

Acorn Cottage

Inspection dates

4–6 July 2017

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Leaders' self-evaluation and school improvement planning is not focused enough on the strategic development of the school. Many school policies are out of date.
- Leaders' plans do not have clear timescales or measures for success to enable the governors to monitor their overall impact.
- Too much of the monitoring and evaluation is informal and is not helping leaders to know what needs to improve.
- Teachers do not provide effective guidance that helps pupils to improve their work.
- Teaching does not ensure that the most able remain fully challenged. Therefore they do not make as much progress as they should.
- Leaders are not checking pupils' progress enough throughout the school to raise pupils' achievement to the highest levels.
- Staff performance is not checked and developed well.
- Not all teachers make sure that support assistants make a good contribution to pupils' outcomes.

The school has the following strengths

- Leaders ensure that all of the independent school standards are met.
- Leaders provide an education that transforms the lives of the vast majority of pupils.
- Pupils feel safe, secure and happy in school. High levels of care and trusting relationships ensure that pupils thrive in a nurturing environment.
- Pupils' attendance rates increase rapidly once they settle at the school.
- Pupils make good progress socially, emotionally, culturally and academically, often from low starting points.
- A broad and balanced curriculum with a wide range of extra-curricular activities successfully engages pupils with learning.
- Careers guidance is a strength. All pupils leaving Year 11 successfully go on to further education or training.
- Pupils read well and fluently.

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?

- Improve leadership, management and governance by ensuring that:
 - the self-evaluation plan of the school’s effectiveness is accurate
 - strategic improvement plans rapidly drive school development
 - robust systems are established to monitor the school’s effectiveness so that leaders know what difference they are making to raising standards in the school
 - policies are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure they are up to date with the latest guidelines
 - teachers are held accountable for the progress that pupils make
 - all staff have the training they need to improve their skills.
- Improve pupils’ learning and raise achievement, by ensuring that:
 - the most able pupils are fully challenged on a regular basis
 - pupils know the best ways to improve their work
 - pupils’ progress is tracked carefully and identified weakness are acted upon
 - support assistants provide consistently good support to improve pupils’ performance.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- All of the independent school standards are met.
- The current education manager took up her post in January 2017. Much of her time was absorbed in ensuring that safeguarding was effective. This has prevented her from tackling some of the weaknesses she inherited. There has not been a clear focus on strategic school development.
- Leaders and directors have a realistic view of the school's current strengths and weaknesses. They discuss what should be improved and how. They do not formalise their plans or share them widely enough.
- Plans lack precise and measurable targets. This makes it difficult for the directors to evaluate and measure the actions taken.
- Leaders check the progress that pupils are making. However, these checks are too informal. Leaders do not use the information they gather to devise robust actions for improvement that can then be checked regularly for impact. Leaders recognise that systems for reporting and recording information are not tight enough.
- Leaders are working to develop a new assessment system that meets the needs of the school more effectively. The new system is in its infancy and in need of further refinement so that leaders and teachers know precisely how well pupils achieve. However, it does show that pupils have made good progress from their starting points.
- The monitoring of staff performance has slipped. Staff do not receive fully informed feedback about their work. Training opportunities are limited. The education manager is aware of this and is looking into ways to improve the situation.
- Pupil-premium funding is used effectively to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. Pupils benefit from electronic aids that enable them to develop their literacy skills. As a result, those pupils who receive this funding achieve at least as well as their classmates. This is beneficial in building their self-esteem and confidence.
- The school's curriculum is broad and balanced. It is tailored well to meet pupils' varying abilities and interests. Pupils are entered for a range of accredited qualifications, including GCSE examinations and vocational qualifications, which help to prepare them for further study or the world of work.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are promoted well throughout the school day. Pupils learn about the principles of right and wrong. They are provided with time to reflect on their own and others' actions, developing empathy and respect for others' viewpoints and feelings.
- Pupils are supported to develop a secure appreciation of fundamental British values. Tolerance of diversity and different backgrounds and beliefs is embedded in attitudes and principles across the school. Pupils learn to respect members of all faiths and all cultural groups. The school helps pupils to understand the dangers of extremism. Opportunities such as these prepare pupils well for life in modern Britain.
- Staff morale is high and people enjoy working in the school. Staff judge that they are well supported, treated fairly and equally, and that leaders show consideration towards them.

Governance

- The directors have been active in strengthening their understanding about what it takes to meet the independent school standards.
- The directors have taken effective action to improve the quality of safeguarding.
- Directors share leaders' ambitions for the school and wholly support its values and ethos. They take a strong interest in all aspects of the school's work.
- The directors know the next steps required to improve the quality of provision further. They have rightly identified that strategic plans and assessment systems need further development.
- The directors are now starting to challenge leaders to present them with more detailed and accurate information about the quality of teaching and the progress being made by pupils.
- The education manager is successfully managing the day-to-day running of the school but the directors do not hold her to account for the overall academic performance of pupils well enough.
- Some policies are out of date and are not being checked regularly.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The safeguarding policy is available on the school's website and meets the most recent statutory guidance.
- The single central record of the suitability of staff meets requirements. All employees are checked thoroughly and promptly.
- All staff have received up-to-date training in safeguarding children. Staff are familiar with 'Keeping children safe in education' (September 2016) and understand how to keep children safe.
- Staff have up-to-date training on the government's 'Prevent' duties.
- Risk assessments are completed for all educational visits and carefully consider any potential risks to pupils.
- Leaders work well with external agencies to ensure pupils' safety and well-being.
- Leaders check the health and safety of the premises routinely and engage the expertise of an external consultant for further checks.
- Pupils are taught about how to keep themselves safe, including the risks attached to using social media.
- When pupils want to talk about issues that concern them, they know whom to turn to. As one pupil told the inspector, 'Staff are caring, thoughtful and lovely. Staff would protect us. They put us girls first.'

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Prior to starting at Acorn Cottage, the majority of pupils have missed significant periods of

education. The school's entirely flexible and bespoke approach enables pupils to re-engage quickly with their learning.

- Teaching staff are caring, nurturing and calm. Pupils very often receive one-to-one support. This enables pupils to feel confident about asking for advice and guidance. It provides them with opportunities to make up for lost time, believe in themselves and make good progress.
- Learning time is used productively. Pupils settle to work very quickly and often enjoy their lessons within a positive learning environment. Relationships between teachers, teaching assistants and pupils are mutually respectful. Teachers know individual pupils incredibly well. This means that pupils are not hesitant to offer their ideas and opinions.
- Classroom routines are very well established. Teachers accurately assess in lessons what pupils know. Misconceptions are rare.
- Teachers have high expectations of pupils' behaviour. Pupils respond well to this and develop good attitudes to learning.
- Teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge and understanding of the age groups they teach. They ask thoughtful questions that engage pupils, probe pupils' understanding and encourage them to develop their thinking and communication skills.
- Pupils have many opportunities throughout the curriculum to develop their communication skills. They are encouraged to participate in discussions, showing the utmost respect for the views and opinions of others.
- The provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is highly tailored to their individual needs and linked clearly to their education, health and care (EHC) plans.
- Previous schooling information, where available, is carefully considered when planning for meeting pupils' needs. Targets are regularly reviewed and form part of detailed EHC plan reviews, which consider how well pupils have progressed from their individual starting points.
- Pupils take pride in their work. This is reflected in their books, which are well presented.
- Careers information, advice and guidance are provided discreetly through the curriculum and also by an external adviser. Some pupils have clear ideas about what they would like to do when they leave school. Teachers work well to incorporate opportunities for pupils to explore these routes further through work experience, such as working with animals. The school has also established links with alternative providers to provide vocational qualifications in vehicle maintenance and hairdressing and beauty.
- Support staff know the pupils well. The education manager has correctly identified that further training is required to target precisely the degree of support being offered to pupils.
- The most able pupils are not sufficiently challenged. The quality of work in their books shows that expectations of them are sometimes not high enough. At times, pupils complete with very little effort work that they have already grasped.
- Teachers' feedback to pupils does not help to improve their work because it is too general to give helpful advice.

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils are well looked after. High levels of supervision ensure that pupils' welfare is considered at all times. Close one-to-one support, where needed, is effective. Pupils' welfare is at the heart of what the school does.
- Pupils feel safe in school and appreciate the guidance that is provided by their teachers and support staff. Pupils know whom to turn to if they are worried. They say that their concerns are taken sincerely and are always investigated by staff. This means that issues are resolved quickly and well.
- Pupils also benefit from a range of tailored extra-curricular opportunities that enrich and extend their learning beyond the classroom. These include swimming, cadets, bowling, skating, the cinema and the gym. A regular programme of visits to museums, castles and sporting events enhances the curriculum and stimulates more practical approaches to engage pupils in their learning.
- The breakfast club provides a caring, safe and stimulating environment for the pupils, who reflect and debate on current affairs. By discussing newspaper articles in depth, pupils learn about a range of faiths, cultures and human relationships.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils are polite, courteous and understand that derogatory language is not accepted.
- In lessons, pupils behave well and listen attentively. They address all teachers with respect.
- Relationships between staff and pupils are strong across the school. Pupils told the inspector, 'Staff are always happy and listen to us. We have anger issues and they really help us to deal with these.'
- Leaders track pupils' behaviour regularly and systematically. This enables them to spot patterns of concern.
- The school retains up-to-date attendance and admission registers.
- Attendance is monitored on a pupil-by-pupil basis. From very low attendance at school prior to arrival at Acorn Cottage, pupils' attendance dramatically improves and is overall above the national average. There are no concerns about persistent absence.
- It is clear that pupils very much enjoy coming to school. Pupils said, 'I am very happy in school. I enjoy the lessons and I have made progress' and 'I feel I have been given a second chance in school and now enjoy learning.'
- All pupils are punctual at the start of the school day and to lessons.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils arrive at the school having missed out on significant amounts of education. This results in many gaps in their attainment, knowledge and skills.
- Teachers target learning precisely to provide pupils with opportunities to catch up on missed learning and secure key skills in literacy and mathematics.
- Pupils make consistently good progress in their academic and personal skills, across a range of subjects. They catch up on missed learning and secure good skills in literacy and mathematics over a short period of time. However, the most able pupils are not always making enough progress. This is because teaching is not always challenging enough for them.
- Disadvantaged pupils are making securely good progress. This is because school leaders discuss the progress of disadvantaged pupils regularly and identify any areas where they could do even better.
- Inspectors saw pupils read confidently in class with fluency and demonstrate good comprehension skills. Frequent access to reading books and other texts quickens the progress pupils make with their literacy development.
- Leaders are ambitious for pupils. As a result, pupils rise to the challenge set by their teachers. Their self-esteem rises, which helps them to do well in their academic subjects.
- Pupils achieve well in a wide range of external accreditations, such as GCSEs in English, mathematics, science, humanities, health and social care, art, and French. An array of other accredited courses are completed by pupils according to their ability and interest.
- The alternative providers deliver a range of accredited vocational courses. These include courses in the level 1 diploma in vehicle maintenance and the level 1 diploma in hair and beauty. Attendance is monitored carefully and pupils make good progress on the courses they study.

School details

Unique reference number	130854
DfE registration number	935/6084
Inspection number	10008942

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	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number of pupils on the school roll	7
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Care Focus Ltd
Chair	Not applicable
Headteacher	Val Petch
Annual fees (day pupils)	£54,600
Telephone number	01473 657030
Website	www.carefocus.co.uk
Email address	valpetch@carefocus.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	26–27 June 2012

Information about this school

- Acorn Cottage is a small independent special school owned by Care Focus Ltd. The school opened in 2005. The school acquired a second site in 2013.
- The school is registered with the Department for Education to admit eight girls. There are seven girls on roll.
- The two proprietors of Care Focus Ltd, alongside two appointed directors, are responsible for the governance of the school.
- All pupils have social, emotional and mental health needs. One pupil has an education, health and care plan.

- All pupils are looked after by their respective local authorities.
- In the recent past pupils have attended the alternative providers Easton and Otley College, Suffolk New College and West Suffolk College for parts of the week.

Information about this inspection

- This standard inspection took place with one day's notice.
- Inspectors visited both of the school sites.
- Inspectors toured the school sites accompanied by the education manager.
- Inspectors held discussions with the education manager, two directors, other senior leaders and teaching and non-teaching staff.
- Inspectors observed the school's work and scrutinised information about achievement, behaviour and attendance. Inspectors also looked at a wide range of documents and records relating to the self-evaluation, the monitoring of teaching and learning, safeguarding and child protection documents, including the checks made on staff.
- Inspectors observed teaching and learning, most of which were visited jointly with senior leaders. Pupils' conduct in lessons and at breaktimes was also observed.
- Inspectors met with pupils formally and informally. They looked at pupils' work and at the records of their progress.
- There were no responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire.
- Phone calls were made to two local authorities and one parent.
- Inspectors considered 24 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for staff.

Inspection team

Stefanie Lipinski-Barltrop, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Sue Cox	Ofsted Inspector

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