

# Priory School

Mount Road, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk IP32 7BH

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this residential special school

Priory School is a co-educational residential special academy for pupils who have complex/moderate learning difficulties. It caters for pupils aged between five and 18 years from Suffolk and neighbouring authorities. The school provides a 24-hour curriculum to support cognitive, social and independence skill programmes. The school has 174 pupils on roll, 39 of whom board. A maximum of 23 children access the residential provision each weekday night. The residential accommodation is located in two boarding houses on the school site.

The last inspection of the residential provision took place in October 2017.

**Inspection dates:** 22 to 24 May 2018

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The residential special school provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the school contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

**Date of previous inspection:** 4 October 2017

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

## Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school is outstanding because:

- The leadership of the residential provision is exceptional. The leadership team remains enthused and committed to improving the children's experiences.
- Managers strive to continually develop the service to provide the children with the highest level of care.
- The children continue to make excellent progress in their education.
- The small dedicated staff team knows all of the children extremely well.
- The staff have an excellent understanding of the children's differing communication needs.
- The children become increasingly able to socialise and develop their ability to undertake life skills such as self-care.
- The children say that they feel safe, and their families and the professionals involved in their lives echo this.
- The children are able to participate in a wide range of activities and events that they would not otherwise be able to.
- There is extensive tracking and analysis of incidents and behaviour management issues. Should any common factors or triggers be identified, the children's stays, timetables and activities are adjusted accordingly.

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

The leadership of the residential provision is exceptional. The leadership team remains enthused and committed to improving the children's experiences. The managers strive to continually develop the service to provide the children with the highest level of care.

Children continue to make excellent progress while boarding at this school. The children said that they enjoy staying with the other children. Parents said that, since they started boarding, their children have learned numerous new skills, are more independent and have formed and maintained friendships. The staff work tirelessly to ensure that the children have the best possible boarding experience. The children spoke happily about the positive experiences that they have with the staff and other children. The children's school attendance is extremely high. This is higher for those children who board all week when compared to those who only stay one or two nights.

The small team knows the children extremely well, and the staff clearly enjoy being with the children. They provide the children with consistent care. The children have formed strong, trusting relationships with the staff. The children spend quality time with the staff from the point that they finish school and transition into the residential provision. There is a great deal of laughter and a genuine warmth between the children and staff. A parent said, 'I know that my child is looked after by staff who know him [my child] as well as his family does.' This knowledge enables the family to fully relax when their child is boarding.

The staff have an excellent understanding of the children's differing communication needs. They expertly give the children space and time to express themselves. The staff also ensure that the children recognise each other's communication needs and give each other the space and time to communicate.

The children provide positive reinforcement for each other. A child was speaking negatively about their climbing skills during a recent activity trip in Wales. Another child responded to her saying, 'You were really good at climbing, [name]'. This peer support is encouraging and motivating for the children. It demonstrates that they can recognise and celebrate each other's achievements. This is a skill that parents said has improved the children's interactions with their own siblings when they are at home.

The staff are proactive in supporting the children with their before and after school routines. These routines include homework and extra-curricular activities such as worksheets, educational games and reading. The children benefit from a 24-hour curriculum that means that they are learning without realising. An example of this is the new pen pal scheme that the school participate in. The scheme encourages the children to write to other children in local special schools. These communications indirectly involve handwriting practice that improves their writing and fine motor

skills, along with encouragement to widen their friendship groups.

The children speak confidently about being able to talk to staff if they are upset or worried. The children know that they can use the 'I want you to know' forms to complain, but most said that they would speak to staff as they trust them to 'sort it'. The independent visitors meet with the children during school time as well as in the residential provision, in order to build a rapport with the children. This familiarity provides additional opportunities for the children to raise any concerns.

Key-work sessions and daily and residential council meetings are examples of the forums during which the children's views are sought. Children have used the 'I want you to know' system to express their wishes, such as requesting a change from a single bedroom to group room. The leadership team appropriately responds to these requests and advises the child of the outcome, including the rationale behind any decision made. The children know that their views are valued and acted on.

Mealtimes are a sociable learning experience. Meals are nutritious, with a good level of choice and healthy alternatives. The children are encouraged to try new foods.

Children partake in a wide range of activities that rotate to give them several opportunities to have new experiences. These include arts and crafts, attending Scouts, pet care and outdoor games. Many of the activities that the children experience would not otherwise be available to them.

The staff have an excellent understanding of children's health and medical needs. Appropriate health plans are in place when needed. Medication processes and procedures are meticulous. The staff take a respectful approach to dispensing children's medication. The child's dignity and need for privacy is central to the process.

The staff work with the children and their families to prepare children for commencing and ceasing stays. These processes include introductory visits as a 'link' child, who attends for a few hours a week before progressing to having a set number of overnight stays a week. In the case of one family, the child is attending as a link child despite not attending the school. The staff team has shown a high level of commitment to this child to ensure that the child receives a good level of support through their transition. The child's parent said, 'Without the school there would be no transition.' She went on to say that she cannot fault the service that they [as a family] and their child have received. This commendable commitment to a child that has no formal ties with the school demonstrates the provision's willingness to go over and above to ensure that children receive the best service possible. The staff help the children to prepare for independence in accordance with their age, understanding and ability. Parents commented on how learning these skills has built their child's ability and confidence. These transferable skills help the children at home and will serve them well in later life.

Children are treated with dignity by the staff and they respect and treat each other in the same way, which is evident both at school and in the residential provision. Children 'tell each other off' when they feel that someone is being rude to staff or

another child. These interventions show that the children understand the importance of knowing how to treat people.

There is a scheduled plan of works, some of which are dependent on the organisation being successful in its bids for renovation grants. The buildings have benefited from some upgrades and redecoration of the sleeping and communal living areas. The space available is utilised effectively to ensure that the children do not feel overcrowded. The children have a sense of belonging as they have the same bed space each time they stay. They are encouraged to take responsibility for the residential provision by helping to tidy up and improving their environment through activities such as creating garden ornaments. This input ensures that the provision and the children's routines are as homely as possible.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding**

The learning from the only breach of national minimum standard identified at the last inspection has been extensive and has resulted in clearer delegation and allocation of safeguarding duties. This clarity ensures that there is now a coordinated response when safeguarding issues arise. The designated officer spoke positively about the changes that have occurred. He now has regular meetings with the school. The staff are totally clear on their responsibilities in relation to whistle-blowing and say that they have no hesitation in using the process should the need arise.

The children said that they feel safe when they are boarding. Their families echoed this. A carer said that the staff's prompt reaction to their child's medical condition has actually saved his life on more than one occasion. The child's social worker agreed with this sentiment.

The children said that they talk to the staff if they are worried, and that they are able to telephone their families if they need to. Children do not go missing from this provision. The staff are confident in the process to follow should this occur. The children's risk assessments are comprehensive and updated as and when required. This ensures that the staff are aware of current risks and concerns. The recent updates provide further detail, in a clearer way, on matters such as why a child is or is not in a single bedroom.

The children demonstrate high levels of care towards each other. The staff closely monitor the children's interactions to ensure that any disagreements or poor behaviour do not manifest into anything worse. As the staff know and understand the children's behaviours, they can quickly and expertly recognise situations that may escalate. The staff subtly and discreetly address any negative behaviours with the children concerned. This skilful level of de-escalation ensures that the children's fun is rarely interrupted by another child's behaviour.

The use of any physical intervention is extremely rare, and there have been no physical interventions since the last inspection. It is evident that some of the children struggle at school in a way that they do not in the smaller, more homely, environment of the residential provision. This explains why some children have had

physical interventions at school but not in residence. There is extensive tracking and analysis of incidents and behaviour management issues. Should any common factors or triggers be identified, the children's stays, timetables and activities are adjusted accordingly.

Children do not have use of their personal electronic devices while they are boarding. This is to enable them to focus on socialising. They can have supervised access to the internet. The children learn about internet safety during lessons and through ongoing conversations with the staff and their families. A child said that she would tell her parents or the staff if she saw 'something naughty posted'. The non-risk-averse approach ensures that, should they require it, the children have the same access to the internet as their non-residential peers.

The recruitment process is thorough and ensures that the staff are safe to work with the children. If concerns about a staff member's practice arise, these are addressed with the staff concerned, either as part of their supervision sessions or during additional meetings. This provides the staff with the space and support to improve their practice. The staff receive regular updated safeguarding training that incorporates potential risks and challenges that the children may face, such as managing child sexual exploitation, radicalisation and cyber bullying. Much of the training is in conjunction with the school staff. This joint training is to ensure that all of the staff working with the children use the same approach and that they are continually working with current information and knowledge.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding**

A cohesive leadership team runs the school. The head of care has been in post for a considerable length of time and is continually striving to develop the provision. A social worker said that the head of care is 'inspiring, caring and tactile, and she is honest with families'. A governor described the headteacher as a 'transformational leader who wants the best for children, both at the school and in the wider community'. The leaders are ambitious for the school and the individual children.

The staff are highly aspirational for the children, and this is evident in the developing of the sixth form pupils who are now 'employed' as volunteer staff in the residential provision as part of their Duke of Edinburgh award. The children were excited as one of the staff was attending Buckingham Palace to receive her Gold Award. This is an exemplary demonstration of leading by example and is a positive incentive for the children.

The staff support the children to participate in activities in the community and to do fundraising for their chosen charities, some of which are local. The children are active members of the community through attending local events and supporting local businesses. This places the school at the heart of the community.

The leaders encourage and develop their staff. This development includes the introduction of a team leader post and a transitions/family worker. These new posts provide additional support to the children and the staff, and have led to the

introduction of achievement schemes for the children such as the star of the week.

A number of projects are either in their infancy or are due to commence. There are now summary reports that detail how the children have developed and the positive experiences that they are having because they are boarding. These projects, existing and proposed, are to enable the provision to further demonstrate the progress that the children make because they board. The leadership team's comprehensive research, review and analysis of feedback and outcomes for the children, present and past, is regularly used to develop and shape the service.

Staff said that they feel supported, listened to and valued by the leadership team and that they can share their ideas. They described their supervision and appraisals as helpful and supportive, and reported that there are ample opportunities for ongoing informal discussions. The staff supervision process is a live process that includes a shared document that either party can update between sessions. This innovative and interactive approach ensures that supervision and appraisal is truly a two-way process.

The governors offer challenge and scrutiny. A nominated governor conducts regular audits and produces reports that are thorough and make recommendations that challenge the provision. The leadership team uses the reports as a tool for continual improvement.

The staff work proactively with other professionals and organisations, such as a local authority, to modify the authority's children's questionnaires to ensure that they are more user-friendly and meaningful for the children. The creation of meetings with the headteachers of local special schools enables the sharing of good practice.

A social worker stated that the staff, who can often be one of the stable factors in the children's lives, provide history and context to cases as they have a deep working knowledge of the children and their families. The social worker described having positive working partnerships, and praised the team for working effectively with parents who otherwise do not engage. The social worker said that the staff are proactive in sourcing additional support for children, including those who do not actually attend the school. All of the professionals and parents who provided feedback acknowledged and appreciated this provision's willingness to repeatedly go above and beyond what is expected. General feedback from the children, parents and professionals included:

- 'If we have a bad day at school it stays at school and we start again. If we have a bad time in boarding, it stays in boarding and we don't get talked to about it in school. I think that's good, because you can start again.'
- 'Not only has she developed socially and emotionally, but she is more independent and wants to do things for herself.'
- 'He loves it. It is a lifeline for us. He is a cheeky chappy and they have the measure of him 100%. I dread the day that he has to leave.'

## **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:** SC024610

**Headteacher/teacher in charge:** Mr Lawrence Chapman

**Type of school:** Residential Special School

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## **Inspectors**

Sonia Hay, social care inspector (lead)  
Trish Palmer, social care inspector



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