

# Helen Allison School

Longfield Road, Meopham, Gravesend, Kent DA13 0EW

#### **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
Sixth form provision	Outstanding
Overall experiences and progress of children and young people in the residential provision	Outstanding
Quality of care and support in the residential provision	Outstanding
How well children and young people are protected in the residential provision	Outstanding
Impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers in the residential provision	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Outstanding

# Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

#### This is an outstanding school

- Under the determined leadership of the principal and deputy principal, leaders have created a research-based culture to bring about continuous improvement. As a result, leaders have maintained, and improved, the quality of provision offered for pupils.
- Pupils' experiences are underpinned by an excellent combination of educational and therapy experiences. These are seamlessly linked to ensure that pupils make excellent progress towards individualised targets.
- Leaders' management of staff performance is highly effective. Consequently, opportunities to improve practice are utilised particularly well. Staff work exceptionally well together to help pupils learn.
- Teaching is highly effective. Teachers are knowledgeable and have very high expectations. They know their pupils' needs extremely well and plan creatively to meet them. Consequently, pupils make rapid gains in their academic, personal and social development.

- Other adults, such as teaching assistants and therapy assistants, are highly skilled and used effectively to support pupils' learning.
- All staff promote the well-being, health and safety of pupils in all that they do. Pupils are very well cared for, including those who board.
  Safeguarding arrangements are very effective.
- The residential care and support are highly individualised. Staff know pupils exceptionally well because of effective and ongoing assessment of pupils' needs. They add value to pupils' learning experiences.
- Pupils show very high levels of engagement in their learning. They recognise the effort that staff make to ensure learning is meaningful. They attend very well.
- The sixth form provision, known as the 'hub', is very effective. Learners are supported very effectively to develop skills and achieve qualifications to succeed in their education, training or employment.



#### **Compliance with regulatory requirements**

- The school meets schedule 1 of The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, as amended by The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.
- The school meets the national minimum standards for residential special schools.



# **Full report**

## What does the school need to do to improve further?

Ensure that plans to extend provision for learners up to the age of 25 include consideration of how leaders will maintain the strength of current provision alongside the expansion.



# **Inspection judgements**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers in the residential provision	Outstanding
How well children and young people are protected in the residential provision	Outstanding

- The principal, ably supported by the deputy principal and principal speech and language therapist, has successfully created a culture of high expectations, shared responsibility and uncompromising focus on learning. Leaders have been highly influential in changing the lives of pupils and their families by securing the commitment of all staff who, as a result, work tirelessly to meet every individual's needs. As a result, provision is excellent and pupils' achievement outstanding.
- The highly integrated trans-disciplinary and whole-school approach has had an extraordinarily positive impact on pupils' outcomes. Current research informs teaching and learning. Furthermore, school leaders, including therapists, are on the cutting edge of developing practice nationally. Together they develop innovative ways to support communication and emotional and social literacy for children with autism spectrum conditions (ASC). The school is a beacon of excellent practice in the sector.
- Leaders are highly focused on the individual needs of pupils. Consequently, each pupil benefits from a curriculum that is designed around their specific interests and needs. This helps ensure that the primary focus on pupils' personal development and communication is very effective. Pupils are set challenging targets in these areas. Teachers and therapists make a highly effective team and ensure that every part of the day is utilised to allow pupils to learn and apply the skills needed to meet these targets. For example, clearly defined parts of the day allow pupils access to experiences that help them regulate their sensory needs. This prepares them exceptionally well for learning.
- Leaders' checks on teachers' performance are very well organised and effective. Leaders have implemented systems to review pupils' learning and track the difference that staff are making to progress. This allows leaders to review with authority how well staff are doing and identify areas that need improving. As a result, teachers and other staff are clear about what they need to do to improve and are held to account rigorously for the progress of their pupils. Leaders evaluate the progress that staff are making against their targets well. Targets are adapted effectively to ensure they continue to meet the developing needs of individuals.
- Leaders manage change very effectively. They consistently look to ensure that staff fulfil their own potential. Professional development opportunities and internal promotions have secured high staff retention rates and a stable and highly motivated staff team. Staff are competent and have personal qualities and views that make them highly effective in their supporting roles.
- Middle leaders make a significant contribution to leadership and management. They have clearly defined roles, for example leading learning for pupils within different key stages at the school. This means they rightly focus their time and energy on their areas of



responsibility. They are fully involved in monitoring teaching and learning and work closely with therapists to develop programmes of study carefully designed for the specific needs of pupils.

- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted very well. Pupils are encouraged to show respect for each other and to treat others fairly. The school advocates exceptionally well for the rights of ASC children and their families. It promotes their social integration very well. Consequently, pupils are highly appreciative of the work that is done for them by staff. They recognise that they are valued as individuals and value the faith that is shown in them. Many go on to secure meaningful employment.
- Leaders strive to improve how the school prepares pupils for the next stage in the education, employment or training. To this end, they plan to extend provision for pupils up to the age of 25. Although the rationale for this is sound, their plans do not yet show how they will ensure that there is the capacity in leadership to maintain the high standards of the current school at the same time as managing the expansion.
- The school's outstanding care and support practice is worthy of wider dissemination. The school has taken a number of steps to promote a better understanding of autism and to advocate for the best practice in this field of care, nationally and internationally. The school stands proudly for British values. It embodies the anti-discriminatory principles exceptionally well.
- The residential provision is very well organised and managed. The leaders, management and staff are highly skilled and unwaveringly committed to enabling residential pupils to achieve their potential. In line with the school's improvement ethos and the passionate drive to do always what is best for the pupils, the residential provision is subject to rigorous monitoring. The residential practice and its impact on the individual pupils' wellbeing and welfare are continually evaluated and then improved.
- Residential pupils benefit from experiencing an extended curriculum programme outside the classroom environment. The school's emphasis on the consistent implementation of comprehensive sensory strategies to support pupils underpins the extraordinary progress that residential pupils make. The residential provision is highly effective in promoting pupils' excellent progress, achievements and attainment.
- Leaders and managers are inspirational and visionary professionals with high levels of expertise. The residential service is well resourced to help translate this vision into practice.

#### Governance

- Governance arrangements are robust and delivered through the mechanisms of the National Autistic Society. Members of the local board have challenged and supported leaders determinedly to be more aspirational for pupils, particularly in achieving better academic outcomes.
- Governors ask searching questions of leaders to understand better how well the school is progressing. They regularly carry out focused visits to check for themselves if leaders' work is making the difference that is needed. They oversee performance management arrangements with rigour to ensure that weaker performance is not tolerated.



### Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Pupils' welfare is paramount for all staff. Detailed policies and procedures follow the best safeguarding practice guidelines strictly and are implemented consistently. Safeguarding practice is fully embedded and of an excellent standard.
- Staff receive comprehensive training on a broad range of safeguarding topics, including online safety, countering radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. They have a deep understanding of pupils' vulnerabilities and of reporting procedures within the school and beyond. Any allegations against staff or concerns about any student's safety are appropriately shared with the local council's designated safeguarding lead, social services and the police. The school is an effective safeguarding partner within the area and further afield.
- Staff and volunteers are selected, vetted and recruited carefully. Their individual files and the school's single central register clearly evidence that robust procedures are followed consistently.
- Excellent health and safety arrangements, including the arrangements for fire safety, ensure that the physical environment remains safe and secure at all times. The procedure for dealing with pupils' medication is comprehensive and implemented fully.

#### Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

#### Outstanding

- Teaching is highly effective. Teachers, therapists and teaching assistants know pupils extremely well because they make excellent use of assessment. From this, they plan lessons that challenge pupils of all abilities, including the most able. As a result, pupils' progress is rapid and sustained.
- Teachers plan lessons so they build on pupils' interests to capture their enthusiasm and support likely future pathways. This helps to ensure that lessons are meaningful and help pupils make excellent progress towards key life and work skills, as well as for their academic gain.
- Teachers have very high expectations of pupils at all times. They ensure that lessons meet the differing needs of pupils consistently. Those who are most able are challenged effectively and supported to take ownership of their own learning. Support for those who find learning challenging is tailored carefully and focuses more on their wider holistic needs. Other adults, including therapists, teaching assistants and therapy assistants, add significant value to learning. They are highly skilled and know what they are trying to achieve with the pupils they support. Excellent use of assessment and the cross-pollination of disciplines both help to ensure that lessons are highly effective in supporting pupils' progress.
- The teaching of literacy and reading is very effective. The curriculum is designed appropriately to give as much opportunity for pupils to communicate as possible. This helps pupils to work through difficulties that many of them face when interacting and working with others. Plentiful opportunities for reading encourage a love of books and literature. Pupils report that they particularly enjoy opportunities to choose texts from the library. The most able readers make the most of the challenge they are given to read



widely, often and across a range of genres.

The teaching of mathematics is also effective. Lessons help pupils to apply their understanding to a number of real-life contexts. This helps to ensure that what they learn is useful to them as they are prepared for the next stage of their education, possible employment or for independent living. Pupils benefit from work that is tailored to their particular abilities and needs. Many leave the school having achieved well in academic mathematical qualifications.

#### Personal development, behaviour and welfare

#### Outstanding

#### Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. This is because pupils receive highly individualised care and support that addresses their needs holistically. They feel understood, valued and well cared for. This has a positive impact on their self-worth and levels of anxiety. As a result, they become happier, calmer and more able to focus on their learning and development.
- Excellent therapeutic work underpins outstanding care. A strong and well-resourced therapeutic team enables staff to have an excellent understanding of pupils' diverse needs, so they respond effectively.
- Staff work closely with external health and social care professionals to ensure that pupils' physical and mental health needs are met exceptionally well. For example, pupils' interests are considered central to the experiences and challenges they face. This helps them to develop a love of learning and strengthens self-esteem, as they regularly experience success.
- Staff motivate pupils to develop healthier lifestyles and independence. They provide ample opportunities to engage in a broad range of extra-curricular activities, within the school, the residential environment and in the local and wider communities.
- The school uses well-tested therapeutic interventions to very good effect. Leaders continually seek to refine and innovate their practice. For example, occupational therapy is routinely included in pupils' curriculum experiences. There are regular opportunities to work with expert speech and language therapists to assess progress and refine the programmes of study on offer.

#### **Behaviour**

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. This is because the management of behaviour is exemplary and extraordinarily effective. The school's policies focus on promoting acceptable, positive behaviours, while recognising and celebrating pupils' unique qualities. As a result, pupils show very positive attitudes to school and their lessons, where they are calm and purposeful. They attend well because they enjoy school and feel safe.
- Pupils' individual positive behaviour plans are managed very effectively. The clinical psychologist keeps oversight of the difference each plan makes to pupils' behaviour. He ensures that each plan meets the specific needs of different individuals accurately, ensuring more precise planning for pupils who present with the most complex behaviour. Together with the principal and head of boarding, the clinical psychologist also ensures rigorous review of all incidents so that the need for physical intervention is reduced effectively.



- Leaders are effective in improving pupils' behaviour over time. Some pupils have highly challenging behaviour because of their sensory and communication needs. There are clear systems and processes that leaders follow to monitor and review what may be triggering unwanted behaviour. Analysis is then used to plan a multidisciplinary approach to improving the provision for pupils, if and when it is needed. As a result, pupils who find regulating their own behaviour a challenge often make rapid improvements in their behaviour. These improvements are sustained over time and help ensure that exclusions are exceptionally rare.
- Parents believe that behaviour is managed very effectively in school. For example, a parent said that his son has become a completely different child since coming to this school: 'His temperament has eased off. He is happier and calmer.'
- The same staff work across the residential provision and the school. This arrangement promotes consistency of the care approach and of the experience for residential pupils. The National Autistic Society's SPELL approach to supporting children who have an autism spectrum condition (structure, positive approach, empathy, low arousal and links with others) is fully embedded across the school. This approach is highly effective in promoting positive outcomes in relation to their behaviour, education and emotional, social and psychological well-being.

#### **Outcomes for pupils**

#### Outstanding

- Pupils' outcomes are fundamental to the vision, drive and ambition of leaders. Staff are focused relentlessly on pupils' academic, social and communication development. They share leaders' very high expectations. Pupils are highly committed to succeed, because they understand the relevance of what they are learning. Consequently, they make substantial progress in lessons and over time.
- Due to their levels of need, pupils often join the school working below age-related expectations. The excellent use of assessment means that staff quickly gain a clear picture of where pupils' strengths and weaknesses lie. They use this information to plan tailored programmes of study that meet pupils' individual needs exceptionally well. This helps to ensure that pupils make rapid gains in their learning from the moment they start at the school.
- Since the arrival of the principal, the attainment of pupils has significantly improved. This reflects the higher expectations she has brought to the school. Pupils increasingly achieve qualifications that help them secure placements in further education. This is because of the highly effective systems for checking pupils' progress and the bespoke curriculum from which pupils benefit. Consequently, nearly all pupils leave the school with at least one qualification and often with many, despite their needs.
- The learning of groups is equally strong across a range of subjects. This is because pupils are treated as individuals and receive an individualised curriculum to meet their specific needs. With the attention to detail given to evaluating all pupils' progress, leaders ensure there is equality of opportunity and all groups of pupils make outstanding progress.
- Disadvantaged pupils, including those who are in the most able group, make the same sustained progress as their peers. They make remarkable gains in their academic, social and personal skills and so the gap in their attainment compared to their peers nationally



is closing rapidly. They are equally well prepared for the next stage of their education, employment or training.

- The most able pupils make exceptional progress. The well-designed curriculum, teachers' careful planning and the individual targets pupils are working towards all ensure that the most able pupils are consistently challenged in lessons. Many secure placements in further education when they leave the school, sometimes in the country's top universities.
- By the time learners leave the sixth form, not only have they made exceptional progress from their starting points, but they are also very well prepared for the next stage in their lives.

#### Sixth form provision

#### Outstanding

- Leaders of the sixth form share the principal's determination to improve outcomes for their learners. The high standards at the 'hub' have improved in several ways, including a strengthening in the quality of teaching, stronger links with key partners, and a move to better accommodation. Learners' individual needs are very well catered for by teachers, therapists and support staff. As a result, learners make exceptional progress and do very well.
- Provision in the sixth form is as effective as it is across the rest of the school. This is because the curriculum is built on the same key principles. Leaders have ensured that learners are very well prepared for their move into the 'hub' by developing carefully planned transition plans. Bespoke plans for learners ensure that useful and varied work experiences and career advice dovetail seamlessly with lessons. The school's close engagement with a number of businesses and enterprises enhances learners' chances of getting positive work-placement experience, apprenticeship or employment.
- Teaching in the sixth form is of a very high standard. Staff are knowledgeable about their subjects, as well as about the needs of learners with ASC. This is supported particularly well by the work of therapists and the excellent links with local colleges. Staff possess the precise skills needed to support learning for the learners they teach. Teachers use a range of creative methods to engage and inspire the learners. They ensure that learners feel safe and are safe. As a result, learners enjoy lessons and make exceptional progress from their starting points, particularly given their levels of need.
- As in the main school, all groups of pupils make rapid and sustained progress. The most able learners receive appropriate challenge and, when possible, they are given the opportunity to access lessons at North Kent College or Hadlow College.
- Learners are exceptionally well prepared for the next stage in their education, training or employment. School leaders help learners develop the skills to live an independent and fulfilling life. Links with key partners, such as the British Legion, have helped secure meaningful work placements for some learners who are less able.
- Learners enjoy learning at the 'hub', behave exceptionally well and attend regularly. This is because the curriculum is personalised and built around their needs and interests.



# Overall experiences and progress of children and young Outstanding people in the residential provision

- Residential pupils experience outstanding quality of care and support. The residential practice stands out from other residential special schools in many ways. The residence has a calm, orderly and positive atmosphere. The physical environment feels homely and follows the low arousal principle, to help pupils who struggle with their sensory needs. Strategically positioned visual aids are agreed with the residential pupils and provide information about the activities and the overall structure of their time. They know what to expect and what is expected from them. Their self-regulation has increased and there have been manifold improvements in their behaviours.
- Having a more established feeling of safety and security has enabled residential students to begin to open up to change, exploration and learning. A number of well-documented 'wow' moments demonstrate pupils' outstanding progress. The school's high expectations, the staff's caring attitudes and their professional expertise have enabled pupils to go beyond what, in the past, some people thought was possible for them to achieve. An example of this is a 'closed-in' pupil spontaneously initiating a contact with another young person for the first time in his life. Another pupil's parent said that they were amazed by what staff had managed to encourage his son to do.
- Staff are highly experienced. They have a broad range of skills and expertise. Their caregiving is insightful, purposeful and highly effective. They are genuinely caring. They provide excellent care that promotes students' sense of worth and meaningful existence. One parent likened residential staff members to 'angels'. Another parent said that the staff have gone above the call of duty in supporting her son. Staff are acutely aware of the residential students' vulnerabilities. Robust and comprehensive risk management strategies enable staff to protect and safeguard residential students effectively.
- Residential students have developed positive and warm relationships with residential staff members. Feeling comfortable with, and trusting, people outside their immediate family members marks very significant steps forward in their emotional and social development. They have become more able to listen to, interact and engage with others. This has a positive impact on their whole development and, in particular, on their independence from their families and the ability to accept being taught.
- The residential provision provides extra opportunities for pupils to practise and gain better communication skills. Staff enhance pupils' understanding of different options that are available to them effectively. For example, staff support pupils in their ability to make and then communicate their choices.
- Through positive experiences of being engaged in a range of enjoyable activities, residential pupils have become more open to trying new things and learning from those experiences. For example, through implementing a thoughtful food-intervention programme that includes fun activities relating to food, residential staff have enabled a pupil to have a more varied and healthier diet. In the past, this young person ate only baked beans. Expanding his nutritious intake has had a positive impact on his health and overall well-being. His fine motor skills have also improved significantly.



Engaging in a broad range of recreational and entertaining activities, such as going to sports centres, museums and castles, and enjoying camping and trips to the seaside, has made residential pupils better integrated within their local and wider communities. They benefit from the school's strong advocacy for the rights of children and people who have an autism spectrum condition and the value they bring to our society.

#### Quality of care and support in the residential provision is outstanding

- The residential accommodation is safe, clean, well maintained and comfortably furnished. The residential care practice is strongly based on evidence of practice which works well. The written care and support plans provide clear and comprehensive guidance to staff across the whole school.
- The residential care provision is monitored robustly through scrutiny of records, regular residential and other meetings, reflection on staff practice and trans-disciplinary reviews of the individual pupils' progress. This is a high-quality, cutting edge, safe service that demonstrates impact through highly effective measuring and monitoring tools.
- The family liaison work is particularly strong. The residence is open for the families to visit. The school staff have visited families in their own environment and provided them with advice, guidance and support on how they could enhance their family life. The impact of the residential provision on the pupils' families is also exceptionally positive. A parent described the residential staff as 'our extended family'.
- The care and support are sharply child-centred. All staff members, irrespective of their roles, work very closely together to help each pupil achieve their potential. This includes input from speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, teachers and support staff. The trans-disciplinary and whole-school approach to pupils' welfare results in extraordinarily positive outcomes for them.
- Food provision in the residency is managed well. Staff consistently follow the procedures for safe food handling to provide healthy, tasty and nourishing meals of pupils' choice. Staff are skilled in encouraging pupils to try different things and develop a more varied diet. Residential pupils get involved in food preparation and have excellent opportunities to gain housekeeping skills.



# **School details**

Unique reference number	118993
DfE registration number	886/6046
Inspection number	10008936

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.

The inspection of residential provision was carried out under the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Care Standards Act 2000, having regard to the national minimum standards for residential special schools.

Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent residential special school
Age range of pupils	5 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	73
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	18
Number of part-time pupils	0
Number of boarders on roll	3
Proprietor	National Autistic Society
Chair	Mrs Janet Corcoran
Headteacher	Mrs Susan Conway
Annual fees (day pupils)	£44,852
Annual fees (boarders)	£77,668
Telephone number	01474 814 878
Website	www.autism.org.uk/helenallison
Email address	helen.allison@nas.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	19–20 July 2012



### Information about this school

- Helen Allison is a residential special school, part of the National Autistic Society, offering day school and residential full-time education to male and female pupils between the ages of five and 19. The school is registered for 77 pupils.
- The school caters for young people with autism spectrum conditions.
- There are currently 73 pupils on roll, of whom three are resident. All but 10 of the pupils are boys.
- The school opened in 1968. Its last full integrated inspection was in July 2012. The last inspection of residential provision was in January 2016.
- The principal and deputy principal both took up their posts following the previous inspection. More recently, a clinical psychologist has been appointed and there is a new head of boarding.



# Information about this inspection

- This was an integrated inspection, which took place at a day's notice.
- Inspectors observed 14 lessons or parts of lessons across all departments, all jointly with a member of the senior leadership team. Pupils' behaviour during lessons, as well as in and around the school, was observed.
- Meetings were held with senior leaders, those who have responsibility for safeguarding, leaders of boarding provision, staff at the school and groups of pupils, including day and residential pupils. A discussion was held with the link governor from the board of trustees on the telephone.
- Inspectors analysed school documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, reports provided by external advisers, annual statement information and tracking information about pupils' achievement, attendance, behaviour and exclusions.
- Safeguarding policies and procedures were scrutinised, including correspondence between the school and the local authority safeguarding board. Records linked to work with other agencies were reviewed, as well as those relating to how the school has responded to complaints.
- Inspectors considered 11 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.

#### **Inspection team**

Matthew Barnes, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Seka Graovac	Social Care Regulatory Inspector



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