

# The Shires at Stretton

Independent school standard inspection report

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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.<sup>1, 2</sup>

## **Information about the school**

The Shires caters for young people between the ages of 11 and 19 who have severe learning difficulties, challenging behaviour and autism. Some students also have additional needs such as epilepsy and Tourette's syndrome. The school opened in 2005 and admits students from all parts of the country, although most are from regional local authorities. All of the students who attend have a statement of special educational needs, some are in public care. At the time of the inspection there were 11 students on roll, of whom five attended on a daily basis. The educational provision was last inspected in January 2009 and the residential provision was inspected in October 2011. The school was taken over by Acorn Care and Education Ltd in December 2010. The school aims to 'create a centre of excellence that provides the best education and care possible in the best environment that can be achieved'.

## **Evaluation of the school**

The Shires provides an outstanding quality of education for its students. Students learn to manage aspects of their disability more effectively and improve their communication skills. Students make exceptional academic progress and vast improvements to their behaviour and personal development and, for some, the change is transformational. The school has sustained and improved upon the high standards set at the last inspection, with further improvements to the curriculum, teaching and accommodation. The outstanding residential provision makes an excellent contribution to students' personal development. All safeguarding requirements are met and the school meets all of the regulations.

## **Quality of education**

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding. The curriculum provides a strong focus for students' personal development of life and social skills and enables them to achieve success in becoming more independent and in making impressive academic progress, given their needs. Planning is thorough and systematic and thematic approaches such as the Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics are used to bring richness and variety to learning. Planning is highly personalised and supporting adults know how activities are to be presented in an individualised manner. Curriculum planning is informed by ongoing assessments and by input from therapists such as a speech

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<sup>1</sup> [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents).

<sup>2</sup> [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents).

and language therapist, an occupational therapist and music therapist. Individual education programmes are reviewed regularly and contain specific learning objectives for students.

Students' literacy is promoted through studying a 'book of the week' and some students are developing their reading skills. The school makes substantial use of off-site visits to provide a wide range of stimulating experiences and opportunities. These enable students to develop their confidence in communication and behaving appropriately in different situations and to be valued members of the local community. These opportunities give students often new and untried previous experiences. One student for example, attended a DJ session to learn how to mix music. Post-16 students follow a more flexible curriculum that places increased emphasis on the development of life skills, and students attend a local horticultural college where they learn how to carry out gardening tasks.

The curriculum operates across both residential and education settings, to provide consistency of approaches for students such as practising daily and independent living skills and making choices. Residential and education staff work closely together to provide a seamless provision and elements of the school curriculum, such as home management are carried out in the residential setting to provide a meaningful context for their learning. All students have planned evening leisure activities. The creative arts are a strength of the curriculum, with art and music being particularly vibrant. These activities provide enjoyment and music is also used effectively to develop students' communication skills. The school has received the Artsmark gold award.

The quality of teaching and assessment is outstanding. Teachers have excellent knowledge of their students and use specialist strategies to teach students with autism. For example, they make very effective use of signs, symbols and photographs. Students are given symbols to show them what they are doing now and what will come next. Routines are well established and provide security and confidence for students. Lessons are usually 30 minutes in duration and as a result they are fast paced to keep students' attention and motivation. The interactive whiteboard is used by teachers exceptionally well to enhance learning. In a music lesson, students composed a short piece of music on the whiteboard and then played it back to the rest of the class. Relationships between staff and students are positive and supportive and this does much to get the best out of students. The school is yet to explore the use of the latest portable tablet technology in order to further enhance students' learning and communication skills. The use of symbols to help students to understand learning objectives at the start of the lesson and other instructions on the interactive whiteboard are not used frequently enough.

Staff are calm and sensitive in the managing of extremely challenging behaviour from students, and they are treated with respect and dignity. Students are encouraged to self-manage their behaviour wherever possible and some are able to recognise when they need to take themselves off to a quiet room. Relationships with parents and carers are strong and they have the opportunity to

receive weekly phone calls about their children's progress, to have home–school diaries and attend meetings to review students' progress.

Students make outstanding gains in their academic skills, although often from low starting points, and in behaviour, communication and personal development. This is because assessment is used very well to inform the next steps of planning and to adapt learning to individual students. Assessment data indicates students make outstanding levels of progress over a short space of time. They make excellent progress particularly in information and communication technology and personal, social and health education. Evidence from placing authorities notes that students gain more independence as well as significant improvements in their overall development.

### **Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils**

The school makes outstanding provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students. Students make important improvements in learning how to self-manage their behaviour where possible and respond well to de-escalating strategies used by staff. Students' behaviour is good, given their needs, and they make dramatic improvements. On entry to the school, students sometimes have developed avoidance techniques and find it difficult to cooperate. However, over time they become more settled and confident and learn how to participate in class and cope more effectively. Students have plentiful opportunities to develop their social skills, confidence and behaviour in the local and wider communities. Students clearly enjoy learning, the wide range of activities on offer and the residential provision. There are numerous opportunities for students to develop independence, make choices and decisions. Students are well prepared for life skills through cooking, dressing, handling money and going to cafes and restaurants and accessing leisure activities in the local community. Students are given excellent opportunities to be involved in the local community and take part in local events such as harvest festivals and the diamond Jubilee celebrations.

The cultural needs of students are carefully considered in terms of foods and celebrations and they enjoy creative experiences for wider cultural development through music, art and celebrations of major festivals. Students learn about other cultures through a wide variety of topics, such as a summer cafe which celebrates food around the world. The school is a harmonious community with the ethnic origin of both the students and staff celebrated with many planned activities. Students enjoy regular assemblies and collective acts of worship and sing with enthusiasm in assemblies or Christmas celebrations.

### **Welfare, health and safety of pupils**

The provision for the welfare, health and safety of the students is outstanding. The school is a safe place in which to work and learn. It has devised and implemented a range of comprehensive policies which are reviewed regularly. These include health

and safety of students on visits outside school, behaviour, anti-bullying and safeguarding. The members of staff responsible for safeguarding have attended the high level of training currently required and the head teacher is an accredited trainer for safeguarding. There is a detailed first aid policy and careful recording of all accidents and restraints for students, together with comprehensive care plans. Comprehensive risk assessments are carried out for activities, both on and off site and for particular individual students. Fire drills are carried out regularly. Students enjoy good wholesome food and are encouraged to take part in regular physical activity. There are high staff ratios and students are well supervised at all times and bullying is rare. Care is taken to ensure students are safe from self-harm and harm from others as a result of their behaviour. Staff receive training in non-aversive physical interventions. There are close relationships with health care professionals who support the students. An independent advocate ensures that students are cared for extremely well and supported in school. The school has drawn up a comprehensive three-year plan to show how it meets its duties under the Equality Act 2010.

### **Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors**

The school checks carefully and systematically the suitability of all staff, including the new owners, to work with the students. This information is held on a suitable single central register.

### **Premises and accommodation at the school**

The school is located in a listed building that has been suitably renovated for the provision of education and care for students. The premises provide a suitable environment for safe and effective learning. There are extensive grounds with plenty of outdoor spaces for play and recreation, such as a sensory garden, swings and hard playing surface. The accommodation consists of a lounge, classrooms, and a kitchen for students' use under supervision, together with quiet rooms. Construction of a sensory room, additional meeting rooms and bedrooms are under way and due for imminent completion. Classrooms are of a suitable size for the number of students on roll and there are sufficient, separate washing and bathing facilities for students and staff. The school is well maintained and the grounds provide good outdoor opportunities for students to support their learning. Students have access to swimming facilities at a nearby school.

### **Provision of information**

The school keeps parents, carers and others well informed through the prospectus, website and newsletters. Parents and carers receive regular detailed reports on their children's progress. The parents and local authority representatives who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire expressed a very high degree of satisfaction with the school, with progress in all areas being evident. One parent commented that the

school was a 'God-send'.

### **Manner in which complaints are to be handled**

There is an effective complaints policy and clear procedures which set out how any complaints will be managed.

### **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:

- Develop the use of portable tablet technology to further enhance students' progress and communication skills.
- Use symbols when presenting learning objectives and other information on the interactive whiteboard to increase students' understanding.

## 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

<b>School status</b>	Independent		
<b>Type of school</b>	Special School		
<b>Date school opened</b>	September 2005		
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11-19		
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed		
<b>Number on roll (full-time pupils)</b>	Boys: 10	Girls: 3	Total: 13
<b>Number of boarders</b>	Boys: 6	Girls: 2	Total: 8
<b>Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs</b>	Boys: 10	Girls: 3	Total: 13
<b>Number of pupils who are looked after</b>	Boys: 4	Girls: 2	Total: 6
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£75,000 - £95,000		
<b>Annual fees (boarders)</b>	£230,000 - £370,000		
<b>Address of school</b>	Shires Lane Stretton Oakham LE15 7GT		
<b>Telephone number</b>	01780 411944		
<b>Email address</b>	marina.gough@theshires.org.uk		
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mrs Marina Gough		
<b>Proprietor</b>	Acorn Care and Education Group		

**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.**



5 July 2012

Dear Students

**Inspection of The Shires at Stretton, Oakham LE15 7GT**

I enjoyed my recent visit to your school and meeting with you. Over a short period of time nearly all of you make outstanding progress. You make vast improvements in your behaviour, communication and personal development. I liked the fact that you have plenty of opportunities to be involved in trips and visits to places of interest and that you can attend local colleges and work placements.

Staff look after you exceptionally well to make sure you are safe and that you can become more self-confident. The teaching you receive is outstanding and you have very positive and encouraging relationships with the adults you work with, which helps you enormously. Parents, carers and other people who look after you told me that you feel safe, and enjoy the school, and this was very clear to me.

The headteacher and staff have worked hard to ensure your school is outstanding. I have asked your head teacher to do the following things to improve the school even further.

- To explore the use of portable tablet technology to further improve your progress and communication skills and for teachers to use symbols when presenting your learning objectives and other information on the whiteboard.

I wish you well for the future.

Yours sincerely

Frank Price  
Lead inspector