

Self-improvement under lockdown.

Many of us had considered using the first Covid lockdown as a chance for some self-improvement. Whilst clearly many were suffering, for some, the reduced time commuting could be put to good use. Maybe less opportunity to indulge, and more time to exercise would improve our fitness. Some wanted to use the time to learn a new language, or develop an existing skill. Whatever we hoped to do, it's fair to say a majority probably failed. Further lockdowns have come and for many, good intentions remained just that, intentions.

This is not true for one school in Thornton Heath, which has undergone a sustained period of self-improvement, over the past challenging year. Founded in 1906, Winterbourne Nursery and Infants School sits on a site with separate Junior Boys and Girls schools, the last remaining single-sex, state-funded junior schools in the country. Whilst the schools often cooperate they remain very much independent schools, with their own staff, heads, budgets and governors.

As with all schools this past year has been unique, and a challenge for its 350+ pupils, its parents and staff. Beyond the challenges of Covid and lockdown the school has been on somewhat of a journey.

In December 2019 the school received a [Requires Improvement \(RI\) Ofsted](#) report. This came on the back of a 'No Assurance' [audit from Croydon Council](#) and a deficit budget. None of these are good positions for a school to have. The school facing all three to work on, plus the challenges of 2020, stretched everyone.

As the country was going into lockdown in early 2020, Winterbourne Nursery and Infants started looking at options for a partner school to develop with, and considered joining an academy chain. Simultaneously the school was working on its Ofsted Action Plan, and its Audit Plan, yet managed to deliver a balanced budget for the 2020/21 financial year. Due to the progress the school was making the governors decided the best route forward was for the school to continue to develop alone.

As we know the year continued to throw up challenges. Online learning was developed, and paper based remote learning was made available for those who needed it. Pupils came back and left again. In school the priority was to make space for pupils of key workers, nursery pupils with specialist needs in the Enhanced Learning Provision (ELP), and other Special Education Needs (SEN) pupils.

In December the school received an unusual Ofsted visit, this time not as an inspection, but as part of a review of how schools were coming back following the extended break in formal schooling. Although the visit didn't pass a judgement [it did highlight](#) that "Leaders have delivered remote education in the form of printed work packs and recorded videos which are accessed through the school website." It went on to acknowledge "Staff have contacted families not accessing the work to give support."

The return of pupils saw the opportunity to produce some excellent recorded [Christmas performances](#) of songs including, Mary's Boy Child, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, and We Wish You a Merry Christmas, interspersed with the telling of lots of seasonal jokes. On a more serious note the school also [teamed up with local food banks](#) to provide vouchers for those in need.

Through all this the school didn't stop focusing on the need to improve. In January the Auditors returned. For those unfamiliar with school audits they are predominantly focus on the schools adherence to financial, data and personnel processes. These are in place to ensure compliance with

required regulations and the good governance of public resources. Following much hard work over the previous year the school received a commendable 'Substantial Assurance' audit.

Of course a school is there to provide education, and in February Ofsted returned for a monitoring visit, held like many classes, using video conferencing. The monitoring visit doesn't provide a grade for the school, but does provide an indication of the path the school is on. Ofsted reviewed the school plans, its [website](#), and classes. They also took feedback from staff, and parents. Due to the hard work of staff, and commitment of the wider school community, Ofsted found the school was improving and on the path to a 'Good' assessment.

The inspectors particularly pointed to "Teachers provide a warm, nurturing start to each day with a live online session. They give clear guidance and support to pupils and parents about the day's learning tasks." and "The local authority provides regular challenge and support to the school. They have helped you make key decisions about your current education provision."

Once Ofsted start visiting again, the school will likely be high on the list for a full inspection. Changes will continue, new budget challenges will come along, as well as new audit requirements. The school will rightly stay focused on delivering the best education it can to all its pupils.

This past year has been a challenge for everyone, some of us have used the time to set goals, many of us have failed to achieve them, but one local school, Winterbourne Nursery and Infants, can rightly say, its whole community should be proud of its journey of self-improvement.