

Mulberry Bush School

Inspection report for residential special school

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Inspector	Christopher Garrett / Michael Williams
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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

Mulberry Bush School is run by a charitable trust and is approved by the DfES as a non-maintained special school. It provides 38 weeks of residential care and education, as well as a number of day placements for up to 40 boys and girls aged five to 12 years, who have experienced severe emotional damage in infancy and early childhood. The school specifically provides therapeutic treatment for children who have serious emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The school is situated in a village in rural West Oxfordshire, five miles south of Witney. Four houses provide the residential accommodation and are located around a 'village green', the classrooms are in close proximity and the layout of the site creates the spirit of a community.

Summary

The purpose of this visit was to conduct an announced inspection of all of the key National Minimum Standards for Residential Special Schools. Some additional standards were also inspected.

The judgements in this report have been made using new benchmarking guidance that was implemented on 01/04/08. Information about this guidance can be found on the Ofsted website. The new basis for making judgments is not directly comparable with that used previously.

In November 2008 it became a requirement for the inspection to comment specifically on the promotion of equality and diversity within the school.

The overall standard of care for the young people at the school is outstanding. The children are cared for by a committed and highly motivated integrated team. The school has a strong commitment to professional development ensuring that all staff are constantly engaged in some level of training that helps them to reflect and update their practice and to acquire the skills and knowledge required for working with children within an therapeutic community. All of the staff demonstrate an informed awareness of their responsibilities in safeguarding and are fully aware of the vulnerability of the children they care for. Parent/carers and significant others comment positively on the emphasis that the school places on ensuring that the children are safe at all times. The children are encouraged to help and consider others and to reflect on the impact that their behaviour has on all members of the community. Children express their confidence in the adults (staff) and that they listen to them and help sort out their issues and concerns.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This section reports only on improvements relating to recommendations set at the previous inspection. The school has been proactive in addressing a number of recommendations made following the last key inspection held in July 2007.

The school has taken steps which improve and consolidate the level of safety and safeguarding it provides for the children. Each of the houses has had a phone installed. These can be used

by the children to contact an external agency to raise or discuss any concerns that they may have. Children can access the independent agency without having to first seek approval from a member of staff. Written explanations are sought on any gaps in prospective members of staff's employment history. The school is in the process of updating all Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. Training on the administration of medication has been provided to all therapeutic care workers. The Head of Group Living (Head of Care) has completed and implemented additional on site and environmental risk assessments. The level of fire safety has been improved by arranging for the emergency lighting system to be regularly serviced and inspected

The arrangements for the effective monitoring of records and the standard of recording of sanctions and the discussions held with children who have gone missing from the houses and/or taken themselves away from the supervision of staff, have been reviewed and improved.

The school has taken steps to ensure that a significant majority of its therapeutic care staff have completed training that is said to demonstrate competencies at a level or above required by National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3.

The school's statement of purpose has been revised and includes details of the audio visual monitoring devices which are used in the houses.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children live in a healthy environment and the health and intimate care needs of each child are comprehensively identified and promoted. The school is a therapeutic community that identifies and provides services, either internally or externally, to promote children's physical, emotional and mental health needs. Children's integrated treatment plans include their health care and medical needs. The school employs a registered nurse who controls the administration of prescribed and non-prescribed medication to children. Therapeutic care staff are trained in the handling of medicines and first aid. The ethos of the school is supportive of personal, social and health education, which is taught both in classes and in houses and is matched to a child's stage of development. A vast majority of the children advise they are well looked after when they are ill and speak positively of the care they receive from the adults and the school nurse.

Children are provided with healthy, nutritious meals that meet their dietary needs. The school's central catering team are focused on children's healthy eating in their preparation of meals for the houses. Children can feed back their comments on the meals to care and catering staff. Children also have opportunities to engage in cooking, through cooking classes and a cooking club and the preparation of meals in their houses. As part of their focus on promoting positive food values, the school is working with a nutritionist to develop staff's awareness of healthy eating. A large majority of the children make positive comments about the food.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Ensuring that the children are safe and that they live in a caring and secure environment is central to the school's ethos. The school delivers outstanding standards of care which ensure that the children's welfare is fully promoted. This is delivered by a child focused integrated team which is supported by established practices, procedure and guidance. All of the stakeholders make references to how the school ensures that the children are safe.

All adults show a high regard for the privacy of the children for maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality. A number of the children require or request some levels of assistance with their personal care. Staff work within guidelines which ensure that the care provided is not intrusive and is carried out with sensitivity and respect. Staff are fully aware of gender and cultural issues and staffing is arranged to accommodate this. A significant majority of the children have their own bedrooms. Staff knock on doors and advise children when they are about to enter. There are arrangements in place for the children to have regular telephone contact with their families and carers. This can be a difficult time for some children and staff are ready to intervene and/or provide support. Details of any agreed restriction on contact are readily accessible to all staff. There are ample private and safe spaces available within the school and the houses for children to meet with their family and others. Written information on the children is kept confidential and secure and electronic records are password protected.

The school has a very open response to managing and dealing with any concerns or complaints that are raised by the children. The children have access to a child friendly complaints form which they are encouraged and supported to use. There is an expectation that most issues can be dealt with within their house, but there are processes for matters to be forwarded and investigated by senior members of staff. Issues raised by the children are listened to and dealt with by the staff. The children are informed about the outcome of any action that has been taken.

There are other forums that the children can use to raise concerns. These include the school council and during the various group meetings that are held during the day. Each house has a free accessible phone which is directly linked to a national children's advocacy service. This allows the children to be able to raise issues or concerns with someone independent of the school or house without having to first seek permission from a member of staff.

Mulberry Bush School demonstrates a strong commitment to ensuring that the children are protected from abuse and takes appropriate action if there is an allegation or suspicion of abuse. The school has very clear and established procedures for responding to child protection concerns. There are established links with the local Children's and Families' Assessment Team.

The school ensures that all of its staff have the knowledge, understanding and skills required to respond to an allegation or suspicion of abuse. The response to child protection issues is coordinated by one of the designated people who has received training for this role. Details of any matters that are not considered to have met the threshold for referral or consultation with the assessment team are logged and retained for future reference. Child protection training is provided during a staff induction period and this is then followed up and regularly updated as part school's renewable training. All of the care staff are fully aware of their individual responsibilities in responding to any potential child protection concerns.

Children indicate that bullying does take place at the school, but adults respond immediately and take positive action if it occurs. One of the children advises that, 'Adults sort it, bullies get told off'. The school has effective systems for monitoring incidents of bullying. Data is collected and is routinely evaluated to identify those children who are at risk and require some level of intervention and support. The school has a number of strategies that are used to address bullying. Staff give a clear and consistent message that bullying is unacceptable. Children who display persistent bullying or have been involved in serious/dangerous incidents may be referred to a bullying panel, attend an anti-bullying workshop or meet with a member of the school

council. This provides an opportunity for them explore their own feelings and motives and to consider the impact that their behaviour has on others and how to make amends.

Staff have access to guidance and know how to respond in an effective and efficient manner if a child goes missing from the houses and/or takes themselves away from the supervision of staff. Individual risk assessments are undertaken when this actual or potential behaviour is identified. Incidences are not common and when they do occur appropriate action is taken.

The school provides residential services and provision for children with severe emotional and behavioural needs. The children can display a range of unacceptable and unwanted behaviours. The management of the children's behaviour is an outstanding feature of the school. It is based on helping and encouraging the children to develop an understanding of their behaviour and the impact that this can have on their safety and that of those around them. The children become aware of the consequences of their behaviour through regular reflection and praise.

Staff set clear boundaries and expectations which are consistently reinforced by all members of the integrated team. Excellent communication via the school's intranet ensures that all staff have up to date information relating to all of the children's behaviour. Regular weekly meetings review individual children's behaviour and identify strategies that are consistently applied in all settings.

Each of the children has a behaviour plan as part of their Integrated Treatment Plan (ITP) which is routinely monitored and updated. There is an emphasis on restoration and reparation rather than in the use of sanctions to deter unacceptable or unwanted behaviour. Sanctions, when used are fair and appropriate and are matched to the level of a child's ability to understand his or her behaviour.

Some of the children can display dangerous and challenging behaviour. The school ensures that all of the staff have the skills to effectively manage this. All of the staff receive regular training on the use of intervention techniques which includes the use of de-escalation skills and physical restraint. The director has authorised the use of supine restraint. Strict guidance is provided on how and when this may be used. Consideration is given to the children's previous life experiences and any medical conditions. Details of the circumstance when physical intervention may be used and what form this can take is recorded in the child's ITP. The school is taking part in a national pilot scheme aimed at reducing the use of physical restraint.

All sanctions and incidents of physical restraint are routinely and appropriately recorded and monitored. The children are encouraged to reflect and make comments on each of the incidents.

The school takes positive steps to ensure that all staff have a high awareness of the vulnerability of the children in the case of a fire. All staff receive fire awareness training as part of their induction and as part of their ongoing mandatory renewable training. A number of staff have received fire marshal training. There are systems in place for the routine checks and servicing on the school's fire equipment. The school experiences a high number of false alarms. These have taken place at different times of the day and night and the children are routinely evacuated from the buildings when this occurs. A fire risk assessment has been previously undertaken and reviewed in January-March 2009.

Positive steps are taken to ensure that children, staff and visitors are safe from other risks and hazards. There is a good range of risk assessments for on and off site activities. The school has

recently implemented environmental risk assessments covering the premises and the grounds. Portable appliance testing has been undertaken. Observations on the school's security arrangements have been provided to senior members of staff.

The school has generally robust and consistent systems in place for the recruitment and vetting of staff which are in line with current Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) guidance. These include the submission of application forms, obtaining and verifying references, exploring gaps in employment history and interviews. The inspection confirms that the school has previously sought advice regarding portability of CRBs. Following this the school has accepted existing CRBs for new staff who have no break in employment, whilst new ones are applied for.

However, the current systems are not in accordance with the most recent guidance which states that National Minimum Standards take precedence over the DCSF guidance and must be fully applied in a residential school setting. The standards make specific reference that CRB checks must be completed before a member of staff, who is not transferring within an organisation, starts their employment.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The school's residential provision actively supports children's educational progress at the school. The school is a therapeutic community where children's group living and educational progress are integrated. This is reflected in children's integrated treatment plans. A child's treatment team includes their house key worker and class teacher. There are numerous different meetings between these and other care and education staff working with a child to look at how they can support and link into each other's areas. Children receive exceptional support during the transition times from house to class and class to house. Children with basic skills, formed around their educational needs, have these skills developed both in their classroom and in their house.

Children receive outstanding individual support when they need it. The school is a therapeutic community that provides individualised care and support to children that reflects their needs exceptionally well. Some children have individual therapy, with the school's psychotherapy team, as part of their integrated treatment plan at the school. The school's family team also provides individual support to children by networking with their families and other professionals working with them. The school ensures that children receive the support they need at various transition times during the school day and term. Following a recommendation from the previous inspection, children now have unfettered access to a telephone in their house to directly contact an independent charity about any personal problems or concerns. An allocated representative from this charity regularly visits children at the school.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children are encouraged and supported to make decisions about their lives and to influence the way the school is run. Children are integral to decision making and there is a wealth of evidence to show how children's views make a difference to the school. Consultation with children runs through the school. For example through: children's integrated treatment plans, that include a child's contribution section; children's consultation with their key worker; the school council, that has brought about changes and that children are elected to sit on and chair

by their peers; regular daily and weekly house and community meetings; and consultation with children for their internal and statutory reviews. Children participate and contribute to a number of forums which include the bullying panel, which addresses behaviour in the school.

Children experience exceptionally well planned and sensitively handled admission and leaving processes. The school is a therapeutic community where these transition times are exceptionally well managed. The school has both an admission and a leaving process that is individualised to reflect a child's particular needs. The school's family team oversees admissions and conduct a pre-placement assessment, an overview of which is in children's integrated treatment plans. The admission process includes devising an introductory programme, an introductory visit, allocating a buddy, and a gradual and supported introduction to the classroom. The school holds a weekly clinic regarding all new admissions. The leaving process includes devising a leaving calendar and a specific leaving assembly that a child's family are invited to.

Children have their needs comprehensively assessed and written plans fully outline how these needs will be met while at the school. Each child has an integrated treatment plan (ITP) that is overseen by their house key worker, who along with their class and family team workers are part of their treatment team. ITPs include children's placement objectives, current targets and recent significant achievements in their house and class. They are based around the five Every Child Matters outcomes for children and core educational areas. Children's ITPs are regularly reviewed by the school through internal case conferences and statutory reviews.

In accordance with their wishes and any safeguarding restrictions in place, children are able and encouraged to maintain contact with their parents and families while living away from home at the school. Children's ITPs include any contact restrictions and some family history. Children have regular telephone contact with their parents, families and friends. The school's family team manage the communication of important issues back to parents and the practicalities of contact arrangements. Parents/carers comment positively on the communication that the school has with them. Families are encouraged to visit children at the school. The school is a therapeutic community where children's dual experiences of being at the school and of having contact with their family are used to help them try and make sense of and improve their lives.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The standard relating to young people about to leave care being prepared for the transition into independent living is not applicable in this setting.

The school provides sufficient space and facilities to meet the needs of the children. The group living accommodation is provided in four houses. These are paired together which allows easy and quick access for staff to move from one house to another. The houses have a range of communal spaces that are put to good use. Activity spaces are well equipped with a range of age appropriate equipment, books and games. The children have access to supervised computer games.

Accommodation is domestic in style and is in a good state of decoration and repair. There are systems in place for damage to be quickly repaired. Some furniture and floor coverings show some signs of wear and tear. The large majority of the children have their own individual bedrooms. Some of the children advise that they have been consulted on the colour schemes in their rooms. The children are able to personalise their rooms if they wish.

The school makes use of audio visual equipment during the night time. Details of its use are detailed in the school's 'Welcome Booklet'.

The houses are set up around a large central lawn which provides a good communal space where the children can play and be supervised. Each of the houses has its own garden. Both the central lawn and individual gardens are equipped with play apparatus. Safety measures have been improved by the provision of devices that deter the children from climbing onto roofs. Windows are fitted with restrictors.

There are sufficient numbers of baths, toilets and showers for the numbers of children in each of the houses. All of these are of a good standard, equipped with working locks, clean and free from offensive odours.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Information on the school's purpose, ethos, values, organisation and what it sets out to do for the children is described in a document entitled the 'Welcome Booklet'. This was last revised in January 2009 and is made available to parents/carers and social workers. The children have access to a handbook which provides a range of information about the school. This is produced in a colourful format and is illustrated with photos and cartoons. This is also available on an animated and narrated DVD. Collectively these provide ample information to enable the children, parents/carers and other interested parties to determine the range of services the school provides and how it operates. The school has a website that provides a comprehensive range of information.

The number of staff on duty during the residential periods are sufficient to meet the complex needs of the children and to support them in their activities. A team of therapeutic care workers is allocated to each of the houses. This arrangement ensures a continuity and consistency in care. Staffing levels ensure good levels of supervision at all times and provide the opportunity for the children's interests to be accessed and supervised. Individual attention and supervision is given to the children as and when it is required.

The therapeutic care team is diverse and gender balanced. All staff are highly motivated, resourceful, resilient and committed and are fully involved in all aspects of the care that they provide.

The commitment that the school has to the staff's professional development is a significant feature of the school. Staff receive training and developmental opportunities that equip them with the skills and knowledge required to meet the needs of the children and the purpose of the school. The school has its own training department. The comprehensive in house training programme and other developmental opportunities ensure that staff are always involved in some aspect of professional development. Training needs are identified through a variety of forums and in response to national and governmental initiatives.

Training is provided in three main strands: induction, renewable and a recently accredited foundation degree. Staff comment enthusiastically on the training they receive. One explained how the induction programme had prepared him/her for working with the children. Another described the training opportunities as being 'absolutely awesome'.

Staff supervision is an established and integrated part of staff development. This is provided in groups and on an individual basis. Peer support is provided through regular team meetings.

The children receive the care and services they need from competent staff. Senior members of the therapeutic care team have a wide range of experience. The school is in the process of providing National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 4 training for all senior members of the therapeutic care team. The school's training programmes have been adapted and developed to meet the needs of staff working within a therapeutic community. A large majority of staff have completed training that is said to demonstrate competencies that either meet or exceed those of NVQ Level 3. There is an expectation that all therapeutic care workers will complete this standard of training.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There is evidence that the school is fully committed to promoting equality and diversity in practice. Equality and diversity underpins the ethos and values of the school. All of the children are valued as individuals and are given the same opportunities. The school promotes termly positive values which celebrate issues including friendships and difference. These are consistently followed through in group living. Issues such as bullying and racism are given a high priority. Strategies to manage these are developed through consultation with the integrated team and the children. The diverse care team brings a range of cultural and life experiences which are shared with the children. Documents demonstrate a commitment to equal opportunities and avoidance of inappropriate discrimination in all forms.

The school has implemented a system carried out by the Head of Group Living and her deputies for effective monitoring of records and practice within group living. A significant aspect of this process is the feedback provided to the therapeutic care teams. This encourages the teams to reflect on their practice within group living and identify areas for improvement.

There is an established process for the trustees to monitor the welfare of the children. Members of the trustee body conduct regular visits to the school. The trustees' checks on some records are focused on a specific area of activity or provision. Trustees meet with staff and the children. Reports are completed and these provide a snapshot on the conduct of the school.

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):

- ensure that the school's vetting procedures are in accordance with the National Minimum Standards. (NMS27)