

Acorn Park School

Andrews Furlong, Mill Road, Norwich, NR16 2HU

Inspection dates

24 June 2014

Reason for inspection

Concerns have been raised by the Department of Education about staff ratios, the high turnover of staff, staff contracts and the supervision of students. There were also concerns about notifications made to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). The Department requested that this emergency inspection examine the impact of the issues above on the regulations relating to welfare, health and safety and the suitability of staff. The impact of the school's staffing issues on its work with students was also examined.

Conclusions

Context and staffing

Since Acorn care and Education took over the running of the school in 2011, substantial investment has been undertaken in improving the quality of the accommodation. Calm/relaxation rooms are no longer used and resources have improved significantly. The environment better suits the needs of autistic students. The Principal has recently been given greater flexibility in managing staff pay so that it reflects the skills needed and the Principal is using this flexibility to better attract people to posts which are difficult to fill.

In the past 12 months, staff turnover has been considerable and, at times, recruitment of staff has been problematic. It has not been possible for the school to appoint a deputy headteacher, or a teacher to work with students with the most complex needs. In addition, the number of students has increased, reflecting the success of the school in catering for students with challenging behaviour, especially those who have not been attending school previously. In addition, the new leadership team's determination to ensure that only the best staff work with students has led to greater demands made of personnel. As a result, some staff have left the school as they have not been able to meet the increased expectations.

Staff reorganisation has been undertaken. New contracts have been issued. Staff roles, responsibilities and skills for a particular job title have been reviewed and pay levels rationalised. The vast majority of staff have accepted this and signed new contracts. It is a requirement that all new appointments have signed contracts.

A considerable range of training has been arranged and is about to be launched. The aim of this is to increase the skills of staff in dealing with students with autism, managing behaviour and in safeguarding. The school recognises that there are gaps in training due to the turnover of staff and is ensuring that all staff are trained to a level of competency befitting the criteria for each staff role.

Class groupings have appropriately been reorganised to reflect the needs of students. In one area of the school it has been difficult to secure a teacher with the right level of skill and there has been a lack of staff stability. The school has found employing a suitably qualified, skilled and experienced teacher to deal with students with the most complex

needs in the school's rural location a considerable challenge. However, a teacher with the right profile of skills is about to be appointed.

Despite all these difficulties, staffing levels are high and students are closely supervised.

Teaching and assessment

Students with the most complex needs are managed well. Staff use techniques successfully to defuse any potentially difficult behaviour. However, there is little evidence to show what students have actually learned over the day and in lessons observed little actual learning at a level appropriate to their needs took place. This is because work was insufficiently matched to their individual needs and abilities.

A complete baseline screening of students is being undertaken to establish students' cognitive ability and their 'p scale' or National Curriculum levels. The school is aware that the high turnover in staffing for students with the most complex needs has contributed towards a lack of confidence in assigning levels correctly. It is implementing clear plans to assure greater accuracy. In addition, the school does not yet measure the progress that students make in relation to students with similar needs nationally, so does not know whether the progress students make is good enough. The use of assessment information and how this links to the next steps that students need to achieve was a weakness identified at the time of the last inspection and remains so.

Leaders do not have an effective system for monitoring the quality of teaching across the school. Although informal observations take place, the school has yet to introduce rigorous checking on the quality of teaching and teachers' performance, although a process is about to be arranged by the senior staff.

Safeguarding students' welfare, health and safety

The school has detailed behaviour management plans based on the risk assessments carried out on students. Behavioural incidents are recorded in detail and there has been a high number relating to students with the most complex needs. The school does not have a process for monitoring and systematically analysing the reports of these incidents, and the school does not adapt or amend behaviour plans in the light of any patterns or trends found.

The school's safeguarding policy is thorough and designated persons have received the appropriate training. Although all staff are to undertake child protection training in July 2014, the school's records show that some staff appointed over the last two terms have not undertaken training as part of their induction and the school could not provide evidence that one member of the established team had undertaken training.

The school has high regard for students' safety and regular checks are undertaken on buildings and equipment. The site is secure and students and visitors are checked well and monitored. All the required testing of fire alarms and emergency lighting is undertaken, as are the fire extinguishers and electrical equipment. However, fire drills are not carried out with the frequency needed, given the high turnover of staff and the regular admission of new students.

The school's safe recruitment procedures for new staff are rigorous and systematically followed. All the required checks on staff are recorded on the school's single central register. Staff files are meticulously kept and interview records are detailed with references

followed up by a telephone call. The school and company are aware that any person who is under investigation, has been disciplined or dismissed because of a safeguarding issue will be referred to the DBS.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school requires improvement and must take action to meet The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010 ('the Regulations'), and associated requirements

- Ensure that teachers show a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensure these are taken into account in the planning of lessons. 3(d)
- Put in place a framework to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly, and ensure that information from such assessment is utilised to plan teaching so that pupils can make progress. 3(g)
- Ensure there is a framework in place by which pupil performance can be evaluated by reference to either the school's own aims, as provided to parents, and/or by national norms. 4
- Make arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school and ensure these arrangements have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State. 7
- Ensure the written policy to promote good behaviour amongst pupils which sets out the sanctions to be adopted in the event of pupils misbehaving, is implemented effectively. 11
- Ensure there is compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. 13

Inspection team

George Derby, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Information about this school

- Acorn Park School is a day and residential special school for students with an autistic spectrum disorder. The residential provision is a registered children's home. Students also have severe learning difficulties and severely challenging behaviour. The school is registered for 90 students, aged four to 19 years. There are currently 42 students on roll, aged 11 to 19 years, most of whom are boys. All have a statement of special educational needs. The school is located on an extensive campus outside the village of Banham in Norfolk. The school was acquired by Acorn Care and Education in May 2011.
- Since Acorn Care and Education took over the school there have been four Principals, the last commencing at the school in September 2013. A new headteacher was appointed in January 2014 (who had been deputy headteacher at the school since July 2013). Staff turnover, recently, has been high.
- The school's last full inspection was in October 2012 when it was judged to provide a satisfactory quality of education.
- Prior to this inspection there was an emergency inspection in May 2011 where concerns had been raised about students' behaviour and the use of 'calm' rooms. A subsequent monitoring visit took place in January 2012.
- At the same time as this current inspection, an interim inspection of the registered children's home's provision was undertaken. A separate report on the quality of care will be published on the Ofsted website.
- The school aims to 'encourage children and young people to be independent and to acquire the necessary social and life skills they need to help them access the wider community.'

School details

Unique reference number	135066
Social care unique reference number	SC435322
Inspection number	447141
DfE registration number	926/6152
<p>This inspection was conducted at the request of the registration authority for independent schools. It was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005.</p>	
Type of school	Special school for students with an autistic spectrum disorder
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	4–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	42
Number of boarders on roll	21
Proprietor	Acorn Care and Education
Chair	Natalie-Jane Macdonald (Chief Executive)
Headteacher	Jared Bubb
Date of previous school inspection	October 2012
Annual fees (day pupils)	£87,355
Annual fees (boarders)	£225,000
Telephone number	01953 888656
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