

Ashley School

Inspection report for residential special school

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Inspector	David Welch
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Date of last inspection	27 November 2006

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The Ashley School is owned and managed by Suffolk County Council and is administered from the Local Area Education Department. The school provides day education for children between the ages of seven and 16 years. The children attending the school are subject to a Statement of Educational Need. All of the children will have been assessed as benefiting from increased educational support. A number will have associated emotional and/or behavioural difficulties. The approach at The Ashley School is one of developing children to their full potential, instilling appropriate routines and habits, teaching life skills sufficient to enable them to be as independent as possible and encouraging them to flourish. The school has undergone some additional building work recently that has seen the provision of a new sports hall, outside play area and more classrooms. There is a covered, heated swimming pool. Other facilities include a dining hall and workshop and greenhouse areas for building and horticultural activities. The boarding provision accommodates children and young people in two boarding houses. One boarding house, Breydon, caters for older boys and the other, Lighthouse, caters for younger boys and girls throughout the age range. Some pupils are able, after an assessment, to take advantage of 'link services' in the boarding houses, whereby they stay behind for activities after school has finished and go home later on. This can be a prelude to staying overnight. When it is operating to its full capacity, boarding provision is provided for a maximum of four nights a week, although it is unusual for an individual child to stay every night. Both of the boarding houses are on two levels, with stairs, and as such are not suitable for any child or visitor with physical disabilities that might impair mobility. In all other respects the school has a very inclusive approach. The school is located on the northern edge of the town of Lowestoft and, dating from the late 1930's, is 'in keeping' with the housing estate that surrounds it. There are grassed areas that provide a pleasant, open aspect for children. Although recently extended, car parking is limited.

Summary

The inspection fulfils Ofsted's current legal responsibility to inspect the school's welfare provision on an annual basis. The Head was informed about the inspection shortly before it took place as a great deal of pre-inspection data and information was required from him. Also, arrangements had to be made for administering the pupil surveys, with staff assistance, and to receive back completed questionnaires from staff and parents. There were no recommendations outstanding from the previous inspection that took place in November 2006. All the standards considered by Ofsted as being 'key' to children's welfare were examined at this inspection together with a number of others. The inspector used the Every Child Matters outcomes for children, plus Organisation, as a template for reporting. In every outcome area the school performed well. It is outstanding in two areas and good in four others. Four recommendations have been made that, if implemented, would further benefit the service provided for children who board. These relate to checking the propriety of the arrangements for the administration of medication, the recording of some personal information about children to maintain confidentiality, strengthening the recruitment checking process and the information provided on restraint forms. This is a well-managed, effective and efficient school with informed and caring staff. The parents of children who stay overnight can be confident that their children will be looked after in a sensitive and understanding way.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The school has developed a Breakfast Club that builds on existing arrangements whereby some pupils have informally been using the boarding houses in the mornings. Staff have been working across the board on an emotional and 'feelings' approach to children's learning. A care staff member has been trained to facilitate refresher training for colleagues in using the School Safe programme of behaviour management. The school has developed a personal safety programme in one of the boarding houses. Children have been supported so that some of them can be involved in staff recruitment interviews. A more structured programme has been introduced to improve children's independence. A team building day was held for care staff to set a clear direction for boarding. Case tracking, matched to Every Child Matters outcomes, has been introduced for children using the boarding houses.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

At this inspection National Minimum Standards 14 and 15 were considered. Children do live in a healthy environment. Staff are aware of the individual health needs of children in their care and take steps to meet them well. There is little personal care intervention required at this time, but staff do know the protocols and follow them. In some instances, where some intimate care of boarders is required, staff are careful to ensure that colleagues know where they are so as to protect the vulnerability of both themselves and the children. Children with particular health needs are served well. The school follows the inclusion agenda for children with very complex needs. This includes welcoming them to take part in outdoor pursuits where the group will be off site for more than a week and on Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme activities, both involving camping. The children do have access to some specialist health care services, with the School Nurse being helpfully proactive in this, although there is some anxiety among staff about their lack of success in obtaining referrals to the CAMHS services for some children. This has been brought about by the arbitrary imposition by that service of an IQ level of 70 as an eligibility criterion. The administration and storing of medication arrangements work, and staff know and understand what is expected of them in this important area. The routine involved in dispensing medication to children serves them well and is to their benefit. However, there may be an element of 'secondary dispensing' by staff. The catering service provides school meals that are healthy, with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables. Parents, in particular, mentioned the healthiness of the dietary arrangements. Children said very appreciative and positive things about the food. There are strenuous efforts to promote healthy eating, which is of benefit to the children. This includes breakfast and tea, both of which are taken in the boarding houses, where the eating experience for the children is relaxed and pleasant. In some cases, the children are involved with care staff in helping to prepare meal items in the houses, thereby learning some useful life skills.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

At this inspection National Minimum Standards 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 26 and 27 were considered. Children's privacy is safeguarded as far as keeping secure most of the information about them is concerned. Their case records are stored in a confidential way and staff generally only share verbal information between themselves on a need-to-know basis. However, some written details

about different children are aggregated together and this does undermine a confidential approach. There is a working complaints procedure, with children confirming that they can make a complaint if they are unhappy with any aspect of their care, as can their parents. The staff listen to children. The school has an effective advocacy function for children and their parents. Children's welfare is protected and promoted through good safeguarding arrangements. Staff are well trained in child protection. Staff protect boarders by understanding what constitutes abuse and how they deal with any disclosures. Bullying is not a real issue in boarding, with children generally being protected by staff from isolated acts of physical aggression and assault. Staff make real efforts to stamp out name-calling. Several boarders said they had been called names at times, and one or two related historical incidents when they felt they had been bullied by other children, but the inspector was confident that there is no sustained, systematic or institutional bullying in boarding houses. Similarly, children going off the premises without any authority to do so is not a problem at this school. The staff are aware if any child goes missing, which is very rare, as is the Head whose room overlooks the front gate, so children are protected. Staff respond sensitively and positively when they return. Care staff help children develop socially-acceptable behaviour by going out with them to shops, by undertaking activities locally and further afield, by gently reminding children about table manners, emphasising to them that they take turns and through sharing experiences. Staff sanction incidents of children's unacceptable behaviour, mostly by imposing a slightly earlier bedtime or time out. In this way children learn constructively and in a supportive environment from staff they know and trust. Physical intervention is normally only used by staff to prevent injury to a child, to others or serious damage. Staff have been trained in the 'School Safe' programme of behaviour management and there is an on-site trainer to assist staff with refresher sessions. While physical intervention is used very sparingly here, restraint records do not state in every case the actual technique used by staff. Neither is the duration of the restraint clearly shown nor the degree of force used. There is no evidence that an adult who the child concerned trusts, has gone through the incident with him or her in order to find out their views on what happened. The Ashley School is a place where the children live in physical safety and security. Senior staff have developed risk assessments for the buildings, grounds and any hazardous areas that protect children using the site. Recruitment checks are sufficiently robust with careful selection of staff and monitoring of visitors to prevent children being exposed to potential abusers. There are one or two shortfalls, however, including no evidence of a gap being checked in one applicant's employment history. The school has also used written references supplied by applicants' personal friends and this is not good practice. In one case the school had only one written reference on file for an employee.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

At this inspection National Minimum Standards 12, 13 and 22 were considered. Care staff are very supportive of the children's educational progress, encouraging boarders with their reading and spelling. They are timetabled, in three cases, to work with children in class, which allows them to see the children in another setting and the children to experience the people who usually look after them in the boarding houses performing another role. Care staff attend the morning briefing meetings so they can be aware of particular children's circumstances and can bring colleagues up to speed with anything that has happened overnight in boarding houses, so they are forewarned and can react accordingly. They liaise with parents about all aspects of care, including school matters, which is of benefit to the children and their primary carers. Parents are very positive about the way the school consults them and keeps them informed.

The school encourages the children to indulge in a good range of purposeful, enjoyable and exciting activities both on and off site, which have health, social and other benefits for those taking part. The activities are structured to allow all children to participate. Care staff are aware of children's particular needs and provide individual support for them. This includes emotional support, guidance on personal hygiene and advice about problems. Care staff in one boarding house encourage children to express how they are through the medium of a 'feelings board', which encourages them to express themselves and be aware of, and sensitive to, others.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

At this inspection National Minimum Standards 2, 9, 11, 17 and 20 were considered. Staff help children to make decisions about their lives in boarding. To a limited extent, the children are also involved in how the school is run. An example of this is when children assist in recruiting staff, which is a really progressive move by the school, giving children an investment in choosing the people who will look after them. This is especially commendable. There are sound relationships between staff and boarders based on the good role models presented by carers and on honesty and mutual respect. In order to encourage children to speak to each other in a respectful way, staff speak kindly and sensitively to children. In this, anti-bullying week, the care staff help the children to stamp out name-calling and have a visual display board so the children can see the progress of the campaign. Staff handle admissions to overnight care in a compassionate way, sometimes by encouraging children to begin by staying for 'link' activities, when they remain in one of the boarding houses for the evening before going home. Later, they may then spend a night in the dormitory. This slowly introduces children to being away from home in a planned way. The school assesses and meets children's needs. The children, all of whom have a key worker, are subject to a Statement of Educational Need (SEN) and a careful plan of care that informs the staff of their particular and individual requirements. Staff prepare a Pupil Tracking plan, matched against the outcome areas of Every Child Matters and giving a summary of home and personal circumstances, for children who stay overnight, or who might board. Contact with parents is not an issue at this school, as no child spends more than three or four nights, at most, in residence before returning home to primary carers. The boarding houses both have telephones, which children can use to ring family members if they are unhappy. Parents can, and do, telephone staff for updates on their child's progress in boarding so are themselves kept informed.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

At this inspection National Minimum Standards 16, 21, 23, 24 and 25 were considered. Children can wear their own clothes that they bring in on the morning of their overnight stay. They are all clean and well presented. They have opportunities at the local shops to buy things with their pocket money, with the oldest children allowed to go unaccompanied. Care staff make good efforts to provide life skills for children, such as cooking and managing money, finding out what things cost and taking responsibility for themselves, to assist the children's move to more independent living later on. The school's enterprise education schemes, in which staff assist children with growing plants for sale as hanging baskets and flower arrangements, raises cash for school projects and provides a sense of achievement for children in corporate fund-raising and doing things that benefit the whole community. Children are able to use showers, bathrooms and toilets in private, thereby promoting their privacy, dignity and encouraging independence.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

At this inspection National Minimum Standards 1, 28, 29, 30, 31 and 32 were considered. The Ashley School has a Statement of Purpose, providing for parents, staff and others a clear outline of operating principles. This will be updated in the next 12 months, but at this time provides all the required information for stakeholders. There is also a Children's Guide that answers most of the questions that children staying overnight might ask. Children are looked after by staff who understand them, who are sympathetic and compassionate and who provide very good role models. They deal with children in a very sensitive way, confronting situations, but always being ready to praise and acknowledge good effort and achievement. The school is clearly meeting the needs of boarders well. Staff have access to good training opportunities. The Head describes his intention to get all care staff assessed at NVQ Level 3 as soon as possible. While the school has encountered some obstacles to this beyond its control, it is doing its best to comply. The school supports and guides its staff well to safeguard and promote children's welfare. Care staff meet weekly as a group and there are regular staff meetings involving other colleagues to discuss policy, procedures, changes to the school routines and the personal circumstances of individual children. The care staff team has been a little unstable recently with the number of changes relating to the Head of Care role and staff shortages, but has managed well with support from senior staff and a Pupil Support Worker doing additional hours. The senior management team provides effective and efficient leadership. The school is well-run. It has a very good reputation locally and with parents.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- obtain some expert outside advice and guidance as to the propriety of the administration of medication arrangements (NMS 14)
- ensure that any personal information relating to children is kept only on separated records that are individual to them, using a cross referencing system, and not aggregated together with other children's details (NMS 3)
- ensure that recruitment checks on applicants include checking all gaps in employment history, not using personal friends to supply written references and obtaining two written references from professional referees in every case (NMS 27)
- ensure that restraint records state in every case the actual technique used by staff, the duration of the restraint, the degree of force used and include a section where the child has a chance to give their view of what happened in writing (NMS 10).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for residential special school

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- children live in a healthy environment and the health and intimate care needs of each child are identified and promoted (NMS 14)
- children are provided with healthy, nutritious meals that meet their dietary needs (NMS 15)

Ofsted considers 14 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- children's privacy is respected and information about them is confidentially handled (NMS 3)
- children's complaints are addressed without delay and children are kept informed of progress in their consideration (NMS 4)
- the welfare of children is promoted, children are protected from abuse, and an appropriate response is made to any allegation or suspicion of abuse (NMS 5)
- children are protected from bullying (NMS 6)
- all significant events relating to the protection of children in the school are notified to the appropriate authorities by the head of the school or designated person (NMS 7)
- children who are absent without authority are protected in accordance with written guidance and responded to positively on return (NMS 8)
- children are assisted to develop appropriate behaviour through the encouragement of acceptable behaviour and constructive staff responses to inappropriate behaviour (NMS 10)
- children live in schools that provide physical safety and security (NMS 26)
- there is careful selection and vetting of all staff and volunteers, and monitoring of visitors to the school to prevent children being exposed to potential abusers (NMS 27)

Ofsted considers 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 26 and 27 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the school's residential provision actively supports children's educational progress at the school (NMS 12)
- children have ample opportunity to engage in purposeful and enjoyable activities within the school and in the local community (NMS 13)
- children receive individual support when they need it (NMS 22)

Ofsted considers 12 and 22 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- children are encouraged and supported to make decisions about their lives and to influence the way the school is run; no child should be assumed to be unable to communicate their views (NMS 2)
- children have sound relationships with staff based on honesty and mutual respect (NMS 9)
- children experience planned and sensitively handled admission and leaving processes (NMS 11)

- children have their needs assessed and written plans outline how these needs will be met while at school (NMS 17)
- in accordance with their wishes children are able and encouraged to maintain contact with their parents and families while at school (NMS 20)

Ofsted considers 2, 17 and 20 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- children can wear their own clothing outside school time, can secure personal requisites and stationery while at school, and are helped to look after their own money (NMS 16)
- children about to leave care are prepared for the transition into independent living (NMS 21)
- children live in well designed and pleasant premises, which provide sufficient space and facilities to meet their needs
- children live in accommodation which is appropriately decorated, furnished and maintained to a high standard, providing adequate facilities for their use (NMS 24)
- children are able to carry out their personal care in privacy and with dignity (NMS 25)

Ofsted considers the key standard to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- children, parents, staff and placing authorities have access to a clear statement of the school's care principles and practice for boarding pupils (NMS 1)
- children's needs, development and progress are recorded to reflect their individuality and their group interactions (NMS 18)
- there are adequate records of the staff and child groups of the school (NMS 19)
- children are looked after by staff who understand their needs and are able to meet them consistently (NMS 28)
- children are looked after by staff who are trained to meet their needs (NMS 29)
- children are looked after by staff who are themselves supported and guided in safeguarding and promoting the children's welfare (NMS 30)
- children receive the care and services they need from competent staff (NMS 31)
- children and staff enjoy the stability of efficiently run schools (NMS 32)
- the governing body, trustees, local authority, proprietor or other responsible body monitors the welfare of the children in the school (NMS 33)

Ofsted considers 1, 28, 31 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.