understanding.
- Sometimes, the school is slow to address gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills caused by pupils' absence from lessons. As a result, some pupils struggle with more advanced learning because they lack the necessary foundations. The school should ensure that pupils who miss lessons, whether due to illness or disengagement, are given timely support to catch up.
- In some cases, the management committee does not know the school well enough to fully understand the quality of provision for pupils at the pupil referral unit. This limits their effectiveness in holding leaders to account and managing strategic changes. The school should ensure that all committee members have sufficient knowledge of the school and PRU to carry out their roles effectively.

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 to be 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 first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good for overall effectiveness in December 2019.

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	134159
Local authority	Stoke-on-Trent
Inspection number	10378248
Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Maintained
Age range of pupils	4 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	17
Appropriate authority	Local authority
Chair	Chris Bird
Headteacher	Sarah Whiteley and Steve Winrow (Co-Headteachers)
Website	www.meritpru-stoke.org.uk
Dates of previous inspection	4 and 5 December 2019, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Since the last inspection, two new co-headteachers were appointed from existing staff in September 2021.
- The school includes a hospital provision for pupils aged four to 18. The hospital provision operates from the Royal Stoke Hospital, Newcastle Road, Stoke-on-Trent ST4 6QG.
- The school does not use any form of alternative provision.
- 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.

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 met with the co-headteachers and other senior staff.
- An inspector met with members of the management committee, including the chair.
- An inspector also spoke with a member of staff from a local secondary school with which the PRU works in partnership.
- A meeting was held with a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors focused inspection activity on the following groups of subjects: English, including reading; mathematics; enrichment; geography; religious education and science. For each group of subjects, inspectors visited a sample of lessons, spoke with pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also sampled workbooks in other subjects to evaluate the quality of curriculum implementation in other areas.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interest first.
- An inspector visited the school's hospital education provision at the Royal Stoke Hospital to evaluate the quality of provision for pupils who are current patients.
- Inspectors met with groups of staff and also considered the opinions expressed through the staff survey.
- Inspectors took account of the views expressed through Ofsted Parent View.

Inspection team

Chris Pollitt, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Sarahjane Cuncannon Edwards	Ofsted Inspector

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