

Shapwick School

Inspection report for residential special school

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Inspector	Heather Chaplin / Kenneth Smith
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Date of last inspection	24 March 2009

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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

Shapwick School is registered with the Department for Children, Schools and Families and with the Council for the Registration of Schools Teaching Dyslexic pupils (CReSTeD) under the 'special provision' category. It is inspected by both Ofsted and CReSTeD.

The school specialises in supporting boys and girls whose education has been adversely affected by dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia. The school does not accept students whose primary need is emotional and behavioural difficulties. Approximately half the students have a Statement of Special Educational Needs.

Occupying two separate rural village sites approximately five miles apart on the Somerset Levels, the school is within easy driving distance of several towns. Shapwick Prep School in Burtle provides for children in the age range of eight to 13 years. Boarders are accommodated in Chapel Hill Farm, which is a short walk from the school. Students aged 13 to 18 years are educated at Shapwick. They are currently accommodated in five single-sex boarding houses.

The Old Vicarage provides accommodation for sixth form students and is on Shapwick Prep school site. Sixth Form students attend Bridgwater College and receive specific support for their learning needs at Shapwick School.

Younger boys are accommodated at The Manor, Little Lawns (both in Shapwick village) and The Lakes in the village of Meare, approximately four miles away. Girls are accommodated in Greystone boarding house in Shapwick, the major part of which is a new build designed specifically for boarding.

The school currently has 141 students on roll across the two sites, comprising 24 girls and 70 boys boarding, with a further 47 students attending during the day.

Summary

Students at this school live at home with their parents and board during term time. Many have experienced difficulties in education in other schools before coming to Shapwick and may have specific vulnerabilities as a result, but most do not have significant behavioural issues. This means that some of the national minimum standards for Residential Special Schools are not an exact fit to the work done by the school. Most parents see the school as a boarding school, rather than a residential special school. Therefore there has been some flexibility shown in this inspection to acknowledge the school's individual status and character.

This was a very positive announced key inspection, with four outcome areas rated good and two rated outstanding. All the national minimum standards inspected were at least met or almost met. Some were exceeded, particularly in terms of the excellent level of support offered to individual children.

Boarders completed a questionnaire and 16 parents' surveys were received. All these responses have been taken into account in preparing the report.

Two recommendations have been made; one in respect of the school's absence policy and the other in respect of supervision and appraisal arrangements for staff.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Three recommendations were made at the last inspection. At that time, medicines were not always stored, recorded and administered in accordance with national minimum standard 14. This has now been addressed and although there is still room for some further development of recording systems, the standard is now met.

A recommendation was made in respect of staff recruitment practice. Sometimes the reasons behind gaps in employment history had not been recorded, and full identity information was not always retained. This has largely been addressed. Although identity information still is not always on file, this is because an outside body conducts Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks.

A third recommendation stated that a representative from the governing body should visit the school at least twice a term and make a written report of the visits. This has been fully addressed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children's health care needs are very well met in this school. Parents receive a health questionnaire prior to admission which covers medical history, vaccinations and any current issues. Parental consent is obtained for emergency first aid or other medical treatment. Any children with specific medical problems are well supported. There are effective policies in place regarding smoking and other hazards to children's health. Education about smoking and drug misuse is comprehensively addressed within the school. Firm action is taken in the event of persistent smoking ensuring that it is not a significant issue in this school.

Children requiring optical, dental or medical treatment in term time are taken to the relevant appointments. One parent said: 'pupils who board are very well looked after and if they are unwell, they are taken to see a doctor locally straight away. They also have the correct help with their medication and parents are kept well informed. There is always someone there for the pupils to talk to if there are any concerns'.

Since the last inspection, the school has sought the advice of their pharmacist, who visited the school. As a result, medication recording systems have improved significantly. All houseparents keep clear records of medication administered. In the senior school an electronic audit trail of medicines received, administered and disposed has been developed.

The school has a small sick bay with one bed, situated in The Manor. Should any student fall ill, parents often collect their child if at all possible. If the illness is minor, students can remain in their own dormitories where they are cared for by houseparents.

The standard of food in the school is generally very good, with a hot main meal at lunchtime and a hot snack in the evening. Fresh fruit is available at breakfast and in the boarding houses. Meals observed and sampled were attractively presented and tasty. They are well-balanced across the day, although in some cases, for example when curry is served, children are not offered vegetables to accompany the meal. There is always a varied, fresh salad bar with baked potatoes available and this is very popular.

There is only one vegetarian student in school, so the majority of students are well catered for, but limited hot food is on offer for those who do not wish to eat meat or fish. Children said that in practice, if they are unable to eat anything on offer, an alternative would be prepared for them. Restricted choice of vegetarian meals was discussed with the school's management team.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The school provides a very safe environment for children to grow and learn. Students report that they can keep their belongings safely and that they have sufficient privacy in the boarding houses. Bathrooms and toilets have suitable locks to enable staff to gain access in an emergency. Students have ready access to phones to enable them to speak with family and friends. They can also access social networking sites and receive advice and support on how to use these appropriately.

The school receives very few complaints but many compliments. Any complaints are generally well recorded. Students say that they are confident that any matter they raise will be addressed.

There is a very clear, comprehensive and recently redrafted child protection policy in place. The school has a designated person for child protection matters and he has attended safeguarding training at level 2. Both deputy headteachers and some houseparents are booked to attend level 1 training and some houseparents have already completed this. All staff receive a thorough induction which includes basic child protection advice. Staff are clear how they would respond if a child makes a disclosure. The school has had no child protection incidents.

Children are very well protected from bullying. Any incidents that do occur are responded to appropriately. One parent said: 'school provides a safe and happy environment for the boarders and the houseparents put in a great deal to make sure that the children are happy and not being bullied. They are quick to pick up on any problem and are good at being in contact with the parents'.

The school has an attendance and absence policy which clearly states that in the event of absence without authority, a member of the senior management team must be contacted immediately. The school has not had any incident of this sort. The leadership team know exactly what they would do to help keep children safe should this situation arise. However, the policy does not go on to specify what actions would be taken by the senior management team.

Some children hold prefect positions in the school, but these are not associated with any responsibility for maintaining discipline. Behaviour in school and in the boarding houses was observed to be of a very high standard. The staff set clear boundaries and parents commented favourably on the outcome: 'children always appear polite, confident, happy and secure in their surroundings'.

The school covers two open sites and with several boarding houses in three villages, it is impossible to have full site security, but it is as good as it can be under the constraints of the site layout. In a quiet rural environment with plenty of staff supervision and CCTV, there is a negligible risk to children from unauthorised access. There are effective signing in and out procedures for visitors.

Fire safety risk assessments and equipment checks are of a good standard. Risk assessments are in place for every boarding house as well as the main school premises. All obvious hazards have either been removed or risk assessed and no obvious hazards are evident. The risks from legionella and from portable electrical equipment are well managed.

Staff recruitment is robust, with clear records of Criminal Records Bureau checks being completed. Written references are obtained and checked. Any gaps in employment history are explored in interview. There is an effective equal opportunities policy in place, with well-structured interview and application forms.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The school ensures that boarding provision supports educational progress very well. Both school sites have good library facilities and all boarding houses have access to the internet in the evening so that children may study outside school time. The school has an extensive programme of personal, social and health education with citizenship to help prepare children for independent life. There is excellent communication between residential and teaching staff to ensure that a holistic approach is taken to learning and pastoral care.

One parent said: 'I think the houseparents achieve a delicate balance between encouraging independence and maturity whilst being nurturing and recognising that they are still children. The task of ensuring a happy living space with a group of teenagers all with their own issues and needs, cannot be underestimated! I have much trust, admiration and praise for the houseparents and their support staff'.

Parents and students agreed that the range of activities on offer had improved and almost all agreed that it is very good. Students interviewed are happy with the choice available. One group of students described a recent caving trip which they had thoroughly enjoyed. Visits to a variety of local attractions can be arranged and students are actively encouraged to offer ideas for activities.

Students at The Manor and other houses in Shapwick enjoy easy access to sporting activities in the evenings and there is an excellent recreation room there. The Lakes stands in a large area of its own land, leading down to the river, which students may access under supervision. The Somerset Levels incorporates many Sites of Scientific Interest and nature reserves, which provide excellent opportunities for walking and exploring as well as learning.

School teaching and therapy staff have exceptional expertise in helping children with specific difficulties. Teachers administer tests to all newly admitted children to evaluate their self-esteem. The deputy headteacher scores the tests and identifies students whose self-esteem is very high or very low. Children are referred for therapy as appropriate.

Some houseparents receive individual consultation from the therapy staff to help them to understand issues around dyslexia and associated disorders. One parent said: 'The boarding school has made an incredible difference to our daughter. She now has self belief, improved self-worth, and the confidence to try new things. She certainly seems to be enjoying her new life and friends. It is a joy to see her...'

These views were echoed by a number of other parents. Children confirmed that after very poor experiences in some other schools, they felt happy and confident in Shapwick School where everyone understood their needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Students interviewed all said that they could speak with any member of staff if they wished to make a suggestion or express their views. They have confidence in the school council. Students gave examples of changes that had been made as a result, for example, to the menus.

Relationships with staff are positive and respectful. Staff show total dedication to their work and value each child as an individual, but maintain very clear boundaries. The school sets high standards of behaviour and on the whole, students adhere to these very well.

Students explained how they are introduced to the school. They have a 'buddy' system and are assigned to an older student to help them settle in. Children can visit and stay for several days, to see whether they wish to join the school.

The school does not need formal placement plans because the equivalent information is held in other documents, for example the Individual Education Plan (all children) and the Statement of Special Educational Needs (approximately half the children). These documents contain pastoral as well as educational information and enable staff to meet their needs.

Students are able to have positive contact with their families through telephone contact, visits home and flexible boarding. The school now has ready internet access in the evenings and most older students have laptops, so they may email parents and make contact through approved social networking sites.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The boarding provision comprises five houses which provide good accommodation for students across the boarding age range. The new-build section of Greystone, situated next door to and adjoining the old cottage of the same name, is of exceptional quality. The building is adapted for any students with physical disabilities and excellent communal areas. There is some variation in the quality of the boarding houses but all are suitable, spotlessly clean and have a homely atmosphere.

The five older houses are on a rolling programme of refurbishment and additional work has been completed since the last inspection. Those completed have good standards of decoration and furnishing. Students said that they enjoy being in their boarding houses and many are very proud of their own house. One student said of Little Lawns 'I love it, it's the best house I have been in'.

The Manor is the oldest house and whilst full of character, some of the communal rooms are a little less homely than in the other houses. However, students really enjoy being in this house because it is so accessible to the sports facilities. Students at the other houses were also very happy with their surroundings. Those at The Lakes said that they like being in another village as it affords them some separation from the other houses and school buildings.

All students have low-level cabin beds with under-bed storage, lockable storage, cupboard space and can personalise their area of the dormitory. There are no high bunk beds and the numbers per room have now decreased to a maximum of four boarders. Some parents commented that there could be additional storage space for clothing for full boarders, but generally all comments received from parents and children were very positive. The school has its own maintenance team and all buildings appeared to be in good repair.

Shower and toilet facilities are very good. Showers are designed for privacy and have solid doors rather than curtains. Some students at the larger and older houses (The Lakes, The Manor and Chapel Hill Farm) said that if everyone has a shower at once, the water pressure drops. The school is aware of this and is trying to resolve the problem.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The school has equal opportunities and accessibility policies and promotes the needs of boys and girls equally. Although some of the older accommodation would not at this time be suitable for children with physical disabilities, the new boarding house provides excellent accommodation for any students who may have these needs in the future.

The head of boarding advocates impressively for children and their parents who are going through an education tribunal process. The school's objective is to help individual children with specific language and related disabilities achieve their potential, and the headteacher is passionate about children's rights to an appropriate education. This is achieved to an exceptionally high standard. Other areas of minority need are recognised, but sexuality, race, religion and other individual differences are not yet as well promoted.

Although the school does not have a formal Statement of Purpose, the website, Prospectus and associated leaflets provide parents with equivalent information about the school's aims, staff qualifications and life in boarding. The admission policy clearly states which children may benefit from attending the school and those for which the school would not be appropriate.

All children have Individual Education Plans which detail their educational, social and pastoral needs. These are securely kept and are accessible only on a need-to-know basis, for example to staff and the child's own parents.

The school maintains good staff and pupil records, including full personnel files for all staff and diaries of events in each boarding house.

Boarding is well-staffed in this school. There are resident couples working as houseparents in all but one of the boarding houses and the single houseparent has ready access to colleagues nearby. There are robust back-up arrangements in place and in the event of an emergency, any of the senior staff would act swiftly to support the boarding houses. Houseparents are very experienced and confident in leading groups outside school premises, which enables students to enjoy a full range of weekend trips and activities.

The headteachers actively promote staff training and although boarding staff do not have a formal personal development plan, there are plenty of training opportunities for them. For

example, all boarding staff are to receive external child protection training in addition to their basic training at induction level.

The school is led by a strong and inspirational management team, which functions together very effectively. One headteacher directs the academic programme and is based at Shapwick School, while the other headteacher, based at Shapwick Prep School in Burtle, is head of boarding and pastoral care. This arrangement, although unusual, has worked very well for 26 years.

The head of boarding has a broad remit with teaching and other commitments, including being a housemaster at The Lakes. If there were to be any suggestion of potential conflict of interest, the other headteacher would be in a position to resolve the matter.

Boarding staff receive a very high level of individual support and meet regularly with the head of boarding. This arrangement is effective, but it is based on day-to-day conversations and has not yet been formalised into regular supervision. Although their training and development needs are very well addressed, boarding staff do not yet receive an annual appraisal.

Most of the boarding staff hold teaching and other qualifications that equip them to work effectively with children and young people, and all are extremely experienced. National Vocational Qualification at level 3 in the Care of Children and Young People is geared mainly towards working with children with emotional and behavioural issues and the headteachers' view is that it would not be appropriate for staff at this school. Training in issues relating to dyslexia is far more helpful to them in this work. The therapy staff provide suitable training to some houseparents through weekly one-to-one consultation. The headteacher and head of boarding holds a teaching qualification and has over 25 years' experience in boarding. Similarly, NVQ at level 4 would not assist him in his role.

The headteacher monitors all boarding records very effectively. There are clear management strategies in place and frequent meetings are held with representatives from the company which owns the school. A company director attends school management meetings 11 times per year and prepares clear and detailed reports on the operation of boarding. The company has brought about a number of very positive developments, including major capital projects. This specialist provider of education takes a keen interest in the day-to-day operation of the school.

All relevant management reports were made available to the inspectors. Copies of the most recent Ofsted education, social care and CReSTeD reports are available on the school's website.

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):

- develop the current absence policy to include what actions would be taken by the senior management team in the event of a child being absent without authority (NMS 8.3)
- consider formalising the current informal supervision arrangements and provide an annual appraisal for non-teaching staff. (NMS 30.2 and 30.6)