

# West Lancashire Personalised Curriculum Support Service: The Acorns Centre

Ruff Lane, Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 4QX

**Inspection dates** 22–23 January 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	Previous inspection:	Outstanding	1
	This inspection:	<b>Good</b>	<b>2</b>
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is a good school.

- Parents are right to praise the high quality of care for pupils: 'the school has turned my child around' typically summarises their views about the often marked improvement in pupils' attendance, attitude to learning and achievement.
- Key Stage 4 pupils generally make good progress because they enjoy the option courses and the vocational training reflects their interests.
- Very nearly all Year 11 pupils in 2012 gained GCSE qualifications, or the equivalent, and have gone into further education, training or employment.
- Strong, lively teaching in science lifts pupils' performance and results have soared.
- Pupils with medical needs do well because of the good provision and the staff's close, effective work with families and a range of agencies.
- Behaviour is good overall, largely because of the skilful handling of pupils by teachers and teaching assistants. Pupils accept one another, feel safe and know that their views matter.
- The headteacher is challenging staff to lift their expectations of pupils and to share ideas in how to make learning more exciting.

### It is not yet an outstanding school because

- As not all teachers expect enough of pupils there is headroom for higher attainment, especially in GCSE in English and mathematics, where there are gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills.
- Staff are hindered in drawing up individualised learning programmes for pupils because there is often patchy or no information from mainstream schools about their academic achievement.

## Information about this inspection

- At the main Acorns school, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) observed four teaching sessions and visited five others. She held discussions with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher concerning the curriculum, lead teachers in assessment, English and science, the chair of the management committee and the head of the local authority's Alternative and Complementary Education and Residential Service (ACERS).
- The headteacher and HMI jointly scrutinised work across the curriculum from a sample of pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4, and also data from assessment and the tracking of pupils' progress.
- HMI visited the base in Skelmersdale, observed two teaching sessions and spoke with the centre manager, staff and pupils.
- HMI visited pupils at two alternative providers and met with representatives of the Young People's Service.
- HMI scrutinised a range of the school's documents related to improvement planning, self-evaluation, performance management and professional development, support for pupils, pupils' progress, attendance, safeguarding and the work of the management committee.
- The responses of 23 members of staff to the questionnaire were considered. HMI also took into account the responses to the school's questionnaires issued in the summer term to pupils, parents and alternative providers.
- HMI spoke by telephone with six parents; there was insufficient response to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View).

## Inspection team

Sonja Øyen, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- The Acorns Centre is a short stay school which is part of the local authority's Alternative and Complementary Education and Residential Service (ACERS).
- It provides full-time education for pupils who have been permanently excluded from mainstream schools, and education, intervention and support for those at risk of exclusion because of their behaviour, or who have poor attendance records, or have missed significant periods of education.
- Since September 2012, the school has taken more Key Stage 3 pupils than before. It is also providing education for pupils who cannot attend mainstream schools on a full-time basis because of their medical needs. This was previously a separate strand within ACERS. Twenty pupils currently attend a base in Skelmersdale, a few miles from the main Acorns school.
- Pupils join the school at all times during the year. Key Stage 4 pupils tend to stay until they leave at 16. At the time of the inspection, there were 16 Key Stage 3 pupils and 44 pupils in Key Stage 4; just over a third were girls.
- The school tailors the provision to the needs of each pupil. At the time of the inspection, half were receiving full-time education, one pupil was being tutored at home, three were receiving one-to-one tutoring at the centre and others were attending a varying number of hours dependent on arrangements with mainstream schools or pupils' ability to cope.
- Key Stage 4 pupils spend half of their week in vocational training led by 11 alternative providers, including Engine Rooms, Fix IT, BDS, West Lancashire Training and Learning Centre and Bolton Wanderers Football Club.
- Pupils come from a range of social and cultural backgrounds: the vast majority are White British.
- Several pupils have specific learning needs including autistic spectrum disorder and attention deficit disorder. One pupil has a statement of special educational needs.
- One in three pupils is eligible for pupil premium funding (additional funding from the government introduced in 2011 for those pupils eligible for free school meals and for pupils who have been looked after continuously for more than six months). This proportion is higher than the national average. However, Acorns receives funding only in respect of a few pupils who are registered with both it and a mainstream school.
- In the last year, there has been a change in headteacher and deputy headteacher and significant periods of staff absence. At the time of the inspection, the mathematics subject leader was absent and the English subject leader was in a phased return to work.

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Accelerate pupils' progress in English and mathematics by:
  - providing individualised programmes of intervention and support to plug the gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills, most especially in reading for meaning, spelling and numeracy
  - sharing effective practice in how to involve pupils in tracking and planning their progress
  - raising staff's expectations of what pupils can achieve, especially GCSE attainment
  - ensuring that alternative providers are aware of the literacy and numeracy needs of pupils, are guided in how best to give support, and that evidence from vocational training is considered when reviewing how well pupils have met their targets

- exploring ways to enrich learning, particularly for those with poor attendance records
  - refining the skills of subject leaders in driving improvement.
- With the change in April 2013 to the school having full responsibility for its own budget and affairs, strengthen the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
- ensuring that leaders and members of the management committee are well briefed in how to manage the school's budget
  - sharpening the use of information from reviews of teaching and learning to set challenging targets for improvement
  - working with the local authority and secondary schools to ensure the speedy transfer of information about pupils' academic progress.

## Inspection judgements

### The achievement of pupils

is good

- Pupils achieve well because of the good quality of care and support to ensure each pupil feels at ease and is willing to learn. Pupils comment on how 'Acorns is a school made for me', that being in small teaching groups helps them to learn and how they feel they can talk about their concerns. For the vast majority of pupils, there is a marked improvement in their personal outlook, their willingness to attend, learn and to gain qualifications.
- In 2012, the school had its best GCSE results with just over half of the Year 11 pupils gaining five or more GCSEs and one in five gaining good grades including English and mathematics. Nearly all pupils gained accreditation in English and mathematics but not always equivalent to GCSE. The headteacher recognises that there is scope to increase GCSE attainment and raise the school's average points score even though in 2012 it was above the past average for similar schools. Pupils, in the main, met or exceeded their predicted targets.
- Pupils with medical needs do well because their learning follows closely what they have been doing in mainstream school and staff set them individual challenges. A very able pupil, for example, produced and presented to the others a well-researched evaluation of a psychological theory.
- In lessons, pupils' learning varies. In some instances, pupils show they can use what they know but in others, there is little willingness to do more than the bare essential. Over time, given their starting points, pupils' progress is generally good and outstanding in some cases. Most pupils start at least three years' progress behind for their age and have significant gaps in their knowledge and skills, particularly in reading for meaning, writing and mathematics. Staff are hampered in drawing up learning plans by the slowness of some mainstream schools to transfer information about pupils' academic achievement. The school's intention to assess on entry each pupil's skills in reading, spelling and number skills should give a much needed basis for well-targeted support. Similarly, the recent decision to use the accumulated pupil premium funding to purchase e-reading material is a useful step in raising the profile of reading.
- The pupils who do not gain qualifications are those whose attendance is poor and whose attitude remains negative despite the school's best efforts to capture their interest. Teachers are also aware of pupils who could have gained higher grades if they had attended more regularly and been willing to make up lost ground. This year, pupils have indicated a willingness to give more time to their studies in art as they see they are on the cusp of gaining high GCSE grades.
- The focus on vocational qualifications and options has proved to be very effective. In science in 2012, the school tripled the percentage of Level 2 attainment and current indications are that all pupils will gain Level 1 and most are on track for Level 2. This is, in essence, due to enthusiastic teaching, practical scenarios that mean something to the pupils and choice in how to present findings. In engineering, girls and boys are enthused by having to devise a sensor to assist a haulage company in reducing accidents involving cyclists.
- Many pupils do well in information and communication technology (ICT). They are adept in using the keyboard, word processing functions, programs and search engines. Presentations, screened in the reception area, show pupils' developing skill in collating material for a public audience.
- A strong element in pupils' achievement is the training given by alternative providers. Pupils' interests are matched to the provider and generally, pupils stay the course and gain not only related qualifications but also a work ethic. In 2012, nearly all the Year 11 pupils went on to further education and training, with four gaining employment or an apprenticeship. Providers are not always fully aware of the literacy and numeracy needs of pupils and how best to support them.

## **The quality of teaching**

**is good**

- The overall quality of teaching is good but inconsistencies which detract from pupils' learning and from their personal development prevent it being better. Although there are examples of inspiring, outstanding teaching, there is also some that, while steady and well-focused, lacks the vitality to accelerate pupils' learning and really lift aspirations and performance.
- A key strength of the teaching is the adults' skill in creating a positive atmosphere. The teaching assistants, in particular, have a high level of expertise in cajoling, encouraging and guiding without doing too much for pupils. In a cookery session, for example, a pupil was asked to instruct the assistant in how to follow the recipe and her gentle reminders and questions enabled him to complete the task and meet his personal target. In several sessions observed, assistants took a firm but persistent stance in insisting that pupils did as they were requested.
- The teachers plan lessons thoroughly, often with well-structured whiteboard presentations, but not all give enough attention to how the content can be best learnt. Some sessions are overly focused on written work. Pupils' work shows this is often the case in English and mathematics. Pupils were most engaged when the tasks were practical, such as playing a dice game to record frequencies or using walkie-talkies to send a message in Morse code.
- The focus on emphasising literacy and numeracy across the curriculum is beginning to have a positive impact on pupils' attitudes and in some work. Staff commented, for example, on how key words have been taken on board – waving both hands to indicate 'ambidextrous' – and how pupils are accepting they should avoid using capital letters mid-sentence in work in mathematics.
- All the staff are adept in praising pupils' efforts and successes. Positive, warm relationships were evident at all times, even when pupils were being defensive or unwilling to cooperate. In sessions observed, staff discussed with pupils how well they had done, how their learning linked with previous and next learning, and how homework extended their learning. For example, sight of bar charts compiled previously on the computer proved a valuable step in gaining Key Stage 3 pupils' willingness to tackle a similar task.
- In marking pupils' work, the quality of comment varies from detailed to cursory, especially in indicating what pupils need to do to improve. The regular use of grade criteria in science and art gives pupils a clear view of what they need to do.

## **The behaviour and safety of pupils**

**are good**

- Overall, behaviour is good within the school and when pupils are working at alternative providers. During the inspection, there were some refusals and outbursts often linked with pupils' inability to cope with challenges. Given that their behaviour has been the major reason in coming to the school for most pupils, the prevalent positive atmosphere speaks well of the improvement in pupils' attitude towards others and towards learning. Pupils helped one another and were polite to adults. The adults manage the pupils extremely well. That said, many pupils are highly reliant on adults to prompt and guide their learning and behaviour: a key reason why behaviour is not outstanding.
- A strong aspect of pupils' behaviour at both sites is the acceptance of each other and the understanding of differing personal situations and needs. Pupils said that they feel safe at all times because the adults 'take care of us'. Keyworkers are prompt to check on pupils' attendance and to talk with family and alternative providers about pupils' progress and to look for ways to help pupils sort out any problems. Daily sessions looking at issues, such as healthy living or relationships and respect for others, play a valuable part in helping pupils to accept responsibility for their actions.
- No pupil, parent or member of staff raised bullying as a concern. Staff and pupils have discussed how to avoid bullying through social networking and any incidents in school, such as verbal abuse, are tackled promptly. Pupils know the sanctions that come into play at such times.
- Attendance improves markedly for most pupils but varies considerably, remaining low compared

with mainstream schools. Currently, three pupils have 100% attendance and over half have 80% since September.

### **The leadership and management are good**

- The headteacher, teaching and support staff form a strong team. There is a shared wish to help the pupils achieve their best and also pride that parents think highly of the provision, and that former pupils return to update staff on how well they are doing.
- The headteacher is giving a firm steer in raising pupils' performance. She is challenging staff to raise their expectations of what pupils can achieve academically, and is making clear her high expectations of those who hold subject leadership and management roles. She has used the findings from the analysis of pupils' progress and attainment at the end of Year 11, as well as from the monitoring of teaching and learning to identify where improvement is needed. Her findings match those of this inspection and indicate a well-founded need to refine some aspects, such as assessment and tracking of pupils' progress to give an even fuller picture, and the range of teaching activities to heighten pupils' interest in learning.
- The absence of several members of staff during the last and current school years has curtailed action to bring about improvement. Key elements, including the revised policies for English and for marking, and procedures to test pupils' skills in reading, spelling and mathematics, have been partially put into practice. The accepted need now is to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of practice at both sites with staff gaining from the experience and expertise within the two teams.
- Since the last inspection, the remit and purpose of this short stay school has widened. Staff have successfully managed the changes, including refurbishment, while sustaining strengths in pastoral care and safeguarding. Much of the daily life of the school promotes pupils' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development but the community times, with materials devised by staff to agreed themes, makes a significant contribution. Links with families and other agencies are highly effective: pupils have ready access to specialist support and advice, including that regarding possible destinations when they leave at 16.
- The widening of the curriculum has been managed well, drawing on the expertise of staff and the interests of pupils to provide option courses and enrichment activities that pupils value. Key Stage 3 pupils, for example, are very aware that they must earn, through showing they can behave in an appropriate fashion, the right to go kayaking or horse riding. The school rightly uses only providers that are approved by the local authority.
- **The governance of the school:**
  - The management committee is effective, supportive and challenges the school and local authority; the chair of the management committee voiced the concerns about the drastic drop in attendance and punctuality when pupils were issued with bus passes with the upshot that taxis are again bringing pupils to school. The management committee questions pupils' achievements and the link with teaching and attendance, but is less able to hold all fully to account as the school's improvement plan has few targets related to specific subjects or the groups of pupils at the two sites. Members are getting ready to take on increased responsibilities when the school has full charge of its budget from April 2013.

## What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>



## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	134872
<b>Local authority</b>	Lancashire
<b>Inspection number</b>	403828

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

<b>Type of school</b>	Pupil referral unit
<b>School category</b>	Pupil referral unit
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–16
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	60
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	K Cooper
<b>Headteacher</b>	Jane Eccleston
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	5 May 2010
<b>Telephone number</b>	01695 575486
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