

Inspection of Cotton End Forest School

High Road, Cotton End, Bedford, Bedfordshire MK45 3AG

Inspection dates:	20 and 21 May 2025
The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Early years provision	Good
Previous inspection grade	Requires improvement

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils prize the special outdoor ethos of Cotton End Forest School and happily attend. They understand how to be kind, polite citizens. They get on well with each other and staff. They feel safe and settled in school. Pupils are proud that their behaviour has improved in recent years. Typically, pupils follow the school rules and are confident that teachers will deal effectively with any misbehaviour.

Pupils enjoy their learning and meet teachers' high expectations for their achievement. Pupils are keen to discuss what they have learned across a wide range of subjects. They remember a great deal of what they have been taught. Pupils progress well in most subjects.

Pupils are unanimous in their love of the regular outdoor lessons they receive. They make full use of the rich range of resources available, including access to the extensive outside woodland space. In particular, pupils enjoy learning about nature and life skills. This helps them feel confident to try different activities, such as climbing or shelter-building.

Pupils are proud to serve in leadership roles, such as that of anti-bullying ambassador. They are confident that these roles help other pupils to feel heard by teachers and make a difference to their lives at school.

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

Together, school leaders and governors have acted urgently and effectively to improve the quality of education. The school has supported staff every step of the way to make the required changes at a manageable pace. The school has successfully introduced an ambitious curriculum that identifies the building blocks of knowledge pupils should learn. This ensures that pupils' knowledge builds well. The school has introduced a well-designed curriculum review programme that involves leaders at all levels. This gives the school the necessary information to adjust the curriculum so that it is well-matched to pupils' needs. Governors maintain an active, knowledgeable oversight of this work.

The school provides effective training. This supports teachers to strengthen their subject knowledge. The training enables teachers to explain new ideas clearly and to use questions well to extend pupils' thinking. However, the school does not provide clear enough guidance to teachers about how to check pupils' understanding in lessons. This means that, occasionally, pupils do not receive the prompt feedback they need to securely build their knowledge and understanding.

Early years children make a strong start. Overall, they learn what they need to make them well prepared for Year 1. Staff know the needs of children well. This enables staff to provide learning tasks that match children's particular interests, while ensuring they learn what they should. Children, including the youngest, typically absorb themselves in their learning activities. They are settled, confident and well looked after.

In reading, most younger pupils quickly gain the phonics knowledge they need. Pupils who require more help are well supported by knowledgeable staff. Pupils enjoy reading and are enthusiastic about the books they study. These firm foundations enable older pupils to develop a strong understanding of more advanced texts. Pupils achieve high standards in reading. However, in early writing, the school's expectations are unclear and lack sufficient ambition. Consequently, a few pupils do not secure basic knowledge and skills, such as fluent letter formation and handwriting. This slows down their progress across the writing curriculum.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make strong all-round progress from their varied starting points. This is because the school swiftly identifies pupils' needs and provides effective support. The school ensures that staff have the information and training they need to adapt their teaching. Consequently, pupils with SEND have full access to the curriculum and any wider activities.

The school supports pupils' behaviour needs well. Typically, pupils focus on their learning and listen carefully to the teacher. Pupils are respectful towards staff and each other. If pupils occasionally become restless, it is usually when they do not receive the feedback they need to keep up.

The well-structured use of outdoor education to promote pupils' personal growth is a hallmark of the school. Regular opportunities to explore the outdoors contribute strongly to pupils' development beyond the academic. This includes creative thinking, risk-taking and teamwork. Beyond outdoor learning, the school's comprehensive personal, social, health and economic education curriculum prepares pupils well for life beyond school. For example, it promotes pupils' understanding of democracy, staying safe online and the importance of respecting differences between people.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school does not provide clear enough guidance about how to check for the misconceptions pupils might have in lessons. This means that, occasionally, pupils do not receive the prompt, precise feedback they need to progress well through the curriculum. The school should clarify its assessment policy so that pupils consistently make the progress they should.
- The school's expectations for early writing are not clear or ambitious enough. This means that some pupils do not develop fluent enough basic knowledge and skills, such as letter formation and legible handwriting. The school should refine its early writing curriculum so that pupils develop the writing accuracy and fluency they need.

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	109446
Local authority	Bedford
Inspection number	10378431
Type of school	Primary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	2 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	389
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Sandra Thacker
Headteacher	Karen Headland
Website	www.cottonendforestschoo.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	24 and 25 January 2023, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Since the last inspection in 2023, the number of pupils enrolled at the school has continued to increase.
- The school does not make use of any alternative provision.
- There is nursery provision for children aged two years and over.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.

- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics, science, art and music. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also discussed the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons and looked at samples of pupils' work in some other subjects.
- Inspectors spoke with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, assistant headteachers, subject leaders, teachers and support staff.
- Inspectors observed informal times of the day as part of their evaluation of pupils' behaviour.
- 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' interests first.
- Inspectors met with governors and with the local authority school improvement adviser.
- Inspectors considered responses to Ofsted Parent View, letters and the free-text comments. Inspectors also considered the responses to Ofsted's surveys for pupils and staff.

Inspection team

Judith Sumner, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Lucy Roberts	Ofsted Inspector
Suzanne Thrower	Ofsted Inspector

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