

Doucecroft School

Independent residential special school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Judith Charlesworth
Social care inspector	Kristen Judd

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.^{1, 2}

The inspection of boarding provision was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 having regard to the national minimum standards for residential special schools, in order to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and the government of the quality and standard of the service provided.³

Information about the school

Doucecroft is a day and residential special school for up to 79 pupils aged three to 19 who have Autistic Spectrum Disorder and, increasingly, Asperger's Syndrome (ASD). The school forms part of the provision and services owned and run by Autism Anglia. There are currently 57 pupils aged seven to 19 on roll, 32 of whom are weekly boarders. Fourteen pupils are looked after by their local authority and all have statements of their special educational needs. The school first opened in 1977 and the main school moved to its current site in Eight Ash Green, near Colchester, in 2005. A further education department, including residential accommodation, opened in 1999 in Kelvedon, a few miles away. This is still operational although additional post-16 provision has recently opened on the main site. The school's residential provision was inspected at the same time as its educational provision. The school's last educational inspection was in December 2007 and its previous social care inspection was in February 2010. The school aims to 'provide a specialist service for children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders that is developed and resourced to facilitate and promote individual growth through education, social skills and self-esteem.'

Evaluation of the school

Doucecroft School provides a good quality of education and outstanding boarding provision. The boarding provision has also been judged outstanding for the past three years. The school fully meets its aims and the educational provision continues to improve. The provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and for their welfare, health and safety, including child protection, is outstanding. Pupils make good academic progress and their personal development, including their

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

³ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/ukpga_20000014_en_1

behaviour, is outstanding. The school meets all but one of the regulations for independent special schools.

Quality of education

Doucecroft provides good quality education. Pupils make good academic progress and outstanding progress in their personal development. These outcomes are underpinned by a good curriculum, good quality teaching and assessment, and the highly effective support offered by the residential provision for all aspects of pupils' education and welfare.

The school is focused on helping pupils to manage the difficulties associated with their autistic conditions. These are identified as difficulties with communication, social interaction and flexibility of thought. Pupils' statements of special educational needs indicate that this is a priority for them, in order that they should learn more effectively and be better prepared for their adult lives and future well-being. Pupils' individual education plans, therefore, address their ASD needs which are met in all curricular and extra-curricular activities, and in the residential provision. In almost all lessons, teaching is underpinned by a detailed understanding of each pupil's academic and personal needs, outstanding behaviour management, planning which ensures that every moment is used for learning and outstanding teamwork between the staff. Lesson plans contain subject targets for each pupil derived from a careful assessment of their individual skills. The detail shown in some of these plans is outstanding, but is not uniform across the whole school. In the Eight Ash Green post-16 department, for example, planning for regular activities such as 'snack and drink' does not always have enough of a focus on learning. Nevertheless, as a result of the strengths in teaching throughout the school, pupils' behaviour is generally outstanding and they learn well.

Physical education and extra-curricular sport and physical activities are strongly promoted in both school and residential settings to help pupils manage their anxieties and difficulties. Similarly, personal, social and health education and communication, language and literacy are both fundamental to the curriculum. The curriculum content and organisation reflect pupils' age and the profundity of their needs. The great majority of pupils in Key Stages 2 and 3 have a subject-based curriculum, derived from the National Curriculum, through which their personal needs are addressed. Pupils with the most profound difficulties have a curriculum which addresses their ASD needs first, and through which subjects are taught to give them their full entitlement to a broad, balanced curriculum. At Key Stage 4, pupils are given options for study and begin externally accredited work. More of their work takes place in the community in order that pupils learn to apply their skills in real-life contexts. The curriculum includes vocational and work-related learning. The post-16 curriculum at Kelvedon is very well established and provides an exciting, community-based personalised curriculum, tailor-made for each student. Good links are made with work placements, colleges and other schools. Recently, for example, students made puppets and filmed their puppet show of Macbeth in collaboration with a local school. The new post-16 department at Eight Ash Green is less well established

although it is undergoing review and development. In principle, it provides a similar curriculum for its students, although they tend to have more profound difficulties, lower attainment and less independence. However, there is currently insufficient cohesion between the two post-16 departments to maximise the extent that good practice can be shared and developed further.

Assessment is good although the school does not yet use progress data as a management tool to identify strengths and weaknesses in provision or to judge the adequacy of pupils' very small steps of progress. In the main school, pupils' developing skills are carefully and minutely tracked, informing teachers' planning and target setting very effectively. This process, however, does not extend into all of the post-16 provision although other means of assessment are used, particularly in relation to the extensive accredited learning.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Pupils have many opportunities for spiritual growth. They develop confidence and a sense of self-worth and self-knowledge. For some higher attaining pupils, spiritual development is characterised by growing compassion and a greater respect for, and tolerance and understanding of, others. Some firm friendships are established, particularly among older pupils. Pupils' excellent behaviour results in an atmosphere that is usually tranquil and quiet. Pupils learn to recognise and manage their own feelings and anxieties. They learn to distinguish between right and wrong and that actions have consequences. The curriculum, extra-curricular and residential activities help pupils understand the basic institutions, services and rules of a democratic society. Pupils learn about issues such as pollution and recycling. Their cultural development is supported effectively by a range of curricular and extra-curricular activities, such as celebrations of different festivals and the music, food and art of different cultures. This broadens pupils' understanding of the cultural diversity around them.

Pupils' and parents' and carers' questionnaire returns confirm that pupils enjoy school. Their relationships with staff are outstanding. Attitudes to learning are very good and attendance is high. Considering that many pupils previously found attending school difficult, this is a significant achievement for them. One pupil, for example, wrote: 'I enjoy the variety at school and I feel safe.' As pupils mature, they contribute increasingly to the school and wider community, for example by delivering the post, tending the grounds and devising innovative ways of raising money for the school and charities.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school makes outstanding provision for the welfare, health and safety of pupils in both the education and residential provision. Staff have a clear, sharp focus on safeguarding pupils. This commitment is summarised in a helpful over-arching safeguarding policy and is backed up by a number of well written and effectively implemented policies and guidance documents which underpin the school's robust

practices. Child protection is very well considered. It is supported by outstanding safe recruitment practices and careful record-keeping in both the school and residential settings. Behaviour management is of paramount importance. The school employs a behaviour support manager and each pupil has a behaviour management programme which emphasises strategies to calm pupils and teach them to manage their own behaviour more effectively. All staff training is up-to-date and a very thorough approach is taken to risk assessments for individual pupils and activities undertaken on and off-site. The school has a suitable three year access plan as required by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, as amended.

The consideration for each pupil's individual needs and physical and emotional well-being is outstanding. Well-conducted handovers between school and residential staff at the start and end of the school day keep all staff very well informed about each pupil's well-being. The school is committed to helping pupils lead safe and healthy lives, for example helping pupils to accept visits to professionals such as doctors and dentists. Healthy food is provided and staff encourage pupils to plan, shop and cook healthy meals, and to extend the range of food that they will tolerate. Personal, social and health education and the residential staff's work include effective teaching about personal hygiene, the dangers of drugs and alcohol, and safety in the community.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

All regulations are met in relation to ensuring the suitability of the proprietor and adults in both the school and residential settings for working with children and young people. These checks are recorded as required.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The main school provides outstanding accommodation for both the education and boarding provision. The premises are located on an attractive, safe and secure four acre site. Outstanding new boarding accommodation has been sympathetically designed to match the existing premises. All classrooms are spacious and very well furnished to meet the particular needs of the pupils which supports learning very effectively. Facilities and pupils' well-being are enhanced by an indoor swimming pool, sports hall, spacious grounds and a small gym suite. A large teaching kitchen allows students to learn cooking skills. New, equally well-equipped post-16 provision, including boarding accommodation, has been developed from existing buildings on this site. This is entirely separate from the main school which provides these students with a safe, suitably adult environment in which to learn.

The long-established post-16 provision situated in a period house on Kelvedon village High Street is well suited to these more able pupils' community-based curriculum. The premises have been fully developed to provide good educational facilities. The grounds provide a suitable context for outdoor and horticultural studies. The boarding accommodation is homely, and students are comfortable and enjoy living there. However, some areas such as bathrooms are in need of updating.

Provision of information

The school meets all regulations except one in the provision of information for parents, carers and others. The prospectuses provide attractive, detailed, accurate and up-to-date information on both the education and boarding provision. They indicate clearly which policies and additional documents are available from the school's website. Outstanding, detailed reports on pupils' attainment and progress are produced for parents and carers, and for all educational and care reviews. The school and residential staff communicate with parents very well through weekly diaries, emails and notices of events. An annual report of income received and expenditure incurred in respect of each pupil funded by local authorities is not provided as required.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school's policy and procedure for handling complaints in both the school and residential settings meet all regulations.

Effectiveness of the boarding provision

The quality of boarding is outstanding. Appropriate action has been taken to address all the recommendations made at the last inspection.

Pupils are provided with an outstanding level of care and their emotional and health needs are promoted very well. Staff on duty have first aid training and staff follow clear procedures for the management and administration of medication. Pupils are provided with a healthy and balanced diet and they are positive about the range of food provided. Mealtimes are well organised with clear routines to support the development of social skills. Older pupils are supported to plan their own menus, shop for groceries and practice their cooking skills. The school emphasises an active lifestyle and pupils engage in a range of physical activities.

Pupil's privacy is respected and information about them is held in a confidential manner. Appropriate procedures are in place to deal with complaints; these are available in a variety of suitable pictorial formats for pupils who have complex communication needs. Pupils have access to an independent advocate. Safeguarding is taken seriously by the school. Staff have an excellent understanding of child protection issues and are fully aware of their duties and responsibilities. Pupils feel safe and enjoy being at the school. Clear anti-bullying policies and procedures are in place and bullying is not identified as a problem. Staff have an outstanding level of understanding about the individual needs of the pupils and know when they are upset or are trying to express their views. Pupils are protected through effective systems to prevent absence without authority.

Staff adopt an holistic approach to caring for pupils. They work hard to help pupils understand what to expect throughout the day and have excellent opportunities to enjoy individualised leisure activities. Comprehensive care plans are updated regularly and provide an accurate assessment of pupils' individual needs. Pupils' behaviour is very well managed by a positive approach with an emphasis on de-escalation. Staff comply with extremely detailed guidance when working with individuals. They receive regular training and maintain appropriate records of the use of physical intervention. Sanctions are not used. There are strong, positive relationships between pupils and staff. Effective procedures keep pupils, staff and visitors safe from risk of fire and other hazards. Thorough procedures are in place for the recruitment and checking of staff and excellent records are maintained.

All staff are sensitive to the individual needs of pupils and they work hard to encourage integration across the school community. Staff help pupils to engage in education by providing a clear structure in the mornings and evenings. There is excellent communication between care staff and the teaching team. The handover system ensures that everyone is aware of the daily needs of the pupils in their care. For example, detailed information is shared in relation to behaviour that may impact on a child's well-being. New pupils are positively welcomed into the school and there are good systems to help them settle. Contact with parents is well supported. Parents may visit and the school contacts parents as necessary regarding any concerns.

Pupils are provided with a very good standard of accommodation which is appropriately decorated, furnished and clean. Pupils like their bedrooms and can personalise them if they wish. There are comfortable, spacious and well-equipped communal residential areas. Leisure times are enhanced by an on-site swimming pool and extensive recreational grounds.

Parents are provided with information about how the school operates and the services provided. The staff team are extremely positive and strive to achieve the best for the pupils in their care. Staffing levels are excellent, with one-to-one ratios when needed. This ensures that pupils' individual needs are very well met. The school provides numerous opportunities for staff training, including child protection, first aid and National Vocational Qualifications. Staff receive regular supervision, however, they do not have annual appraisals. This limits the manager's ability to identify specific individual training needs or to reflect with staff on their level of performance.

The headteacher and the head of care provide clear and effective leadership of the school's boarding provision. The management team meets regularly, ensuring that matters affecting the boarders' welfare are discussed and monitored. Governors and the independent advocate undertake regular visits to the boarding provision. Documentation in the boarding house, such as that relating to restraints and incidents, are regularly monitored. However, there is no formal review of the boarding provision in line with the national minimum standards. Consequently, there

is no evidence to demonstrate improvement and development of the boarding aspect of the school. Overall, the outstanding boarding provision and good communication and cohesion amongst staff teams are extremely beneficial to the pupils.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 (‘the Regulations’), with the exception of those listed below.⁴

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the provision of information (standards in part 6) and must:

- where a pupil who is registered at the school is wholly or partly funded by the local authority, provide an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of that pupil to the local authority and on request to the Secretary of State (paragraph 24(1)(h)).

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- develop more cohesion between the two further education departments to provide a continuum of high quality post-16 provision
- develop the use of assessment data as a means of judging the adequacy of pupils’ very small steps of progress, and as a source of information to support whole-school management and improvement
- carry out annual formal appraisals on all staff working in the residential provision (NMS30.2)
- carry out a review in writing on the operation and resourcing of the school’s welfare provision which includes an internal assessment of its compliance with the national minimum standards, and incorporate any shortfalls identified into the school development plan (NMS32.4).

⁴ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2010/1997/contents/made

Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education		✓		
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils		✓		
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs		✓		
How well pupils make progress in their learning		✓		

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	✓			
The behaviour of pupils	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils	✓			
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The quality of boarding provision

Effectiveness of boarding provision	✓			
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School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Day and residential special school		
Date school opened	1977		
Age range of pupils	7–19		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 55	Girls: 2	Total: 57
Number of boarders	Boys: 30	Girls: 2	Total: 32
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 55	Girls: 2	Total: 57
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 13	Girls: 1	Total: 14
Annual fees (day pupils)	£54,291		
Annual fees (boarders)	£88,794		
Address of school	Abbotts Lane, Eight Ash Green, Colchester CO6 3QL		
Telephone number	01206 771234		
Email address	kcranmer@autism-anglia.org.uk		
Headteacher	Ms K Cranmer		
Proprietor	Autism Anglia		