

Acorn Park School

Independent school standard inspection report

DfE registration number	926/6152
Unique Reference Number (URN)	135066
URN for social care	SC435322
Inspection number	397677
Inspection dates	3–4 October 2012
Reporting inspector	Judith Charlesworth

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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 Park School is a day and residential special school for students with autistic spectrum disorder. Students also have severe learning difficulties and severely challenging behaviour. The school is registered for 40 students aged four to 19 years. There are currently 27 on roll aged 11 to 19 years, most of whom are boys. All but one has a statement of special educational needs. The school opened in May 2005. It is located on an extensive campus outside the village of Banham in Norfolk. The school was acquired by Acorn Care and Education in May 2011. The Executive Principal, who is also the Principal of another smaller school in the Acorn Care and Education group, took up her post at Acorn Park in September 2012. The school aims to 'encourage children and young people to be independent and to acquire the necessary social and life skills they need to help them access the wider community.' The school's last full inspection was in July 2009. It received two monitoring visits in May 2011 and January 2012.

Evaluation of the school

Acorn Park provides a satisfactory quality of education and students make satisfactory progress. The school's educational systems have undergone considerable change this term and the new practices are not yet fully effective. Provision for students' welfare, health and safety is good and supports their good spiritual, moral, social, cultural and personal development. Behaviour is satisfactory, although this represents a significant improvement for all individuals, and staff manage students' challenging behaviour very well. The multi-disciplinary 'Support for Learning' team provides strong support for students' learning, behaviour and related needs. Safeguarding arrangements are good and the school meets all but two of the regulations for independent schools.

Quality of education

The curriculum is satisfactory. A new curriculum has been introduced this term which, in itself, is very appropriate. However, its implementation is currently only satisfactory as staff have not yet got fully to grips with the new arrangements. The curriculum underpins planning and teaching in subject areas. Subject and lesson planning are the same for all groups. Teachers are expected to adapt these common

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

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

plans to suit their students' particular needs. However, currently, adaptation of this planning is a relative weakness. The curriculum is based on a commercial scheme that combines the required subjects into key areas that suit these particular students' needs and abilities. Areas include home management, environment, community, and creative arts. The curriculum encourages the development of speaking, listening, literacy and numeracy skills across all subjects. Ultimately, this helps them to be as independent and fulfilled as possible in adult life. Communication is supported by the use of a symbol system which also helps students to understand the structure of the day. However, symbols are not used to the maximum, and signing as a support for communication and understanding is insufficiently used. Personal, social and health education is an important aspect of the curriculum and also pervades the school's everyday work. Consequently, students make good progress in this area, and their personal development is good. Provision, overall, is not good because the curriculum and teaching do not ensure students achieve well enough academically.

The quality of teaching is satisfactory. Behaviour is very well managed and well-established practices minimise disruption to learning. However, this often leads to students being absent from the classroom to calm down, which limits the time they have for learning. Furthermore, a few more-able students deliberately use this tactic to avoid work. Staff generally keep students calm and engaged and understand each individual's needs and abilities extremely well. Nevertheless, they do not always relate this to planning for learning. Sometimes, not enough demands are made of students. A new system to address this has been introduced this term. It includes new individual education plans with sharper learning targets, and 'differentiation sheets' based on students' needs as reflected in their statements. These help staff adapt work and lessons more precisely to help students learn. This system, though, is not yet fully operational.

When teaching is at its best, students engage very well in their tasks and are pleased and proud of their successes. This was seen in several lessons, including 'Circle Time' and in a literacy lesson on *The Rainbow Fish* where one student was pleased to be able to point out the main characters on a page. At other times, however, activities do not link sufficiently to what the students have just done. For example, individual work on sequencing pictures did not relate to the story of Dick Whittington which was the main theme of the lesson. Activities for certain individuals are occasionally too long, so the student loses interest.

The school has always assessed students' progress adequately. This has been in relation to the targets set on their personal learning plans, and by estimating progress against the National Curriculum levels designed for students of lower attainment. The 'Support for Learning' team provides detailed assessments that contribute well to students' learning and management plans. A commercial system to measure and track individuals' small steps of progress was introduced in December 2011 and the information so far collected has just been analysed. This information is beginning to feed into students' subject targets, new individual education plan targets and 'differentiation sheets', which in turn inform planning for teaching and learning.

The limited information available indicates that students make satisfactory academic progress. Progress in lessons depends on the quality of teaching. Progress is patchy,

with some individuals making good progress overall, and most making better progress in some areas than in others. Such information has not yet been used to improve practice.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. The great majority enter school with very challenging behaviour and are hard to 'reach'. However, they quickly establish good relationships with staff. Students enjoy school and become calmer and more able to join in activities for longer periods. Their attendance is good. Students are clearly proud of their achievements, and enjoy receiving praise and, for some, being able to show off their work to adults. They often demonstrate an aura of tranquillity when on the swings and outdoors, and when listening to music. The school is developing its provision to support students' spiritual development. Class assemblies have recently been introduced. Students are treated with respect, and are encouraged to treat others in the same way. Challenging behaviour is rarely deliberate, and bullying is not an issue at Acorn Park.

Students' social development is particularly good. They contribute to the school and wider community by litter picking and recycling, watering plants and planting bulbs. Students learn that all actions have consequences and the school helps them to understand right from wrong. Students learn to tolerate each other and a variety of situations that they previously could not manage. They visit the local and wider communities and are generally encouraged to be independent and make choices and decisions. The school emphasises life skills such as cooking, dressing, handling money and using the community for leisure activities. Students celebrate festivals and each other's birthdays, which gives them a sense of belonging to a community. All such activities are particularly well supported by the residences.

Students' behaviour is satisfactory. It improves considerably due to the staff's careful interventions and most make significant strides in learning how to manage their own behaviour. For example, in one lesson, a student was escorted out after becoming very challenging and distressed. Later in the lesson, he took himself out to the garden when he felt his anxiety developing which stopped it escalating into an incident. At times, though, students are over-protected which prevents them using their initiative.

Students' cultural development is good. Cultural celebrations and experiences take place throughout the year, and students' varying heritages are celebrated, particularly in the residences. Major world faiths are included in religious education lessons and cultural development is promoted through assemblies, cookery and music.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The provision for students' welfare, health and safety is good, and previously identified weaknesses have been rectified. Child protection procedures are thorough. Staff have been appropriately trained in child protection and in other aspects, such

as fire safety, first aid and physical intervention. Regular checks of the premises and fire-safety are made to assure students' safety. The students themselves, and all activities, are carefully risk-assessed to minimise potential dangers.

The management of students' challenging behaviour is a significant feature of the school. The record of any incidents, physical interventions and use of the 'relaxation rooms' are very detailed. While these are carefully monitored, analysis is not always sufficiently penetrating to support planning for improvement in procedures, or in how individual students are managed.

The staff show considerable care and concern for students' welfare. This is underpinned by good relationships. All students have at least one-to-one support. The 'Support for Learning' team produces excellent, comprehensive 'Working with Me' packs which help staff address students' additional needs, such as sensory and communication needs. The school does much to promote healthy lifestyles, through a considerable amount of physical activity and an emphasis on healthy eating. Consequently, students learn to use their energy purposefully, and to widen their diet.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

All of the required recruitment and staff vetting checks are made to ensure the suitability of adults to work with children. They are recorded as required in a single central register.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The school's premises and accommodation allow students to learn effectively. They meet all regulations. The premises have been extensively refurbished since the last inspection, in line with current thinking about a suitable learning environment for students with autistic spectrum disorder. This includes colour schemes, furniture, fittings, lighting and flooring. Classrooms are very spacious and deliberately sparsely furnished, although the acoustics are hard which some students find upsetting when it becomes noisy. The safety and security of the premises are given a high priority. All rooms, including the 'relaxation rooms' where students calm down, are now safe. The school is situated in 32 acres of grounds. They include an extensive area of hard surface and some simple play equipment, all of which are used to support students' education, behaviour and out-of-school activities. A large 'play barn' is used for sport, physical education and indoor play.

Provision of information

The information provided for parents and others is clear, accurate and up to date. All regulations are met. A new prospectus has been prepared for the start of this term, and is available on the school's website. It includes a list of all of the required documents that are available on request. The safeguarding policy is available as a separate download. Parents, carers and local authorities receive extensive education

and therapy reports on students' attainment, academic progress, personal development and related issues.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school's policy and practices for dealing with complaints meet all but two of the regulations. The recording and logging of complaints is not robust enough, and procedures regarding school day and out-of-school-hours' complaints lack clarity.

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 manner in which complaints are to be handled (standards in part 7) and must:

- ensure that the complaints procedure provides for the panel to make findings and recommendations, and stipulates that a copy of the findings and recommendations are sent by electronic mail or otherwise given to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about;
and,
that a copy of the findings and recommendations are available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the headteacher (paragraph 25(i))
- ensure that the procedure provides for written records to be kept of all complaints, indicating whether they were resolved at the preliminary stage or whether they proceeded to a panel hearing (paragraph 25(j)).

What the school could do to improve further

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

- provide training, support and guidance for the class staff on the effective use of the new curriculum plans, assessments, 'differentiation sheets',

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

and individual education plans to focus all class work more securely on each student's learning

- review the use of taking students out of class to calm down, to make sure that it is always completely necessary
- improve the consistency of use of symbols and signing to support students' communication and understanding
- improve the complaints procedure by:
 - simplifying the policy so that the procedure for complaints relating to the school day, rather than to out-of-school hours, is clearer
 - creating a complaints log in a secure, bound book rather than in loose-leaf form, and keeping documentation relating to each complaint separately from this log
 - making sure that all events relating to a complaint, such as telephone calls and emails, are recorded in the complaint's documentation as soon as they happen.

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	Residential and day special school		
Date school opened	May 2005		
Age range of pupils	4–19 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 23	Girls: 4	Total: 27
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 22	Girls: 4	Total: 26
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 12	Girls: 1	Total: 13
Annual fees (day pupils)	£87,355		
Address of school	Andrews Furlong Mill Road Banham NR16 2HU		
Telephone number	01953 888656		
Email address	admin@acornparkschool.co.uk		
Executive Principal	Marina Gough		
Proprietor	Acorn Care and Education		

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 October 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Acorn Park School, Banham, NR16 2HU

Thank you for your welcome when we visited your school. I enjoyed observing your lessons and break times, and seeing how well you are learning. Your new school building is super, and much better than it was before.

Acorn Park provides you with a satisfactory quality of education and most government requirements are met. You make satisfactory progress. The therapy team does well in helping you and class staff to understand and deal with the additional difficulties you face. All of the staff look after you well, and make sure that you are safe.

The class staff are just getting used to lots of new ways of working and planning for your learning and progress. These have been introduced to help you learn better and faster, but they are not all running smoothly yet. I have asked the new Principal to help the staff with this. I want the complaints procedure improved and staff to use symbols and signing better to support your communication and understanding.

When you first start at Acorn Park, most of you have a lot of difficulty in managing your own behaviour. You get good help from the staff, and your behaviour improves a great deal. Well done. Your personal development is good, and you learn many things that will help you now, and when you are grown up. A few of you, though, try to avoid class work through antisocial behaviour. I have asked the staff to help you learn not to do this.

Yours sincerely

Judith Charlesworth
Lead inspector