

Valence School

Valence School, Westerham Road, Westerham, Kent TN16 1QN

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

Valence School is a maintained residential special school. The school caters for pupils who have physical disabilities and/or complex medical needs. Currently, 48 students aged between 11 and 19 years board. They live in seven of the eight bungalows provided for residential care. Accommodation is situated within the grounds of the school. The residential provision was last inspected in March 2017 and a monitoring visit was undertaken in June 2017.

Inspection dates: 31 October to 2 November 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: 28 March 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school requires improvement to be good because:

- Strategies for the recruitment and retention of staff are not proving effective. Managers and senior managers are challenged daily to ensure that there are sufficient staff to meet the needs of students.
- Safeguarding systems are not yet sufficiently embedded.
- Staffing issues result in shortfalls in practice, such as medication errors and frequent changes in key workers for students.

The residential special school's strengths are:

- The continued focus on improvement and adhering to its action plan following the last inspection.
- The governing body and the senior leadership team have worked hard to address the breaches previously identified.
- Students are very confident in expressing their views, wishes and opinions, and are fully encouraged to do so.
- Staff have an increased knowledge and understanding of how to identify and report concerns or actual harm.
- Students are happy, and form good relationships with the staff who care for them.
- Staff are nurturing, caring and compassionate, and respond very well to emergency situations.
- The excellent level of respect seen between students and staff.

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

Compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools

- NMS 15.1 There is a sufficient number of competent staff deployed appropriately, both as a staff group and on individual shifts, to fulfil the school's statement of purpose and meet the individual needs of all children resident in the school.

This relates to recruitment and retention.

- NMS 15.7 There is continuity of staff such that children's relationships are not overly disrupted. No more than half the staff on duty at any one time by day or night at the school are external agency staff or temporary staff who do not know the children very well.

This relates to the high use of agency staff and lack of consistency of individual key workers for each student.

- NMS 11 The school ensures that: arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of children at the school and such arrangements have regard to any guidance issues by the Secretary of State.

In particular, that the quality of safeguarding records is improved and that they contain audit trails of the action taken and the outcomes of these actions.

Recommendations:

- Broaden the range of activities on offer so that they appeal to more students.

Inspection judgements

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

For some students, their experiences and progress are hindered by the high turnover of permanent staff and vacancies. Feedback from parents and staff states that staffing is a concern. Leaders and managers are acutely aware of the staffing issues and are working hard to rectify the situation. However, shortfalls in practice have occurred, including medication errors and frequent changes in key workers. Despite the challenges, the current staff team works hard to ensure that the students are happy and enjoy their time at the residential provision. Staff are caring and nurturing, and work with compassion and passion.

Senior managers continually implement new and more robust systems to lessen the likelihood of poor practice, for example by introducing more stringent medication administration protocols and daily monitoring. There is a determination by all staff and managers to reduce the numbers of medication errors taking place.

Safeguarding is much improved and students are cared for by staff who are better informed of safeguarding practices and reporting procedures. There is now improved practice in relation to referral, investigation and subsequent disciplinary proceedings.

Students, in general, make good progress in regard to their education, health, and emotional and social well-being. Individual complex health and communication needs are taken into account when assessing the progress made. Assessing progress continues to be an area that the school is developing.

Students are happy at the school. They say that they enjoy their residential experience, and they appeared very relaxed during the time that the inspectors spent with them. Much laughter and fun was observed during this inspection. There are trusting relationships between the students and staff. Many friendships are formed between the students. The inspectors observed students being very respectful of each other and understanding of their individual needs.

The residential accommodation is of a very good standard, with all adaptations necessary. Students are able to learn independence skills and were seen preparing and cooking their own meals, with support and encouragement from staff only when needed. A dedicated independence programme ensures that all students have targets and know the areas that they need to develop. The independence programme is under constant review.

Students enjoy a range of activities that are provided on site. Some students feel that the activities on some evenings are too sports focused. A recent increase in accessing activities off site has been embraced by students. They enjoy trips to comedy clubs and local activity centres. However, providing these experiences has at times been hindered by a shortage of permanent staff.

The residential provision strives to work in partnership with parents, carers, placing authorities and external agencies to support the students.

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

Arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of the student's continue to improve.

It is clear that considerable work has been done to raise the profile of safeguarding at the school. This has resulted in increased reporting of concerns, and greater oversight and scrutiny of these reports by the senior leadership team and the safeguarding governor. The systems are not yet sufficiently embedded and there is further work needed to improve the consistency and quality of the safeguarding records kept. In addition, the audit trails of the action taken and the outcomes of these actions are not sufficiently clear.

The governors, and in particular the safeguarding governor, demonstrate a clear understanding of their role to scrutinise and challenge the senior leadership team. Governors have accepted the findings of the last inspection, and have a continued determination to address and improve safeguarding arrangements at the school.

Staff's understanding of safeguarding has improved and continues to be a priority for training days. There is an increased confidence by staff in the senior leadership's team response to any reported issues. The quality of referral, investigation and subsequent disciplinary proceedings is much improved.

The systems to record complaints have improved since the last inspection. Documents show prompt investigation and attention to parental concerns and preferences. The investigation of complaints is prompt and thorough. The school is striving to meet parental requests and, when appropriate, has arranged for independent investigations.

Recruitment procedures are consistent. The school council has influence over the appointment of potential staff, and representatives are present during interviews. This ensures that the voice of the students is actively considered when recruiting staff. Volunteers undergo the same recruitment processes as paid staff.

Health and safety routines across the school are well organised and effective. Students experience fire evacuation drills so that both they and the staff know what action to take if a fire occurred. Each student has a personal emergency evacuation plan, taking their complex health, moving and communication needs into account.

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

Leaders, managers and the governing body have strong determination to continue to make improvements following the last inspection. They have responded to the many shortfalls identified. Audits carried out across key areas of the school have resulted in many positive changes. Leaders acknowledge that there is more work to do.

A significant challenge for the school is the ineffective recruitment and retention of residential staff. Leaders, managers and the governing body are acutely aware of the impact that this is having on the staff and students. An analysis of why staff turnover is so high and the possible reasons why people do not apply has been undertaken. Some reasons are out of the school's control, such as its location.

Challenges in staffing the individual residential units are managed on a daily basis. There is a high level of agency staff use to fill the gaps in permanent staffing, particularly for night shifts. Managers have put in place measures to reduce potential risks when agency staff are working. These measures are detailed. All agency staff are provided with clear information about students' individual needs and their support plans. Managers try to ensure that they use regular agency staff who can come to know the students.

The training provided for staff has increased and is proving to be effective. However, the decreased permanent staffing level has had an impact on the number of staff who can deliver specific health-related care, such as medication administration and individual feeding systems. Managers plan for this on a daily basis, with clear tasks for individual staff to undertake. Although a good response to the current situation, it is not an effective long-term strategy.

The management of the residential provision has been enhanced by the recent return of the residential care manager, who is able to support the interim head of care during these challenging times. The plan for a permanent head of care to be recruited is actively being addressed. The recent introduction of improved supervision and appraisal systems means that staff feel better supported by managers, while their practice and training needs are also addressed.

The school's governing body is subject to a review as a result of a recommendation made at an education inspection carried out in July 2017. Effective monitoring has improved and continues to improve.

Arrangements for external visits to the residential provision have improved. A suitably experienced and knowledgeable independent professional now undertakes visits and reports on the progress being made, and identifies the areas that need improvement. They spend time with the students and report that they are happy at the school.

The feedback from students, parents and staff was considerable. A range of opinions and views have informed this inspection.

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 difference 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: SC041791

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Roland Gooding

Type of school: Residential special school

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Inspectors

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