

Helen Allison School

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	John Gush
Social care inspector	Sophie Wood

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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}

The inspection of boarding provision was carried out under the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Care Standards Act 2000, having regard to the national minimum standards for residential special schools, in order to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and the government of the quality and standard of the service provided.^{3, 4}

Information about the school

The Helen Allison School is an independent residential special school owned and operated by the National Autistic Society. The school's primary aim is to provide a high quality, relevant education designed to meet the specific needs of pupils and students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). The school was opened in 1968 and provides co-educational and weekly boarding facilities for children and young people with ASD aged from five to 19 years of age. There are 70 students on roll, the vast majority of whom are boys. There are 14 boarders. All students have a statement of special educational needs related to their autistic spectrum disorder and some have additional medical needs and specific learning difficulties. The school occupies two sites. The primary and secondary departments are situated on the edge of the village of Meopham in Kent, in a semi-rural area six miles from Gravesend. The further education department and residences are situated on the Overcliffe, near the centre of Gravesend. Students are referred predominately by neighbouring local authorities, but also by other authorities from around the country. The school's last full inspection took place in February 2009 and the residential provision was last inspected in April 2011.

Evaluation of the school

The school provides an outstanding quality of education for its students and it fulfils its aims very effectively. The overall effectiveness of boarding is outstanding as a result of excellent leadership and management. The quality of the curriculum is outstanding as is the quality of teaching and assessment. As a result, the students make outstanding progress in their learning and the outcomes for boarders are outstanding. The provision the school makes for students' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development is outstanding and behaviour is good. Arrangements to protect

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

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

³ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents.

⁴ www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/a00192112/boarding-schools.

the welfare, health and safety of the students, including safeguarding, are outstanding. The school now complies with all the regulations for schools and the national minimum standards for residential special schools, which is an improvement on the last inspection.

Quality of education

The curriculum is outstanding. This is because, in addition to being broad and balanced and covering a wide range of subjects and activities it is also kept under rigorous review and adjusted and adapted to meet the needs, abilities and requirements of the school's students. The curriculum covers all National Curriculum subjects together with excellent courses in personal, social and health education (PSHE) and religious education.

In the primary department, in addition to meticulous attention to numeracy and literacy, including the teaching of phonics, the focus is on preparing pupils for learning and appropriate social interaction. Most days begin with sensory, touch and alerting routines (STAR). These very worthwhile sessions, led by the school's occupational therapist, help pupils engage their thinking and settle to the day's work.

In Key Stage 3, a valuable innovation this year has been to pilot a cross-curricular approach designed to encourage students to discover the links between subjects and so to make learning more meaningful. The Key Stage 4 curriculum provides a very good range of programmes that make it possible for all students to achieve success in publically accredited courses at a level related to their abilities. Classes are mostly age related, but a very effective recent change to ability-based groups for English and mathematics has resulted in an increased rate of progress for most students. The further education department provides three very well-designed and implemented 'learning pathways'. These enable some students to attend local further education colleges, while other students practise the skills they need for independent living.

The comprehensive PSHE programme provides many opportunities for students to explore all aspects of their personal development in a safe way. It also provides very good advice and guidance in relation to each student's transition to their next phase of learning and reinforces the support offered by the local Connexions service personal adviser who visits the school on a regular basis. The very well-resourced speech and language and occupational therapy departments contribute their expertise to ensure the curriculum meets the varied needs of the students. An excellent range of physical education activities provides ample opportunities for exercise and promoting fitness with students clearly enjoying these lessons.

Teaching and assessment are outstanding. The excellent quality of the assessment of students' needs and abilities is a particular strength of the school. Very effective assessments of students' academic abilities and their progress in the various subjects are supplemented by standardised tests of cognitive ability and competence in communication. The information from these assessments is presented for each student in a straightforward graphic style that is readily assimilated and is used to

excellent effect by teachers and teaching assistants in delivering lessons where every activity is personalised to each student's individual needs. It is also used as the basis for students' learning targets, which the students understand well.

All lessons observed were good or outstanding. Teachers make very good use of excellent lesson plans and individualised learning objectives. They adopt a suitable pace so that students remain interested and their use of questioning and prepared activities pose appropriate challenges, helping students to move forward in their learning. Teachers use computers very effectively to support learning. Interactive whiteboards are used in many of the lessons. However, this is primarily for presentations by teachers and students do not have sufficient opportunities to come to the front and use the interactive facilities. Very effective cross-curricular links are made in most lessons with literacy skills, for example being woven into the STAR programme in the primary department, and an independent travel session in the further education department.

In the residential provision, meticulous assessment processes and care plans are completed to a very high standard. Staff plan many activities to complement students' school-based learning targets and as a result residential students make very good progress, especially with regard to social interaction.

A very detailed and thorough annual statement review process ensures that the provision requirements of all students' statements of special educational needs are regularly checked and adjusted as needed. A clear marking policy is adhered to throughout the school and encouraging comments are made that point out strategies for improvement. Teachers demonstrate their expert subject knowledge and their specialist abilities in autism education and they provide excellent direction for the highly proficient teaching assistants.

The outstanding progress that students make is measured by a very thorough process where teachers' assessments are moderated by colleagues in school and in other local schools. The detailed and thorough portfolios of students' work confirm students' excellent progress, as do the wide range of successes in externally accredited courses including GCSEs and vocational qualifications.

Outcomes for residential students are outstanding. They thrive within a nurturing environment, which places their well-being at the core of the school's ethos and delivery.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding and its impact is aptly summarised by a parent who said of her son that 'his confidence and self-esteem had improved dramatically'. Students say that they enjoy coming to school and this is confirmed by the high attendance figures and exemplary punctuality to lessons. Overall, they are courteous to each other and welcoming to visitors. On the occasions when they fall below this high standard they accept support and encouragement with good grace. For example, one student

refused to move when another student wanted more space at the table in a lesson. He nevertheless apologised for his intransigence explaining that sitting exactly in that spot was important for him at that moment. His apology and his explanation were accepted.

Staff deliver a strong and consistent message about socially acceptable behaviour with high expectations which are modelled on their own behaviour. This results in students developing a firm awareness of the difference between right and wrong that is reinforced by regular celebrations of individual success and achievement during assemblies. Students gain very good understanding about personal responsibility and about their place within their local community. For example, the school council is currently campaigning to have the number of individual plastic packages reduced when meals are served as they regard this as poor environmental practice and, in the further education department, the student council has successfully lobbied to have a workshop converted into a fitness gym. In the residencies, students take very good advantage of many opportunities to develop their self-confidence and personal responsibility. For example, visits to the local supermarket enable students to purchase menu items they have chosen to make their favourite meals.

Students' awareness of other cultures is very well developed through the PSHE and religious education lessons and visits, for example to the local Sikh temple. Learning to accept difference and develop an attitude of tolerance is central to the school's ethos and the students' overall behaviour and demeanour attest to its effectiveness. Visits from the local police and fire brigade enhance citizenship lessons and provide students with a strong and effective awareness of English institutions and services.

The school's psychology department produces clear and helpful behaviour support plans for students who are given expert support in working towards very specific targets. Students' behaviour is good overall and this is a significant achievement in view of the profound difficulties associated with volatile mood swings and impulsive reactions that many demonstrate when they come to the school. Staff members make very effective behavioural interventions and frequently succeed in diverting students whose behaviour becomes socially unacceptable. All interventions are carefully scrutinised by the psychology department to ensure the appropriate use of physical intervention techniques. The rare use of any form of a seclusion technique is currently under review to ensure its use is shared with all relevant external parties to ensure transparency.

In the residential provision, a competent and confident staff team recognises the challenges posed by individual traits and behaviours and it tackles these in a way that preserves and fully supports the dignity of the individual.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school makes outstanding provision for the welfare, health and safety of its students and a powerful attitude of care and support pervades all interactions between staff members and students across the school and the further education

department. Robust safeguarding arrangements include regular training for all staff in child protection, physical intervention, fire safety and health and safety. The two designated child protection officers have received the required advanced training. Five staff members have higher-level training in first aid and senior staff members are trained in safer recruitment. Robust policies exist and are effectively implemented for safeguarding, fire safety and first aid. The school implements clear and effective policies to support appropriate behaviour and to counter bullying that make clear the school's approach and its range of intervention strategies and support mechanisms. Very effective inter-departmental reviews are held every term for every student. They are chaired by a member of the psychology team and ensure the consistency of the care provided across the school. Awareness of bullying is usefully raised in assemblies, in PSHE lessons, in the personal and social development course in the further education department and during the annual anti-bullying week. Students are confident in the teachers' ability to deal effectively with any bullying. Students are very well supervised.

Boarders are effectively protected from potential sources of harm and abuse. Residential staff have very positive relationships with the local authority and other agencies in relation to any safeguarding concerns.

Risk assessments are carried out for all the venues visited by students and every trip that is planned is reviewed and signed off by a senior staff member. Effective regular health and safety checks are made on vehicles, school property and equipment and risk assessments are carried out for all the places and facilities that students work with. The school has correctly maintained admissions and attendance registers and is implementing a three-year accessibility plan in fulfilment of its duties under the Equalities Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

A robustly administered safer recruitment policy ensures that all the required checks are carried out on staff, supply staff, members of the proprietorial body and others to ensure their suitability to work with children. A register of these checks is effectively maintained in a single central register.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The main school site provides very good accommodation and specialist facilities for the primary and secondary departments. Classrooms are of a good size and are well equipped, providing an autism-specific environment with sensory rooms and a range of quiet areas to support reduction in anxiety. The school has adequate outdoor space for play and relaxation and appropriate arrangements are available for students who are ill.

The further education department is located away from the school site and its premises and accommodation are satisfactory, only because a number of students receive much of their education in local further education colleges. The school's

proprietor is aware that the accommodation is cramped and that the facilities are only just adequate for the number of students in the department.

Provision of information

The school's website provides a useful broad picture of the services and facilities available at the school. All the information that the school is required to provide, or make available on request, is contained in a very detailed brochure with up-to-date enclosures. A daily home-school book is rigorously maintained to ensure regular contact with parents and carers and detailed annual progress reports outline students' progress and achievements. Financial information is sent, as required, to the local authorities of all students.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school has a complaints policy and procedures that fully meet requirements.

Leadership and management of the residential provision

The quality of the leadership and management of the residential provision is outstanding, resulting in outstanding outcomes for boarders.

Managers acknowledge the importance of boarding and ensure that it has a significant impact on boarders' educational and personal development. High quality self-evaluation ensures that provision is very well tuned to boarders' needs and is very well coordinated with boarders' experience in school. Planning for boarding is thorough and well integrated with the school's overall development plans. Residential staff regularly receive the training and guidance they need to develop their understanding and provide for the diverse needs of those in their care.

Boarders are fully integrated into decision-making processes. Consultation mechanisms are varied and creative to ensure that their views are captured and influential. Parents, carers, professional support workers and external bodies are frequently consulted on how boarding can be improved and their comments are acted upon. The one previous recommendation from the welfare inspection conducted in April 2011 to review auditory monitoring has been fully met. Multi-disciplinary working among staff and with outside professionals is a particular strength of the provision and is strongly encouraged by management. Individual information is shared in a seamless and timely manner.

Safeguarding arrangements are excellent.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

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

National minimum standards

The school meets the national minimum standards for residential special schools and associated 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:

- encourage additional student use of the interactive whiteboards in the classrooms
- improve the quality of the accommodation in the further education department.

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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Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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Overall effectiveness of the residential experience

Overall effectiveness of the residential experience	✓			
Outcomes for residential pupils	✓			
Quality of residential provision and care	✓			
Residential pupils' safety	✓			
Leadership and management of the residential provision	✓			

School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Residential Special School		
Date school opened	1968		
Age range of pupils	5–19 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 65	Girls: 5	Total: 70
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of boarders	Boys: 14	Girls: 0	Total: 14
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 65	Girls: 5	Total: 70
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 3	Girls: 0	Total: 3
Annual fees (day pupils)	£ 43,972		
Annual fees (boarders)	£ 76,146		
Address of school	Longfield Road, Meopham, Gravesend Kent DA13 0EW		
Telephone number	01474 814878		
Email address	jacquiashtonsmith@nas.org.uk		
Headteacher	Dr Jacqui Ashton-Smith		
Proprietor	National Autistic Society		

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.



23 July 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of the Helen Allison School, Meopham DA13 0EW

Many thanks for the welcome that you gave us when my colleague and I visited your school recently. We spent our time in the main school, the further education department and in the residencies, and we were delighted to observe the courtesy you showed to each other and the respect that you showed for your teachers and the other members of staff.

Your school makes outstanding provision for your education and this enables you to make outstanding progress. The school makes outstanding arrangements to promote your welfare, health and safety. The support you receive for your personal development is outstanding and your behaviour is good overall. Well done!

We were particularly pleased to see that:

- you worked hard and concentrated well in your lessons
- your excellent work is displayed so prominently on the classroom walls
- you listen hard and take note of the helpful suggestions that your teachers make
- when situations are difficult for other students and their behaviour is a bit disturbing, you show tolerance and try to avoid making things worse.

To make the school even better I have suggested that you should have more opportunities to use of the interactive whiteboards and that the school should consider improving the accommodation in the further education department.

You have excellent teachers and care staff who work hard to provide the outstanding education you receive. We know that they often give you helpful advice and suggestions. Do listen to them and try to do as they suggest. This will help you to make even better progress with your development.

Yours sincerely

John Gush
Lead inspector