Willow Bank School

Address: Winwick Road, St Helens, Newton-le-Willows, Merseyside, WA12 8DE

Unique reference number (URN): 104843

Inspection report: 12 May 2026

Exceptional	
Strong standard	
Expected standard	● ● ●
Needs attention	● ● ●
Urgent improvement	

Safeguarding standards met

The safeguarding standards are met. This means that leaders and/or those responsible for governance and oversight fulfil their specific responsibilities and have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and concerns are actively identified, acted upon and managed. As a result, pupils are made safer and feel safe.

How we evaluate safeguarding

When we inspect schools for safeguarding, they can have the following outcomes:

- Met: The school has an open and positive culture of safeguarding. All legal requirements are met.
- Not met: The school has not created an open and positive culture of safeguarding. Not all legal requirements are met.

Expected standard

Inclusion

Expected standard

The school is committed to making sure every pupil feels included and supported. Leaders ensure that they identify pupils' needs well. They act quickly to make sure they get the correct support. Staff use clear, well-organised systems to understand each child's additional needs. This enables pupils to have the support they need when they need it. This includes support for pupils' social, emotional and mental health, as well as any other needs they may have. Teachers use a variety of approaches generally effectively. This allows pupils overall to fully take part in lessons. As a result, many pupils overcome barriers to learning and grow in confidence. Pupils achieve increasingly well and make progress from their individual starting points.

Leaders use additional funding carefully for disadvantaged pupils. Staff set clear short-term goals for pupils based on the broader targets in pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans. They review these targets well to check pupils’ progress. For pupils who are known, or previously known to social care, staff take appropriate action to support both pupils' learning and wellbeing. The joined-up approach between pupils EHC plans and the work for other disadvantaged pupils results in a positive experience for pupils at the school.

Leadership and governance

Expected standard

Leaders and governors have successfully addressed a decline in the quality of education since the previous inspection. They have carefully reviewed how well the school is performing and used this understanding to improve pupils' learning and overall experiences. These improvements are becoming more firmly established although leaders recognise that further work is needed. For example, they recognise the inconsistencies in curriculum teaching and have clear plans in place to ensure that this becomes more consistent overtime.

Governors now play a stronger role in overseeing the school's work. They have put effective systems in place to make sure they meet their statutory responsibilities. They regularly check how well pupils are doing and how they experience school life. For example, they have challenged school leaders to improve attendance, and this is starting to improve.

Leaders make staff training a clear priority. They ensure that professional development closely matches the school's key priorities. Some staff are developing their expertise by monitoring the quality of the curriculum and teaching in their areas of responsibility. As a result, the quality of teaching is improving across different classes and subjects. However, a few staff are still developing their leadership skills. This means that they are not quite as sharp in overseeing their areas of responsibility.

Leaders and governors take staff workload and wellbeing seriously. They actively support staff to manage their workload. Staff say that they feel supported well by leaders. Parents and carers are equally positive about the school. Both staff and parents feel welcomed and involved. They value the opportunities given to contribute to decisions about pupils.

Personal development and wellbeing

Expected standard

Leaders maintain a clear and effective oversight of the school's personal development provision. The personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education and relationship, sex education (RSE) is well structured. It allows pupils sufficient opportunities to return to topics so that they can develop their understanding of different topics covered. Highly effective pastoral support ensures that pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs are supported appropriately. Pupils effectively learn about how to stay safe, including online.

Pupils benefit from a broad and varied enrichment programme. There are regular visitors to school, including poets and external professionals such as the police. These visits have a defined purpose such as enhancing pupils’ understanding of staying safe within the community. This includes raising awareness of risks such as gangs. Pupils also take part in educational visits to museums, theatres or seeing a live orchestra. Leaders ensure that pupils have opportunities to contribute to their local community, including in public speaking events. In addition, pupils learn about how to help people less fortunate than themselves through charity fundraising. Pupils’ physical and mental health is promoted successfully through events such as the interhall sports and subject area competitions.

Careers education is well matched to pupils' needs. Pupils visit local colleges and meet visitors who provide them with information about a range of career options. Practical experiences, such as lessons on budgeting and visiting local shops to collect ingredients for meals, help pupils develop their independent living skills. These events also successfully help to prepare pupils for adulthood. Transitions to local colleges are thoughtfully planned, so that pupils are confident in their next steps.

Pupils play an active role in helping the school to improve through their various leadership roles. For example, through the pupil council, they have helped to expand the wide range of clubs further. These opportunities are built around pupils' talents and interests. There are suitable systems in place to track pupils' participation in enrichment activities. Leaders ensure that all pupils have equal access to them and address any barriers.

Needs attention

Achievement

Needs attention

Generally, pupils make progress from their individual starting points. For example, in art, pupils learn new skills and use them confidently in their work. In reading, many pupils improve their accuracy and show a better understanding of texts. Furthermore, in their behaviour, pupils regulate their emotions increasingly well. These are clear strengths. However, in other areas of the curriculum, pupils' achievement is not as secure. Some pupils do not build secure essential skills. Writing is a particular challenge for some pupils. While some pupils develop effective writing skills and achieve well, too many pupils continue to struggle. Errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and handwriting persist. This makes it difficult for pupils to communicate their ideas clearly in their writing.

Most pupils leaving the school are ready for their next steps in education, employment or training. Many pupils take suitable qualifications including in English and mathematics. However, because some gaps in learning remain, not all pupils are as well prepared as they should for the next stage in their lives.

Attendance and behaviour

Needs attention

Leaders work tirelessly to keep a clear and secure overview of attendance and behaviour. They take swift action to tackle any concerns. These steps make a positive difference for pupils. While attendance is not at the levels leaders would like, it continues to steadily improve. Fewer pupils now miss school regularly, and persistent absence is reducing. Leaders place great importance on helping pupils to come to school more often. A key, effective, approach is ensuring that pupils see the value and purpose of their education. As a result, pupils do feel more positive about coming to school.

The school provides a calm and orderly place where pupils feel safe and ready to learn. Staff usually apply rules and consequences appropriately. However, at times staff responses can vary, particularly when pupils use unkind language. In most cases, staff address this quickly with pupils and provide additional support for pupils affected when needed. However, for a small number of pupils, their use of unkind words continues. This can make others feel uncomfortable.

Pupils generally enjoy their learning. They show positive attitudes in lessons. With staff support, they settle well and engage with tasks. Bullying is rare. Pupils understand what bullying is and staff deal with any concerns promptly and effectively.

Curriculum and teaching

Needs attention

Leaders have a clear understanding of how well teaching and the curriculum are working. They quickly identify where things needed to improve and take action to make the necessary changes. Pupils are beginning to benefit from these changes, but leaders know there is more to do. For example, they recognise that they need to further support staff so that the quality of teaching is consistent across classes and subjects.

The curriculum is broad and balanced. It is carefully planned so pupils build their learning step by step. Leaders ensure that teachers make the adjustments required so that pupils can access their learning. These adjustments are often well placed to help pupils with their learning.

Teachers know their subjects well. This helps them to teach with confidence. Reading is very important in the school. Pupils get the right help to improve their reading and enjoy reading books. Although, teachers check what learning pupils remember during lessons, the effectiveness varies across classes. When teachers do this well, pupils successfully build upon their knowledge as teachers address misconceptions and deepen their understanding. However, when this is not done as effectively, teachers miss these opportunities.

What it's like to be a pupil at this school

Many pupils join the school after experiencing a disrupted education. From the moment they arrive, staff work tirelessly to help them settle quickly and feel welcome. Adults build secure, positive working relationships with pupils so that they feel valued, supported and part of the school community. Pupils trust staff to guide them and keep them safe. Pupils understand who to talk to if they feel worried or unsafe. This sense of security helps many pupils to improve their behaviour and manage their emotions more effectively.

Bullying happens rarely in school. When it does occur, leaders act quickly and deal with issues thoroughly so that problems do not continue to spread. Most pupils behave positively. However, some pupils still use offensive, unkind words at times. Staff challenge this and support pupils to use kinder words. That said, this is not having the long-term impact required. Further work is needed to ensure that these improvements last over time.

Pupils work towards a range of qualifications. They usually try hard in their lessons. Staff know pupils well. They use the school's systems well to identify any additional special educational needs and/or disabilities as early as possible. By recognising these needs quickly, staff help reduce pupils' barriers to learning and give pupils the support they require. As a result, pupils attend school more regularly. Pupils increasingly benefit from a curriculum that continues to grow in quality. However, some inconsistencies in teacher's practice mean that gaps in pupils’ learning are not always addressed as effectively as they could be.

Beyond the classroom, pupils enjoy taking part in a wide range of activities. They especially value opportunities that help them grow in confidence, independence and leadership skills such as participating in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award.

Next steps

- Leaders should strengthen the effectiveness of their approach to managing unkind behaviour. They should ensure that pupils understand expectations set and that incidents continue to reduce overtime.
- Leaders should ensure that teachers routinely and accurately check pupils' knowledge and understanding during lessons and adapt teaching accordingly.
- Leaders should ensure that pupils develop a secure and accurate understanding of grammar, spelling, punctuation and handwriting so that they can communicate their ideas clearly and effectively in writing.
- Leaders should further develop leadership capacity by ensuring that the extended leadership team and subject champions have a secure understanding of their roles and are able to drive improvement in their areas of responsibility.

About this inspection

The chair of the board of governors in this school is Maggie Neale.

Inspectors carried out this full inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. Following our renewed inspection framework, all inspections are now led by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) or by Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) who have previously served as HMI.

Inspectors spoke with the headteacher, deputy headteacher and other senior leaders in school. The lead inspector spoke with a group of governors, including the chair of the governing board. They also spoke with a representative of the local authority.

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 includes provision for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. All pupils who attend the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. The school currently uses no alternative provision.

A new headteacher and deputy headteacher has been appointed since the previous inspection. Some other staff are also new to their roles since the previous inspection.

Nicola Laughton: Headteacher

Lead inspector:
Stuart Perkins, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:
Gaynor Roberts, Ofsted Inspector
Nigel Hunt, Ofsted Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

The data was used by the inspector(s) during the inspection. More recent data may have been published since the inspection took place.

This data is from 12 May 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

71

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils currently at this school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

School capacity

65

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils who can attend the school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

70.42%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years.

Pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan

100.00%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan. This covers pupils with more support than is available through special educational needs support.

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

0.00%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with reported special educational support needs at the school.

Location deprivation

Well below average

What does this mean?

Based on the English Indices of Deprivation (2019) and the school's location, we have calculated whether the school is located in a more or less deprived area.

Resourced Provision or SEND Unit (if applicable)

No resourced provision

What does this mean?

Whether school has Resourced Provision or SEND unit (if applicable).

Type of specialist provision (if applicable)

SEMH - Social, Emotional and Mental Health

What does this mean?

The type of Special Educational Needs provision provided at the school (if applicable).

Destinations after 16

Destinations after 16

Percentage of pupils staying in education or employment for at least 2 terms after the end of secondary school (key stage 4).

Year	This school
2023 leavers (revised)	55%
2022 leavers (revised)	67%
2021 leavers (revised)	53%

Absence

Overall absence

The percentage of all possible mornings and afternoons missed due to absence from school (for whatever reason, whether authorised or unauthorised) across all pupils.

Year	This school
2024/25 (3 term)	29.2%

Year	This school
2023/24 (3 term)	25.0%
2022/23 (3 term)	29.2%

Persistent absence

The percentage of pupils missing 10% or more of their possible mornings and afternoons.

Year	This school
2024/25 (3 term)	64.4%
2023/24 (3 term)	63.2%
2022/23 (3 term)	65.1%

Our grades explained

Exceptional

Practice is exceptional: of the highest standard nationally. Other schools can learn from it.

Strong standard

The school reaches a strong standard. Leaders are working above the standard expected of them.

Expected standard

The school is fulfilling the expected standard of education and/or care. This means they are following the standard set out in statutory and non-statutory legislation and the professional standards expected of them.

Needs attention

The expected standards are not met but leaders are likely able to make the necessary improvements.

Urgent improvement

The school needs to make urgent improvements to provide the expected standard of education and/or care.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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