

Doucecroft School

Doucecroft School, Abbots Lane, Eight Ash Green, Colchester, Essex CO6 3QL
Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

Doucecroft is a co-educational day and residential special school for children and young people, aged from three to 19 years, who have autistic spectrum conditions. The school, which is privately owned by Autism Anglia, is situated in a small village on the outskirts of Colchester. The boarding accommodation is located in two boarding houses on the main site. Residential care is provided for up to 294 nights per year for students aged nine to 19 years. There is respite provision available for day students. There are 43 students on roll, of whom 16 are residential/respite students. The last welfare inspection took place in February 2017.

Inspection dates: 9 to 11 October 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account

requires improvement to be good

How well children and young people are helped and protected

requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

requires improvement to be good

The residential special school is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of previous inspection: 7 February 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school requires improvement to be good because:

- There are five unmet national minimum standards. Although progress has been made since the last inspection, three of these standards were also unmet at the last inspection.
- Agency staff work with the children and young people. Leaders and managers have not consistently assured themselves that agencies have undertaken appropriate safe-recruitment checks prior to the agency staff working at the school.
- The systems for monitoring the quality of the provision are not good enough.
- The behaviour management policy is not implemented consistently. Monitoring of the records of physical interventions lacks depth. Leaders and managers do not ensure that the staff who are involved in physical interventions in the residential provision receive debriefings.
- The service specialises in working with children and young people who have disabilities. However, the staff have not received training in safeguarding children and young people who have disabilities.
- Some elements of the residential accommodation do not contribute to a homely environment. Some of the showers are dirty, and paintwork needs attention.
- The handover of information from the residential staff to the day staff sometimes takes place in a chaotic environment. This increases the chance of information being missed, misheard, or overheard by people who should not hear it.

The residential special school's strengths:

- Improvements have taken place in a number of areas in the residential provision.
- The children and young people receive good care from staff who know them well. The staff are calm and caring in their approach to meeting the children's and young people's diverse needs.
- The staff have a good understanding of autistic spectrum disorders and the effect on individual children and young people.
- An independent person visits the children and young people regularly. This provides the children and young people with opportunities to raise any concerns with an adult outside of the staff team.
- Parents and carers value the service, and they have confidence in the staff. Communication is highlighted as a strength.
- The children and young people make progress in developing their independence skills. This varies from child to child. Examples of progress

include dressing independently and taking driving lessons.

What does the residential special school need to do to improve?

Compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools

The school does not meet the following national minimum standards for residential special schools:

- 12.1 The school has and consistently implements a written policy on managing behaviour, including promoting good behaviour. This policy includes: measures to combat bullying, including cyberbullying, and to promote positive behaviour; school rules; disciplinary sanctions; when restraint, including reasonable force, is to be used and how this will be recorded and managed; and arrangements for searching children and their possessions.
- 12.5 All children and staff are given an opportunity to discuss with a relevant adult (who was not directly involved) within 24 hours incidents of restraint, including reasonable force, they have been involved in, witnessed or been affected by.
- 13.1 The school's governing body and/or proprietor monitors the effectiveness of the leadership, management and delivery of the boarding and welfare provision in the school, and takes appropriate action where necessary.
- 14.1 Schools operate safe recruitment and adopt recruitment procedures in line with the regulatory requirements and having regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State.
- 20.2 Most monitoring visits are carried out unannounced. They include: checks on the school's records of attendance, complaints, sanctions, use of reasonable force, risk assessments, and where they exist, individual care plans for children; evaluation of the effectiveness of the care provided to children and whether they are safeguarded; assessment of the physical condition of the building, furniture and equipment of the school; and opportunities for any child or member of staff who wishes to meet the visitor (in private if they wish).

Recommendations

- Ensure that staff have access to learning and development opportunities in relation to safeguarding children and young people who have disabilities.
- Ensure that handovers take place in an appropriate environment.
- Ensure that the decor of the residential provision is consistently maintained to promote a homely environment.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Leaders and managers have made clear progress in addressing the shortcomings identified at the last inspection. However, further progress is necessary to make sure that the children and young people receive a consistently good service. Although there are areas of good practice across the service, progress has not yet been sufficient to ensure that all of the national minimum standards are met.

Monitoring arrangements, although stronger, are not sufficiently embedded. The issues identified during this inspection demonstrate this. Governors undertake monitoring visits that are designed to comply with the expectations of the national minimum standards. However, these visits do not provide sufficient scrutiny or challenge. They do not routinely report on the quality of the residential accommodation, or on the quality of the care provided. Governors recognise that this is an area for development, and they are exploring ways in which improvements can be made.

There are aspects of the residential accommodation that require attention. There are patches of mould in shower rooms, and paintwork is damaged or unsightly in a number of rooms. This does not contribute to a homely environment.

The children and young people enjoy the experience of boarding. A child said, 'It's all good here.' A parent said, of her child, 'He is loving it. He is absolutely loving it. He is counting the days until he goes to boarding. It is something special.' The children and young people gain the opportunity to experience new things because of boarding. An external professional commented, 'He [child] has high levels of anxiety and this manifests itself in physical aggression. At [the school] he has settled, and is able to access things he would not otherwise be able to do.'

The children and young people attend the on-site school. New systems have been introduced to monitor and measure how the residential provision effects educational progress. School staff work in the residential setting, and residential staff work in the school setting. This assists in a joined-up approach to support the children and young people to achieve their educational and developmental goals.

The children and young people experience individualised care from staff who know them well. The children and young people benefit from high staffing levels, with at least one-to-one staffing always available. These high staffing levels, combined with the staff members' knowledge of autistic spectrum disorders and the effect of diagnoses on individuals, result in children and young people making progress in their independence skills. The staff recognise this drive to promote independence as a crucial focus of the service. Children and young people can describe the effect of the service. One young person said, 'I have made so much progress. I used to be in trouble. I used to be naughty. Not anymore. I am learning to drive. I am going to

work experience. It is great.'

There has been a significant increase in the focus on monitoring and measuring additional areas of progress for residential children and young people. This monitoring is in its earliest stages, with baseline assessments having taken place. This positive development has the potential to demonstrate improvement or indicate the need for approaches to be adapted.

Families and external professionals are generally positive about the quality of the service and the quality of the relationships that they have with the staff. A parent said:

'I don't worry about him [child] at all. They [staff] know him so well, and I know them. They know his triggers and problems. He gets a very high level of support. They are able to do things with [child] that I would not consider myself. They are confident. They know him back to front and inside out. That makes it easier for me to trust them.'

Another parent said:

'Communication is great with the school. Communication is the best thing. It means we do the same things. It means he [child] is not lost. We are all working the same way.'

The staff speak of a more joined-up approach to meeting the children's and young people's needs. Residential and education staff feel that there has been a significant change in the status of the residential provision. There is now a sense of shared responsibility for residential practice.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Safeguarding arrangements are generally effective. There is regular liaison with local authorities and the designated officers when safeguarding concerns arise. The school has five designated safeguarding-trained staff. Residential staff know who these designated leads are. The residential staff talk with confidence about what they would do if they had concerns about the conduct of a colleague, or safeguarding concerns about a child or young person. These staff are also able to identify how they would take concerns further if they were unhappy with the response from safeguarding colleagues at the school.

Individual risk assessments identify risks and offer pointers for managing these risks. The school's missing-child policy has been updated since the last inspection. There have been no incidences of children or young people going missing. The school's behaviour policy has also been updated.

The staff in the residential provision use physical intervention as a last resort to

manage the children's and young people's behaviour. The systems for monitoring the records of these physical interventions have not been effective. Although the records are completed, they lack reflection and evaluation. At present, the residential staff are not receiving debriefings following physical interventions. Senior staff recognise that the behaviour policy is not consistently implemented. The headteacher has identified actions to improve this.

Leaders and managers rely on agency staff to provide cover. Safe-recruitment checks for agency staff do not comply with statutory guidance. Although the school staff were eventually able to gather records during the inspection to show that the agencies had undertaken appropriate checks on the agency staff, there have been occasions when the school has not had evidence of these checks prior to the member of agency staff working at the school.

The staff have access to safeguarding training. However, they have not received training specifically focusing on safeguarding children and young people who have disabilities. As a result, the staff are not receiving the support that they need to understand and reflect on key messages from research regarding the increased vulnerability to abuse for these children and young people.

Parents and professionals have no concerns about the children's and young people's safety. An independent person visits the residential provision each half term. This provides children and young people with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with an independent person with whom they can share concerns.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

Leaders and managers have made progress in addressing some of the shortfalls that were identified at the last inspection. However, this progress has not been sufficient to ensure that all of the unmet national minimum standards have been met at this inspection. In addition, some further unmet national minimum standards have been identified. The systems for monitoring the quality of the service have not been strong enough and, as a result, monitoring has failed to identify the shortfalls and has not made a sufficient contribution to improvements.

An experienced and qualified care manager leads the residential provision. An experienced deputy supports her. The staff receive supervision and appraisal, and they have access to a range of training courses. The staff have, or are working towards, relevant level 3 qualifications.

The staff have high expectations of the children and young people. There is a strong understanding of the needs of children and young people who have autistic spectrum disorders. This understanding is both general in terms of commonalities associated with autistic spectrum disorders, and individual in terms of the way in which the children's and young people's diagnoses affects them personally.

Parents are positive about the support that they and their children receive when they first begin to board. For many children and young people, this is the first time that they will have stayed away from home. One parent, talking of the challenges such a transition presented, said, 'The staff really helped with this.' Another parent spoke of the ease with which the move occurred. The parent said, 'He [child] loved it straight away.' The support that children and young people and their families receive when children and young people first move into the service means that those who traditionally find change particularly difficult are able to move, with little distress, into an environment that they enjoy being in.

There is a positive culture in the residential provision. The successes of children and young people are celebrated. The layout of the accommodation means that the children's and young people's routine needs for privacy are met. Each child and young person has their own private space. The staff approach each child and young person as an individual, recognising their diverse needs. The staff adapt information to make it more accessible to children and young people.

The residential managers undertake monitoring that results in audit action plans. However, the conclusions of audits and quality assurance activity are over-optimistic. Practice that is good is often graded as outstanding. This may limit the improvements by creating the impression that no further work is needed to improve practice.

There are positive relationships between the residential and education staff. The residential provision and the residential management team are now embedded in the wider school management team. When children and young people transition from the residential provision to the school, information about the children and young people is handed over. However, in some instances the inspector saw this happen in a chaotic way, with discussions in busy corridors. This risks information being missed or inappropriately overheard.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the school knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the national minimum standards.

Residential special school details

Social care unique reference number: SC018010

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Mrs Alison Smart

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Inspector

Ashley Hinson, social care inspector (lead)



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