

North East Centre for Autism – Aycliffe School

Cedar Grove, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham DL5 6UN

Inspection dates–	26–28 April 2016
Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Sixth form provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Leaders have a relentless focus on identifying, and then meeting, pupils' individual needs. Consequently, pupils make good progress in their learning, communication and personal development from their low and varied starting points into school.
- The sharper focus on improving the quality of teaching since the last inspection, and particularly since the arrival of the new headteacher, is making its mark. Teaching is usually good and contributes to pupils' improving literacy and numeracy skills successfully.
- Teachers and staff are well trained to work with pupils with autism. They know their pupils well and are adept at implementing the positive behaviour strategy. Consequently, pupils' behaviour and attitudes improve well during their time here.
- The broad curriculum is enriched by a wide range of activities that build pupils' confidence and extend their horizons as well as successfully promoting their academic, vocational and personal development.
- Leadership and management are good. Trustees and school leaders have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and are driving the school's improvement forward successfully. They have tackled weaknesses identified at the time of the last inspection effectively, including ensuring that all independent school standards are now met.
- The impact of the school's provision for learners of sixth-form age is good. Good-quality teaching, pastoral support, the vocational curriculum, practical development of functional skills, life skills and regular work experiences prepare learners well for their next steps after school.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Not enough teaching is outstanding.
- Following breaks, sometimes teachers' move into lesson activities at too leisurely a pace, delaying the start of the well-planned lesson. When this happens, pupils' progress in the lesson is not always as rapid as it could be.
- Regular performance reports to the trustees do not always provide information about the progress pupils are making towards their academic and other developmental targets. It is therefore difficult for them to check the impact of the school's work on pupils' progress and achievements often enough.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of teaching that ensures the rapid progress of pupils by:
 - embedding further the strategies being used to drive improvement in the quality of teaching
 - ensuring that time planned for learning is always well utilised.

- Improve the rigour with which trustees can evaluate the impact of the school's work by ensuring that leaders always identify the progress pupils are making towards their academic and developmental targets in the formal termly reports to trustees and the director of education.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- There is a shared and increasingly successful vision from the trustees, chief executive, director of education and headteacher, to ensure the best possible outcomes for pupils so that they can reach their full potential and be well prepared for their future lives. Leaders have tackled the weaknesses identified at the time of the last inspection well and ensured that the independent school standards are now fully met.
- Leaders review the school's work regularly and have an accurate understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Succinct improvement plans stem from these reviews. Plans are checked for impact by the director of education through regular reporting on progress of priorities and the headteacher's detailed reports about the progress each pupil is making towards their targets. Reports to trustees do not always include this pupil progress information, so it is hard for them to know precisely enough the impact of the school's work on pupils' achievements over time.
- The recently appointed headteacher's calm and clear leadership is accelerating the improvements begun after the last inspection. She has raised the bar in terms of expectations of staff, for example, by leading improvements in the quality of teaching and teachers' use of assessment of pupils' abilities in the classroom. This is ensuring that pupils, whatever their needs or starting points into school, are making good progress in their learning and development.
- In discussions, staff say that they value the detailed, constructive feedback they receive following observations of teaching and the support they receive to improve further. They also report positively on the increased rigour of performance management arrangements and the range of training opportunities they have to improve their skills, especially in understanding the needs of pupils with autism.
- Not all staff are as positive about the necessary changes, and some who responded to the inspection questionnaire expressed concerns about leadership. Leaders know about the concerns some staff have as the expectations on them have increased. The headteacher has already set in place actions to improve communication and understanding. Previously high levels of staff changes have lessened in recent times.
- The teaching of communication skills is integral to the school's work. Signs, symbols or written words are used at the right level for each pupil to ensure that they can understand the routines of the day, communicate their ideas and feelings, and access their reading, writing, mathematics and other activities successfully.
- The promotion of equality of opportunity is a strength. Every effort is made to provide a broad, balanced, personalised curriculum and support for each pupil that builds on their individual needs and interests. This can be seen in the diversity of activities that pupils can take part in during the day and the many visits out of school that broaden pupils' horizons and also develop the life skills so needed for their futures.
- The curriculum prepares pupils well for life as citizens in modern Britain through well-chosen and planned activities in personal social, health and economic education (PSHE), circle time and tutorials on themes that include democracy, the rule of law, respect and tolerance of others different to themselves.
- The wide range of activities pupils undertake also have a positive impact on pupils' life skills and good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Shopping trips, visits to farms, travel training and activities like orienteering and swimming build pupils' confidence, self-esteem and resilience. Visits to local places of worship enhance their understanding of world faiths. Work supporting the local food bank provides them with a strong sense of community and purpose in helping others in times of need.
- Learners of sixth-form age are well supported in developing their vocational and life skills and achieve well. They follow a wide range of courses that are appropriate to their needs and interests, some of which provide formal accreditations such as GCSEs and functional skills. Every effort is made to provide the courses they want to follow. For example, a number of pupils attend the society's post-16 provision next door, Thornbeck College, to study enterprise activities, woodwork or car maintenance.
- All pupils from Year 8 receive carefully planned and effective independent careers advice and guidance. Strong and developing links with local and national businesses and the college next door support the provision of regular work-experience, enterprise and vocational activities that enable pupils to develop skills they will need when they move on. Such activities, together with visits out of school, independent careers advice and visitors from public services, broaden pupils' understanding of the world of work well. All pupils made successful transitions on to their chosen college or training courses successfully last year.
- The headteacher is developing her role successfully and receives good support from the director of education, senior leaders from the society's partner school in Sunderland and Thornbeck College.

■ The governance of the school

- Governance is good. Trustees work closely and effectively with leaders to ensure that the school continues to improve. They worked together quickly after the last inspection to tackle identified weaknesses.
 - Trustees have ensured appropriate and improved performance management, supervision and appraisal arrangements are in place for the headteacher and staff. This is contributing to the improvements in teaching and learning across the school. They monitor the work of the school through regular visits, formal reports and termly review of plans.
 - Reports to the trustees have not always identified precisely enough the progress pupils are making over time. This has limited their ability to hold the headteacher to account fully for the impact of the school's work.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Safeguarding practice is vigilant and informed by a range of up-to-date policies and the regular training of staff. All staff have been trained in line with the most recent Department for Education guidance and have a good understanding of what to do when they have concerns. This includes concerns about risks to pupils' safety from sexual exploitation or extremism and radicalisation. Thorough risk assessments are in place for all activities and for each pupil. Procedures for the recruitment of staff are robust and recruitment files are in good order. The school works closely and successfully with parents and agencies to make sure that pupils are safe and protected in times of need.
 - An anonymous complaint was made the Department for Education (DfE) regarding concerns about the quality of teaching, pupils' welfare and leadership. This inspection has found these aspects to be good.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Good-quality relationships between staff and pupils are typically seen in learning activities across the school. Staff are well trained in understanding the needs of pupils with autism. Very careful transitions into school and detailed assessments of pupils' abilities on entry ensure that staff have a good understanding of the learning, communication, social and emotional needs of pupils.
- Teachers use this knowledge well to plan the individual learning experiences that each pupil will carry out and to establish appropriate expectations of what they will achieve in each lesson. This means that the most-able, disadvantaged or lower-ability pupils are provided with work that is usually matched well to their current levels of understanding in order to help them move on quickly in their learning.
- Occasionally, teachers take too long moving from breaktimes or circle time to start the lesson, so important learning time is lost. Nevertheless, the good knowledge teachers, key workers and staff have about pupils' complex behaviours means that those who experience difficulties settling down are well supported to reduce their anxiety and stress and join in lessons as soon as they are able.
- The broad curriculum where creativity is encouraged is used well as a means of energising pupils to participate fully in their work. This can be seen in the way that sensory art work captivates pupils' interests alongside improving their skills, knowledge and understanding in the subject. Practical application of mathematics and literacy is used to enhance pupils' development of their basic skills and life skills within vocational, academic and creative activities.
- The high levels of staff mean that pupils are well supported during their learning. Staff are adept at making it very clear what pupils need to do to achieve their individual targets. Teachers are skilled in posing questions that help pupils to think about their work and then about what they might need to do next. This was seen in one literacy lesson, where the teacher expertly teased out a pupil's knowledge of letters and sounds to help him build his own words unaided.
- Pupils receive constant oral feedback on what they are doing well and are then challenged to think for themselves and tackle their work independently. Signs, pictures and symbols as well written comments are used as feedback mechanisms appropriate to the differing levels of understanding of each pupil. For example, the most-able pupils receive detailed oral feedback and were seen to respond to it articulately in lessons like food technology and enterprise activities.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. Over three quarters of pupils had experienced significant disruption to their learning before arriving here. High-quality individual care and support helps pupils to thrive socially and personally and build their confidence and self-esteem, preparing them well for their next steps.
- Partnerships with parents are strong. All parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire are full of praise for the way their children's lives have been transformed. One parent's comment, 'This is a fantastic school, I have seen my son thrive immensely during his time here,' reflects the views of many. One of the two parents who spoke to the inspector also reflected this view.
- Pupils who responded to the pupils' survey report positively about the safety and care they receive. Discussions with pupils confirmed that they are happy in school, feel safe, that bullying of any kind is rare and that staff are always on hand when times get difficult or if they have a concern. There have been no records of incidents of bullying in the school's detailed incident recording logs in recent times.
- There is a strong emphasis on ensuring pupils' safety and to help them take responsibility for their own behaviour and safety, and the safety of others. The PSHE curriculum, tutorials and circle time ensure that pupils are taught in a practical way about risks to their own safety, both in school and beyond. Work includes guidance on drugs, alcohol, sexual health, mental health, travel safety and life skills. All potential risks to pupils' safety in school, during activities and on outside visits are carefully checked and risk assessed.
- Records from case files and incident logs show the very detailed work with agencies and parents to support pupils and their families in times of great need.
- Work identified in the school's 'equalities and diversity' and 'British values' calendars add to the range of activities that support pupils' good social, moral and cultural development. International Women's Day, World Autism Day, St George's Day, the local elections, enterprise work and the raft of charity work pupils undertake are just a few examples of the extensive, diverse and effective activities.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. The school's 'positive, proactive behaviour strategy' has helped staff to manage pupils' complex behavioural needs effectively. Lessons are generally calm and purposeful and pupils respond to teachers' requests appropriately. Vigilant staff make sure that potential incidents are tackled calmly and promptly, to minimise risks of escalation and to ensure that the learning of others is not disrupted.
- Individualised activities at the start of the school day enable pupils to overcome anxieties that are barriers to their learning and good behaviour. The smooth passage to circle time adds to pupils' preparedness for the next steps in the lesson. They enjoy the routine and gain a clear understanding of what activities they will be undertaking throughout the day, reducing anxiety and providing a calm start to learning.
- Lunchtimes are an enjoyable occasion, with pupils enjoying and sharing their meal with the staff and other pupils. Leaders have developed a respectful atmosphere. They ensure a balance of meeting pupils' complex needs and encouraging successful social interaction and communication where possible.
- Attendance rates shoot up once pupils settle into school and are well above that found in special schools nationally. At 94.2% they are broadly similar to that found in mainstream schools across the country. Attendance of groups and individuals is tracked rigorously and timely action is taken with parents and agencies to tackle any barriers to attendance quickly and get pupils back on track and in school.
- Incidents of misbehaviour are meticulously recorded and responded to by staff. They are monitored closely by leaders and through regular reports to trustees. Improvements to the way the school responds to pupils' complex behavioural needs has resulted in a significant fall in the number of pupils who need to be restrained for their own safety and that of others in the past year.
- There are no permanent or fixed-period exclusions because of the way the school works with parents, local authorities and other agencies to modify and adapt the curriculum and support to pupils in times of crisis. Offsite activities run by school staff for three pupils with high levels of need have been developed in consultation with external agencies, parents and pupils. Leaders monitor the activities carefully for impact on pupils' learning and development and all activities are risk assessed to assure pupils' safety continuously.

Outcomes for pupils

are good

- Pupils come to school often with significant gaps in their education. This, coupled with their complex needs, means they often enter school with very low starting points. Pupils' books, observation of learning, teachers' detailed assessments of pupils' skills alongside individual learning files show the good impact of teaching on pupils' learning and progress over time.
- The school's detailed assessment information shows that nearly all pupils make the progress expected of them and a significant proportion make more than expected progress in their basic skills in English and mathematics and towards meeting their other individual targets. Improved teaching and more effective pupil assessment procedures over the last year have resulted in a significant increase in the proportion of pupils exceeding expectations. Currently around 42% of pupils in school have exceeded expectations; this is above that found for the whole of last year.
- Pupils make good progress in their social communication, reading, writing and mathematics development because of the strong emphasis on developing these important skills. Pupils also make good progress in subjects like art, food technology and science.
- The few more-able pupils make good progress in English and mathematics because of the individualised programmes for each pupil and the way basic skills teaching is threaded through other subjects including practical and creative subjects. The impact of this can be seen in accreditations older pupils achieve. However, there are too few pupils to report their attainment without individual pupils being identified.
- Good, targeted support to disadvantaged pupils or those of very low cognitive ability ensure that they make incremental and successful gains in their learning.
- Pupils' individual termly 'achievement album' records their successes across the curriculum. This album shows parents in a very visual way the progress their children are making in, for example, literacy, numeracy, science, work-related skills, art, sensory work, geography, music or PSHE. Each one is bespoke to the individual pupil and exemplifies the person-centred approach used within the context of a broad and balanced curriculum. It also identifies the use of practical activities to energise pupils to take an active part in their learning.
- Annual reports to parents about their children's academic attainments and progress, their social and communication, personal development and their attendance and behaviour in school are very informative. This was an area of weakness at the time of the last inspection.

Sixth form provision

is good

- The expertise of the headteacher makes an important contribution to the good leadership of the sixth form. This has driven improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, which is good, and the good and improving links with businesses, colleges and the society's college next door.
- The personalised 16 to 19 study programmes build on learners' previous achievements in school. They are developed to take into account each learner's individual needs and include very carefully planned transitions and taster sessions. The practically based curriculum is interwoven with functional skills to ensure that learners achieve well in their English and mathematics as well as their vocational subjects. As far as possible learning takes place as in 'real-life' situations.
- The value of the links with the college can be seen in learners' work in the 'custom confectionary' social enterprise class. Learners talked about how they are required to identify the cost of the ingredients to make fudge to their own recipes, and then seek out the principal of the college to secure the right funding to buy the ingredients. They work maturely and productively, with strong focus on the health and safety requirements of an industrial kitchen. They proudly showcased their innovative and tasty products. Vocational opportunities at college also include car maintenance and woodworking.
- Work experience is a strength, with learners taking part in work experiences once a week. Staff report how this work enables learners to be transformed into confident young people, who dress appropriately, get to work on time, develop teamworking skills and follow instructions. Learners learn how to be safe in the workplace and are proud of their endeavours.
- The school's successful focus on developing learners' independence skills and their social inclusion can be seen through the many visits into the community. Each activity is planned to develop learners' individual skills, with thorough risk assessment and plans in place. Learners have volunteering opportunities such as working in the food bank, and placements in local shops and department stores.
- Older pupils value their roles as student counsellors and their involvement in supporting younger pupils in

enrichment activities. Some older learners are adept at carrying out health and safety checks, and reporting hazards and maintenance issues to leaders.

- All learners who start the 16 to 19 programme continue it to the end. Attendance rates in the sixth-form age group, although slightly below that of younger pupils, are at least in line with those found nationally. Term-by-term analysis shows variable attendance because of the small numbers of learners.
- The impact of the provision, including effective personalised advice and guidance, ensures that learners are well prepared for their next steps into the wider world. This can be seen in their successful progression to sustained education, employment and training opportunities. All learners moved on to training and college courses last year and the school's tracking information shows they have maintained their involvement in these opportunities successfully.

School details

Unique reference number	139329
Inspection number	10017429
DfE registration number	840/6013

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, 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
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	27
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	12
Number of part time pupils	1
Proprietor	North East Autism Society
Chair of trustees	Mr Gavin Bestford
Headteacher	Nicola Brown
Annual fees (day pupils)	£24,7000 to £137,991
Telephone number	01325 328090
Website	www.ne-as.org.uk
Email address	nicola.brown@ne-as.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	28–30 January 2014

Information about this school

- Aycliffe School, the North East Centre for Autism, is a small school. It is one of two independent schools run by the North East Autism Society. It provides education for pupils with autism. The school opened in January 2013 and is registered by the DfE for 55 pupils aged three to 19 years. There are currently 27 pupils on the school's roll, aged between six and 19 years.
- Pupils are divided into two classes for those aged below 14 years and two for pupils over 14 years. Pupils are then grouped according to their individual needs and developmental stage. The 12 pupils aged between 16 and 19 years access the 16 to 19 study programme within the post-14 classes.
- Pupils attend school full time. Very occasionally pupils are provided temporarily with part-time or offsite curriculum provision to meet additional, emerging complex needs. Pupils accessing an offsite curriculum are taught by school staff and are integrated back to full-time provision when their needs are met. One pupil is currently accessing a part-time curriculum, with a plan to have full reintegration shortly, and three are taking part in activities across the community with dedicated society staff.
- Few pupils come from minority ethnic communities. All pupils have either a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Pupils are funded by a number of local authorities. Currently these are: Durham, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, Darlington, York, Hartlepool, Stockton-on-Tees, Northumberland, Gateshead, Newcastle and Sunderland. The cost of each varies according to pupils' individual needs. There is no identified additional funding for disadvantaged pupils.
- A new headteacher took up her post in the autumn term 2015. The school was last inspected in January 2014, where it was judged to require improvement.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out over two and a half days. The DfE requested that Ofsted conduct the inspection at no notice and earlier than that usually planned for schools that require improvement. This was due to a complaint made about the school that raised concerns about the quality of teaching, welfare and leadership and management. The complaint was considered as part of this inspection.
- The inspector observed learning in nine lessons, four of which were observed jointly with the headteacher.
- Discussions were held with the headteacher and director of education for the society, a group of staff, pupils, the chief executive and chair of trustees for the North East Autism Society. A telephone conversation was held with a manager from one of the local authorities that place pupils at the school.
- The six responses to Ofsted's parent questionnaire, 'Parent View', were considered, as well as the outcomes of telephone calls from two parents. The views of 24 staff who completed the Ofsted staff questionnaire were also considered.
- The inspector checked the school's compliance with the independent school standards, including the standards the school did not meet at the time of the last inspection. She reviewed a wide range of documentation, including those regarding the safety and welfare of pupils, statutory policies, information on the progress pupils make over time, and behaviour and attendance records.

Inspection team

Margaret Farrow, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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