

Acorns School

19b Hibbert Lane, Marple, Stockport, Cheshire SK6 7NN

Inspection dates

10–12 May 2016

Overall effectiveness

Good

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Satisfactory

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Leaders and managers, including the proprietor, share a common vision for excellence and work tirelessly to achieve this. They care passionately for the welfare of their pupils and have established positive relationships. As a result, pupils develop their levels of trust so they feel safe and secure.
- Pupils acquire knowledge and understanding in a range of subjects, including life skills, because teachers design activities that capture pupils' interests so they learn well.
- Pupils make good progress in a wide range of subjects, including English, mathematics and science.
- Systems to ensure pupils are protected from risks and stay safe, including from the dangers of radicalisation and extremism, are strong.
- The school meets all of the independent school standards.
- Pupils are proud of their school and the help it provides for them to overcome obstacles to their learning. Their conduct around the school is exemplary. Pupils are inquisitive and eager learners who actively seek additional support to help them achieve well.
- Pupils know how to adopt healthy lifestyles and stay safe, including while online, because of the effective teaching they receive.
- Pupils make appropriate and informed choices about their next stages of education and careers because of the high-quality information, advice and guidance the school provides.
- The school's broad and balanced curriculum meets pupils' needs and provides them with many opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding to achieve national accreditations. It prepares them well for life in modern Britain.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Teachers sometimes miss opportunities to develop pupils' application of skills across a range of subjects in order to make more rapid progress.
- Not all middle leaders have fully developed their leadership skills to ensure they have the best impact on improving their areas of responsibility.
- Teaching does not ensure pupils consistently and systematically develop their knowledge and understanding in geography and history.
- Leaders' records, analysis and evaluations are sometimes too descriptive and do not always focus sharply enough on the impact of actions.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the 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?

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that leaders' monitoring sharply focuses on and evaluates the impact of actions
 - developing further the leadership skills of middle leaders, particularly those who are new to their roles.

- Enhance the quality of teaching, particularly in subjects other than English, mathematics and science, to ensure that pupils make better progress and achieve the very best they can.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- Senior leaders have ensured that all independent school standards are met.
- Leaders and managers have high expectations of their staff and pupils which are centred on the school's ethos of mutual respect and care. As a result, pupils develop their confidence as learners and make good progress both academically and in overcoming barriers to their individual needs.
- Leaders work closely as a team with the proprietor's senior managers and have developed a clear vision to provide the best education they can. Staff, who are overwhelmingly supportive of the school's leadership team, share this vision.
- The school's broad and balanced curriculum effectively promotes pupils' literacy and numeracy skills as well as developing their knowledge and understanding in a broad range of other subjects. The curriculum is augmented by a wide range of extra-curricular activities, which ensure pupils' specific needs and interests are met.
- Leaders ensure they meet the requirements for providing information, including those required on the school's website, for parents, carers and others. Through their detailed reports, they share appropriate information regarding pupils' progress and their next steps for development with parents and with local authorities, for those pupils with statements of educational needs or education, health and care plans. Regular contact with parents, carers and a number of care homes which host pupils attending the school means that leaders and teachers quickly put into place appropriate actions to meet pupils' changing needs and keep them safe. Local authority placement officers and care homes praise the positive impact the school has on developing the achievement of pupils. They value the school's actions to provide a curriculum tailored to individual needs, which helps pupils to succeed in the workplace.
- Leaders effectively implement suitable systems for evaluating the performance of staff that links directly to any pay awards. Staff have appropriate opportunities to develop their roles by taking on additional responsibilities, such as leading a subject.
- Teachers' and teaching assistants' training and development is closely linked to the school's priorities, particularly those related to keeping children safe. All staff have received up-to-date training in physical restraint and different aspects of safeguarding. Staff are vigilant to reduce the risks to pupils from radicalisation and extremism. Additional training on curriculum subjects, provided by a local authority, ensures that teachers' skills are further developed.
- Leaders' close attention to the small number of pupils who are educated away from the school site ensures that their education is effective. Detailed plans for any off-site teaching, including risk assessments, monitoring plans and regular reviews, are established before any placement or off-site provision begins. Leaders' regular visits ensure pupils are safe and teaching is effective. Consequently, these pupils make good progress in their learning.
- School improvement planning is effective. It identifies appropriate priorities for improvement because leaders have a detailed understanding of the school. Regular reviews of current development priorities and issues faced by pupils, during weekly briefing meetings, ensure that staff are well informed. Frequent monitoring of teaching by leaders ensures that they know the school's strengths and weaknesses. Through their observations of teaching, leaders systematically check that teachers act upon areas for development that have been identified. However, leaders' observations sometimes focus too much on the implementation of policies or teachers' actions and not enough on evaluating the impact of these on pupils' learning and behaviour.
- Middle leadership is developing well. Leaders encourage both teachers and teaching assistants, who have particular skills or interests such as in art, to take on more significant roles in leading improvements. These roles are relatively new and, as a result, not all middle leaders have had the opportunities or training to fully develop their leadership skills.
- **The governance of the school**
 - The company's officers, including the director for education, frequently visit the school and have a detailed understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. The headteacher is also a senior manager within the company and supports the leadership of other schools. Her identification and subsequent effective sharing of good practice, including the provision of secondment opportunities elsewhere for individuals, ensure staff continuously improve their skills.

- The company has effective procedures in place to monitor the performance of the school rigorously. Weekly performance reports and immediate notifications of any issues ensure that senior managers hold school leaders closely to account.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The proprietor ensures rigorous and robust checking of the suitability of adults working with children at the school. Effective procedures are in place to deal with any concerns. Senior leaders' consistent and thorough implementation of the school's safeguarding and safety procedures ensure pupils feel safe.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve socially and academically. Positive relationships between staff and pupils ensure that a strong bond of trust is formed. Consequently, pupils develop their self-esteem and become confident learners who achieve well. For example, key stage 4 pupils in science maintained their concentration over a significant period of time to meticulously record their observations arising from a practical investigation about emulsifiers and egg yolks.
- Teachers and teaching assistants work closely and effectively together. They know each other's strengths and frequently lead different parts of the lesson, alternating the leadership of learning in lessons based on their recognition of each other's skills. Teachers and teaching assistants use questioning well to probe pupils' knowledge and develop their understanding. Sometimes, however, they are too quick to give pupils answers or undertake their work for them. Consequently, on these occasions, progress slows because pupils are not learning or applying their skills to new challenges.
- Teachers' good knowledge of how pupils' special educational needs or disability can affect their learning ensures that curriculum topics are chosen carefully and classroom environments are developed specifically to allow pupils to engage well in their learning. 'Chill out' rooms provide comfortable and safe places where pupils can address their anger issues or relax with appropriate games or interests. This ensures that pupils' learning is not interrupted when their peers may need time away from class.
- Teachers use their good subject knowledge effectively to promote pupils' learning, particularly in English, mathematics, science and art. They generally plan learning that effectively builds upon prior knowledge and understanding so that pupils make good progress, in a wide variety of subjects. However, teachers' weaker subject knowledge of history and geography means that pupils' work is not always set at the correct level, resulting in activities that are either too easy or too hard for them. Consequently, pupils do not systematically develop their knowledge and understanding in these subjects as strongly as in others.
- Teachers' effective use of ongoing assessment to check pupils' understanding means they frequently amend their teaching or lessons to ensure pupils make progress. Teachers do not always make the best use of opportunities to let pupils consolidate and enhance their understanding by applying newly acquired skills in other subjects.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Pupils overcome many obstacles to their learning, especially those relating to low self-esteem and their ability to self-regulate their behaviour. This is because of leaders' effective actions, well-established routines, high expectations and clear boundaries. Consequently, nearly all pupils become enthusiastic and inquisitive learners who demonstrate confidence in tackling new experiences and challenges. Pupils who spoke with the inspector were effusive in their praise for what the school had done for them. Pupils are articulate and able to identify what differences the school has made and how staff don't criticise and judge but seek solutions. As one pupil commented, reflecting the views of others, 'I am so much better because I came here.'
- Pupils value the excellent relationships they have with all adults in the school. They recognise and appreciate the extra work staff do to help them succeed, including taking them on college open days to ensure they make the most appropriate choices for their future. Pupils say, 'Teachers are fantastic, they really help you.'
- Opportunities such as participation in the town's Festival of Remembrance and other charity events allow pupils to become more involved in the local community and quickly develop their social skills. Regular open days are well attended and are themed by leaders to ensure pupils learn from them. Excellent links

with local businesses provide older pupils with opportunities to develop their social and employment skills effectively, for example through work placements in hair and beauty salons or local shops.

- Pupils receive high-quality independent advice and guidance about careers and future educational opportunities. Open days for businesses allow pupils to meet employers and learn about careers. Visits to colleges and one-to-one coaching by staff ensure pupils carefully evaluate their options and choose the most appropriate courses or career pathways. External support from local authority careers advisers ensures independent balance to the information pupils receive. Consequently, pupils make well-informed choices about their next steps and almost all proceed into education or gain employment.
- Pupils' welfare is at the heart of the school's ethos. Excellent health education programmes improve pupils' abilities to make informed choices regarding their sexual health and the risks of smoking and drugs, including alcohol. Pupils' awareness of healthy eating has been enhanced by recent studies of the sugar content of their favourite energy drinks. Pupils have excellent knowledge about staying safe in the community and while online, including the threats posed by identity theft and online fraud, because of the high-quality guidance they receive.
- Pupils' participation in democratic elections for their school council and curriculum projects on anti-racism, respect and diversity effectively promote fundamental British values, while visits from organisations such as Stonewall enhance further pupils' understanding of sexuality and gender identity. Consequently, pupils are prepared well for life in modern Britain.
- Opportunities for pupils to enhance their spiritual, moral and cultural understanding are abundant throughout the school. Pupils participate in religious education in which they study a variety of faiths in addition to Christianity. For example, some pupils have recently visited a Hindu temple to study the Hindu festival of spring, Holi. The effective use by leaders of educational visits, including visits to Manchester Jewish Museum, the Liverpool Maritime and Slavery Museum and the Museum of Science and Industry, enhance pupils' learning beyond the classroom so that they feel part of wider society.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Pupils' conduct around the school is exemplary. Pupils are polite and welcoming. They are proud of what they are doing and are often eager to talk about their learning and school experiences. Pupils who requested individual meetings with the inspector were articulate, thoughtful and courteous; they spoke highly of the positive difference the school had made to their lives.
- Pupils show a genuine care of each other, exemplified by one older pupil who explained how fortunate they felt to be able to help younger pupils improve their self-confidence and overcome the emotional challenges of living away from home. Pupils are eager to become involved in lessons. They often overcome significant shyness and issues of trust to work very effectively in collaboration with each other, irrespective of age. One example of this, shared by pupils, was that older pupils frequently work together in lessons, such as in health and beauty, with pupils who are much younger so they can all develop new skills.
- All pupils say they feel safe in school and that there is no bullying. Pupils are confident teachers would immediately deal effectively with any bullying that occurred. Older pupils stressed that it was not just the teachers who would not tolerate bullying but pupils also, stating with respect to bullying, 'We wouldn't have it at all. We are a family in this school.'
- All staff consistently and effectively implement the school's behaviour policy. Consequently, it is highly effective in modifying pupils' previously challenging, aggressive and violent behaviours. The clear communication and fair and rigorous application of rewards and sanctions ensure that all pupils have a clear understanding of what is and is not acceptable behaviour in school. As a result, the need for staff to use physical restraint is rare, but when required is done so proportionately and in line with school policy.
- Pupils enter Acorns with a history of extremely poor attendance at their previous schools. All pupils make rapid and significant improvements to their attendance records because they enjoy school. Currently, two thirds of pupils achieve full attendance and three quarters achieve above the national expectations. Leaders have strong systems in place to deal with absences, including immediate phone calls to pupils' homes to identify reasons for absence and, if necessary, to organise additional support to continue their learning. Occasions where pupils leave school without permission are extremely rare because of the effective systems leaders have in place to keep pupils safe and engaged in their learning.
- The effective use of alternative provision contributes strongly to some pupils' personal development and achievement. Carefully planned learning and placements build upon personal interests. Consequently, the small number of pupils who are taught away from school achieve well and develop good attitudes to learning and positive self-esteem.

Outcomes for pupils are good

- Nearly all pupils have a statement of special educational needs or disability or an education, health and care plan in place, while others are currently undergoing assessment for such plans. Pupils make good progress from their starting points in a wide variety of subjects, including English, science and art, because of the effective teaching and support they receive. However, in geography and history, pupils do not make as strong progress because these subjects are not taught as well.
- Pupils make rapid progress from their starting points in reading. Over half of those currently in school have age-expected reading abilities, while others are rapidly closing the gap in attainment. This is because pupils read widely and often. Leaders and teachers strongly promote a love of books. Classes are well resourced and common themes in lessons, including the plays of Shakespeare, systematically develop pupils' understanding. Additional stocks of books placed in 'chill out' rooms are focused on pupils' individual interests. This further enhances pupils' access to books of their choice.
- Some pupils benefit from additional therapeutic support, including play therapy. This support, provided by company experts, complements the high levels of effective assistance in the classrooms. As a result of these additional therapies, pupils improve their abilities to self-regulate their behaviour and gain greater access to learning opportunities, both in and out of school.
- All key stage 3 and 4 pupils currently on roll have gained external accreditation for many aspects of their work in a variety of subjects, including writing, mathematics, physical education, outdoor education and life skills.
- In 2015, all pupils leaving the school gained a range of qualifications in English, mathematics and science while some achieved more advanced qualifications, including GCSEs. All pupils who left the school in 2015 achieved a place in further education to continue their learning.

School details

Unique reference number	131551
Inspection number	10006097
DfE registration number	356/6027

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	5–17 Years
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	24
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	Keys Childcare Ltd
Chair	Nicola Kelly
Headteacher	Naseem Akhtar
Annual fees (day pupils)	£37,050
Telephone number	0161 449 5820
Website	www.keyschildcare.co.uk/services/education/acorns
Email address	acornschool@keyschildcare.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	3–4 October 2012

Information about this school

- Acorns School opened in 1997. It is a small independent special school for day pupils.
- The school is registered for 40 boys and girls aged from five to 17 years who have significant social, emotional and mental health difficulties. The school does not provide sixth-form education.
- The school is part of the Keys Childcare Ltd group, who own a number of other schools in England.
- The school has no religious emphasis or affiliation.
- All of the pupils who attend the school have been referred by their local authority.
- Currently, there are 23 pupils on roll from 13 different local authorities. Nearly all pupils have a statement of special educational needs or disability, or an education, health and care plan. Eleven pupils are in the care of their local authority.
- Nearly all pupils are of White British background.
- The school aims to 'educate in an emotionally healthy environment' by providing 'a holistic education that will provide them (students) with learning opportunities, which target their specific individual educational needs.' It further emphasises that it 'will help these children and young people to achieve their academic and personal potential and hence to help equip them with the skills they need to enjoy a full, well integrated and satisfying life.'

Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out with half a day's notice.
- The inspector observed pupils' learning in several lessons, all of which were jointly visited with the headteacher.
- The inspector looked at pupils' work and at the school's records of their progress.
- The inspector held meetings with senior leaders, staff and pupils. He took account of written responses from local authorities about the provision and 10 responses from staff.
- There were no responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire.
- The inspector scrutinised a range of documentation provided by the school.
- The inspectors checked the school's compliance with the appropriate regulations for independent schools.

Inspection team

John Nixon, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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