

High Close School

Barnardo's, High Close School, High Close, Wiltshire Road, Wokingham, Berkshire
RG40 1TT

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

High Close School is a non-maintained school operated by a national charity. It provides for both day and residential pupils, aged from seven to 18 years, with most boarders being of senior school age. There are 71 pupils on roll, with provision for 36 boarding. At the time of the inspection, there were 20 residential pupils living in the four residential units on the school site. The school takes young people who have been unable to succeed in mainstream school and who have statements of special educational need arising from social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties and speech, language and communication needs.

Inspection dates: 25 to 27 June 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	outstanding
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	outstanding
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding
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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 July 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school is outstanding because:

- the provision of residential care has a substantial beneficial impact on the progress made by the children and young people who reside there. There are measurable improvements in: educational attainment; the reduction of significant incidents resulting from their behaviour; and an increase in the skills they acquire.
- families vouch for the improvement in the quality of family life, for them and their children, that placements and other support provided by the school has facilitated.
- the school has exemplary safeguarding procedures and practice.
- positive relationships with staff are the foundation for children to find the emotional security to manage anxiety and other strong feelings, and to then rise to the challenges of learning and relating to others more constructively.
- managers and staff know children, their personalities and needs so well that they can tailor approaches to their care which are of maximum benefit.
- the houses are places in which children feel safe, enjoy social interactions and have opportunities to expand their horizons.

The residential special school's areas for development are:

- improving the guidance available to staff and managers regarding the use of surveillance equipment, particularly regarding its deployment being based on risk assessments of individual children rather than indiscriminate use.
- improving recording practice to facilitate more effective monitoring of practice and decision-making.

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

Recommendations

- The school's CCTV policy should be reviewed to ensure that it provides appropriate guidance regarding how the system should be used and monitored, how visitors and children who are deemed competent should be asked for consent to be filmed, and the records to be kept in respect of its use within the school.
- The use of surveillance, including CCTV and door alarms, should be based on assessments that identify that their use is required to reduce known risks of individual children. Any such assessments should be regularly reviewed with appropriate input from the child, their parents or carers and appropriate professionals.
- The school should have clear, documented maintenance processes, including for planned work and monitoring of urgent remedial work. The school should also ensure that relevant risk assessments are in place, such as those for any controlled substance under The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH).
- Records of physical interventions, sanctions, room searches and key-work sessions should be reviewed to ensure that they include all relevant information to allow for effective monitoring of practice and decision-making.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Managers and staff provide effective and successful support for children and young people who stay in the school's residential provision. The great majority of students and their families benefit from the improvement in their life experiences and prospects and, for some, it can be life-changing. For example, the support from the school and its family resource team was noted to have had an enormous impact on the quality of life of whole families.

Staff have a great understanding of the needs and characteristics of children, helping them to provide highly individualised care. This is a process promoted from well before a child is admitted, as managers obtain substantial information about them at the referral stage and will procure training regarding specific issues before admission.

The high level of support continues throughout a child's stay and into transferring to new provision at the end of it. Professionals and parents commend staff for preparing young people to make this move and helping new providers to understand their needs.

A range of activities are available for children to participate in. One child said, 'There is a lot to do: shopping, clubs, going out with your key worker, cooking and house nights when we all go out somewhere like a park or cinema.' Activities promote children's interests and social interactions (for example, attending a local drama club), provide life-enhancing experiences (such as funding a trip abroad with cadets), or engaging them in events that stretch their abilities (including performing with an orchestra).

Children and young people are helped to try new foods, with olives, jalapenos and various dressings being eaten at evening meals during the inspection. They report enjoying meals in houses and the cafeteria, where various choices are available. One young person who had decided to become vegan was pleasantly surprised to have a meal prepared for her the next lunchtime.

Children and young people make substantial progress, often beyond the expectations of parents. One mother commented on how her daughter was helped to make dramatic improvements because of the school's work, saying, 'Suddenly the world around her made sense for the first time.'

Support from residential staff has frequently had a decisive impact on students' academic performance. For example, enabling a young person to take exams by invigilating in the house unit is predicted to improve outcome grades. Staff have assisted the same student to prepare for a college placement by facilitating extra visits due to her anxiety.

Children are helped to reduce the risks they put themselves at or pose to others, sometimes by collaborating with specialist agencies. This has resulted in some

children gradually increasing the amount of unsupervised time they have, which greatly improves their autonomy and future options.

Children are clear about the difference that being in residential has made for them. One spoke about how he used to spend most of his time in his bedroom, but now he really likes sports and enjoys working with the caretaker closing the school part of the premises at night. Another wrote to staff thanking them for their help to overcome her anxieties, which has subsequently improved her behaviour.

Positive relationships that focus on meeting individual children's need are instrumental to the residential provision's success in improving outcomes. One young person explained the role her key worker played in her progress, saying this was 'because she listens to me and helps me understand things.' Her key worker capitalised on the young person's passion for drama to help her understanding of body language using role play, as observed during the inspection.

Independence programmes are individualised to ensure that work is tailored to a child's age and ability. Progress may be gradual due to a student's cognitive abilities, but it enables many students to feel more confident in their skills and have a wider range of choices of future accommodation.

Each student has a set of targets based on education, health and care plans, reviewed with them when possible. Progress is mapped over time, allowing staff to demonstrate the improvements achieved. Some children know their targets, but many do not; staff have not found it possible to help those with limited ability of recall to retain a basic awareness of what they are working on. However, these children still make progress in their behaviour, self-care skills and education.

An appreciation board promotes social skills such as being aware of other people's emotions, offering to help and demonstration of empathy through examples being displayed. This follows through in the school's good citizenship awards.

Managers and staff facilitate and respond to the views that children and young people express about their experience of residential provision. An excellent example is the consultation exercise that formed part of a review of the school's countering bullying policy and resulted in establishing student anti-bullying helpers to assist their peers.

One young person told an inspector that she wanted staff to use a different calming technique with her, which was readily accepted by a manager as an approach to try.

Students know how to complain; two made about the behaviour of peers were resolved by mediation, but also led to a change in staff practice to avoid future occurrences.

Such examples illustrate how staff successfully enable children and young people to influence their daily experience and develop a sense of personal agency.

How well children and young people are helped and protected:

outstanding

The introduction of an electronic system to record and track safeguarding concerns has enabled managers to oversee the progress of individual cases and to make prompt interventions. The ease of accessing and updating records gives staff the confidence that their own practice is effective, and concerns are being managed well. The priority given to safeguarding is matched by the high level of competence shown by managers and the skills staff have in this area. For example, staff could cite a range of people and organisations they could speak to outside of school if they had concerns about practice.

Training for all staff on safeguarding has a high priority; half-termly refreshers provide regular updates and consideration of current issues in the school or news. Senior managers in the residential provision showed commendable knowledge of these issues. A striking example of effective training is that the administrator responsible for the safeguarding recording system has undertaken a designated safeguarding lead course so that she knows its role and purpose in keeping children safe.

Managers have worked well with the designated officer of the local authority to ensure that concerns raised about staff are thoroughly addressed. This includes agreeing a protocol for helping a young person who made frequent allegations when in a heightened state to reflect on what she has said once calm. This carefully and effectively allows for a swift assessment of things said 'in the heat of the moment' while ensuring that genuine concerns are not overlooked. The number of these allegations is now reducing.

Children and young people said that they feel safe and that staff step in if conflict between them becomes a problem. They were confident about being able to approach a member of staff if they had a problem and knew that it would be dealt with. Some children knew of the independent visitor from her visits. She is relatively new and an email account for students to contact her is still being set up. However, none of those asked knew what the role of the Children's Commissioner is.

The school has good recruitment procedures which are well documented and reviewed. Changes introduced to the provider's recruitment policy since the last inspection have ensured that they are in line with statutory guidance.

Children and young people are supported to become increasingly safe. For example, one young person has been assisted to keep away from unsafe areas like fire escapes by helping her take photographs of these places and then using them as visual reminders. This has resulted in a marked reduction in such incidents. Such creative, tailored approaches demonstrate exemplary practice.

Managers changed the behaviour management approach the school used to better respond to the emotional needs of children and young people, illustrating the focus on support rather than control that exemplifies the school's ethos.

The number of physical interventions for some children and young people has

dropped remarkably due staff to helping them to manage their feelings without resorting to aggressive behaviour. Some students recognise that working on ideas to deal with strong emotions has helped them calm, including the physical activities available for them in the occupational therapy room.

Rethinking management strategies for some children and young people, including their involvement in constructive activities and/or carefully planned moves to another house, has resulted in a remarkable improvement in behaviour, despite initial settling problems. A new tool to record the assessments involved in such transfers has been devised and is to be used for future moves and admissions.

Staff safely administer medication to children and young people. However, on a few records the initials of the person administering have been changed by being overwritten without an explanation being given about why this has been done.

Staff in the family resource team have successfully helped parents and carers who have opted to access its support; two parents who attended a group reported that 'we understand autism more now rather than just know what it means'. Individual and group work has helped children and young people know how to be safer online. Where this knowledge has not resulted in changed behaviour further bespoke interventions are developed, exemplifying the tireless efforts made across the school to help students to be safe and to progress.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Governors have a good grasp of the needs of children and monitor their care well. They have thorough procedures for overseeing safeguarding and recruitment to ensure that practice is robust.

The principal and other senior managers have worked hard to address issues arising from the last full inspection. The improvements seen at the monitoring visit have been further strengthened. This includes ensuring that recommendations have been followed before closing safeguarding concerns and half-termly monitoring of all incidents for individual pupils. These developments add additional checks to ensure that all actions to promote children's safety and well-being have been taken.

There are excellent opportunities for training which reflect both individual staff's needs and those of the children. The organisation sees training as a real benefit, apparent from the outset of employment with an effective induction programme. Staff feel valued because of the commitment made to their development. There is some dissatisfaction with how the wider organisation recognises their work, but staff appreciate the feedback that managers within the school give them.

Managers have developed a culture of transparency and challenge in the school. One effective way of promoting this has been to introduce a process of house managers monitoring each other's homes, leading to the sharing of best practice. Governors and managers have appointed a new independent person to monitor and report on the residential provision with the aim of increasing the level of challenge provided by

this process. There is already evidence that this is constructive.

Excellent supervision helps staff to identify their strengths and review areas of development. It is well monitored to ensure quality and timeliness, with any issues dealt with swiftly. Managers have developed an effective way to encourage equality and diversity by including an entry in supervision records for staff to report on activities they are engaged in to promote understanding or experience.

There are ample opportunities for staff to reflect on practice, including their own supervision, team meetings and handovers. This contributes to the excellent level of understanding they have of the work being done with each child. One member of staff said, 'Communication, especially in relation to children's behaviours, comes together here and makes me feel "in the know" about the children we work with – especially where they are so complex.'

Behaviour management practice is well thought through, but records of physical interventions, sanctions and room searches lack some important details. These include the child's views of incidents of being held, a precise description of the behaviour leading to a sanction, and reasons for conducting a room search without the student present. It is not possible to check the timeliness of these logs as the format does not require a date for when it was made to be entered. These omissions have implications for monitoring rather than children's safety and managers have undertaken to review recording formats to better capture information.

Case files provide the information required with records which are clear and easy to follow. Placement plans, risk assessments and behaviour support plans are kept up to date and contain contributions from young people and families where possible.

Key workers draw up plans for sessions and half-termly reviews to ensure that this work is focused and contributes to children's development. Much thought is given to how to address topics creatively and records demonstrate children's participation in activities or discussion. Managers recognise that recording practice is, however, 'a work in progress' and are developing a format to capture when children raise issues themselves and any actions arising from sessions.

The fabric and furniture of houses are of a high standard, although drawers are missing from chests in a few bedrooms, having been broken. There is an understanding that kitchens will be refurbished over time, but there is no written plan which provides clear evidence of how major developments are decided and managed, or an agreement between the provider, governors and manager as to the priorities for the school.

Although staff report that the maintenance team responds promptly if there is a safety issue, evidence was found during the inspection that a fire door known to not close properly occasionally took some weeks to report and then be repaired.

The family resource team is available in school holidays and provides support to

families facing particular difficulties or who have less support available to them than others. The development of this 'hands-on' provision by the service has significantly increased the support the school is able to provide students and their families.

Managers and staff promote collaboration between families, professionals, education and residential provision. This has included effective advocacy and promoting best practice among professionals, parents and carers, which supports children to make excellent and sustained progress.

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: SC011327

Headteacher/Teacher in charge: Zoe Lattimer

Type of school: Residential Special School

Telephone number: 0118 9785767

Email address: high.close@barnardos.org.uk

Inspectors

Chris Peel, social care inspector (lead)

Ruth Coler, social care inspector



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