

The Larches

Independent school standard inspection report

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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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

The Larches School is a small independent special school located in Leominster. The school opened in March 1996 and is owned by Advanced Education. It is registered for 20 students aged between 11 and 16 years. Currently there are 13 students on roll and all have severe behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Some also have moderate learning difficulties; eight have statements of special educational needs. All but three of the students are resident in accommodation owned by the company. All students have had a disrupted education which has adversely affected their attainment and self-esteem. The headteacher is supported by a regional headteacher who oversees a number of the company's schools. The school's last full Ofsted inspection was in December 2009, followed by progress monitoring inspections in November 2010 and March 2011.

The school aims 'to develop young people with active, creative minds that can, do and will make a positive contribution to society. The school strives to transform their learning experience, secure their academic achievement, social and emotional development and sense of ambition'.

Evaluation of the school

The Larches School provides a good quality of education and meets all the regulatory requirements. There has been considerable improvement since the time of the last full inspection, and under the positive leadership of the headteacher the school maintains a programme of continuous development. Students are provided with a good range of experiences and activities which meet their individual needs and enable them to make good progress in their learning. Procedures for the welfare, health and safety of the students, including safeguarding, are outstanding and ensure that students with complex personal circumstances are fully included and supported.

Quality of education

The good curriculum is implemented in a way that ensures all students receive their entitlement to English and mathematics, together with a flexible response to their specific needs and aspirations. The requirements of students' statements of special educational needs are used effectively, together with the school's assessment of

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

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

their skills and aptitudes, to produce precise targets in an individual education plan (IEP) when they enter the school. The school is proactive in ensuring that reviews of students' statements keep pace with their changing needs. Staff ensure that gaps in students' previous education are quickly identified, particularly where their standards of literacy and numeracy give cause for concern. In addition to English and mathematics, all students study a suitable range of subjects, including science, information and communication technology (ICT) and physical education. Students in Key Stage 3 have access to the full range of National Curriculum subjects, an improvement since the last inspection, and appropriate experiences of personal, social, and health education. The school's curriculum policy is implemented effectively, ensuring that their personal and social development is promoted alongside their academic learning.

In Key Stage 4 students continue to study the English, mathematics and science and, in addition, they enjoy optional vocational subjects which are available on-site or with local providers. Current students are enjoying success, for example, in food technology, child development, construction and motor mechanics. Students in both key stages are keen to talk about their positive experiences of a wide range of outdoor sports and activities with a local provider.

A particular strength of the school's provision is its response to the needs of students who enter the school, often late in Key Stage 4, after a long period of disrupted education.

The school is also effective in preparing students for the next stage of education or training by discussing career options, accompanying them on visits to local colleges, and assisting them with application letters and personal readiness. Work experience is available on an individual, risk assessed basis resulting, for example, in one student currently working successfully as the school chef on one day a week.

The quality of teaching and assessment is good. Teachers prepare well for teaching, basing their planning on suitable schemes of work which have been extended to cover all subjects since the time of the last inspection. Imaginative approaches to learning are used to engage students and staff are quick to make appropriate adjustments to learning as lessons proceed. Good use is made of computers and interactive whiteboards in a number of lessons which ensure that students have access to a stimulating range of visual resources for personal research and presentation. Teachers make good use of time and demonstrate patience and persistence on occasions when students may be distracted or disturbed by complex personal issues.

Interruptions to learning are rare and managed well by staff. The great majority of lessons are characterised by a calm and settled learning environment. Students are trusted to take responsibility for much of their own learning, for example in ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) and BTEC courses. The quality and extent of work produced in food technology and child development is particularly pleasing and rewarding for the students involved.

The school has recently implemented a system of assessment using National Curriculum levels. This is being developed effectively but has not yet reached the stage where all staff have a good understanding of each students' progress across the full range of subjects studied. Students make variable rates of progress over time, dependent in part on their attendance and the extent of the personal anxieties experienced by a number of students. The assessment data demonstrate that, overall, students make good progress in their learning. Recent and current students have achieved success in entry level certificates, level 1 and 2 awards in English, mathematics and science, BTEC certificates in vocational subjects, and occasionally GCSE grades. For the majority, these results exceed expectations from their varied starting points.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is good. The school has a strong commitment to the personal development of students and is largely successful in meeting its aim of securing students' social and emotional development and sense of ambition.

The majority of students develop their self-esteem and confidence effectively. Relationships with staff are good and there is considerable perseverance by staff to ensure that anxious or troubled students can benefit from all the experiences provided by the school. Students make progress in their ability to cooperate with others and appreciate their contributions. Successful teamwork is developed, for example, in active and lively PE lessons. Residential support workers from a number of the students' residences play an effective part in the daily life of the school acting as good role models of cooperation and respect. The behaviour of students is good and individuals make good progress in managing their anger and cooperating with the school's expectations. They are taught to be reflective about the consequences of their actions. The school makes effective use of the on-call services of the company's psychologists and therapists to work with individual students as required. Students' are often absent for different reasons, for example, care reviews and similar activities which take place during the school day. There is currently no forum for organisations involved to discuss ways of avoiding the disruption of students' education.

The themes covered in citizenship lessons, including community involvement and political literacy, provide students with experience of public services in England. Coordinated links with the students' residences ensure that students are provided with appropriate opportunities to develop their understanding of issues such as substance abuse and healthy lifestyles. They are actively involved in raising money for charities. The multi-faith religious education curriculum contributes to students' awareness and understanding of diversity in beliefs and cultures both in England in the global community. Students' folders of work in food technology provide good evidence of experience in cooking foods from diverse cultures. However, the extensive, high quality displays of students' work around the school include only limited examples of cultural diversity.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Arrangements for the welfare, health and safety of students are outstanding. The school does not give up on students who present challenging and complex behaviours. A high ratio of adults to students, together with careful risk assessment and diligent exchange of information, ensures that students are provided with a safe setting in which to develop relationships and feel secure. Attention to staff training is meticulous and all staff are trained to the required levels and within appropriate timescales, for example in child protection, first aid and fire safety. Robust policies, such as those for safeguarding, behaviour management, the prevention of bullying and safety on educational visits, are reviewed regularly and take account of the latest government guidance. All aspects of fire safety are monitored regularly, including a current fire risk assessment and routine checks on fire safety equipment. Company policies which integrate common expectations of home and school, provide an excellent context in which the staff work consistently well, with considerable commitment, to make sure that neither vulnerability or challenging behaviour are barriers to successful inclusion.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

All the required checks on the suitability of staff and proprietors are completed consistently in line with the company's published recruitment policy. Details of all required checks are recorded in a single central register.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The premises and accommodation provide a safe environment for successful learning. The accommodation includes specialist facilities for teaching practical subjects together with general teaching rooms of adequate size for teaching groups. The school is maintained and decorated to a high standard and the staff work hard to enhance the appearance of the premises with effective displays of students' work. The outside space includes an excellent all-weather facility for games and recreation which is appreciated by the students.

Provision of information

The school provides all the required information for parents and carers through its prospectus and the company's website. Parents and carers are made aware of the range of school policies which are available on request. Regular written reports on the attainment and progress of individual students provide parents and carers with extensive information.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school has suitable arrangements in place for the management of any complaints.

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.

- Consolidate the current development of assessment procedures to ensure that all staff have a good understanding of the extent of progress made by individual students across the full range of subjects studied.
- Introduce better arrangements for avoiding students' absence and the consequent disruption to their education.
- Ensure that the diversity of cultures in the local, national and global communities is celebrated more in all aspects of school life.

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 day school for students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.		
Date school opened	March 1996		
Age range of pupils	11–16 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 9	Girls: 4	Total: 13
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 7	Girls: 2	Total: 9
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 8	Girls: 4	Total: 12
Annual fees (day pupils)	£800 per week		
Address of school	Coningsby Road Leominster HR6 8LL		
Telephone number	01568 620443		
Email address	katereeves@clifford-house.co.uk		
Headteacher	Kate Reeves		
Proprietor	Advanced Education 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.



26 November 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of The Larches, Leominster, HR6 8LL

I would like to thank you for the welcome that you gave me when I visited your school. The inspection judged that The Larches provides you with a good quality of education. I appreciated the time that some of you gave to speak with me and to show me a wide range of your work. The school 'chef's' preparation of lunch on Friday was a particular highlight of my visit! There are a number of good things about your school.

- The staff understand the challenges which you face and provide a safe school where everyone is welcome.
- You told me how much you enjoy visits to Top Barn and I saw from students' PowerPoint presentations how many opportunities it provides to take part in new sports and activities.
- Your teachers work very hard and prepare interesting lessons with a lot of excellent practical activities.
- You get on well with your teachers and show good teamwork in your lessons, particularly in PE.
- Most students have either achieved qualifications already or are working well towards examinations in a number of subjects.
- The school helps you with your personal development and to prepare well for life in the future.

A few of you have poor attendance which prevents you from achieving your best in lessons. I have asked the headteacher and staff to support you to improve your attendance; a few of you are already doing this. Well done! I have also asked them to make sure that you have more opportunities to understand and celebrate the wide variety of beliefs and cultures in England and around the world. I would like to wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

David Young
Lead Inspector