

Prior's Court School

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Andrew Redpath HMI
Social care inspector	Clare Davies

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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}

An inspection of the care provision was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 having regard to the national minimum standards for children's homes. This inspection took place at the same time but the full report is published separately on Ofsted's website and should be read in conjunction with this report which covers the educational registration of the school.

Information about the school

Prior's Court School is a residential special school for pupils aged five to 19 years who have an autistic spectrum disorder. The school makes residential provision for 44 weeks of the year and is registered as a children's home. The school is in the ownership of a charitable trust, the Prior's Court Foundation. Currently, 53 students are on the school roll, all of whom have a statement of special educational needs. All students are resident at the school and the large majority are boys. While registered to take pupils between the ages of five and 19 years, currently, only secondary-aged students are on roll. As well as experiencing difficulty with communication, all students have severe or complex learning difficulties and most display challenging behaviour. Residential accommodation is provided in six houses on the school site or in an additional house in a nearby village. Students come from various parts of England and have their places funded by their local authorities.

The school was last inspected by Ofsted in September 2007 and the residential provision by Ofsted's Children's Directorate in February 2010. The school aims to 'enable pupils to access their individual strengths and achieve as independent a life as possible'. To achieve these aims, there is a focus on providing structure throughout the waking day with regular opportunities for physical exercise.

Evaluation of the school

Prior's Court School provides a good quality of education. It is successful in meeting its central aims and provides an outstanding curriculum that is sensitive to the individual needs of students with an autistic spectrum disorder. The good quality of teaching and the sensitive management of students' behaviour enable students to grow in confidence and to make good progress. The school meets all the

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

safeguarding requirements. It has made satisfactory progress since the last inspection and meets two of the regulations that were previously not met. It has improved resources for older students and has put in place a sex and relationships education programme for girls. The school now meets all except two of the regulations and it is rightly developing plans to ensure greater consistency in the use of assessment information in planning and in the recording of students' progress.

Quality of education

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding. A clear set of aims is supported by schemes of work for all the required areas of learning. Planning ensures topics are adapted appropriately for students who are at the early stages of acquiring numeracy, literacy and communication skills. A structure is provided throughout the day which includes a suitable balance between individual and group work. Pictures and symbols are used very effectively to enable students to understand the daily timetable and to reinforce their learning. Regular exercise is provided which helps students to reduce their levels of stress and to settle more calmly to their work. Recognised approaches to the teaching of physical education (PE), movement and swimming are well established and contribute significantly to students' enjoyment of school. The personal, social and health education programme contains topics which are very appropriate to the needs of students, for example personal hygiene, sex and relationships, and making appropriate physical contact. It is supported well by activities provided in the care homes.

The school's 'Countryside Learning Centre' is an extremely valuable part of the school's provision. It enables students to gain first-hand experience of animal care and to develop their vocational skills.

The provision of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, music therapy and advice and monitoring from psychologists ensures that the requirements of students' statements of special educational needs are met fully. Students receive appropriate careers guidance, mainly from the school and residential care staff who plan carefully for students' future beyond school. All students study the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) course which focuses on the development of independence and social skills.

The programme for post-16 students is of a very high standard. It is designed around the needs and capabilities of individual students and has a good mix of activities which develop independent living and vocational skills. Residential care staff work effectively with teachers to enhance the waking day curriculum and to promote students' independence. They plan regularly with education staff to organise recreational activities which reinforce topics studied in the classroom.

The quality of teaching is good overall. Arrangements for assessing students' work and recording their progress are satisfactory. Teachers have good knowledge of how to teach students with an autistic spectrum disorder. They explain clearly each morning the structure of the day and students are prepared carefully for each

change in activity. Staff use pictures, symbols and Makaton signing effectively to help students develop their communication skills and to enable them to make choices. They are successful in forming good relationships with students and manage any challenging or inappropriate behaviour in a calm and non-confrontational manner. Lessons typically contain a good variety of activities and move at a brisk pace. As a result, students display positive attitudes to their work. The use of assessment information to inform teaching varies between classes. In a few lessons, students make slower progress because their learning targets are too broad and not matched closely enough to their existing skills and knowledge. Resources to support teaching and learning are satisfactory. Staff are creative in designing story books linked to symbols which are specific to a student's individual understanding and interests. Most learning support assistants are highly skilled and make a significant contribution to students' learning. On occasion, such staff employed on a temporary basis lack the knowledge and experience to support learning fully.

There are satisfactory systems in place for assessing students' progress based on the use of P levels (performance descriptors used for recording the attainment of students working towards the first level of the National Curriculum). Procedures for recording students' progress in lessons vary between classes and sometimes small gains in learning are not captured. The school is currently reviewing this aspect of its work. Students make good progress, particularly in managing their behaviour and in developing their social skills.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is good. The school promotes effectively the self-esteem and self-confidence of students through sensory aspects of the curriculum. Students demonstrate they enjoy school by gesture, choosing positive symbols and pictures, and by their very high level of attendance. They celebrate each other's successes in assemblies when achievement certificates are awarded.

Students gain an understanding of what is right and wrong because staff model appropriate behaviour and treat students with respect. Students' behaviour is good and the school provides a calm and orderly environment. While there are daily incidents of inappropriate behaviour, these are usually associated with students' lack of understanding of what is required in some social situations. Students learn to become increasingly independent and to contribute to the school community, for example when they tidy away at the end of lessons, run the school tuck shop or when they shop and cook meals in the residential homes.

Students are prepared effectively for their next stage beyond school. All post-16 students complete some form of work experience and take part in mini-enterprise activities, for example working in a local nursery or making Christmas cards. Trips to the local community make students aware of those public institutions and services they are likely to encounter when they leave school, for example the local shops, library and leisure centre. Students learn about different faiths and cultural traditions

through topics which are also followed up in the care homes, although planning in this area is underdeveloped.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Provision for the welfare, health and safety of students is good. The school provides a caring environment where students feel safe and valued. A parent liaison worker works closely with parents to help new students settle into the school. The school also makes a house available in the school grounds where parents can stay when they wish to visit their child. Detailed health and safety policies and risk assessments are in place which cover all aspects of the school's work. Appropriate arrangements are in place to safeguard students. Staff have received recent training and a clear child protection policy is in place and implemented. Behavioural incidents are recorded as required, although the analysis of information to detect an overall pattern of incidents is underdeveloped. Fire drills are held regularly and fire-fighting equipment checked by a specialist company. The school has policies in place which set out procedures for providing intimate care and one-to-one working which ensure students' personal dignity. A high level of staffing ensures that students are supervised closely in the school and in the residential care homes. However, the deployment of different support staff to work with the same student during the school day is occasionally unsettling for some students, as noted by a small number of parents.

The school has a very strong emphasis on students leading a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise is provided at intervals throughout the day, which includes swimming, movement therapy, walking and adventurous play. Healthy food is provided at lunchtime and individual diets are managed carefully.

The school has a plan for increasing access to the site which meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2002.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

The school has thorough procedures in place for the recruitment and appointment of staff. All staff have been subject to clearance at an enhanced level with the Criminal Records Bureau to ensure they are suitable to work with children. As required, a single central register is held to record other checks that have taken place prior to a new appointment, for example on an applicant's identity and qualifications.

Premises of and accommodation at the school

The classrooms and boarding houses are pleasant and maintained to a good standard. Teaching accommodation is located in a main building containing several general classrooms, an information and communication technology suite, sensory room, library and therapy rooms. All rooms are of a suitable size for the numbers of students using them. Additional buildings contain specialist classrooms to support the

teaching of practical subjects such as science, horticulture, art, music and food technology. A sports hall and swimming pool provide very good facilities for PE. The school is set in extensive grounds which provide ample opportunities for outdoor play. Climbing apparatus, play areas and a woodland trail have been carefully planned to ensure that students can exercise safely.

Provision of information

The school provides all the required information for parents, carers and others. An attractive prospectus and an accessible website provide a clear picture of the school's work. Parents and carers receive detailed annual reports on their children's progress and there is regular telephone contact by care staff. Parents and carers expressed overwhelmingly positive views about the school in the small number of parental questionnaires returned during the inspection. All were happy with their children's progress, although an occasional concern was raised, particularly regarding communication with the school, continuity in the use of staff and the provision of homework.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The complaints policy meets all the regulations. The policy sets out how informal and formal complaints may be made to the school and parents are made aware that they can receive a copy on request. There have been two complaints since the last inspection and these were handled appropriately, although the school has not recorded the details as required.

Effectiveness of the boarding provision

The care provision was judged to be satisfactory and nine national minimum standards were not met. A full report on the care provision is available on Ofsted's website and should be viewed in conjunction with this report.

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.³

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the quality of education provided (standards in part 1) and must:

- utilise assessment information consistently to plan teaching so that all students can make progress (paragraph 3(g)).

³ www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/1997/contents/made

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the manner in which complaints are to be handled (standards in part 7) and must:

- keep written records that indicate whether complaints were resolved at the preliminary stage or whether they proceeded to a panel hearing (paragraph 25(j)).

Please see the report on Ofsted's website relating to the care provision in the children's home which should be read in conjunction with this report.

What the school could do to improve further

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

- use assessment information more consistently to inform teachers' planning and thereby maximise students' learning
- provide a unified system to record and track the progress of students
- ensure greater consistency in the deployment of support staff throughout the school day.

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	Residential special school for pupils with an autistic spectrum disorder		
Date school opened	September 1999		
Age range of pupils	5–19		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 41	Girls: 12	Total: 53
Number of boarders	Boys: 41	Girls: 12	Total: 53
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 41	Girls: 12	Total: 53
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 16	Girls: 7	Total: 23
Annual fees (day pupils)	£73,260		
Annual fees (boarders)	£160,684		
Address of school			
Telephone number			
Email address	rpenny-larter@priorscourt.org.uk		
Headteacher	Mr Ralph Penny-Larter		
Proprietor	Prior's Court Foundation		