

Acorn Cottage

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	David Young

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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}

Information about the school

Acorn Cottage is a small independent special school which opened in 2005. It is owned by Care Focus Limited and is registered to admit girls in the age range 11 to 16 years. At the time of the inspection there were four students on roll, in Years 9, 10 and 11. All students live in residential accommodation provided by the company and all are looked after. The students' learning needs relate to behavioural, emotional and social difficulties; three have statements of special educational needs. The school was last inspected in February 2009.

The school's aims are based on the principles of 'positivity and respect'. The school aims 'to enable young people to become: successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve; confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; and responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.'

Evaluation of the school

Acorn Cottage School provides a good quality of education. The curriculum offers good opportunities for students to study all of the required areas of learning. The quality of teaching is good, based on a thorough understanding of the learning needs of each student. Students make good progress in their personal development but uneven patterns of attendance restrict the extent of students' progress in their learning to satisfactory, not good. Arrangements for the welfare, health and safety of students, including safeguarding procedures, are thorough and are monitored well. The school has maintained its quality of education and now meets all of the regulatory requirements.

Quality of education

The curriculum is good and enables students to experience a good range of subjects and learning activities. All students are taught English, mathematics and science at levels well matched to their previous attainment. Due to disruption in their previous education, most students have missed important aspects of learning in these subjects and the school works hard to identify and fill these gaps. As a result,

¹ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents.

² www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents.

students are enabled to complete GCSE courses and to achieve success in these core subjects. The majority of subjects are linked into half-termly themes which develop successful links between a variety of content and skills. Students state in their responses to questionnaires that they enjoy school and this is evident in their interest and engagement in the majority of lessons, for example investigating the lives of famous Olympians or striving to win humanities-based board games. Good use is made of computers for research and for the recording of students' work. Each student has the opportunity to take part in work experience placements during Key Stage 4. These are chosen well, for example, in a children's nursery or a riding stables, to match students' individual interests and career aspirations. Students take their responsibilities seriously by contributing to the full range of activities in their chosen placements; this enables them to demonstrate important independence and social skills as they prepare for further education or employment.

Good links with the local careers service ensure that students have access to relevant information and advice as they prepare for the future. All of the current students have had an opportunity to take part in the school's 'nurture programme', learning important practical skills of parenthood. Their personal reflections on the experience demonstrate growing maturity in their ability to reflect and comment on the lessons learned. Suitable, well-planned lessons in art and physical education add a further practical dimension to the curriculum. Paintings, drawings and artefacts provide evidence of students' good progress in art. Excellent working relationships between the school staff and the students' residences, ensure that students' interests, for example in riding, army cadets or swimming, are extended beyond the school day. However, there are limited opportunities for students to take part in off-site educational trips and visits, during the school day, to enhance the interest and relevance of their learning. Good attention is given to the management of students' transition to new experiences in further education or employment, and often new accommodation, as they complete their final year of schooling.

The quality of teaching and assessment is good. Teachers' planning takes account of the individual capabilities of each student and tasks are chosen carefully to encourage engagement and an active response. Students mostly respond well to the learning opportunities provided, particularly when activities move at a brisk pace and allow for a variety of learning styles. Relationships between students and their teachers are characterised by mutual respect, good humour and flexibility. At times, students' concentration lapses and they become distracted from their work. Teachers, and the learning assistants working alongside them, demonstrate patience, persistence and resilience in maintaining their expectations that work will be completed. Teachers assess students' work appropriately, making good use of the level descriptors of the National Curriculum, particularly in English, mathematics and science. Students' personal targets are reviewed and amended with them on a weekly basis, ensuring that each student's personal timetable remains relevant and challenging. Overall, students make satisfactory progress in their learning during their relatively short placements in the school. Evidence from lesson observations and from work in students' books demonstrates that students often make good progress during lessons, to the extent that gaps in their previous education are addressed and a number achieve success in GCSE examinations, adult literacy and

numeracy accreditations, and ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) bronze and silver awards. Overall progress is not good because attendance at lessons by most students is not consistent; fluctuating patterns of attendance restrict the extent to which students achieve the standards of which they are capable.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. The school works effectively with welfare staff in the residences to ensure that the development of emotional and social resilience is given high priority. This results in a number of areas of success. Students develop their self-esteem and the confidence to face up to challenging new experiences. The quality of personal relationships and the consideration shown by adults, provide excellent role models to raise the students' expectations of what constitutes acceptable behaviour. Students make good progress with the management of their anger and anti-social behaviour; progress is often slow but is clearly evident. As a result, students' behaviour and cooperation are good and show a marked improvement during their time in the school. The majority of students do not have an adequate commitment to regular attendance at the school and as a result the rate of progress in their learning is slowed with students making satisfactory gains in their learning over time. However, students are taught to be reflective and a lot of patient work has a positive impact on raising expectations and improvement over time.

The school ensures that students are presented with good opportunities to learn about public institutions and services in the locality, particularly those of relevance to their lives, such as the health centre and sports centre. Their work experience placements enable them to learn important lessons about reliability, cooperation and respect. They also contribute to charitable collections and share domestic responsibilities within their residences. A number of themes in the curriculum, including the life skills programme, develop their awareness of diversity in the national and global communities. The community of staff and students represents a diversity of backgrounds and cultures and students live and work in a daily environment of respect and tolerance.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school makes good provision for the welfare, health and safety of students. School and residential staff who work in the school, are all trained to the required standards in child protection, first aid and fire safety. The child protection policy and procedures are comprehensive and are implemented and monitored well. The company's recruitment policy and procedures are implemented thoroughly and ensure the suitability of staff for the roles to which they are appointed. The school's behaviour policy is well supported by an incentive and rewards system which students understand and value. Premises and fire risk assessments are completed and monitored on a regular basis and all of the required checks on fire safety equipment are completed with recommended timescales. The school is diligent in maintaining records of admissions, attendance and any incidents requiring sanctions.

All records are monitored and outcomes evaluated in a manner which enables the school to take any action required for improvement of systems and procedures. Students state that they are safe in the school and that they are supported to develop healthy lifestyles. The school meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

All of the required checks on the suitability of staff and proprietors to work with students are completed systematically and comprehensively. The details of all checks are maintained in an up-to-date single central register which meets regulatory requirements.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The school premises provide a safe and effective environment for learning. The main classroom is of a suitable size for the number of students using it and additional spaces are available for work with individual students. There is suitable outside space for play and recreation which is supplemented by off-site facilities for some aspects of physical education and games.

Provision of information

The school provides all of the required information for parents and others. Parents and carers are made aware of the availability of a range of suitable policy documents on request. Annual written reports, together with termly progress reports, provide parents and carers with a comprehensive account of the progress of their children in all of the subjects studied. The school is fully involved in the statutory review of students' statements and personal education plans.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school has fair and appropriate procedures for the management of any complaints and they meet regulatory requirements.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations').

What the school could do to improve further

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

- Implement a more regular programme of educational visits to enhance the curriculum and to stimulate more practical approaches to learning.

- Ensure that attendance improves to an average of 90% for each individual student to enable them to make at least good progress in their learning.

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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School details

School status	Independent
Type of school	Special school for behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.
Date school opened	September 2005
Age range of pupils	11–16 years
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Girls: 4
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Girls: 3
Number of pupils who are looked after	Girls: 4
Annual fees (including residential)	£196,300
Email address	ninasquires@carefocus.co.uk
Headteacher	Claire Guernari
Proprietor	Care Focus Limited

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



28 June 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Acorn Cottage School

I would like to thank you for the welcome which you gave inspectors when we visited your school recently. You showed a keen interest in our work and gave us lots to think about. The inspection judged that Acorn is a good school. I was particularly pleased to see that:

- your questionnaires state that you enjoy school and feel safe there
- your relationships with staff in the school are good and that you respect the quality of teaching which they provide
- you are learning to control your moods and anger to make sure that these do not prevent you from getting on well with others
- you make good progress when you attend lessons regularly
- a number of past students have achieved good success in GCSE examinations and that you are preparing to do the same
- the 'nurture programme' has been a success and that you enjoyed the experience
- you are learning so much from your work experience placements.

You make good progress when you attend and take part in lessons. Your progress could be even better with improved attendance. I have asked the proprietor and staff to work with you to improve attendance to 90%. My second recommendation is that they should provide more off-site educational visits to make the curriculum more interesting and stimulating for you. I would like to wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely

David Young
Lead Inspector