

Potterspury Lodge School

Potterspury Lodge, Towcester, Northamptonshire NN12 7LL

Inspection dates

7 March to 9 March 2016

The overall experiences and progress of children and young people

Requires improvement 3

The quality of care and support

Requires improvement 3

How well children and young people are protected

Good 2

The impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers

Requires improvement 3

Summary of key findings

The residential provision requires improvement because

- Weaknesses in leadership and management have affected the residential provision. While the new owner organisation has taken steps to improve the provision, these are not yet fully effective. The shortfalls have had, and continue to have, an impact on staff and students. Residential staff say that they feel unsupported and are not fully confident in leaders and managers.
- Some staff have not received training to support the care of students with a diagnosis of ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder). Consequently, they have not been given advice and guidance that would help them to understand presenting behaviours in the context of the students' disability. This is especially relevant as the school caters particularly for this area of need.
- The introduction of waking night staff is weakened by the position being covered solely by agency staff. This arrangement does not promote consistency of care. Additionally, no training, formal supervision, or appraisal are provided to agency staff so that they can be supported to develop their practice and skills.
- A failure to ensure a coordinated and well-planned approach to behaviour management has resulted in staff being unclear at times how best to manage individual needs.
- Weaknesses in consultation with parents have resulted in some feeling that their views are neither heard nor used to inform individual care arrangements.
- Safeguarding arrangements are a strength of this service. A safe and well-maintained living environment is provided. An involved professional commented that he is 'wholly satisfied' with the manner in which a safeguarding issue was

addressed by the service. Permanent staff have been provided with updated safeguarding children training. Consequently, they understand their roles and responsibilities in the protection of children and young people.

- Students contribute to residential arrangements. Residential and school council meetings provide opportunities for them to raise suggestions. They have access to a range of activities and leisure pursuits. This has helped them to grow in confidence and develop new social skills.
- The executive headteacher, new to the school in September 2015, is very enthusiastic about the advancement of the whole school, including the residential provision, and has initiated a range of service developments.

Compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools

The school does not meet the national minimum standards for residential special schools.

15.7 There is continuity of staff such that children's relationships are not overly disrupted. No more than half the staff on duty at any one time by day or night at the school are external agency staff or temporary staff who do not know the children very well.

13.2 There is clear leadership and management of the practice and development of residential and care provision in the school, and effective links are made between academic and residential staff.

19.1 Staff are equipped with the skills required to meet the needs of the children as they relate to the purpose of the setting. Training keeps them up-to-date with professional, legal and practice developments and reflects the policies, legal obligations and business needs of the school.

19.6 All staff have access to support and advice for their role. They also have regular supervision and formal annual appraisal of their performance.

Information about this inspection

One inspector conducted a three-day inspection that was announced on the morning of the first day. The inspector visited the one residential hostel in use, and made observations of the care and support received by students. The inspector reviewed a selection of policies, procedures, individual files and records. Discussions were held with residential students, care staff and members of the management team throughout the inspection. The inspector spoke by phone to two parents and reviewed survey feedback from two parents. The inspector also spoke with two involved professionals and reviewed survey feedback from one placing authority.

Inspection team

Mary Timms

Lead social care inspector

Full Report

Information about this school

Potterspury Lodge School is an independent residential special school for 43 boys aged eight to 19 years. The school offers termly boarding, weekly boarding and day provision. The ownership of the school changed in June 2015. The large national provider now operating the school has commenced a programme of service development, including refurbishment of premises.

One upgraded 'hostel' is operational in a temporary manner, split into three age groups on separate floors with dedicated staffing support. There are currently eight residential students.

The school is situated in south Northamptonshire and caters for children and young people with Asperger's syndrome, high-functioning autism, complex needs and challenging behaviour.

The residential provision was last inspected by a social care inspector at a full inspection in September 2014.

Inspection Judgements

The overall experiences and progress of children and young people

Requires improvement

Leaders and managers are not yet fully effective in identifying and tackling weaknesses. While the new provider is committed to service development and has introduced positive new initiatives, areas of weakness have had, and continue to have, an impact on the residential provision. Weaknesses include a lack of specialist training in autistic spectrum disorders. Additionally, the care staff informed the inspector that they are demoralised and often frustrated in their role, following changes in behaviour management approaches. They say that they do not feel supported by managers. Poor communication between care and education staff further contributes to staff frustration.

Adequate numbers of staff are available to support students. However, the sole use of agency staff to cover the waking night role means that students are supported overnight by temporary staff. Agency workers do not receive the same support and guidance received by other staff. For example, they have not been provided with formal supervision, appraisal or training.

Students have opportunities to make their views known, including access to an independent advocate. Residential meetings provide students with opportunities to raise concerns or make suggestions. A post-16 residential student leads on the school council. He spoke confidently, setting out how he raises issues from residential students, such as their concerns that the valued after-school clubs seem to have ceased recently. Plans to re-open the clubs were later pointed out to the inspector. This demonstrates that students' views are heard and acted on.

An inspection of the education provision undertaken by HMCI in February 2016 judged the provision as good in all areas, including the educational outcomes for students. Effective monitoring tools gather evidence and allow managers to review each student's academic progress.

For the most part, students enjoy the residential provision. Post-16 students spoke confidently about the positive impact that residential has had on their personal development. Comments include: 'Residential has been really good for me, I am now attending college and have lots of friends, definitely being in residential has helped me to achieve this.'

Relationships between residents are mixed. Older students confirm that generally they have positive relationships with each other, and that the staff support them if there is a point of conflict. However, there are times of conflict within the younger resident group. Staff encourage students to be empathetic and to interact with each other appropriately. This shows that students receive support to manage their emotions and to maintain positive relationships.

Two post-16 students stay on the top floor, known informally as 'the penthouse'. The addition of a refurbished kitchen, dining room and lounge provides them with the opportunity to develop independent living skills. Their comments confirm that they value this opportunity. One spoke with enthusiasm about looking forward to taking on more

responsibility for meal preparation. Students have the opportunity to take part in work experience in the community, which promotes a sense of maturity and independence. Some have been dedicating time to personal fitness and taking part in charity fundraising through running events. This shows that they are learning about disadvantage and personal commitment.

The safeguarding arrangements are strong, and updated policies and procedures reflect current legislation and multi-agency safeguarding procedures.

The quality of care and support

Requires improvement

Residential staff do not fully understand how best to support individual and group needs. Changes to care arrangements have left staff feeling disempowered and occasionally unsure in their role. Comments from staff reflect feelings of frustration at not having clear strategies to manage behaviours. They say that they are disempowered by a decision to restrict their use of previously common sanctions, without implementing alternative strategies. The use of sanctions is also an issue for students, who talked to the inspector about a perceived lack of fairness, referring to the use of sanctions for some and not others. This highlights a failure to ensure that coordinated and agreed behaviour management strategies are implemented and understood by staff and students. Comments from parents include more than one expression of concern that individual needs are not fully understood and supported. For example, 'xx (child) needs visual aids around the residential building and they are just not there.' This highlights a failure to ensure that well-planned strategies are developed in consultation with parents that are clearly understood by all staff and students.

Leaders and managers have failed to ensure that staff undertake training in Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). This is of particular concern because the care of children and young people with ASD is a stated specialism of the school.

An improving living environment is provided. The new owners have implemented a programme of refurbishment. Currently, one completely updated residential 'hostel' is in use, separated into floors for three different age groups.

Students access a range of leisure and sporting activities. Individual preferences are supported. For example, one student attends cadets and others choose to go horse riding. A school scout group provides additional opportunities, including outdoor pursuits and trips to a trampoline club.

Students benefit from the provision of a balanced menu. The catering staff are clearly valued team members. The executive headteacher talked with pride about 'all meals being made from scratch'. A strength in this area is that some vegetables used in catering are grown on site. A 'horticulture department' is developing within the school to expand this further.

Students are able to speak with their parents regularly by phone. Responses from parents about the quality of communication with residential staff are mixed. Parents

completing an online survey confirm that they can easily contact the staff who care for their child. Parents spoken to during this inspection emphasise that communication is at times inconsistent. Comments from parents include reference to difficulties for students wanting to use their own mobile device for face-to-face video connection calls with their parents. Concerns were expressed that there are inconsistencies in how rules are interpreted by different staff, cited by a parent as causing increased anxiety for them and their child.

The new owner of the school has added strength to arrangements for health and well-being by enhancing the role of therapists. In future, an occupational therapist will work in school four days a week instead of two, as previously. This will provide additional time with students, and will support residential staff in planning health and welfare needs. Staff work in partnership with parents to plan and support individual health needs. The school has well-developed links with local primary health care providers, which supports them to meet known and emerging health needs.

The new provider has implemented systems with the objective of enhancing joint working between school and residential staff. However, comments from staff show that communication is not always effective, for example, students returning to the hostel from school without any explanation.

How well children and young people are protected

Good

The designated safeguarding lead is supported by senior staff, who have also undertaken training in the management of safeguarding concerns. This means that there is always someone on duty or on call with the appropriate knowledge and skills to respond to safeguarding concerns. Updated safeguarding children training means that permanent staff are appropriately knowledgeable about issues such as internet safety, and understand their role and responsibilities in the protection of students. Agency staff working regularly in the home have not undertaken recent safeguarding children training.

Two historical safeguarding issues have been notified to the local authority since the last inspection. External safeguarding officers report positively on the manner in which these issues were reported, and the engagement of senior staff supporting the safeguarding investigation processes. The safeguarding referrals and subsequent investigations did not identify any serious shortfalls in safeguarding arrangements at the school.

Students are protected from unsuitable adults gaining employment in the school by the effective implementation of recruitment procedures. Staff and students challenge anyone walking around the school who is not showing a visitor's badge. This is a culture that further enhances the safety of students.

Students do not go missing or become involved in risky behaviours in the community. Physical intervention to manage behaviours is used as a last resort, with only two such incidents since the last inspection. Managers carefully evaluate all restraint practice to ensure that physical intervention is necessary and proportionate.

Students live in a safe environment. Environmental risk management strategies are

effectively implemented, in response to broad-ranging risk assessments. Reporting has been improved by the recording of 'walk-around checks', as identified as an area for further improvement at the last inspection. Fire safety is seen as important. Fire evacuation drills are undertaken each term. Records of fire drills have been updated recently to capture the names of all those involved. This supports effective management oversight of fire safety arrangements. Actions have also been taken to strengthen fire safety arrangements in response to a premises fire safety audit undertaken by an external agency in 2015.

The impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers

Requires improvement

There has been a period of management instability since the ownership of the school changed in June 2015. Staff lack confidence in some areas of the management structure, which has left them feeling extremely unsupported. While it is apparent that staff are very committed to their role, the divide between residential staff and managers is likely to distract staff, at the least, and is not beneficial to students.

An area of weakness is the staffing of the waking night position, introduced in September 2015. This is because the role relied solely on agency staff, new to the service and completely unknown to students when the role was introduced. Further shortfalls are linked to this night care position. The six agency staff covering the night care position have not been provided with any training or formal supervision to support them in their role. This raises the potential that the staff on duty overnight will not have the skills and knowledge to understand and meet individual needs.

The organisation has implemented a broad training programme for residential staff. However, specific training in relation to working with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) has not been provided. Staff are keen to learn more about ASD to support their work.

A core of residential staff have worked at the school for several years, and share their knowledge with less experienced team members. Staff are very committed and want only the very best for the students. Comments include, 'as care staff we all work really well together'. Some of the older students have used the residential provision for several years and spoke positively about their longstanding relationships with staff.

Complaints or concerns raised about the service are low in number. Concerns are listened to and investigated. Managers identify and act on learning points. While one complaint had not been updated in the formal complaints log, the evidence confirmed that the issue had been investigated. Action was taken during the inspection to update the complaints record.

Policies and procedures have been broadly reviewed and updated to reflect the new provider of the school. Weaknesses in behaviour management policies and procedures at the time of the last inspection have been addressed.

What inspection judgements mean

The experiences and progress of children and young people are at the centre of the inspection. Inspectors will use their professional judgement to determine the weight and significance of their findings in this respect. The judgements included in the report are made against 'Inspections of boarding and residential provision in schools: the inspection framework'.

Judgement	Description
Outstanding	A school where the experiences and progress of children and young people consistently exceeds the standard of good and results in sustained progress and achievement. The outcomes achieved by children and young people are outstanding and the impact the boarding/residential provision has had in supporting this progress and achieving these outcomes is clearly evidenced.
Good	A school providing effective services which exceed minimum requirements. Children and young people are protected and cared for and have their welfare safeguarded and promoted.
Requires improvement	A school where there are no serious or widespread failures that result in children and young people's welfare not being safeguarded or promoted. However, the overall outcomes, experiences and progress of children and young people are not yet good.
Inadequate	A school where there are serious and/or widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded or if their care and experiences are poor and they are not making progress.

School details

Unique reference number	122136
Social care unique reference number	SC012962
DfE registration number	928/6039

This inspection was carried out under The Children Act 1989, as amended by the Care Standards Act 2000, having regard to the national minimum standards for residential special schools.

Type of school	Residential Special School
Number of boarders on roll	8
Gender of boarders	Mixed
Age range of boarders	Eight to 18
Headteacher	
Date of previous boarding inspection	11 September 2014
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