

Inspection of Wemms Education Centre

Woodstock Lane North, Surbiton KT6 5HN

Inspection dates: 10 to 15 May 2023

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Inadequate

Personal development

Inadequate

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Sixth-form provision

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

No

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils' experiences at Wemms Education Centre vary widely. The recent move to expansive premises has proved popular. Pupils benefit from ample indoor and outdoor space for informal times as well as lessons. Pupils generally behave well in lessons, working individually or in twos with a teacher. Pupils achieve strongly across a range of subjects, frequently beyond their own and their family's expectations. Older pupils learn to drive, helping them to be prepared for their futures. However, these successes are not mirrored in other aspects of school life.

Too many pupils do not feel happy or safe at school. They are fearful of the bullying behaviour of other pupils, which goes unaddressed. During inspection, pupils, staff and parents spoke of the negative impact on pupils of racial and homophobic slurs, inappropriate sexualised language and behaviours. Pupils trust only some adults in school to help them. Many pupils fear a lack of empathy, even reprisals, from certain leaders should they report a concern. Pupils believe they are treated inconsistently and unfairly. Consequently, a culture of intimidation, mistrust and fear abounds. Most pupils attend well, but there is insufficient help for those who do not. Leaders' work to keep pupils safe is unacceptably poor.

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

The school is a deeply fractured community. Relationships within and between all groups of staff are severely flawed. There is a widespread lack of trust and confidence in the school's leadership. During inspection, many staff and parents requested individual meetings or phone calls to share their views and experiences. Many put these in writing and most were profoundly negative and often concerning. Less than a quarter of staff who completed the Ofsted staff survey consider that the school is well led and managed and only one third believe they are treated fairly and with respect. Nevertheless, around two thirds remain happy to work at the school and believe leaders are considerate of their workload.

Parents too are deeply divided in their views of the school, particularly its leadership. A broadly equal proportion of written comments expressed positive and negative opinions, with a smaller proportion expressing neutral views. Nevertheless, three quarters of parents who completed Ofsted's online survey, Ofsted Parent View, indicated that they would recommend the school. Common themes of concern related to the school's unsupportive behaviour towards pupils and parents, particularly regarding the management of concerns. Many parents complained about poor communication with and from school leaders. Although the school complaints policy is suitable and is published on the school website, there is no published information regarding numbers of complaints received. Current open complaints have not been responded to according to the timescales given in the school's published policy. For these reasons, the independent school standards (the standards) relating to the provision of information, the complaints policy and its implementation are not met.

The school's overarching curriculum policy, published on the school's website at the time of inspection, is not fit for purpose. Therefore, the standards relating to curriculum policy are not met. The policy, updated in August 2022, contains inaccurate and irrelevant information. For example, the policy refers to early years provision, which the school does not have. More than 50 school policies have been reviewed recently with no mechanism to include staff in, or update staff about, changes and updates.

High academic ambition exists across the school. The curriculum is broad and reflects the national curriculum. At individual subject level, the curriculum is methodically planned. Curriculum leaders possess expert subject knowledge. Teachers are clear about what they want pupils to learn and how. Pupils are taught individually or in very small groups, and staff are closely aware of individual pupils' learning needs. Learning builds step-by-step and is reinforced well. For example, in a personal, social and health education lesson in key stage 2, learning in mathematics was put to good use when pupils identified and extracted key information from charts and tables. Teachers across the school routinely check pupils' understanding and knowledge through questioning, marking and tests. Lessons are adapted so that identified gaps in learning can be closed.

Most pupils are fluent readers when they start at the school. Pupils who need extra help with early reading are supported by staff trained in dyslexia and phonics. Reading records show that pupils receiving targeted support make good progress.

The subject curriculum at key stage 4 and in the sixth form is defined by examination syllabuses. Leaders have not considered more widely what pupils should learn or why, in some subjects. Many pupils attain very well in GCSE and A-level examinations and transition into employment or university. Some parents and staff expressed concern about early examination entry, which they considered not in pupils' best interests. Students receive helpful careers guidance, although some aspects are being developed further. Pupils learn about relationships, including sexual relationships, in an age-appropriate way. They learn to drive and take part in frequent trips and residential visits, including abroad. Such activities are a routine element of pupils' experiences at Wemms. These experiences should prepare pupils well for adulthood and the next steps in education. However, the strong work in this regard is sullied by a culture of discrimination and inequality that goes unaddressed.

During the inspection, most pupils engaged well in lessons. Some examples were seen and heard of pupils removing themselves from lessons and sitting in corridors or around the school. Information from staff indicates that absconding behaviours are common. Widespread and deep concern exists that leaders' responses to pupils' transgressions in behaviour are inconsistent and unfair. Records of behaviour incidents are limited in number. Sanctions are not applied consistently. Inspectors heard repeatedly from staff, pupils and parents that pupils are not kept safe from bullying and abuse, including the use of racial and homophobic slurs and sexualised language and behaviours. Leaders have not undertaken effective analysis of behaviour. Consequently, they lack awareness of the prevalence of different

behaviours and have no established strategies to address them. The school's behaviour and anti-bullying policies are not effectively implemented.

Most pupils attend school well. However, action is not taken to increase the attendance rates of those with very limited attendance. Inspectors could find no evidence to indicate that leaders consider the welfare of this group of pupils.

Staff, pupils and parents expressed concern about the school's response to pupils' medical needs. The administration of medicines policy on the school website, reviewed in August 2022, is incomplete. Records of administration of medication and first aid are sparse. Combined with assertions from staff, pupils and parents, it seems highly unlikely that records are complete. The trained and qualified school nurse shared concerns, in writing, with school leaders in March 2023. These related to safeguarding, medication, staff training and a lack of autonomy to practise as a school nurse. The school nurse left her position during the inspection as a consequence of concerns not being addressed. The standards relating to the health, welfare and safety of pupils, including those relating to behaviour and bullying, are not met in full.

Wemms Education Centre has grown in size and complexity. The school is governed by a small group of trustees. Systems and practices for oversight of education and welfare are not sufficiently established. Leaders are insufficiently aware of the effectiveness of the school and have failed to address escalating concerns, including those relating to safeguarding. Leaders have not demonstrated capacity to lead and improve the school. Leaders are aware of the state of unrest in the school community. They have commissioned consultants to carry out a safeguarding audit and a culture review. This work had started prior to inspection. Some parents and staff have identified connectivity between the consultants and the headteacher and are concerned about impartiality. The standards relating to the quality of leadership and management are not met.

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

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.

Leaders have not established a safe environment for pupils. Some pupils are routinely subjected to prejudice-based language. Leaders' understanding of safeguarding is weak. Leaders do not have a shared understanding of what constitutes a serious concern. Consequently, referrals to other agencies have been too slow, meaning that pupils are placed at risk of harm. Furthermore, senior leaders are not clear about who the most vulnerable pupils in school are. There is no agreed understanding about what sensitive information should be shared with which staff. Therefore, additional oversight and care are neither planned nor provided.

Systems for recruiting, checking on and inducting staff are not robust.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- The principal and trustees have not ensured that arrangements for safeguarding are secure. Many weaknesses, including in systems, practices, understanding and culture, leave pupils at potential risk. Leaders should take urgent action to ensure that statutory requirements and guidance are complied with so that pupils are kept safe and feel safe while at school.
- The school's behaviour and anti-bullying policies are not implemented consistently, effectively or fairly. Some pupils are bullied at school and discriminatory language is commonplace. Leaders must ensure that everyone in the school community understands acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and must ensure that suitable policies are understood and implemented effectively.
- Leaders do not take action to encourage pupils with low attendance to attend school more routinely. Leaders do not assure themselves of these pupils' safety and well-being. Pupils with low attendance are missing important aspects of their education. Leaders must ensure that there are plans in place to enable all pupils to benefit from full-time education, including working with parents and carers.
- A negative culture pervades the school and permeates across staff, pupil and parent groups. Some staff, parents and pupils are wary of leaders and feel unable to air their views or concerns. Leaders should take urgent action to ensure that members of the school community are able to express their views without fear of reprisals. Leaders should work to establish a positive, shared school ethos.
- A number of the independent school standards are unmet. These standards impact directly on pupils' welfare, health and safety. Leaders have not taken appropriate action to ensure that the standards are consistently met. Leaders must ensure that they monitor all aspects of the school's work, including compliance with the standards.

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	142416
DfE registration number	936/6006
Local authority	Surrey
Inspection number	10284269
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	8 to 20
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	104
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	20
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	Wemms Education Unlimited Limited
Chair	Ian Harvey (Interim)
Headteacher	Joy Wemms
Annual fees (day pupils)	£50,000
Telephone number	01372 276499
Website	https://wemms.co.uk
Email address	joy@wemms.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	25 to 27 February 2020

Information about this school

- The last full standard inspection was carried out on 25 to 27 February 2020.
- Since that time, the school has expanded and moved premises. A material change inspection, required to change the details of the school's registration, took place on 4 August 2022. A further material change inspection took place on 31 August 2022. At the second material change inspection, it was judged that the independent school standards were likely to be met if the material change was approved by the Department for Education.
- The school has recently acquired charitable status and is no longer owned by a single proprietor.
- The former proprietor has continued in her role as principal of the school. There is a small group of trustees, made up of the principal and two others, who oversee the work of the school. Leaders are in the process of recruiting additional trustees.
- The school's entry on the government's Get Information about Schools website was inaccurate at the time of this inspection. For example, the principal was still named as the proprietor. However, the school was not operating beyond its registration.
- Wemms Education Centre offers education to pupils who have been unable to cope in mainstream education. Pupils typically have social, emotional and mental health needs. Pupils' individual needs vary widely and include neurodiversity, social communication challenges, post-traumatic attachment disorders, brain damage, dyslexia, dyspraxia, medical conditions and other conditions that affect pupils' learning and development. Many pupils have previously experienced extensive absences from school. Almost all have an education, health and care plan.
- The school does not use 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.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- The inspection was paused at lunchtime on Thursday 11 May 2023, the first full

day of inspection, due to concerns for the principal's health. The inspection resumed and was completed on Monday 15 May 2023.

- The school was due for routine inspection at about this time. The Department for Education requested Ofsted to carry out a full inspection as promptly as possible due to concerns arising from parental complaints.
- Inspectors held meetings with the principal and vice-principals, other school leaders, teachers and staff.
- Inspectors spoke to pupils during lesson visits and at unstructured times of the school day. Inspectors held individual meetings with pupils whenever requested.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading and English, physical education, personal, social and health education and humanities. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also looked at a selection of pupils' workbooks from across the curriculum and key stages.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors reviewed a range of safeguarding documentation, including the school's record of recruitment checks. Inspectors spoke to school leaders, staff and pupils about safeguarding and feelings of safety. Inspectors considered the many safeguarding concerns expressed by staff, parents and pupils made verbally and in writing.
- Inspectors held individual and small group meetings with staff and parents. In addition, inspectors took account of the results of the staff survey, completed by 44 members of staff (approximately 40%), and Ofsted's online survey, Ofsted Parent View, completed by 77 parents. Inspectors took account of individual phone conversations and written submissions from parents and staff on a range of matters.

Inspection team

Hilary Macdonald, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Alice Roberts

His Majesty's Inspector

Lee Selby

His Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school failed to meet the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 2(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if-
 - 2(1)(a) the proprietor ensures that a written policy on the curriculum, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, which provides for the matters specified in sub-paragraph (2) is drawn up and implemented effectively.

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.
- 9 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor promotes good behaviour amongst pupils by ensuring that-
 - 9(b) the policy is implemented effectively; and
 - 9(c) a record is kept of the sanctions imposed upon pupils for serious misbehaviour.
- 10 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that bullying at the school is prevented in so far as reasonably practicable, by the drawing up and implementation of an effective anti-bullying strategy.
- 13 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that first aid is administered in a timely and competent manner by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written first aid policy.

Part 4. Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors

- 18(2) The standard in this paragraph is met if-
 - 18(2)(d) the proprietor ensures that, where relevant to any such person, an enhanced criminal record check is made in respect of that person and an enhanced criminal record certificate is obtained before or as soon as practicable after that person's appointment and in the light of the information from the checks referred to in paragraphs (c)) to (f) the proprietor considers that the person is suitable for the position to which the person is appointed.

Part 6. Provision of information

- 32(1) The standard about provision of information by the school is met if the proprietor ensures that- information specified in this sub-paragraph is-
 - 32(1)(b) the information specified in sub-paragraph (3) is made available to parents and prospective parents of pupils and, on request, to the Chief Inspector, the Secretary of State or an independent inspectorate.
- 32(3) The information specified in this sub-paragraph is-
 - 32(3)(f) details of the complaints procedure referred to in paragraph 33, and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year.

Part 7. Manner in which complaints are handled

- 33 The standard about the manner in which complaints are handled is met if the proprietor ensures that a complaints procedure is drawn up and effectively implemented which deals with the handling of complaints from parents of pupils.

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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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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