

Acorn Park School

Andrews Furlong, Mill Road, Norwich, NR16 2HU

Inspection dates

5 February 2015

Overall outcome

Independent school standards met

Context of the inspection

- The school's last full inspection was in October 2012 when it was judged to provide a satisfactory quality of education.
- An unannounced emergency inspection took place in June 2014 because of concerns raised with the Department of Education as to the impact of high staff turnover on the school's work with its students. That inspection examined issues in relation to welfare, health and safety, including the school's procedures for safeguarding students. It also coincided with an interim inspection of the registered children's home provision and a separate report was published on the quality of care.
- The emergency inspection found staff turnover had been high but was being addressed by the proprietors and the executive principal. It identified six of the independent school regulations as not being met, three relating to the quality of education and three to welfare, health and safety, as detailed below.
- The proprietors were required to submit an action plan to the Department of Education detailing how they would address these shortcomings. An evaluation of the action plan in October 2014 concluded that the action plan was likely to lead to the regulations being met, subject to implementation being seen.

Main findings

Teaching and assessment

- The inspection of June 2014 found that the school did not meet three standards relating to the quality of teaching and assessment. This was linked to the high turnover of staff and to the lack of an effective system for evaluating pupils' progress. Staff lacked confidence in assigning achievement levels to students and the school did not have a way of comparing the progress students made with that of others nationally. Staff therefore did not use information about students' current achievement to plan the next steps for them or to evaluate their progress. As a result learning was too slow for some students, particularly those with the most complex needs.
- In its action plan the school indicated that it would take steps to address these shortcomings through staff training, recruitment and performance management and the use of a commercial assessment package, alongside national progression guidance. The school has implemented its action plan effectively so that it now meets all the standards relating to the quality of education. This is because the proprietors and the executive principal have made new appointments to the school staff and because there is a substantial training programme in place that has already improved staff skills.
- The leadership team now regularly observe teaching and learning in classrooms and scrutinise staff planning to check that it takes account of what is known about students' learning to date. They hold regular meetings with staff to discuss students' progress; they hold staff to account

for this, but also support them in identifying how their teaching can improve further.

- Staff say they feel supported by these meetings and also because they now understand more about how well students are learning and what each student should do next. The inspector's observations, jointly conducted with the headteacher, confirmed that staff are using assessment information more systematically to plan work for students. A Key Stage 1 mathematics lesson took good account of pupils' levels and interest and pupils' learning was good as a result of this match and also the strong relationships between staff and pupils.
- These observations confirmed that the leadership were clear about the quality of teaching and learning currently and how it can improve further.
- In line with the school's action plan it has strengthened the ways in which it tracks students' progress and achievements and the ways it evaluate these. The leadership was able to present evidence of detailed tracking of individual students using a commercial package and the ways in which this information is collected. Staff have been trained so that they can assign students to levels more accurately and these levels are moderated by staff teams together and termly by the special educational needs coordinator.
- The data is analysed to assess students' term on term progress towards targets set according to their starting points and compared with the national progression guidance. This means the leadership and teachers are able to evaluate students' progress more effectively. This is already raising expectations for individual students and giving staff confidence to set more challenging work for some students, including those with more complex needs. The school is now well set up to use the data gained to consider the progress of different groups in the school, as well as that of individuals.
- The leadership have also invested considerably in other staff training, compiling a matrix to ensure that any gaps in expertise are swiftly identified. All staff currently are receiving weekly training through the Autism Educational Trust, to ensure that they feel confident about the most effective approaches to use with individual students.

Safeguarding students' welfare, health and safety

- The inspection in June 2014 found that, although the school had detailed behaviour plans in place, it did not have a process that monitored and analysed systematically behavioural incidents and amended behaviour plans as a result of any trends or patterns found. In addition there were shortcomings in the safeguarding training and records for some new staff and in the frequency with which fire drills were carried out.
- As a result of implementing its action plan the school has reviewed its behaviour policy and its use of sanctions and rewards; all staff have had training in relation to the policy. The implementation of the 'positive behaviour management' approach was observed being used consistently by staff during the inspection visit. Incident books were examined and confirmed that detailed records are kept using a consistent approach by all staff. These are now carefully analysed by the leadership, who has introduced a software package which will help to analyse trends and patterns. This development is too recent for such trends yet to have become evident.
- Students' behaviour plans are now regularly reviewed, alongside other aspects of achievement and progress through regular progress meetings with teachers. Records of such meetings show a clear focus on reflecting on triggers for students' behaviour and how best to provide for the future. All new staff are trained as to how to manage challenging behaviour, including understanding what might be the cause or triggers of such behaviour for the students in their care.

- The action plan indicated that all new appointments would receive safeguarding and child protection training on the first day of their appointment and that they would subsequently receive Level 2 training from an external provider. This training would be available several times during the year. The school has implemented this plan effectively but also decided to develop its training further. It has made the completion of an online child protection and safeguarding course compulsory for all staff in the first few days of an appointment, with the face-to face Level 2 training to take place within a term or earlier if possible. All staff within the school in the autumn term have had their Level 2 training. New staff for this term are in the process of taking the online training.
- The school's action plan indicated that the frequency of fire drills would be increased to at least one per term and more if felt necessary because of new arrivals. This was implemented immediately after the June 2014 inspection. The drills are recorded meticulously and records are checked regularly by the school's health and safety committee.
- The above actions mean that the school action plan is being effectively implemented and that the standards in relation to safeguarding students' welfare, health and safety are now met.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and associated requirements

Inspection team

Susan Lewis, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Information about this school

- Acorn Park is a day and residential special school for students with an autistic spectrum disorder. The school is registered for 90 students, aged four to 19 years. The school has never admitted early years children. The residential provision is a registered children's home. There are currently 52 students on roll, aged 5 to 19 years, most of whom are boys. There are nine students in the sixth form.
- Almost all students have complex learning needs in addition to autistic spectrum disorder. These include severe learning difficulties, often very challenging behaviour and medical needs. Students arrive at the school at any point during the school year. Many have not been in school for long periods of time, before attending Acorn Park. All have a statement of special educational needs or are in the process of assessment for an education, health and care plan.
- The school opened in May 2005 and is located in large grounds on the edge of the village of Banham in Norfolk. It was taken over by Acorn Care and Education in 2011. The proprietors have carried out considerable renovation of the premises since then to make the environment more suitable for students with the range of needs who attend the school.
- 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
Inspection number	455283
DfE registration number	926/6152

This inspection was conducted at the request of the registration authority for independent schools. It was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008.

Type of school	Independent special school
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	4–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	52
Of which, number of pupils in the sixth form	9
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	Acorn Care and Education
Chair	Natalie-Jane Macdonald (Chief Executive)
Headteacher	Jennifer Gill
Date of previous school inspection	24 June 2014
Annual fees (day pupils)	£40,000-£86,000
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