

Little Acorns School

London Beach Farm, Ashford Road, St Michael's, Tenterden, Kent TN30 6SR

Inspection dates

8–10 November 2016

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an inadequate school

- There is no form of governance to monitor or improve the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes.
- The co-headteachers do not have a manager to whom they report for the overall effectiveness of the school. They have no job descriptions.
- The arrangements to safeguard pupils are ineffective. Staff do not know about the statutory guidance for keeping children safe.
- Some pre-employment checks on staff have not been carried out.
- The proprietor has not ensured that all of the independent school standards are met.
- Pupils' outcomes are not checked externally. Teachers do not meet with other professionals to compare their approach to assessment or learn from best practice elsewhere.
- Teaching is not planned effectively to build on pupils' prior learning across a range of subjects, including on entry to the school.
- The school's premises are shabby, in a poor state of upkeep and generally unclean. The senior school's classroom has damaged flooring which presents a potential safety hazard.

The school has the following strengths

- Staff are dedicated to supporting pupils well. They are very skilled in modelling calm, patient and respectful behaviours.
- Pupils' personal development and behavioural needs are nurtured very effectively.
- Teaching is peppered with laughter and fun throughout the day.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school must take action to meet the requirements of the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and associated requirements. The details are listed in the full report.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Establish governance arrangements urgently that:
 - clarify precisely who acts on behalf of the proprietor to maintain an overview of the effectiveness of the school
 - identify the roles and accountabilities of those who will be involved in governance and how they will carry out the necessary duties of governance
 - ensure that the school's leadership structure is fit for purpose, that leaders have job descriptions and know who they are accountable to and for what
 - ensure that safeguarding and child protection training arranged for all the school's staff takes account of the statutory guidance contained in 'Keeping children safe in education,' September 2016
 - ensure that all policies and procedures associated with child protection or the safeguarding of pupils are revised fully to provide accurate details of who the named persons are and their contact details
 - ensure that leaders monitor the use of physical restraint for individual pupils and adjust practice as necessary
 - identify how the quality of teaching will be monitored and supported to improve
 - identify how the school's leaders will be trained and supported to develop their knowledge and skills
 - ensure that leaders know and understand the independent school standards and the documentation that underpins those standards
 - recognise issues such as the repairs, upkeep and cleanliness of buildings as important and urgent if pupils are to thrive and achieve well.
- Improve the impact of teaching and assessment on pupils' learning outcomes by ensuring that leaders:
 - identify each pupil's academic starting points precisely, including their speech, language and communication abilities where appropriate
 - ensure that teachers take account of pupils' starting points when planning their lessons
 - build a profile of each pupil's skills, knowledge and understanding across subjects
 - measure pupils' performance rigorously, identifying gains in learning and sharing these routinely with pupils and staff.

The school must meet the following independent school standards

- The proprietor must ensure that teaching at the school:
 - enables pupils to acquire new knowledge and make good progress according to their ability so that they increase their understanding and develop their skills in the subjects taught (paragraph 3, 3(a))

- shows a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensures that these are taken into account in planning of lessons (paragraph 3, 3(d)).
- The proprietor must ensure that arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State (paragraph 7, 7(a), 7(b)).
- The proprietor must ensure that the relevant health and safety laws are complied with by the drawing-up and effective implementation of a written health and safety policy (paragraph 11).
- The proprietor must carry out appropriate checks to confirm, in respect of all members of staff, that they are not working in contravention of a prohibition order, an interim prohibition order, or any direction made under section 128 of the 2008 Act or section 142 of the 2002 Act, or any disqualification, prohibition or restriction which takes effect as if contained in either such direction (paragraph 17, 18(1), 18(2), 18(2)(b)).
- The proprietor must keep a register to show that all pre-employment checks have been carried out for all members of staff, supply staff and proprietors, together with the date that each check was made (paragraph 21(1), 21(3), 21(3)(a), 21(3)(a)(iii), 21(3)(b), 21(4)).
- The proprietor must ensure that the acoustic conditions and sound insulation of each room or other space are suitable, having regard to the nature of the activities which normally take place therein (paragraph 26).
- The proprietor must provide information to parents of pupils, parents of prospective pupils and others about:
 - the proprietor’s full name, address for correspondence during term time and holidays and a telephone number on which the proprietor may be contacted
 - the school’s policy on and arrangements for misbehaviour and exclusion
 - the school’s anti-bullying strategy
 - the names of the co-headteachers
 - the particulars of the educational and welfare provision for pupils with Education and Health Care plans and pupils for whom English is an additional language
 - the school’s curriculum policy
 - the school’s written policies for behaviour, health and safety, and first aid
 - the school’s academic performance during the preceding school year, including the results of any public examinations
 - the details of the complaints procedure and the number of complaints registered under the formal complaints procedures during the preceding school year (paragraph 32(1), 32(1)(a), 32(1)(b), 32(1)(c), 32(2), 32(2)(a), 32(2)(b), 32(2)(b)(i), 32(3), 32(3)(a), 32(3)(b), 32(3)(c), 32(3)(d), 32(3)(e), 32(3)(f)).
- The proprietor must ensure that the persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school
 - demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently

- fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently
- actively promote well-being of pupils (paragraph 34(1), 34(1)(a), 34(1)(b), 34(1)(c)).

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- The arrangements to safeguard pupils are not tight enough. Policies and practice are out of date and do not match current requirements. The absence of any rigorous governance arrangements has enabled this to happen.
- The co-headteachers took on the shared leadership role when the previous headteacher left, earlier in the year. They are trusted by pupils and the school's staff and are perceived as dedicated and very supportive. However, they are unfamiliar with the independent school standards or the requirements of headship.
- The strategic direction of the school is weak. The co-headteachers do not check for compliance with the independent school standards. They are not held accountable for keeping children safe, the quality of their teaching or pupils' outcomes.
- The co-headteachers have received no induction training and have no job descriptions. They undertake a full-time teaching commitment as the school's only teachers. They organise the work of learning support assistants diligently.
- The school's new staffing structure leaves too many questions unanswered. For example, it is unclear how teaching is monitored or by whom. Furthermore, systems to hold the joint headteachers to account for the quality of their teaching have not been established.
- The school's buildings are poorly kept and in need of a deep clean. Repairs to the heating in the nurture classroom have been identified but have yet to be completed. In the senior classroom, damaged laminate flooring is not secured and is unsafe.
- Acoustics in the senior classroom are poor. Leaders are aware of this. Although soundproofed doors have been purchased, they have yet to be installed.
- Parents, prospective parents and local authorities do not have all of the required information available to them (as identified above in the list of unmet independent school standards).
- The school's website is difficult to find and to navigate. It does not feature the required school's policies, including those concerning safeguarding and child protection. Most of the information available is about Choice Lifestyles, the school's proprietor.
- The school's curriculum is suitably broad to support pupils' academic performance. However, the school's statement of purpose contains misleading references to its coverage of the national curriculum. This is because schemes of work and the assessment of pupils' learning have not been revised fully to align with recent changes.
- The range of subjects and activities work well in improving pupils' behaviour. The skills of the staff enable pupils to build confidence, self-belief and the motivation to do well. Pupils of all ages are given good opportunities to show that they can achieve well.
- Pupils' understanding of different beliefs and cultures is supported well through the curriculum. Controversial issues are discussed and considered openly. Equal opportunities issues, including gender, race, or religion, are covered appropriately according to pupils' age levels and maturity.
- Inspection evidence points to the school's good level of engagement with local authorities.

There were no responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View. The school's leaders do not gather evidence of parental satisfaction through 'in-house' surveys.

- Staff are very dedicated and committed to ensuring that pupils know the difference between right and wrong and being a good citizen. They model these behaviours very effectively at all times.

Governance

- There are no governance arrangements in place at the school.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.
- Although staff have had relevant and recent training, the training has not been effective in informing or improving practice.
- Staff know the general signs of potential abuse and know what to do if they are concerned. However, the named person responsible for child protection and safeguarding in the school has left. Policies have not been renewed and still refer to the previous post holder. Some policies date back as far as 2011.
- Staff are aware of their general duties to prevent extremist or radical views and child exploitation. However, policies and procedures, including the arrangements for staff induction, are not comprehensive or accurate enough.
- Although all staff are trained in the use of physical restraint, the co-headteachers do not monitor its use or countersign the entries in the records of sanctions used.
- Staff are not aware of the changes to statutory guidance for keeping children safe issued by the Department for Education and revised in September 2016. Important information about the pre-employment checks for staff and how to record the information have been missed or misunderstood.
- By the end of the inspection the required information had been checked for all staff and entered on to the single central record of staff employed within the school.
- Prior to the inspection, there was no safeguarding policy on the school's website. Some of the information on the website was either inaccurate or misleading.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- When pupils join the school, their needs and prior learning are assessed. Leaders set academic targets for each pupil in relation to literacy, numeracy and science. However, targets are not set across other subject areas so as to build learning securely.
- Systems to assess pupils' attainment and track their progress are not robust. Teachers' assessments have not been checked against a range of evidence, including with external sources such as other schools to check it is accurate. As a result, the school's information on pupils' achievement may not be reliable. Although learning support staff can access pupils' learning targets, not all of them do.
- Overall, it is not clear if the most able pupils are challenged sufficiently or consistently. Weaknesses in the assessment of pupils' academic starting points mean that the most able pupils are not identified properly from when they join the school.

- Nevertheless, teaching throughout the school is characterised by pupils' good levels of engagement with staff members' positive attitudes and calming influences.
- Teachers and support staff work well together as a team. All staff express a keen desire to develop their skills to improve pupils' learning. However, teachers have not been supported to visit other providers or learn from best practice elsewhere.
- In both classes, teaching provides individual tuition or group work. This approach ensures that pupils engage well and are supported at their own level with their learning. For example, in the 'nurture' class, pupils spoke confidently about column subtraction and shapes. They approached activities self-assuredly, showing a clear enjoyment in their learning.
- Work scrutinised during the inspection showed pupils have made gains in their learning in numeracy and literacy in both classes. In the senior class, pupils worked independently, producing pieces of extended writing. They spoke confidently to the lead inspector about their stories, building well on prior learning. They were also able to correct any punctuation errors themselves with very little prompting.
- In some instances, tasks are not tailored to pupils' starting points or individual targets. As a result, pupils do not make good progress over time.
- Teaching staff have good, positive relationships with pupils. Pupils' behaviour is managed well and when someone behaves inappropriately, others rarely join in.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Inadequate

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is inadequate because of the ineffective arrangements to safeguard pupils.
- An evident culture of trust and respect mean that many aspects of pupils' personal development are strong. This is because staff manage pupils' anxieties, fears and frustrations very well.
- Staff are quick to spot, and celebrate, the things that go well. They pick up on cues and intervene effectively so that learning can continue smoothly, uninterrupted by disruptive behaviour. Pupils' confidence and readiness to learn develop well as a result.
- Staff discuss pupils' well-being continuously, often formally, and create a culture where pupils discuss personal issues or sensitive themes openly and respectfully.
- At the start and end of each day, support staff and teachers discuss pupils' personal development and agree ways forward. All school staff work well to support pupils' behaviour consistently throughout each day. However, the information from these meetings is not recorded and therefore does not inform pupils' risk assessments or behaviour plans.
- At the end of the inspection, action had been taken to ensure that notes of future meetings would be recorded and held on a secure location within the school's intranet.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.

- Attendance is above the national average for all pupils. This is a remarkable improvement given pupils' previously low attendance and unhappy experiences of schooling elsewhere.
- The school does not use exclusion as a punishment. Instead, pupils are taught to understand the effect of their behaviours on others. This approach is very successful. Pupils who have behaved inconsiderately show a willingness to make amends, often apologising in front of their peers.
- In general, pupils behave well in lessons and around the site. Some take a while to settle in class but once on task, show respect and enjoy their learning as a result.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Pupils join the school with attainment levels that are well below age-related expectations. This is because many of the pupils have experienced prolonged periods of absence and disrupted learning before joining Little Acorns.
- A scrutiny of pupils' work and discussions with pupils indicated that pupils are making at least expected progress with their literacy and numeracy.
- Leaders do not collect assessment information in relation to pupils' progress across all subjects. Equally, the absence of any external checks on teachers' assessment means that current information lacks reliability.
- Leaders do not track the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils or the most able pupils as discrete groups. It is unclear if these pupils are meeting or exceeding their potential academically.
- Leaders spoke passionately about the very significant strides that staff make in improving pupils' confidence and social skills. However, leaders do not gather information which would enable them to measure the important improvements to which they attest.
- Pupils make good progress with their reading. This is where the most significant gains have often been made when compared with their reading ages on entry to the school.
- The lead inspector listened to several pupils identified as the most able reading fluently. These pupils were also able to interpret some of the more complex sentences and vocabulary successfully.
- Pupils generally move on from Little Acorns to special school provision elsewhere. However, in the past, some pupils have returned to mainstream provision successfully.

School details

Unique reference number	131810
DfE registration number	886/6085
Inspection number	10012905

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	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 14
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	7
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	Mr Jawad Sheikh – Choice Lifestyles
Chair	None
Headteacher	Tony Hollett and Alison Neal
Annual fees (day pupils)	£42,234
Telephone number	01233 850422
Website	www.choicelifestyles.co.uk
Email address	Tony.Hollett@choicelifestyles.net
Date of previous inspection	14–16 May 2016

Information about this school

- Little Acorns opened in 1999. It is a school that specialises in working with pupils who have severe behavioural, emotional and mental health issues. The school does not provide alternative provision.
- The school is owned by Choice Lifestyles and is registered to take pupils aged from five to 14 years of age.
- There are seven pupils on roll.
- All pupils have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.

- Key stage 2 pupils are taught together in the nurture class. Key stage 3 pupils are taught together in the senior class.
- The school was last inspected in May 2013. The quality of provision was judged to be good and all the regulations for independent schools were met.
- Since the school was previously inspected the leadership has changed. The headteacher left in March 2016. The school has been led by two co-headteachers since April 2016.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed teaching, scrutinised pupils current and previous work and looked at teachers' plans, assessment information and curriculum documents.
- The inspector scrutinised the co-headteachers' self-evaluation and school improvement plan.
- The inspector scrutinised the school's schemes of work and a range of policies, including the school's health and safety, risk assessment, behaviour and bullying policies. Pupils' files, including their education health and care plans, were scrutinised.
- The single central record of pre-employment checks for staff was scrutinised, together with procedures and policies for child protection and safeguarding pupils.
- Discussions were held with the co-headteachers and non-teaching staff, including two managers employed by Choice Lifestyles.
- There were no responses from parents on Parent View.
- The inspector had informal conversations and discussions with pupils throughout the inspection.

Inspection team

Lesley Farmer, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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