

Sycamore House

C/o Castlecare Group, The Manor House, Squires Hill, Kettering, NN14 6BQ

Inspection dates 22–23 October 2013

Overall effectiveness	Adequate	3
Pupils' achievement	Adequate	3
Pupils' behaviour and personal development	Good	2
Quality of teaching	Adequate	3
Quality of curriculum	Adequate	3
Pupils' welfare, health and safety	Good	2
Leadership and management	Adequate	3

Summary of key findings

This school is adequate because

- There has been a long period with no students on roll which ended only 10 days before the inspection, making it impossible to report on learning and progress of students over the last 15 months.
- There is scope to further develop and extend the curriculum to create a more topic-based approach in order to support the re-engagement of students in learning.

The school has the following strengths

- The teacher has experience and expertise in working successfully with students who have challenging behaviour, enabling them to re-engage with learning.
- Positive support for students who enter school with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties helps them successfully modify their behaviour and adopt more positive attitudes.
- Former students have made a successful transition from the school to college placements, reflecting success over time.
- The school supports students from faith backgrounds other than Christianity to participate actively in their religion, amending the school week to permit this.
- The executive headteacher actively promotes the professional development and expertise of teaching and non-teaching staff under her remit.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets schedule 1 of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, as amended by The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 ('the independent school regulations') and associated requirements.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection was undertaken with 24 hours' notice. Three lessons were observed, taught by the school's teacher aided by support workers, and students' written work was looked at.
- Discussions were held with the executive headteacher, the teacher, current and former students, and staff.
- Written evidence, including information on students' learning and progress, schemes of work, lesson planning and individual education and behaviour plans were looked at.
- The views of staff, students, carers and associated professionals were taken into account.

Inspection team

Martyn Groucutt, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Sycamore House is part of the Castle Care group, which runs schools across the country from its headquarters in Northamptonshire.
- It is a small special school in Norfolk. It is registered for students of either gender between the ages of 11 and 16 years who have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Students live in residential accommodation provided by the Company.
- Students have generally had a history of fragmented education. While having special educational needs they do not always have a statement of special educational needs.
- The school aims to provide a safe and secure environment where an appropriate individual curriculum can help students to re-engage with learning and formal education.
- No students were taught in the school over the last academic year, since previous students had reached the age of 16 and moved on to college provision, with no new students being admitted until shortly before this inspection.
- The last full inspection of the school was in February 2010, with a subsequent inspection in October 2010 to monitor progress in the areas for improvement that had been identified.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Develop the curriculum to include a more thematic approach that engages students and helps them to become active learners, while also giving them opportunities to study English, mathematics, science and computer skills across the curriculum.
- The school's proprietors should seek to ensure that there are always students on the school's roll, working with placing authorities to maximise the resources of the wider organisation across the country.

Inspection judgements

Pupils' achievement

Adequate

Achievement is only adequate overall because, while students at the school in recent years have made good progress and successfully re-engaged with learning, there had been no students registered in the 15 months that ended days before the inspection. Of the small number who had attended previously none had completed a whole key stage as a student. It is therefore difficult to show sustained progress and achievement over time. That said, the school has shown that it can take students with very fragmented histories of previous education and enable them to make good progress, going on to obtain accreditation from the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) and at Entry Level. Standards in English, mathematics and other subjects are below those usually found among young people of their age because of the behavioural, emotional and social difficulties that had previously led to their failure in mainstream schools. This is true of all, irrespective of race, gender or other form of grouping.

When there have been students in school their individual education and behaviour plans have supported them in raising their standards, with suitable emphasis on English and mathematics. Effective teaching and good engagement in learning across the curriculum have supported the needs of students. A very effective element of the provision is the way in which the school works actively with students' parents and carers. The school's focus on raising students' reading standards is very well supported, with encouragement to read during the evening and before going to bed. There are also opportunities to engage in a range of extra-curricular activities that meet students' interests and aptitudes, such as cinema visits.

Pupils' behaviour and personal development

Good

Students' behaviour and personal development over time have been good and have been well supported by the programme that supports their spiritual, social, social and cultural development. Muslim students value the fact that the school allows them to attend mosque for Friday prayers, which is a good illustration of the school's positive support and willingness to amend usual timetables. The development of improved behaviour and more positive attitudes is monitored and tracked carefully for every student that has been through the school. Former students who left school in July 2012 but who are still in residence with the Company have demonstrated this development by their current maturity that sees them successfully following college placements or accessing apprenticeships having completed their time in the school. All students enter with very challenging behaviour and the evidence of former students is that the school has been very successful in helping them adopt far more positive attitudes and a far greater self-awareness around personal safety and relationships. A social worker recently stated that a review of one of the school's former students 'demonstrated the immense changes in my young person'. The school, now that it has students again, is a place of calm where hard work and engagement in learning are the expectations, while at the same time staff are prepared for set-backs and will always support. Current students are therefore settling in well and after only a short time show that they want to do well.

Quality of teaching

Adequate

While the quality of teaching is currently judged to be adequate, this reflects the difficulty in measuring progress and achievement over the considerable time in which the school has had no students. Although no student has ever completed a whole key stage at the school the teacher has monitored every student's progress, which shows good progress from individual starting points, although some students have only attended for short periods. Progress is measured from baselines on entry in reading, writing, comprehension and mathematics. Effective teaching allows for a good rapport to be developed quickly, as has happened recently with new arrivals, so that they start to

gain confidence as learners after years of experiencing failure. Careful planning from the time of their arrival and well developed individual education and behaviour plans focus on identified needs, with challenging targets that allow students to start making up lost ground effectively. However, more time is needed in order to sustain this improvement. Staff have high expectations and students' progress is shown through regular, effective marking. In an observed English lesson there was time at the outset for correction and amendments before the main part of the lesson was started; this is effective in helping students to start to fulfil their potential. Lessons are well planned to support individualised teaching, they have a range of activities, maintain good pace and, through effective questioning, allow students to show their understanding and developing confidence. This is supported by a well-equipped classroom, the regular use of technology as a learning tool and a good range of age-related learning materials. This encourages learning and progress, including that made in English and mathematics. Support staff are employed to work jointly between the students' residences and school, and this supports the strong staff-student relationships that are built up. This encourages students to do their best in acquiring new knowledge and making progress, often having to fill gaps in prior knowledge and understanding caused by their previously very fragmented patterns of education.

Quality of curriculum

Adequate

The quality of the curriculum is adequate, again due in large part to the difficulties in demonstrating evidence of students' progress and achievement over time. Curriculum planning shows good coverage of all the appropriate areas of learning and a weekly timetable shows sufficient coverage for all subjects, with a focus on English and mathematics. Schemes of work are based firmly on the National Curriculum, modified to meet individual needs now that there are students in school once again. While the curriculum is engaging students in learning successfully, it is currently based on individual subjects. The school recognises the growing expectation that, for students working at the levels of those currently in the school, topic work is increasingly the norm, not least because it enables students to develop their skills in English, mathematics, science and computing across a range of subject areas. There are plans for teaching to move towards such a model. Appropriate careers advice is included in the curriculum, together with opportunities to participate in the arts and recreation. Personal, health and social education is promoted, including a focus on the importance of citizenship. Health education reflects the close collaboration between school and home in working on programmes such as smoking cessation, or promoting positive attitudes to relationships. Former students have demonstrated their success in moving on to college or employment with much more positive views about learning than they had when they first arrived at the school.

Pupils' welfare, health and safety

Good

The provision for welfare, health and safety is good, including arrangements for child protection. Recruitment procedures are good and nobody takes up a post until enhanced checks are completed. Details are maintained, as required, in a single central register. Staff have received appropriate training at the required level, including training in recruitment and in child protection. The former students who left school and are still in residence with the Company confirm that they always felt safe in the school. They appreciated the support of staff who were very positive role models. Staff are taking great care to ensure that current students are safe, working in close collaboration with placing authorities.

All required policies are in place having been developed centrally by Castle Care, including those for health and safety, prevention of bullying, discipline, first aid, recruitment and child protection. They are well written, understood and implemented effectively by staff and reviewed annually across the whole company. Where appropriate they are also understood by students, such as the behaviour policy which is based firmly around rewards and sanctions which are clearly understood and supported.

Centrally employed staff help maintain the premises in good condition and undertake risk assessments to ensure the safety of the building. Fire safety certificates are in place and there are regular tests of equipment. Good links with other agencies and with placing local authorities support the care and welfare of students. The school meets all the independent school regulations.

Leadership and management

Adequate

The school's leadership and management are adequate only, in large part because the lack of students over an extended period has limited their impact on learning and achievement. The company has not found sufficient take-up of places from local authorities to make the school viable over the last academic year. However, looking over a longer period, leadership has played a major role in supporting students in engaging with education and adopting more positive behaviour and attitudes. Data shows that all students who have joined the school have made progress and former students continue to move towards responsible adulthood after their successful school experience.

The school knows itself well and has a clear view of the nature of the young people with whom it feels it can engage positively. Its premises are of good quality, as are the resources available to support learning, including access to information technology. At its last inspection the school was found to comply with all the regulations for independent schools and this continues to be the case. There are clear procedures across the company for monitoring the quality of teaching and for the professional development of teachers, including the management of their performance. At Sycamore House leaders have created a professional team meeting the needs of the students who have been admitted recently. As a visiting solicitor representing a young person put it, there is 'a positive environment and a good team spirit'. This creates high expectations and a confidence that students can and will do well once they are at the school. As a consequence they can be effectively supported to make good progress from low starting points once admitted, as reflected by the progress of former students.

All necessary information is made available to parents, carers and others. This includes details of the complaints procedure, although no complaints have been made. The single storey school building is suitable for learning and fully accessible. Arrangements for students who are taken ill, including the maintenance of first aid boxes, are appropriate.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	A school which provides an exceptional quality of education and significantly exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 2	Good	A school which provides a high quality of education that exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 3	Adequate	A school which meets minimum requirements but needs to improve the quality of education it provides.
Grade 4	Inadequate	A school where minimum requirements are not met and/or the quality of education has serious weaknesses.

School details

Unique reference number	135784
Inspection number	420227
DfE registration number	873/6046

This inspection was carried out 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.

Type of school	Special school for students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11–16 years
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	Castle Homes Care Ltd
Headteacher	Marion Paige
Date of previous school inspection	21 October 2010
Telephone number	01536 711111
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