

North East Centre for Autism

Cedar Grove, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, DL5 6UN

Inspection dates	28–30 January 2014	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate	3
Pupils' achievement	Adequate	3
Pupils' behaviour and personal development	Adequate	3
Quality of teaching	Adequate	3
Quality of curriculum	Adequate	3
Pupils' welfare, health and safety	Adequate	3
Leadership and management	Adequate	3

Summary of key findings

This school is adequate because

- Following a period of turbulence, associated with much staff change, the school is now settled but teachers have not received the guidance and support needed to improve their work.
- Students' achievement is only adequate because too many lessons do not fully meet the learning needs of all students.
- Teachers do not always use assessment information to plan work that will sufficiently extend all students and teachers' expectations are not always high enough.
- The amount of time available for learning is shortened by long breaks or choosing times, where activities do not contribute enough to academic learning.
- Although there are adequate curriculum plans, they sometimes lack precise information about what will be taught and how it will be adapted to the needs of students.
- Self-evaluation is improving but arrangements to check on the use of physical restraint and the quality of off-site provision lack rigour.

The school has the following strengths

- Relationships between staff and students are generally positive. Consequently, students indicate that they are happy and feel safe in school.
- Leaders have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Decisive actions have been taken to deal with shortcomings in teaching. Consequently, achievement is rising.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school requires improvement and must take action to meet 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 standards') and associated requirements. The details are listed in the full report.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out without notice. It was conducted as an unannounced emergency inspection at the request of the Department for Education (DfE) after Ofsted and DfE received a 'whistle-blowing' complaint from a member of staff. There was a focus on behaviour management, the use of restraint, incident recording, staff training and levels of supervision.
- The inspectors observed 11 lessons taught by the school's teachers, looked at students' work, and held meetings with teachers, staff members and students. The inspectors looked at the school's documentation, including teachers' planning and students' work.
- Twenty four questionnaire responses from staff were taken into account. There were insufficient responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) to evaluate the views of parents and carers or those of placing local authorities. Telephone conversations were conducted with two parents.

Inspection team

Amraz Ali, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Chanan Tomlin

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The North East Centre for Autism is an independent day special day school for pupils with autism and Aspergers' syndrome located in the Newton Aycliffe area of Durham. It is one of two special schools in the north east of England run by the North East Autistic Society. It opened in January 2013 and this is its first inspection.
- The school is based on a site purchased from the local authority within a large complex housing several other establishments, including offices and a maintained special school.
- The school's provision consists of a new, large and purpose-built school with extensive grounds on its own site, together with a number of other refurbished blocks from the previous provision which contain a swimming pool and a gymnasium.
- The school is registered for up to 55 students aged between three and 19 years. Currently there are 27 students on roll aged between six and 19 years; seven are girls.
- All students have a statement of special educational needs related to autistic spectrum conditions. Some have other specific medical or communication needs. The students are referred and funded by local authorities in the north east.
- Students are grouped into two classes for those aged under 14 years and two classes for those over 14, including those students who are aged over 16 years. They are then grouped by needs and ability rather than age.
- Three students attending the school also attend alternative off-site provision provided by the North East Autistic Society.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching so that more is consistently good or better by:
 - providing guidance and support to teachers and staff following observations of their performance
 - ensuring that teachers use assessment information to more effectively plan the next pieces of work for students
 - raising teachers' and support staff's expectations of what students can do and achieve over time.
- Improve the curriculum so that it is better planned and more effectively meets the needs and abilities of students by:
 - ensuring that all classes use a detailed timetable that provides students with short, well-focused tasks
 - ensuring that all schemes of work include appropriate detail about the work to be taught and how it can be modified to meet the needs of all students
 - reviewing the use of free time and free-choice activities so that more of this time contributes to students' academic learning.
- Improve the arrangements for monitoring the work of the school, particularly the effectiveness of planned improvements, by:
 - regularly reviewing the use of restraint so that 'lessons are learned' about how to successfully manage each student's behaviour
 - ensuring that senior school staff check on the effectiveness and impact of all planned off-site alternative education.

■ The school must meet the following independent school standards:

- The proprietor must ensure that there an admission and attendance register which is maintained in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006¹ (paragraph 17).
- The proprietor must ensure that the following information is made available to parents and carers: the school's policy on and arrangements for admissions and exclusions; particulars of educational and welfare provision for pupils with statements of special educational needs and for pupils for whom English is an additional language; particulars of academic performance during the preceding school year, including the results of any public examinations; the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year; and the number of staff employed at the school, including temporary staff, and a summary of their qualifications (paragraph 24(1)(b)).
- The proprietor must ensure that the safeguarding policy is made available on the school website or provided to parents and carers (paragraph 24(1)(c)).
- The proprietor must ensure that parents and carers are provided with an annual written report of the progress and attainment for each student covering each subject taught (paragraph 24(1)(f)).
- The proprietor must ensure that, where a student is funded by the local authority, an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of that pupil is not provided to the local authority (paragraph 24(1)(h)).
- The proprietor must ensure that the school's complaint policy indicates that that parents and carers can attend the panel hearing and, if they wish, to be accompanied (paragraph 25(h)).
- The proprietor must ensure that the complaints policy provides for the panel to make findings and recommendations and procedures stipulate that a copy of the findings and recommendations are provided to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about; and available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the headteacher (paragraph 25(i)).

¹ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2006/1751/contents/made.

Inspection judgements

Pupils' achievement

Adequate

Students' achievement is adequate; although improving, achievement is only adequate because in too many lessons teaching is not strong enough to ensure all students make good progress in their learning. The picture is better in the post-14 classes where more able students are aiming for GCSE entry level qualifications. In the last academic year no students gained externally accredited qualifications. This is expected to change as the school is now registered as an examination centre and some students' current work demonstrates that they are capable of gaining externally accredited qualifications. There are systems in place to record improvements in students' behaviour and personal development along with their academic progress. However, until relatively recently the assessment and recording of academic progress has been limited. In some classes there is limited evidence of recorded work prior to January 2014. Nevertheless, the recorded work from across the school and particularly from the start of this term demonstrates that students are making adequate gains in their English and mathematics skills. Recorded work is generally of low quality but demonstrates that students are making small but appropriate gains in their skills, such as in improving their letter formation and ability to write numbers. Students' individual educational plans identify mostly appropriate short-term targets along with teaching strategies to be used, criteria for success and whether or not targets have been met. Across the school a relative strength is the progress students make in learning to speak, read or use visual symbols to communicate. There are no marked differences in achievement between boys and girls.

Pupils' behaviour and personal development

Adequate

Students' behaviour and personal development are adequate but there is a mixed picture overall. Many students behave well around school and in lessons. Their enjoyment of school is evident, and they indicate they are happy and safe at school. Many students have good relationships with staff and staff use these positive relationships with students to encourage students to behave appropriately and engage in their lessons. However, some students find behaving well a challenge, in part connected to their often complex needs. Where incidents of inappropriate behaviour were observed during the inspection, they were largely managed appropriately by staff. The students' needs mean that many do not always respond well to change and they like clear routines. The large number of changes that took effect at the start of the autumn term 2013 led to some poor behaviour. Consequently, the autumn term saw a relatively high number of incidents of challenging behaviour. On occasion, some students need to be restrained or held, for their own safety or the safety of others. Inspection evidence confirms that appropriate staff training means that this can be done safely and recent incidents are recorded appropriately. However, earlier records indicated that some incident reports were not recorded appropriately and monitoring by senior leaders did not identify shortcomings in recording for almost two terms. Consequently, records were not analysed to identify the causes of any unacceptable behaviour and how these could be avoided in future. Records show that between September and December 2013 the number of incidents decreased month-on-month. However, although decreasing some inappropriate behaviour and the use of restraint remain a regular occurrence. Older students who have previously been restrained say that they were treated fairly and understand why the restraints were needed. Some older students state that they have been taught self-management skills, such as going for a walk or listening to music.

Students make sound progress in their personal development in all key stages, including the post-16 students. Some, particularly the older and more-able students, have made significant gains in their attitudes to learning and in developing strategies to control their behaviour. Attendance is good for all key stages, including the post-16 students. Some staff help students too much, and this reduces the amount of responsibility and independence students are able to develop. Relationships between staff and students are positive, and students show they feel safe by the way

they approach and respond positively to adults. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is adequate overall with some strengths in their cultural development. Opportunities are provided to develop students' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, cultures and beliefs that are different to their own. For example, one student was able to talk about Judaism and the beliefs of others. Students are taught about key elements of British identity, including features of the different countries within the United Kingdom, the police and the monarchy. Students also learn to distinguish right from wrong and to develop a respect for the rule of law. The staff handbook makes it clear and requires that staff take care to avoid partisan views, for example when discussing current affairs.

Quality of teaching

Adequate

The quality of teaching is adequate and enables students to make adequate progress overall. However, teaching is too variable and inconsistent in quality across the school to enable all students to make good progress. Strengths include the high adult to student ratios in all classes which mean that all students receive much help and support. In all subjects, many opportunities to practise speaking or communicating using visual symbols help students to develop these skills well. Recent improvements in lesson planning ensure that all lessons have clear learning activities identified. However, planned activities do not always precisely match students' levels of ability or needs because assessment information is not used well. In some classes, not enough time is given to students' learning due to extended breaks and by allowing too much time on free-choice activities that do not help them to make good progress in their academic work. Learning is good when teachers have high expectations about what each student will achieve. An example of this was seen during the inspection when students successfully completed a well-chosen range of mathematical problems involving money. At times teachers expect too little and support staff are sometimes too quick to help students without allowing them to complete tasks or answer questions by themselves. Marking and verbal feedback to students is variable; where it is effective, teachers identify two stars (things that students have done well) along with a wish (what could be improved).

Good use is made of teachers' subject knowledge, particularly in the post-14 classes and to support students who have particular talents. The skills of the specialist art teacher are used effectively to support those students with skills in art and textiles. A student who is a talented musician has access to a specialist music teacher, which is helping to improve his skills further. However, a relative shortcoming is a lack of subject specialists to teach English and mathematics in the post-14 classes; more-able students identify this as a potential barrier to them securing external qualifications in these subjects. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used regularly to engage students and to stimulate learning. For example, in the post-14 class students used an online supermarket website to investigate food prices and plan expenditure on ingredients for a cookery lesson. However, when accessing computers during free time, some students tend to search for videos of fantasy games being played. Resources, including text books, are generally of good quality and support teaching and learning appropriately.

Arrangements for assessing and recording students' levels have recently been improved. Students' abilities are assessed when they join the school and there is a timetable for assessments to be completed throughout the year. Students' levels are assessed against National Curriculum levels and P-levels, which identify very small steps for students working at below National Curriculum levels. However, records are limited to the current term and only limited use has been made of the assessment information gathered.

Quality of curriculum

Adequate

The quality of the curriculum is adequate and leads to adequate achievement overall. The planned curriculum is broad and balanced, and covers all the required areas of learning. Schemes of work are built around the National Curriculum, using broad themes and topics. Long-term plans set out

what will be taught over the year on a term-by-term basis. However, in some subjects the termly plans lack detail. They do not identify clearly what will be taught and how work will be adapted to meet the varying abilities and needs of students. For example, the opportunities for the youngest students to learn about letters and sounds (phonics) are not planned systematically. Recent improvements to the way individual lessons are planned means that lessons usually have a clear focus and identify what each student will do. However, teachers are very new to this approach and its impact on learning has been inconsistent. All students have appropriate opportunities to develop their skills in speaking, reading, writing and mathematics. The school has recently identified a range of externally accredited courses for some of the older, more-able students. Consequently, some students are now preparing for relevant examinations. Learning is more successful where timetables are clearly structured and pupils are presented with a series of short, clearly focused tasks. This is not the norm and in the pre-14 classes some lessons are overly long and do not always follow an established structure. Pupils themselves identify that they learn best when routines are clear and lessons well structured; some clearly state they would welcome more structure and routine in the timetable. Personal and social education topics are integrated into lessons so that students are able to explore issues such as drugs and relationships. Students learn how to keep safe and to recognise threats and dangers. Appropriate advice about future options is provided for students through meetings between the school's staff and parents and carers. A strong aspect of the provision for older students is their work experience and careers education. Some have undertaken supervised placements in supermarkets and garden centres.

Pupils' welfare, health and safety

Adequate

Students' welfare, health and safety are adequate. Although almost all regulatory requirements are met, students' behaviour and historical inconsistencies in the recording of instances of restraint mean that this is adequate overall. There are good systems and procedures in place to ensure that the building and grounds are maintained to a good standard and students are supervised appropriately. All staff are committed to ensuring the best care and support for their students. Good supervision at break times and around school helps to promote a safe environment. Staff routinely praise and encourage students, which aid their confidence and self-esteem. However, this does not ensure that all students' behaviour is always appropriate around the school. Consequently, some students and staff indicate that the behaviour of a minority of students remains poor. Students are taught about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and diet, and they are encouraged to eat fresh fruit.

Risk assessments for fire, general health and safety and outside visits are good. Fire drills to practise evacuation procedures are conducted as required, and fire appliances are tested and checked regularly. An appropriate number of staff hold first aid qualifications. Safeguarding procedures are sound. Staff, including the designated person for child protection, have received the right levels of training in safeguarding students. All the required checks on the suitability of staff to work with children have been made prior to their appointment and they are recorded, as required, on a single central register. There are clear procedures for addressing bullying and instances of bullying are said to be rare. The school has not maintained an admission register and the system of students or their escorts signing in each day does not meet the requirements for a daily attendance register.

Leadership and management

Adequate

Leadership and management are adequate but some of the regulatory requirements are not met. Where regulations are not met, these do not compromise students' safety or well-being. The senior leaders, including the education director and newly recruited headteacher, have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Once shortcomings in the work of teachers and senior staff were identified, appropriate actions were taken to improve performance. The new headteacher has carried out lesson observations across the school, which has contributed to a realistic evaluation of its effectiveness. However, there has been limited impact of the

guidance and support provided to improve the performance of teachers and other staff. A sound start has been made implementing plans for improvement. This has included the introduction of a wide range of new routines and systems for lesson planning, and the assessment and tracking of students' progress and new performance management arrangements for all staff. However, the impact of these recent changes has been limited; students' learning and achievement are variable and remain adequate rather than good. All senior leaders realise that there remains much work to be done if improvements are to be secured rapidly. The many recent changes of personnel at the school have brought some uncertainty and short-term difficulties. This has been reflected in students' behaviour and levels of engagement in planned learning. Although staffing is now more settled, it is taking longer than leaders anticipated to bring all students' learning back on track. Plans for post-16 students to access alternative provision off-site, such as work-based learning and sports-related training, are sound. Arrangements for senior leaders to check on the effectiveness and impact of off-site provision for older students are underdeveloped.

The purpose-built school building represents a particularly positive feature of the school and provides a good range of classrooms and communal spaces, including a café that is used by all students each day. The school prospectus provides parents, carers and local authorities with a range of useful information. However, it does not include all of the required information including details on some policies and procedures. The safeguarding policy meets requirements but is not available on the school's website and has not been provided to parents and carers. Parents and carers are not provided with an annual written report of the progress and attainment for each student covering each subject taught. Where a student is funded by the local authority, an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of that pupil is not provided to the local authority. The school's complaint policy meets most of the requirements but does not explicitly state that parents and carers can attend the panel hearing and, if they wish, be accompanied. Similarly, it does not provide for the panel to make findings and recommendations; or stipulate that a copy of the findings and recommendations are to be provided to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about and be available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the headteacher.

The trustees of the North East Autistic Society, which owns the school, are aware of the shortcomings at the school. They in turn have approved new appointments to senior posts and new arrangements for checking on aspects of the school's work with a view to securing further improvement.

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 the quality of education has serious weaknesses.

School details

Unique reference number	139329
Inspection number	422859
DfE registration number	840/6013

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 day school
School status	Independent School
Age range of pupils	3–19 years
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	27
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	North East Autistic Society
Chair of Trustees	Mr Gavin Bestford
Headteacher	Ms Karen Ferguson
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
Annual fees (day pupils)	£34,064 to £137,991 depending on assessed needs
Telephone number	01325 328090
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