

The Serendipity School

399 Hinkler Road, Thornhill, Southampton, Hampshire SO19 6DS

Inspection dates

22–24 November 2016

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- The proprietor rightly says that ‘this school is where magic happens’. Leaders and staff transform the lives of pupils and prepare them extremely well for the next stage of their lives and education.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are excellent and lead to remarkable progress for all pupils. Teaching staff and therapists work together in a highly effective way to restore pupils’ welfare and sense of self-worth.
- Outcomes are outstanding. All pupils leave the school with nationally recognised qualifications and important skills for life, which they might not have dreamed to be possible previously.
- Communication across the school and with other professionals is exemplary and helps to keep pupils safe from harm.
- Pupils benefit from enriching social and cultural experiences that challenge them and educate them about the world in which they live.
- The school’s work to improve pupils’ behaviour is outstanding. All staff and leaders ensure that the school is a welcoming and nurturing place. Pupils flourish because of the exceptional care they receive.
- School leaders carry out meticulous checks to ensure that the school complies with all the independent school standards.
- School leaders and those responsible for governance constantly review their work and are honest about what could be even better. The school is continually improving.

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?

- Extend the influence of the school as a centre of excellence, in order to reach other professionals who work to safeguard and improve outcomes for vulnerable pupils.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Leaders at all levels are inspirational. Every member of staff knows what they are working towards and all staff share the same powerful drive to improve the life-chances of all pupils in the school. As one staff member said, 'we hold the girls' hearts in our hands'.
- Leaders are ambitious and resilient. In the face of what sometimes seem insurmountable challenges, they tenaciously seek and find solutions to problems. As a result, even the most vulnerable pupils make outstanding progress academically and personally.
- Nothing but the best is good enough for pupils in this school. Leaders review their work frequently and thoroughly: they are not afraid to admit when mistakes have been made and are realistic about the difficulties and complexities of the work they do. They never stand still or give up.
- Since the previous inspection and with the appointment of the headteacher and deputy headteacher, there has been a determined focus on improving pupils' learning and progress. Leaders are completely committed to making sure that pupils catch up with their basic skills, including speech and language, reading, writing and spelling. The school is clearly a place of learning.
- Communication between staff is excellent. Teaching and therapy staff systematically share important information through formal meetings to discuss pupils' progress and well-being. Daily briefings and debriefings are highly informative and structured around each pupil's individual successes and difficulties in and out of lessons. Successes, however small, are celebrated, although more often than not improvements in behaviour, progress and welfare are immense. All staff have a voice and are able to share their expertise and knowledge and suggest better approaches to supporting pupils.
- Leaders and staff have implemented imaginative programmes to support pupils' learning and progress. Pupils benefit hugely from individual therapies to help them look after and value themselves more. Staff rightly ensure that pupils eat healthily, are able to benefit from exercise and receive dedicated extra help from the school's psychology team.
- Leaders and staff possess a wealth of expertise. Through their first-hand knowledge and academic research, staff have amassed a deep understanding of the impact of trauma and neglect on children's developing brains. They know how the right provision of teaching and care makes a significant difference in restoring pupils' ability to make progress. Leaders set staff challenging targets and make sure that the training they receive is of high quality.
- The proprietor, directors and leaders are rightly seeking to share their first-hand knowledge and expertise further afield with professionals and other school settings in order to improve life-chances for all pupils growing up at risk of harm.
- The school offers flexible programmes of study that are tailored uniquely to each pupil. English, mathematics and science are top priorities, particularly the improvement of reading, writing and numeracy. Pupils also benefit from studying a range of other subjects, performing in drama and taking part in music. Physical education and outdoor pursuits have a major impact on pupils' self-esteem and physical fitness, including rock-climbing, water sports, horse-riding and horse care.

- Pupils enjoy a huge range of excellent experiences which enhance their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils learn about the world around them and the part they can play in it, from moments of patient awe and wonder, watching chicks hatch from eggs, to enacting the European Union referendum and the frequent team-building days. The school ensures that pupils have events to look forward to throughout the cycle of the year, through religious festivals, theatre productions and sports days. Pupils also have the opportunity to attend school trips, such as the regular visit to Paris. In this way, pupils collect positive memories to look back on with pride.
- Older pupils, who attend college courses and work experience as part of their timetable, are extremely well supported by staff, who monitor their progress and welfare closely.
- Relationships with parents and carers are excellent. Parents are uniformly positive about the work the school does and the way pupils are supported and make progress.
- School leaders, including the proprietor and director, make sure that staff welfare is also a key consideration. Support is always available and staff are provided with strong supervision to help them work effectively and safely in a challenging environment.
- Leaders are assiduous about making sure that the independent school standards are met, carrying out their own regular audits and providing evidence to all stakeholders against each standard.

Governance

- The proprietor and directors of the company are responsible for governance in the school. They ensure that the right staff are appointed and that their performance is carefully monitored. They are guardians of pupils' aspirations, in addition to involving themselves fully in the life of the school. They are committed to the pupils' and also the staff's well-being and have made sure that staff are supported and take care of themselves.
- The proprietor has been inspiring staff and pupils since she set up the school ten years ago. There is no compromise with her determination that pupils in the school have the very best that can be offered. She is not afraid to challenge poor practice in and out of the school, including relentless pursuit of the right responses from local authority children's services. She has established an excellent relationship with other organisations, including mainstream schools and professional colleagues, such as those in the health service and the police.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The school makes sure that all statutory requirements for protecting children are fully met. Relevant policies are completely up to date and published on the school website. Leaders are diligent about carrying out the necessary checks on staff recruited to work in the school.
- Pupils' safety and well-being are at the centre of the school at every level. Every pupil has a voice: their concerns and worries are heard and acted upon. Leaders and staff are highly trained and knowledgeable about all aspects of child protection and safeguarding.
- Leaders make sure that information about pupils is shared with staff and that they have time to absorb and explore new concerns in order to decide upon the best course of action to support pupils and keep them safe.

- All the school's records related to safeguarding, behaviour and risk assessments are exemplary. Leaders oversee the records and review all aspects of their work, identifying honestly and cogently the improvements they could make to their practice.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- Teachers make excellent use of information about pupils' ability, needs and interests when planning lessons. They adapt and reframe what they are teaching according to the types of response they get from pupils. Sometimes there are large differences between what pupils have previously attained and what they are actually capable of because there are gaps in their learning. Teachers are adept at identifying how much to challenge the most able pupils, changing tack and seizing the opportunity to teach pupils what they need to learn.
- Teachers ensure that pupils understand the links between different activities and within sequences of lessons by providing a running commentary which tells the story of the learning. This approach really helps pupils, who sometimes are distracted, to understand the purpose of what they are studying. The teacher's narrative of what is happening in the lesson reassures pupils and keeps them focused on what they need to learn.
- Teaching staff are cheerful and light-hearted. They use humour and their knowledge of pupils to enhance learning and help pupils to concentrate. However, this does not detract from gentle but firm persuasion and high expectations of behaviour and politeness. Staff and pupils are on first-name terms, but there is no doubt who is in charge. Relationships are warm and mutually respectful. Pupils value their learning and want to learn more.
- Teachers and assistants have created purposeful classroom environments with useful resources. Displays are bright, clean and tidy, which sets an excellent example to the pupils who take good care of their classrooms and their books and folders. Pupils are proud of their work and complete increasing amounts of homework with interest and diligence.
- Teachers use questioning exceptionally well, to make sure that pupils have mastered and secured learning. Some pupils have difficulties with retaining information or maintaining a logical order of events in their mind. In particular, the most able pupils are sometimes impulsive and their thoughts range widely around topics. Teaching staff deal with this skilfully. They remind pupils to 'hold that thought' and gently bring them back to the topic at hand, without dismissing their contributions. In this way, pupils gain confidence, feel comfortable about contributing their ideas and gradually acquire better control of their emotions and thought patterns.
- Sometimes scheduled lessons and programmes of study are not immediately successful because pupils are not ready to settle in a normal classroom environment. The school rightly ensures that pupils are carefully nurtured to help them feel safe and get used to the school's high expectations. However, teachers make sure that learning happens in every session. For example, in what appeared to be a therapeutic cooking session, pupils were actually learning number, weights and measures very successfully.
- The few older pupils, who attend local colleges, are studying extremely well-planned courses that equip them very well for their future careers.
- The teaching of reading is understandably a top priority in the school. Pupils read every day alongside staff in an impressive daily 'drop everything and read' session. They enjoy choosing appropriately challenging and attractive books. Special programmes designed to

help with reading and spelling are timetabled for pupils, as are regular phonics sessions to help fill gaps in pupils' knowledge when breaking down words. Pupils enjoy their sessions and can see immediately what progress they are making. Pupils use their understanding of phonics extremely well when trying to read unfamiliar words.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Pupils settle to school life quickly and acquire a better sense of identity, self-confidence and self-esteem through the school's high expectations, consistent approach to learning and therapeutic support. Over time, pupils take more care of themselves, gain a better understanding of the risks they may be susceptible to and look to the future.
- Pupils want to learn and do well. They are helped to unlock their aspirations and ambitions. No ceilings are placed upon what they are able to achieve. Pupils are loyal to the school. They dress appropriately in school uniform and take care of their books and folders.
- Those pupils who attend local colleges as part of their programmes of study are well supported when working with different people in different educational settings. Older pupils who attend work experience and college are also nurtured and coached so that they gain confidence and learn appropriate behaviour in the workplace.
- Pupils are well supported to improve their physical health through programmes of exercise, outdoor activities and healthy eating. For example, all pupils eat a healthy lunch and breakfast together with staff, with a strong focus on the link between taking care of yourself physically and emotionally.
- There is a strong link between what the school offers on the curriculum and as enrichment activity and personal development. For example, pupils are able to care for animals as both a therapeutic activity and for possible career goals.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Pupils join the school typically having been excluded from mainstream or other special schools. Some have not been attending school for some time. Most pupils have severe difficulties managing their own feelings and behaviour because of their previous history of trauma and vulnerability. Through the excellent support and guidance they receive, pupils' behaviour improves over time and they are increasingly better at dealing with their negative emotions and controlling inappropriate behaviour. The improvement they make is outstanding.
- For those pupils whose behaviour can be particularly challenging, there are excellent risk assessments and behaviour plans. Leaders and staff know exactly how each pupil's personal anxieties can trigger destructive habits. There are very few instances of physical intervention required, which testifies to the school's excellent and successful approach.
- There are firm boundaries for behaviour and conduct. Pupils understand the importance of politeness and need very few reminders. They show respect to staff and each other. Pupils are rarely intentionally discourteous or hurtful.

- Pupils are considerate of the feelings of others and quickly acquire the ability to put themselves in others' shoes. There is very little bullying and when it does occur, it is dealt with well not just by adults but also by the pupils themselves, who have a strong sense of justice. The school supports pupils to make amends for any misdemeanours through a restorative approach.
- Staff model courtesy, kindness and consideration, speaking with respect and grace at all times. Raised voices are rare. In this way, pupils are firmly put on the right path to better management of their feelings and impulses.
- Pupils appreciate and value rewards and praise. The extremely well-designed 'STAR' book tracks each positive step they make in and out of lessons during the school day. Pupils are attached to these books and proud of them because they are a tangible record of their steps of progress.
- Pupils attend well. They enjoy school and are punctual. For those pupils who rarely attended previous schools, their improved attendance is remarkable.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- Pupils typically arrive at the school with large gaps in their education because they have missed school. Some pupils find it particularly difficult to catch up because of their previous history of trauma and neglect. However, once settled in the school and ready to learn, they make rapid and exceptional progress in all areas of the curriculum.
- Talent and ability are unlocked through the school's patient and determined approach to finding exactly what will excite and inspire each pupil. The school is rightly proud that no pupil leaves the school at 16 without a range of nationally recognised qualifications, including some at GCSE.
- Making notes and writing are challenges for most pupils. The school's approach of 'think it, say it, write it down' works effectively to build up their confidence. Some pupils are still reluctant to write, but make superb progress through persistence and practice. The most able pupils, many of whom were hesitant writers, progress quickly to creating lively and accurate writing. They relish creating special effects and using sophisticated and expressive vocabulary to convey atmosphere to the reader.
- Pupils attain excellent results in end of key stage qualifications in mathematics. Pupils also make good progress in a wider range of practical mathematical skills in order to prepare them well for their next steps.
- Pupils achieve well in science, particularly those who are the most able, because they appreciate the opportunity to think about abstract concepts and solve problems. They learn well from practical experiments and enjoy scientific thinking.
- Pupils do extremely well in programmes designed to prepare them for independent living. Older pupils who attend college have compelling evidence of their excellent progress in vocational courses and work experience.
- Pupils' performance in other subjects in the curriculum is excellent, particularly drama. The school also ensures that those pupils who may have a particular skill, for example in playing a musical instrument, are given every support to keep up their studies and take relevant examinations.

- Right from the beginning, school leaders and staff prepare for when pupils will move on to the next stage of their education or employment. All pupils leave the school and go on to education, employment or training. Each pupil has a detailed individual pathway plan which is initiated as soon as possible after admission to the school.

School details

Unique reference number	131556
DfE registration number	852/6009
Inspection number	10008862

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	Independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	9 to 19
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number of pupils on the school roll	12
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	The Serendipity Centre Ltd
Chair	Sue Tinson
Headteacher	Michele Aldridge
Annual fees (day pupils)	£68,000
Telephone number	02380 422255
Website	www.serendipity-education.com
Email address	info@serendipity-education.com
Date of previous inspection	13–14 February 2013

Information about this school

- The Serendipity School was established ten years ago to cater specifically for girls with severe and complex emotional and mental health needs. Most girls admitted to the school have experienced extreme trauma and are considered likely to benefit from a girls-only environment.
- The school's vision is encapsulated in its motto: 'Every child deserves a chance'.
- Pupils have typically been excluded from mainstream or other special schools and many have been out of education for some time. Nearly all pupils have an education, health and care plan, and the majority are looked after by their local authorities.

- Three local authorities currently place pupils at the school.
- Since the previous inspection, the school successfully applied for a material change in order to admit students aged 16 to 19. The 16 to 19 provision is in its second year of operation and as numbers are very small, the provision for older students is incorporated into the main judgements in this report.
- The current headteacher and deputy headteacher were appointed in 2014.
- The school is governed by the proprietor as company director and a chief executive who is also the senior designated safeguarding leader. The school staff is made up of teaching staff, teaching assistants and well-being professionals, including clinical psychologists and the therapy team.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out with one day's notice.
- Her Majesty's Inspector observed teaching and learning in seven lessons, accompanied by senior leaders. She also observed specialist literacy, numeracy and phonics sessions.
- Pupils were observed reading during the daily reading session and reading aloud in lessons and specialist literacy sessions.
- Meetings were held with senior leaders, members of the therapy team, staff and the consultant who supports leadership in the school. Her Majesty's Inspector spoke to a former local authority placing officer on the telephone.
- The inspector observed a multi-disciplinary team meeting, attended by school leaders and the therapy team.
- Pupils took the inspector on a tour of the school, showed her their work and spoke to her in meetings and in and out of lessons.
- Her Majesty's Inspector reviewed a sample of pupils' work in all subjects and evaluated information about their progress and that of previous pupils.
- Four responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, were taken into account, including parents' written comments about the work of the school.
- The 10 responses to the staff questionnaire were considered alongside other evidence.
- A range of documents and policies were reviewed in order to check compliance with the independent school standards.

Inspection team

Janet Pearce, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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