

Avocet House

The Old Vicarage, School Lane, Heckingham, Norfolk NR14 6QP

Inspection dates

9–11 May 2017

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- The head of education, with strong support from the principal, executive principal and other senior staff, is exceptionally effective in developing a culture of very high aspiration that enables pupils to excel.
- The proprietors are highly involved in the school. They challenge leaders constructively and support them in order to improve the school even further.
- Arrangements for all aspects of safeguarding are exemplary. Pupils feel safe and learn how to keep safe.
- Pupils respect the staff and are respectful of each other.
- Excellent pastoral care systems and the highly motivating curriculum transform pupils' attitudes to learning.
- Pupils' attendance improves significantly during their time at the school. The vast majority rarely miss a day.
- Close teamwork between parents, therapists and the school staff mean that pupils' behaviour and emotional needs are managed very skilfully. Pupils' behaviour improves rapidly and is outstanding.
- Pupils' learning quickly accelerates because of the high-quality individual attention and support they receive.
- The curriculum, tasks and activities are planned precisely to match the learning needs of each individual pupil.
- Teachers provide stimulating creative opportunities for pupils to learn.
- Overall, pupils make outstanding progress from their different starting points. Their progress with writing is not always as rapid as other aspects of their literacy.
- Excellent guidance and support prepare pupils extremely well for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
- Proprietors and senior leaders have ensured that the school meets all the independent school standards but they do not have an in-depth knowledge of them.

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?

- Ensure that leaders and managers have a sharper understanding of the independent school standards and use this knowledge to evaluate the school's performance.
- Improve all aspects of pupils' writing, including handwriting, spelling, punctuation and the quality of extended writing so that they make consistently strong progress.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- All of the independent school standards are met.
- The head of education, with the strong support of the executive headteacher and senior leaders, provides outstanding leadership and direction, ensuring that the school continues to move from strength to strength.
- The proprietors and senior leaders have created an exceptional culture of achievement throughout the school. Care and support for pupils is at the heart of the school's aims and provision. Pupils, who experience complex emotional and social barriers to achievement, learn to believe in themselves and recognise that they can succeed.
- The staff form a cohesive team with a shared commitment to ensure that each pupil feels secure in school. This provides the environment in which pupils begin to recognise that they can manage their behaviour and succeed with their learning.
- The school's self-evaluation is rigorous, although leaders do not have an in-depth understanding of the details that underpin some of the independent school standards. Nevertheless, there is a detailed analysis of whole-school provision to inform school improvement planning. The school improvement plan has the necessary precision to continue to drive rapid school improvement.
- Pupils follow a highly personalised curriculum based on the national curriculum. It is designed to meet the needs of each pupil's academic progress and personal development. This fulfils the educational requirements in each pupil's statement of special educational needs or education, health and care (EHC) plan very effectively.
- The school's motto is, 'Care and learning without limits'. The school 'makes the curriculum fit the student and not the other way round'. Pupils are active partners in developing their individually timetabled personalised learning package. A high priority is placed on English, mathematics, science, information and communication technology, personal and social development, and citizenship together with a range of other subjects.
- A wide range of extra-curricular activities enhances pupils' learning and enjoyment. Examples of additional activities are gardening, cookery, golf, talent shows and climbing. Pupils are encouraged to take part in clubs and activities in the local community such as army cadets and sea cadets. The activities contribute to and build pupils' self-confidence as they take part and successfully acquire a range of new skills.
- The school's assessment procedures are rigorous. The progress of all pupils is checked regularly to identify any pupils who have difficulties. This is followed up with high-quality support by the class teachers or teaching assistants.
- British values are promoted effectively. Pupils learn about respect, rights and responsibilities, democracy and the rule of law. Pupils readily conduct mock elections at appropriate times and hold restorative conversations to learn right from wrong.
- The school actively promotes equality and diversity in all aspects of its work. It ensures that pupils understand and are learning tolerance and acceptance of others. Pupils learn about the rule of law by learning to distinguish right from wrong through discussion in lessons and staff modelling positive behaviour.

- Staff who completed the inspection questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the school. All said they were proud to work at the school and fully understood what senior leaders were aiming to achieve.
- Parents are justifiably very complimentary about how happy and well looked after their children are. Typical examples of their views are: 'he has made fantastic progress' and 'I would recommend them to any local authority'.
- Correspondence from local authority placement officers affirms the positive work of the school and recognises the impact it has on pupils' education and well-being. As one officer commented, 'they formulate the best bespoke package and I am massively impressed with the risk assessments'.
- The authorities that place their pupils in the school are given annual audited accounts in respect of the money they pay towards fees. Highly efficient management of financial resources maintains and develops the high quality of provision.

Governance

- The proprietors share the passion of the senior leaders and staff for ensuring that the pupils receive the finest possible education.
- The proprietors provide an exceptional balance of support and challenge to senior leaders for all aspects of the school's performance.
- The proprietors are experienced educational professionals. Their in-depth knowledge of education and pupils' well-being enables them to play an informed role in ensuring that the overall effectiveness of the school remains outstanding.
- The proprietors have clear expectations that leaders manage the performance of staff through effective procedures for appraisal and target setting. Staff know their personal goals and understand the expectations placed on them.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The safeguarding policy is on the school website and meets the most recent guidance.
- Appropriate pre-employment checks are completed and recorded diligently. Staff, consultants and visitors are checked to ensure that they can work with children.
- Staff are familiar with the latest guidance for keeping children safe in education. Senior leaders ensure that all staff benefit from comprehensive training that is regularly updated in line with changes in legislation.
- The designated safeguarding lead is trained to the appropriate level. Leaders and staff are highly aware of their responsibility to safeguard pupils. Staff know the procedures to follow in the event of any concerns raised by pupils or members of staff.
- All statutory policies are in place and are reviewed regularly by the proprietors.
- All staff are extremely vigilant in their care for pupils. They understand the vulnerability of pupils and their individual characteristics and needs.
- The curriculum covers all aspects of safeguarding and ensures that pupils understand the

basic rules of keeping safe, whether online, in school or out of school.

- High levels of supervision ensure that pupils are safe and their welfare protected.
- The school carries out comprehensive risk assessments on all aspects of school life. Meticulous record-keeping helps to keep pupils safe.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- Pupils are mainly taught individually allowing for the delivery of highly personalised programmes. This enables them to make outstanding progress as a result of the precisely focused, inspirational teaching.
- There is a purposeful atmosphere in school where pupils are exceptionally keen to learn and to do their best. Lessons are imaginative and provide plentiful opportunities for pupils to engage actively in their learning and achieve remarkably well.
- Teachers have consistently high expectations of behaviour and achievement. Pupils know what is expected and settle well in lessons to enjoy their learning. They are focused, expect to learn and encourage each other to learn. No one is allowed to disrupt and pupils help each other to behave well.
- Teachers and teaching assistants work extremely well together. They demonstrate exemplary commitment and sustained focus on the individual learning needs of pupils.
- Staff have secure knowledge of the subjects they teach and an excellent understanding of how to interest and motivate pupils to achieve.
- Pupils reflect on the progress they make in lessons and learn how they can improve. Their self-esteem goes from strength to strength.
- Pupils enjoy reading and are keen to read aloud. In response to teachers' questions, they show excellent understanding of what they have read and discussed.
- Teachers are skilled in re-shaping learning, often through varying the language they use to ensure that misunderstandings and uncertainties do not become barriers to progress.
- Arrangements for the assessment of pupils' progress and the evaluation of outcomes are excellent. Progress is measured against bespoke frameworks for assessment in national curriculum areas, the description in each pupil's statement of special educational needs or EHC plan, and against targets in other individual plans. Staff have an exceptionally clear picture of the extent of pupils' progress from their starting points.
- Staff have established excellent routines both in the classroom and in the outdoor learning area. This helps pupils to move from one activity to another smoothly and quickly with no time lost.
- Staff report regularly to parents and local authorities. Written reports provide comprehensive information about progress in the full range of subjects studied. This is supplemented by regular, informal oral updates.
- Staff use a wide range of courses, visits and residential trips to further enhance learning. Where specific interest or talents are identified by the school personalised provision is provided, such as a tutor for individual lessons in Mandarin and a professional tennis coach.

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Pupils usually arrive at Avocet House after difficult experiences in previous settings and many have had periods of time with no education. As a result, their self-esteem is very low. The exceptional therapeutic and nurturing approach is an essential element of the school's ethos. It helps pupils to settle quickly and to begin to thrive so that learning can take place.
- Staff continuously work hard to develop high levels of trust between pupils and adults throughout the school. Pupils rapidly grow in confidence because they know that they are valued and cared for.
- Pupils feel safe. They know who they can talk to if they have any concerns. They are clear about what constitutes safe and unsafe situations.
- Pupils are proud of their achievements and respond very positively to verbal feedback. They value the school's reward system and this helps to encourage and motivate them. Pupils achieve exceptional improvements in their ability to focus, to follow instructions and to respond positively to staff.
- The provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. It equips them to become thoughtful, caring and active citizens in school and in wider society.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding in lessons and around school. Behaviour rarely disrupts learning because staff are highly skilled and sensitive in recognising possible triggers. This enables them to take positive action to avoid incidents occurring.
- The school's expectations of behaviour are very high. Pupils respond extremely well to teachers' guidance. They are keen to learn and show a real enthusiasm in lessons.
- In lessons when together, pupils demonstrate tolerance and consideration towards each other. They understand the importance of their and others' opportunities to learn and that this must not be inhibited by poor behaviour.
- Pupils are very respectful of each other, adults and visitors. They are polite, cheerful and happy as they go about the school.
- Positive behaviour rewards include weekly celebration certificates for progress and effort in and out of class, termly commendation awards and accreditation certificates for various activities in and out of school. Pupils value the certificates and are eager to share their achievement with adults.
- The school site is secure and supervised well. There is no litter or graffiti or other items of rubbish around the school.
- Pupils are caring of each other. The respect they enjoy from staff helps them to empathise with other pupils as far as they are able.
- Pupils say there is no bullying. If it were to happen they have every confidence that it

would be dealt with quickly and effectively. This is supported by records held by the school.

- From very low attendance at school prior to arrival at Avocet House, pupils' attendance improves and is now in line with the national average. There are no concerns about persistent absence. It is clear that pupils very much enjoy coming to school and the pupils spoken to say that, 'it's a place where you can be happy, it's great' and 'I love coming to school.' All pupils are punctual at the start of the school day and to lessons.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- All pupils, on entry, are working at levels well below those expected for their age. Despite this, the complex nature of pupils' needs and their histories of interrupted education, pupils' outcomes are outstanding.
- Pupils in all key stages make significant gains in self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Pupils enjoy reading, including reading works of fiction for pleasure. They demonstrate fluent and accurate reading skills demonstrating rapid progress over time.
- While pupils are able to produce good items of writing, overall skills in writing are less well-developed than their reading and comprehension skills.
- Pupils demonstrate outstanding progress in their ability to listen and respond to the ideas of others. Teachers are skilled at encouraging discussion based on effective listening to each other. For many, this represents considerable progress in overcoming their anxiety in social situations.
- Unless their stay at the school is very short, pupils leave the school with a range of accreditations. These include GCSE mathematics, science and English; Level 1 and 2 functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics; a range of BTEC Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications; City & Guilds Award in hospitality at Level 1; the Arts Award Bronze; sailing awards; Level 1 awards for climbing; and Level 1 awards in vehicle maintenance.
- Pupils attending alternative provisions make at least good progress, have regular attendance and enjoy the courses they are doing.
- Over the past three academic years, all Year 11 pupils proceeded to further education, employment or an apprenticeship. Leaders prepare pupils well for their next stage. Career pathways are very carefully considered and planned. Pupils take good advantage of the personalised guidance provided to them in order to be successful.
- The school tries very hard to keep in touch with former pupils. Many return to update the school on their progress.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 134978 |
| DfE registration number | 926/6419 |
| Inspection number | 10008940 |

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.

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| Type of school | Other Independent Special School |
| School category | Independent special school |
| Age range of pupils | 8 to 18 |
| Gender of pupils | Boys |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 7 |
| Number of part-time pupils | 0 |
| Proprietor | Specialist Education Services Limited |
| Chair | Jon Lees |
| Head of Education | Dan Green |
| Annual fees | £252,000 |
| Telephone number | 01508 549320 |
| Website | www.specialisteducation.co.uk |
| Email address | office@specialisteducation.co.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 26–27 June 2012 |

Information about this school

- Avocet House is a small independent special school in Norfolk. It opened in 2005 and is registered to admit a maximum of 10 boys between the ages of 8 and 18 years.
- Specialist Education Services Limited owns the school. The proprietors provide the governance of the school.
- There are seven pupils on roll aged 10 to 15 years.
- All pupils have a statement of special educational needs or EHC plans, relating to their social, emotional and mental health needs.

- The school uses Easton and Otley College, and Norwich and Great Yarmouth College for alternative provision.
- The school was last inspected in June 2012 when the overall quality of education was found to be outstanding and all of the independent school standards were met.
- Avocet House holds the Investor in People Gold Award.
- The school's motto is 'Care and learning without limits'. Leaders believe that regardless of experiences, every child, given the right circumstances, has the resources to move forward positively to a preferred future.

Information about this inspection

- Although registered to admit students of sixth-form age, the school has not had students within this age range since January 2017. Therefore, there is no separate section in this report about the quality of the sixth form.
- The inspector toured the school site accompanied by the head of education.
- Meetings were held with the head of education, the executive headteacher, other senior leaders and one of the proprietors.
- The school's website was scrutinised.
- The inspector reviewed the checks made on staff about their suitability to work with children.
- The inspector scrutinised the school's self-evaluation summary; the school improvement plan; various policies; data relating to past and current pupils' achievement, information on progress; records of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; information on pupil's behaviour and attendance, health and safety records; the admissions and attendance registers, and the annual account of income received and expenditure incurred.
- The inspector spoke to pupils in lessons, considered the eight survey responses completed by staff and made six phone calls to parents and placing authorities. There were no responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.

Inspection team

Stefanie Lipinski-Barltrop, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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