

Acorn School

Independent school inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Mick Megee

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A¹ of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005,² the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

Acorn School is an independent day special school located in a rural setting near South Molton in Devon. It provides education for up to six students, aged between 11 and 16 years, who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and who have had a negative and fragmented experience of education. The average length of stay at the school is two months. This is the school's first inspection and there are currently six students on the school's roll and all are looked after by the local authority. Three students have a statement of special educational needs. The school, which opened in September 2007, is owned by Phoenix Learning and Care, a company that offers residential care and similar educational provision in the south of England. The school aims to provide, 'a quality education for troubled young people'.

Evaluation of the school

The school provides its students with a satisfactory quality of education, which is supported by sound levels of care and, as a result, students make satisfactory progress in their learning. The school offers a satisfactory curriculum, although it does not offer all the subjects to which the students are entitled. Teaching and assessment are satisfactory although there is insufficient clarity and consistency about the roles of the various adults present in the classroom. Students feel safe and happy, their attendance improves significantly, and their behaviour and attitudes to learning are generally positive. The school meets its aims and most regulations, including the safeguarding requirements.

Quality of education

The overall quality of education is satisfactory. Acorn School provides its students with a satisfactory curriculum that focuses on the personal and academic skills that students require in order to rejoin mainstream education or to move on to the next stage of their lives. These skills include literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) as well as the ability to get along with others and to react positively to adversity. The school has a good personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum that underpins all activities and subjects. The school's

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

planning is sufficiently flexible to ensure that the students receive individual and small-group tuition which is tailor-made to match their individual starting points and capabilities. The school enriches this curriculum through educational visits and outdoor activities such as kayaking. There are good opportunities for learning related to the world of work through practical activities such as growing plants in the school garden. Students' achievements are accredited through suitable schemes such as Entry Level Awards and GCSE. Throughout the day, the students develop sound practical skills, for example, through pottery and art lessons. There are good links with a local pupil referral unit and with the organisation's other school where students undertake joint lessons and workshops. The school has sound schemes of work and medium- and short-term planning for the subjects that are taught, based on appropriate published curriculum guidance. All the students who have a statement of special educational needs require full access to the National Curriculum, but too little time is currently allocated to the teaching of history, geography, a modern foreign language or music.

Teaching and assessment are satisfactory. On joining the school, staff effectively assess students' starting points through baseline tests in reading, writing and numeracy. The school's assessment files show that there is regular assessment of students' improving standards in the school's core areas of learning in numeracy and literacy, and for personal development. Teachers have kind and tolerant relationships with the students, and skilfully ensure that work is at the right level for each student. They work hard to offer students an interesting and enjoyable range of activities, and to encourage them to do their best. Good use is made of new technology to provide for different learning styles, and teachers have a good knowledge of the subjects on offer. Different care staff from the various homes owned by the organisation bring the students into school each day, and remain in the teaching rooms in order to assist students who become upset or lose control. However, these staff come with a variety of expectations about what the students can achieve, and the support they offer is not consistently proactive and positive. They do not have a clear role, shared by all, in supporting students' learning, behaviour and personal development. This holds back rapid learning and progress and presents the students with a weak model of teamwork and cooperation. Resources are sufficient for most of the subjects taught, but resources for science do not yet adequately support the curriculum.

Lesson observations and samples of students' work show that students make satisfactory progress in their learning from their different starting points and against their individual learning targets during their short stay at the school. The staff's hard work and commitment to building success means that students leave the school better prepared for their future than when they arrived.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students is satisfactory. Students enjoy coming to school. They say that they particularly like the small groups and the relaxed atmosphere, and they like coming to the centre to meet up with their friends from the other homes. Attendance is above average and behaviour is satisfactory, and both improve once students join the school. They speak well of the school and its staff, and confirm the positive impact that Acorn School has had on their lives. One student said: 'I've calmed down a lot since I came here. It's because you know that the staff have your interests at heart'. Students develop their self-awareness and a greater understanding of the consequences of their actions on others. The staff receive training in positive handling but the organisation has not yet developed a behavioural approach, including reward and recording systems, that is consistent across the care and teaching staff. This means that a few students continue to repeat patterns of unacceptable behaviour, and disrupt the learning of those students who are keen to get on with their work. Nevertheless, there is no bullying and most students develop a generally positive attitude to learning, and their behaviour becomes much more controlled.

The PSHE curriculum affords the students with good opportunities to discuss their relationships and helps to equip them with the knowledge and skills to deal with the range of issues they face as they grow up. However, the school does not yet do enough to help students learn about the lives, faiths and cultures of others. The school recognises this as an area for development in its self-evaluation. Students are soundly prepared for their future economic well-being through their satisfactory acquisition of basic skills in numeracy and literacy and through their increasingly positive interactions with staff and other students. Students make an increasing contribution to the school community, for example through their work in the garden. There are few opportunities for students to develop their musical skills but many of the students show promise and talent in other creative areas, such as art, pottery and woodcarving.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The school makes satisfactory provision for safeguarding, monitoring and promoting the welfare, health and safety of its students. The school has a satisfactory range of policies and procedures in place to ensure students' safety and welfare, and all staff have received the required training on child protection. Staff receive good training for dealing with any behavioural incidents in the appropriate manner. However, staff do not keep a written record of sanctions that they have applied to students. The students say that they feel safe, that they trust the staff to keep them safe, and that there are people to whom they would turn if they had a problem. The school provides a satisfactory range of opportunities for students to take part in exercise, both on the site as well as at the local leisure centre. Staff and students eat together at lunchtimes and this provides a good opportunity for staff to steer the students towards a healthy and balanced diet. Smoking is an issue for most students, and

they have a good understanding of how this is harmful. The school's rules on smoking on the school site are too lax, by allowing students to smoke on the site. The school regularly carries out fire drills and checks on fire equipment. However, the school has not carried out its own fire risk assessment since 2007, and the local fire and rescue services have not carried out a full fire safety audit and sent a report to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Risk assessments for educational visits are employed well. The school meets all the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and has in place a three-year plan to improve access.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school carries out all the necessary checks on prospective employees and volunteers to make sure that there is no reason why they should not be employed to work with young people. The school maintains all the required information on a single central register.

School's premises and accommodation

The school's premises provide a very pleasant environment in a peaceful, rural setting where students can learn effectively and safely. There are three good-sized, well-lit and pleasantly decorated teaching rooms. The school plans to extend the accommodation further so that more students can have one-to-one teaching whenever this is necessary. There is a games room with fitness equipment and a pool table. The school has a good-sized deck outside with a basketball hoop, extensive woodland and garden areas as well as a pleasant grassed area where students can relax. The outside area is enhanced by a number of bird feeding areas and nestboxes, made by the staff and students, that attract a large number of birds and squirrels to the grounds.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school provides clear, accurate and up-to-date information to parents and prospective parents, and to inspectors on request. The school provides an informative prospectus containing most of the required information. However, the prospectus does not currently contain information about the availability of the curriculum policy or of the school's arrangements for discipline or exclusions.

Procedures for handling complaints

The school has a clear, written and fair complaints procedure that meets all requirements.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended ('the Regulations'), with the exception of those listed below.³

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the curriculum (standard 1) and must:

- provide teaching in the full range of National Curriculum subjects in order to fulfil the requirements of the students' statements of special educational needs (paragraph 1(2)(e))
- provide classroom resources, particularly in science, of an adequate quality, quantity and range and ensure they are used effectively (paragraph 1(3)(f)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (standard 2) and must:

- assist students to acquire an appreciation of and respect for their own and other cultures, in a way that promotes tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions (paragraph 2(e)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety (standard 3) and must:

- ensure that a full fire safety audit is carried out by the local Fire and Rescue service and carry out regular fire risk assessments (paragraph 3(5))
- maintain written records of sanctions imposed upon students for serious disciplinary offences (paragraph 3(8)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the provision of information for parents, carers and others (standard 6) and must:

- ensure that parents are aware they can request particulars of the school's policy on and arrangements for discipline and exclusions (paragraph 6(3)(a))
- ensure that parents are aware they can request particulars of the school's curriculum policy (paragraph 6(3)(c)).

³ www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031910.htm

Inspection judgement recording form

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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School details

Name of school	Acorn School		
DCSF number	878/6061		
Unique reference number (URN)	134301		
Type of school	Special		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	September 2007		
Age range of pupils	11–16		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 3	Girls: 3	Total: 6
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 2	Girls: 1	Total: 3
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 3	Girls: 3	Total: 6
Annual fees (day pupils)	£ 93,450		
Address of school	Little Oak Knowstone Devon EX36 4SA		
Telephone number	01271 859720		
Fax number	01884 881606		
Email address	nedmorgan@fsmail.net		
Headteacher	Mr Ned Morgan		
Proprietor	Phoenix Learning and Care		
Reporting inspector	Mick Megee		
Dates of inspection	15–16 March 2010		