

Ashcroft School

The Together Trust Centre, Schools Hill, Cheadle, Cheshire SK8 1JE

Inspection dates 21–23 June 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	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The caring and passionate headteacher is making a real difference to pupils' life chances across the school. Leaders empower staff to work together and have created a caring learning community where individuals can flourish.
- Unified staff understand the barriers to pupils' learning and build strong relationships with them, modelling respect. Pupils are courteous and respectful. Their positive attitudes to learning in the classroom are very strong.
- The curriculum is tailored to match pupils' aspirations and interests. It is enriched with extensive extra-curricular opportunities which rebuild pupils' social skills and self-confidence.
- Personal, social and health education is carefully crafted; all pupils are expertly supported and developed. Consequently, pupils have an excellent understanding of life in modern Britain.
- The school is a safe haven for pupils; care and support is exemplary. A wide and varied range of therapy enables pupils to overcome mental and emotional barriers to learning. Pupils who had previously had a very disrupted education are attending well and thriving.
- Teachers instil high aspirations and support pupils in the completion of meaningful accreditation towards future employment.
- The most able pupils receive unique and inventive support which rebuilds their self-esteem and supports ambitions for higher education.
- Skilled and highly experienced governors and trustees know the school very well and provide appropriate challenge and support.
- The 'nurture group', a specialist unit, provides outstanding support for pupils.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Leaders do not provide staff with enough opportunities to share good practice across the school or seek support from other providers. Consequently, teaching and learning is not supporting outstanding pupils' outcomes.
- New systems to improve the tracking and monitoring of pupils' progress are not yet fully embedded. As a result, the approach to tackling pupils' underachievement is uneven.
- A number of new initiatives introduced across the school have yet to impact on teaching and learning, and pupils' outcomes.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of 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?

- Further improve pupils' outcomes by:
 - sharpening systems to track and monitor pupils' assessment information so that any underachievement can be swiftly and successfully tackled
 - providing all staff with further opportunities to share good practice across the school
 - further extending links with other providers so that staff can deepen their understanding of highly effective teaching and learning
 - continuing to embed the current actions taken to raise standards across the school.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The caring and ambitious headteacher understands how to improve the outcomes and life chances for pupils in her care. She is resolute and determined to ensure that all pupils have the best education, whatever their circumstances. She drives a skilled team of leaders that successfully empower staff to work together, ensuring that pupils' lives are enriched and setting a culture of high expectations and aspirations. Consequently, pupils across the school are very well provided for and many make good progress during their time in school.
- The headteacher has a keen eye for spotting new teaching talent within her provision. She identifies future teachers and ensures that they are supported in entering the teaching profession. This approach has secured a supply of good-quality teachers and provided the school with opportunities to increase the number of pupils entering the school. Consequently, the school has been able to operate jointly two pupil referral units with Manchester local authority. This provides greater choice and a further dimension to the curriculum offered within the school.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced for the needs of all pupils. Pupils are assessed on entry and their prior learning and aspirations are established. Leaders tailor the curriculum to meet pupils' needs. The school focuses on pupils' strengths and captures their interests to enable all pupils to achieve according to their potential.
- A day a week is dedicated to cultural enrichment and pupils access a wide variety of experiences, including first aid training, food technology and performing arts visits. Leaders have high aspirations and ensure that pupils have the opportunity to complete an array of qualifications. Careers education is well organised and all pupils receive independent careers advice with clear, well-supported next steps. The curriculum is blended with an appropriate balance of academic and welfare support.
- Leaders recognise that the heart of the school's work is developing resilient pupils who are able to work and function well within society and life in modern Britain. Through careful planning of the cultural enrichment timetable and personal, social and health education programme, leaders promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development exceptionally well.
- Specialist therapy support is built into some pupils' timetables to provide individual support and remove barriers to learning. This is provided through the use of a clinical psychologist, a range of therapies and access to a sensory room. As a result, pupils are able to make sense of issues affecting their lives by exploring thoughts and feelings.
- Leaders provide physical education in the form of outdoor educational pursuits. Pupils access showers and changing facilities within external site locations and under appropriate supervision by school staff. Pupils are encouraged to build and develop skills in climbing, orienteering, canoeing, swimming, squash and bushcraft. Many pupils are rewarded for their perseverance and achieve awards in these sports and the challenging Duke of Edinburgh's Award and this contributes to pupils' good levels of spiritual, moral and social education.
- The school premises meet all relevant independent school standards. Additional buildings and facilities have improved and enriched the quality and accessibility of music and performing arts. There are ample external areas for physical activity including access to an outside gymnasium.
- Leaders monitor the quality of teaching, planning and feedback on a regular basis. They recognise staff strengths and areas for development, and act swiftly when staff request professional support. Nearly all staff who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire were positive about their professional development, and the help and support that they receive. However, there are too few opportunities for teachers to share good practice within school and also with other providers. Consequently, some practice is less effective and some pupils do not make rapid progress.
- A number of pupils attend the school's own off-site provision. The quality of teaching and attendance of pupils is checked carefully. Pupils benefit from opportunities to participate in courses that cannot be provided in the school, including construction and sport BTEC level 2 diploma.
- Leaders promote a strong culture of respect. Inspectors frequently observed strong, positive relationships between staff and pupils. Behaviour is well controlled and pupils attend well.
- Safeguarding is exemplary. There is a strong culture of vigilance among staff across all areas of the school. Leaders work hard to protect pupils from child sexual exploitation and radicalisation. Staff are provided with regular, up-to-date, high-quality training and are alert and knowledgeable about the next steps needed to protect pupils. Leaders continually invest and seek out high-quality training, never resting on their laurels.

- The school nurture group provides identified pupils with the opportunity to experience nurturing that they might have missed in early life. This allows pupils to develop the skills to overcome complex trauma and to deal confidently and calmly with life's challenges. Pupils are exceptionally well supported and make leaps in their progress. The school's success in nurturing its pupils has been accredited as outstanding by the 'Nurture Group Network' and has received the prestigious 'Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark Award'.
- Leaders work closely with the trust and appreciate the well-targeted support and scrutiny they receive. Members of the trust have scrutinised the performance of the school effectively while also ensuring targeted frequent support, for example through the commissioning of a school improvement advisor. The school have responded swiftly to all advice and guidance and made appropriate amendments to policies and school systems. All weaknesses that were previously identified have been addressed and a platform secured for further growth and development.
- Leaders value and act upon annual parental feedback and the views of parents and carers to ensure that provision is continually improving. Parents speak warmly about the school and the efforts of teachers and leaders to ensure that their children thrive and achieve. A comment from a parent typified the views of many: 'There is no better place to support my child's needs socially and educationally.'
- Leaders have a secure and accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. Leaders are accurate in their self-evaluation and have a clear set of priorities to help the school develop in the future. Many of the areas for improvement for this inspection, including sharpening assessment and tracking systems to identify underachievement even sooner, have already been recognised and steps are under way to address them.
- Leaders requested a material change to allow early years foundation stage entry into the school. However, the lead inspector declined the material change request due to concerns with the accommodation and the suitability of the premises currently available.
- The school provides sixth-form provision for pupils on an individual need basis; it is not a 'standard provision' for all. Access is closely aligned with personal barriers to learning and pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs. Currently there are no pupils within the provision accessing sixth-form education.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors are unwavering in their support of the school and are strongly committed to their responsibilities in raising school standards. They visit the school regularly and fully support the school's ethos and inclusivity. They recognise the extreme diversity and vulnerability of pupils and the challenges that leaders face in raising aspirations.
 - Governors access training through the trust and are highly skilled professionals. As a result, the governing body has been successful in challenging the school to do better and holding leaders to account. They are knowledgeable about the school's own self-evaluation and work alongside leaders in further school developments.
 - The trustees have a good grasp of the school's finances and have ensured a solid financial base to support future developments across the school.
 - Members of the trust have updated governors in their roles and responsibilities. They provide all governors with training and ensure that they are updated on current legislations and well informed to challenge leaders across the school. Governors are aware of the school's strengths and actively and strategically support the school in their drive to improve standards.
 - Governors recognise that leaders need to sharpen assessment systems so that underachievement can be swiftly and successfully tackled. Consequently, they have supported the school on the appointment of a member of staff to address this issue.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. There is a very strong focus on keeping pupils safe. Leadership is exemplary. Procedures are fully in place and leaders and governors fulfil their statutory duties effectively. Staff have received a range of training on potential areas of risk for young people.
- Staff are recruited in line with safeguarding requirements and pre-employment medical checks are undertaken.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- The quality of relationships throughout the school is exemplary. Staff reinforce high expectations for all pupils. There is a genuine empathy and understanding of pupils' needs and emotional development. All staff are highly motivated to help pupils succeed. Consequently, pupils engage well in lessons and make good progress across the school.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and adhere to comprehensive schemes of work designed to meet the demands of the syllabus. Teachers usually plan interesting activities sculpted around pupils' personalised educational and behaviour plans that meet pupils' varied needs. Consequently, lessons are tightly focused and pupils are highly engaged in learning.
- Pupils receive good feedback from marked work as a result of teachers' relevant points for improvement and motivational comments. The school's marking policy is consistently applied by staff. For example, pupils are able to establish 'what went well', and many respond to the 'even better if' when improving their work.
- The very small class sizes allow teachers and learning support assistants to target individual support for pupils, so that areas of uncertainty are clarified and misconceptions tackled. Teachers use probing questioning to increase challenge and deepen pupils' understanding in lessons.
- Leaders recognise the needs of the most able and ensure that inventive curriculum programmes support their academic achievement well. The most able make remarkable progress across the provision due to the high-quality support and guidance. Leaders maintain and support the most able pupils' aspirations consistently well.
- Pupils' developments and progress are communicated to parents and carers through a variety of methods such as termly celebration assemblies and frequent phone calls to parents by tutors. This ensures that parents and carers are kept very well informed about their children's developments.
- Teachers regularly assess pupils to establish accurate information on their progress and to plan next steps that challenge pupils to do their best. However, leaders do not use this approach rigorously to track and establish underachievement across the school and among cohorts of pupils. Consequently, pupils do not make rapid and sustained progress across the school.
- Teaching is now developing and growing in strength. Leaders do not yet provide enough opportunities for staff to share good practice to enhance staff skills even further.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. School leaders are passionate about improving the lives of pupils in their care. They rapidly transform pupils' attitudes so that they attend regularly and have improved aspirations. Pupils develop a sense of purpose and belief in their abilities because of the continued high-quality care provided across the school.
- Inspectors observed strong attitudes to learning in lessons and high standards of presentation and expectations. Pupils show a strong resolve to work hard in lessons; they apply themselves exceptionally well. Many are driven by a desire to better themselves.
- The wealth of opportunity to excel in a range of activities, such as outdoor education, performing arts, music, drama and cooking, helps pupils to build their confidence and self-belief. Pupils of all ages work well together and are tolerant of ideas and opinions that vary from their own. This is because leaders ensure that mutual respect is a high priority across the school. Pupils' work is vibrantly displayed across the school and is well respected by all pupils.
- Form tutors use the purposeful start to every school day to reinforce high expectations. Form tutors lead 'emotional literacy' lessons, which prepare pupils for learning and provide tutors with valuable opportunities to judge pupils' welfare and development needs.
- Pupils who attend alternative provision have their attendance, development and welfare checked on a regular basis and achieve what is expected of them.
- New arrivals to the school are very well supported from the start. No time is lost in establishing pupils' needs and providing access to first-class therapy. Consequently, pupils settle quickly and adjust swiftly to their new surroundings.
- Pupils are encouraged to work together and no form of discrimination is tolerated. Pupils report that bullying is rare and dealt with swiftly on the occasions when it occurs. The school monitors bullying diligently and incidents are extremely unusual.
- Pupils in the nurture group are very well protected and supported. Staff plan a curriculum that enriches pupils' experiences and provides for all aspects of personal development. For example, pupils recently performed a medley of songs at a music festival, building their confidence and self-esteem.
- The arrangements for supporting pupils' emotional and mental well-being are outstanding. Trained staff counsel and guide pupils, and a team of well-qualified specialists and consultants are on hand to provide

support. As a result, first-class arrangements are in place to ensure that all those involved in working with pupils are aware of their needs and the support they receive.

- Pupils are very well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment. All receive a well-informed careers interview and a personal career pathway, to ensure that they are clear about their next steps. Leaders carefully monitor and evaluate careers provision.
- Within the effective programme for personal, social and health education (PSHE), all pupils develop a thorough understanding of British values. They are taught to stay safe online and are clear about the dangers of radicalisation. Pupils are encouraged to discuss and debate challenging topics. For example, 'women are not paid the same as men for doing the same job. Why do you think this is?'
- All staff are highly trained in safeguarding procedures and the school have several designated leads. All staff are acutely aware of the dangers around child exploitation and are very well versed in how to recognise and report such concerns. Key staff are suitably trained in first aid and fire safety, and the school carries out all required assessments to manage risk well.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. Many pupils enter the school with very challenging behaviour and with a history of disrupted education. They have little enthusiasm for learning. Many are angry, distrustful of adults and have low self-esteem. After a short period of time at the school, pupils display enthusiastic and positive attitudes to learning. Staff ensure that pupils are taught how to manage their own behaviour and how to recognise when they need further support.
- Pupils say that they really enjoy coming to school. They form strong relationships with staff and consequently disruption to lessons is rare. Any digression from these high standards is quietly, calmly and skilfully addressed. Staff seek guidance and apply recommendations from pupils' behaviour plans. Consequently, they are well informed on how to support pupils and know what works best for individuals across the school.
- Pupils feel they have a say in helping to develop the school and are very proud to be part of the school council. They are, for example, in the process of designing a new sports centre and organising storage lockers for all pupils.
- Once settled, pupils often make great leaps in their attitude to school becoming keen learners who enjoy coming to school. Consequently, in comparison to their starting points, their attendance and punctuality dramatically improve.

Outcomes for pupils

are good

- Often pupils are placed in the school at very short notice throughout the year. Many pupils enter the school with levels of attainment below those expected for their age, due to complex histories of disruption to their education. Some have not attended school for a considerable time and the school works well to readjust these pupils back into learning. The school's outstanding provision for pupils' personal development is pivotal in enabling them to re-engage with learning and make good progress in subjects across the curriculum.
- Leaders ensure that all pupils follow their own personalised accreditation programme. Information provided to inspectors shows that pupils leave with a plethora of awards and accreditations that link well to their next steps and future learning. The number and quality of accreditations gained by pupils has dramatically increased since the last inspection. Pupils now follow appropriate level 1 and 2 qualifications and develop their employability and life skills.
- Staff take a positive approach and have high expectations for all pupils. Pupils are encouraged to aim high and teachers ensure that any barriers to their learning are removed. Consequently, pupils become much more confident learners than previously and make excellent progress in their personal development and strong progress in their academic achievement.
- Pupils who enter with low reading ages are well supported with a structured reading recovery programme. Pupils are able to build their reading ability and grow in confidence. Teachers in the nurture group ensure that pupils develop their reading, writing and communication skills. Nurture teachers ensure that phonics skills (letters and the sounds that they make) are reinforced and developed among pupils.
- The abilities of the most able pupils are recognised. They are placed on appropriate level GCSE examination courses and are well supported academically and emotionally. Consequently pupils build a love for learning and move on to higher education and university.
- Pupils' creative skills are developed effectively through extensive project work. Leaders apply for external

funding to support projects within the school. For example, they judiciously use the funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop drama and multimedia projects. This allows pupils to work and participate together across the college, building confidence and refining pupils' skills in drama, music and performing arts. A recent radio project based on the Victorian history of the school building, 'Deep pockets and dirty faces', received high praise at a local history festival.

- Pupils at the newly commissioned pupil referral unit are well supported and engaged in appropriate accreditation courses. Although no final accreditations are yet available, information provided to inspectors shows that pupils are developing well, and engaging positively in appropriate courses.
- Leaders ensure that assessment is embedded in all subjects. However, assessment is not tracked and monitored sharply enough by leaders, and opportunities to intervene and support pupils' progress are sometimes missed.

School details

Unique reference number	106162
Inspection number	10008861
DfE registration number	356/6025

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	SEMH – social, emotional and mental health
School status	Independent special school
Age range of pupils	8–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	81
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	0
Number of part time pupils	10
Proprietor	The Together Trust
Chair	Roger Horne
Headteacher	Eileen Sheerin
Annual fees (day pupils)	£33,000–35,000
Telephone number	0161 283 4832
Website	www.togethertrust.org.uk/special-education/ashcroft-school
Email address	ashcroft.school@togethertrust.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	12–14 February 2013

Information about this school

- Ashcroft School provides education for up to 105 boys and girls between the ages of five and 18 years with social, emotional and mental health difficulties; some have additional complex needs.
- The school is run by The Together Trust, which provides residential care, foster care, social work and educational services.
- The school is located on the main Together Trust campus in Cheadle, Greater Manchester. Some pupils attend off-site courses run by colleges and training organisations.
- The school jointly operates two pupil referral units (PRUs), Ashcroft College, for key stage 4 pupils, in Ashton-under-Lyne and The School House, for key stage 3 pupils, in Droylsden.
- Pupils often join the school after a history of exclusion and long-term absence from mainstream schools or other special school provision.
- Most pupils have a statement of educational needs or an education, health and care plan.
- Of the 105 on roll, 10 attend part time by agreement with their placing authorities.
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.

Information about this inspection

- Meetings were held with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, middle leaders, governors, trustees and other members of staff.
- Telephone calls were made to the school improvement adviser, the education director of The Together Trust and the headteacher of the pupil referral unit.
- Inspectors visited all of the school's sites, including those based in Ashton-under-Lyne and Droylsden.
- Inspectors observed learning in a wide range of lessons across all year groups. A large number of lessons were jointly observed with the deputy headteacher and a middle leader.
- Inspectors engaged in a detailed analysis of pupils' work in books and files.
- Inspectors observed pupils' conduct and behaviour as they arrived at the school, during break and lunchtimes, as well as in lessons. Inspectors spoke to the school council to gather their views of the school.
- The inspection team observed the school's work; scrutinised data about pupils' achievement, behaviour and attendance; looked at documents used by leaders to check the school's work and viewed records relating to the monitoring of teaching. School policies and other documentation provided by the school were examined to check compliance with the independent school standards and to provide other inspection evidence. During the inspection, consideration was given as to how the school prepares its pupils for life in modern Britain.
- The lead inspector took into account parent responses provided by the school (due to a low response on Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire) and also spoke with two parents. The inspector reviewed responses made by pupils and staff to a recent school survey. Questionnaires returned by 37 members of staff were also considered.
- New buildings and changes to the school premises were reviewed during the inspection and evaluated under an additional material change inspection.

Inspection team

Dawn Platt, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Martyn Groucutt

Ofsted Inspector

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