

Acorns School

19b Hibbert Lane, Marple, Stockport, Cheshire, SK6 7NN

Inspection dates

5–7 February 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- The proprietary group has not ensured that all independent school standards are met consistently.
- Senior and middle leadership is underdeveloped. Too much rests on the shoulders of the headteacher. This limits the school's capacity to improve.
- The quality of teaching is variable. The lack of specialist subject knowledge, detailed curriculum plans, and effective teaching approaches limits the pace and challenge of some lessons.
- Leaders do not have an adequately detailed understanding of pupils' attainment and progress across the curriculum. The data they gather does not always give the information they need to evaluate effectively how well pupils are learning.
- The school's plans and curriculum policy meet the requirements of the independent school standards. However, the curriculum plans are not sufficiently detailed to ensure that pupils acquire the essential subject knowledge during the time they attend the school.

The school has the following strengths

- Pupils are well cared for and safe. Pupils trust the adults who work with them and so will share any worries or concerns. Staff go the extra mile to help pupils by providing clothing, food and equipment when needed.
- Pupils' attendance and behaviour improve significantly when they join this school. Pupils generally attend on time, every day. Serious incidents are rare.
- Relationships are a strength of the school. Pupils and staff get on well together.
- Over the past four years, all pupils have moved on to education, employment or training when they have left the school.
- Pupils gain qualifications, including unit awards, entry-level and functional skills qualifications, as well as certificates. Most key stage 4 pupils are well motivated to sit examinations and complete coursework.
- Some younger pupils are helped to move successfully back into mainstream school.

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 the leadership and management of the school, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and outcomes for pupils, by:
 - developing more detailed curriculum plans that set out clearly the essential knowledge that leaders want pupils to acquire
 - providing teachers with subject-specific training and support to help them plan learning to meet the needs of different pupils
 - setting out clearly the school's measures and benchmarks of pupils' progress, so that leaders and teachers have an accurate view of how well pupils are achieving
 - developing the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders
 - sharpening checks on the school's effectiveness for further improvement.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- A number of independent school standards were unmet at the start of the inspection. The swift actions of proprietors and leaders ensured that these issues were resolved before the end of the inspection. These unmet standards did not pose a health, safety or welfare risk to pupils. Neither did they have a negative impact on pupils' academic progress.
- Leaders' evaluation of the school's performance is overly rosy. The evaluation is unduly descriptive. It lacks the quantitative and qualitative evidence required to determine the school's effectiveness across a range of measures. Leaders have a wealth of information about pupils' attendance and behaviour, but this is not replicated for teaching and learning. However, leaders know what the school's most pressing issues are and have already taken action to address these.
- Leaders have acted to improve the school's curriculum. Teachers in key stages 2 and 3 have devised their own schemes of work following the national curriculum. Teachers in key stage 4 have relied on the syllabuses provided by examination boards. However, leaders' lack of oversight of these schemes of work means that they cannot be sure that pupils are acquiring essential knowledge. At key stage 2, leaders have introduced a thematic approach to learning that is better suited to pupils' interests and levels of understanding. It is early days, so leaders do not yet have sufficient evidence to evaluate its effectiveness. Leaders intend to implement a similar approach at key stage 3 next term. This will build on the learning from key stage 2. This new curriculum is supported by detailed plans that are helping the non-specialist teachers deliver the full range of subjects more confidently and competently.
- Historically, the school has had a number of different approaches to assessment. This has made it awkward for leaders and teachers to evaluate how well pupils are performing across the school and over time. Although teachers have been recording pupils' attainment and checking on progress, leaders have not set out clearly their measures of how much progress pupils are expected to make. Leaders have set up an online assessment tracking tool to give them the information they need. Currently, there is not enough data available in the new system to provide leaders with any meaningful information.
- There is limited assessment information against which leaders can benchmark pupils' performance. Leaders' records of monitoring of lessons do not focus on the progress pupils are making over time. This makes it difficult for leaders to be certain how well both individuals and groups of pupils are achieving across the curriculum, over time, in the different classes.
- The headteacher assumes most of the leadership responsibilities. There have been limited opportunities for other staff, including the deputy headteacher, to take responsibility for aspects of the school's work. Subject leaders do not have the time or resources to do more than offer ad-hoc, informal advice to colleagues. This limits opportunities for those staff who would like to develop middle leadership skills and experience. Furthermore, it restricts school improvement. For example, teachers are not getting information from subject leaders about educational developments or help to plan lessons and teach tricky concepts.

- The school supports pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. For example, pupils have learned about Chinese traditions and tasted Chinese food to celebrate Chinese New Year. A visit to the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool prompted discussion about historical and contemporary slavery.
- This school succeeds where other settings have failed. Despite their history of education failure, almost all pupils maintain their place at this school. Many stay on until the end of key stage 4.
- The headteacher works well with local authority colleagues to facilitate pupils' admission to the school, provide reports and hold review meetings. Local authority colleagues appreciate the school's flexible approach to meeting pupils' needs, willingness to adapt their offer when pupils are struggling, and the positive engagement with parents and carers and other agencies.
- Parents are highly supportive of the school's work. Most parents had given up hope of their child settling well into a school. Parents find staff approachable, communication between school and home useful, and staff support for both their child and themselves valuable. For some parents, this is the first time their child has wanted to attend school and been successful.
- The school does not receive any additional pupil premium or special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) funding from the local authorities placing pupils at this school.
- The school carries out its responsibilities for its most vulnerable pupils well. The headteacher makes sure that pupils with SEND and children looked after receive the additional support they need. The school hosts frequent review meetings, provides information to parents and professionals, and keeps in touch with local authority officers.
- Although the school is registered for pupils up to the age of 17, those pupils above the statutory school age who have attended the school in the past have followed the key stage 4 curriculum. This is because these pupils have had significant gaps in their education prior to joining the school. Currently, there are no Year 12 pupils attending the school.
- Leaders keep up-to-date records and logs of events within the school, including those that record serious behavioural incidents. These logs record incidents and their outcomes in detail. The headteacher and the proprietary group meet regularly to review incidents and to identify any emerging trends or reasons for their occurrence.
- The proprietary group has ensured that the school's safeguarding policy pays due regard to the most up-to-date guidance from the Secretary of State and that it is published on the school's website.
- The proprietary group has notified the Department for Education (DfE) to confirm that Keys Group Limited is the proprietary body for this school. The director of education is the proprietary body's named representative.

Governance

- The proprietary group has put in place systems and procedures to make sure that the school complies with the independent school standards. However, it has not checked that external contractors have carried out tasks to the standards expected by the group. Consequently, the proprietary group was unaware that some standards were unmet at

the start of the inspection. The proprietary group made sure that all these minor issues were resolved by the end of the inspection.

- The proprietary group provides support for the headteacher. The regional manager meets frequently with the headteacher and checks on the school's work. The group's specialist teams, such as human resources, take on some responsibilities, for example in carrying out all pre-employment checks on potential new staff.
- The governing body provides challenge as well as support to the headteacher on behalf of the proprietary group. Governors keep a close eye on aspects of the school's performance through external reviews, audit activities and headteacher reports. However, the focus of their scrutiny is on pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare.
- The proprietary group has made a considerable financial investment to ensure that the school building is suitable, there are sufficient staff to provide the intensive support pupils require and that the provision offered meets local needs.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The proprietary body carries out checks on all staff before they join to make sure that they are suitable to work with children. All staff attend safeguarding training as part of their induction. The proprietary body makes sure that staff are familiar with the school's safeguarding policy and procedures. Staff attend regular training to make sure that they are aware of potential risks to pupils and their responsibilities.
- Staff develop good relationships with pupils, so they feel confident to share any worries or concerns. Staff make sure that they report any concerns promptly to the designated safeguarding lead. This lead works well with external partners to make sure that pupils and their families get the help and support they need.
- Staff prioritise teaching pupils about potential risks and how to best manage these. For example, they make sure that pupils are aware of the risks associated with drug and alcohol misuse. Staff help pupils to know how to keep themselves safe and what to do if things go wrong.
- Pupils and parents agree that pupils are well cared for and safe at the school.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Staff are adept at encouraging pupils to re-engage with learning when they join the school. Staff use warmth, humour and encouragement to good effect. Staff help pupils to overcome their negative views of schools and teachers.
- Teachers plan activities that engage pupils and help them to learn. They know pupils well and adapt lessons to respond to pupils' moods. This approach helps keep pupils in class and on task even when they may find it difficult.
- Lack of detailed curriculum plans means that teachers' planning does not take sufficient account of the essential knowledge pupils require for each subject. This means that teachers do not make the best use of the limited time pupils have at this school in terms of securing progress.

- Teachers lack the specialist knowledge required for the wide range of subjects they are required to teach. This, coupled with limited subject leadership across school and access to training, make it hard for teachers to plan and deliver consistently high-quality lessons, for example in modern foreign languages and art.
- Teachers use questioning, but this does not sufficiently check pupils' understanding or help move their learning on efficaciously. This is particularly the case in those subjects where teachers' subject knowledge is less secure.
- The school provides parents with regular written reports. In addition to formal reports, teachers keep in touch with parents informally. They let parents know what has gone well and inform them of any issues as a matter of routine. Leaders endeavour to make sure that any formal meetings are accessible to parents. For example, they make sure that meetings are held close to pupils' homes.
- Teachers check on pupils' work both during and after lessons. They keep their own records of pupils' learning to know what to teach next, as well as producing reports for parents and professionals.
- Teachers prioritise the development of pupils' literacy skills. However, they lack expertise in the teaching of phonics and early reading. This means that teachers cannot provide the intensive support some pupils need to learn to read confidently and fluently with understanding. Moreover, teachers do not systematically develop competent readers' higher order reading skills. Consequently, the most able pupils do not sufficiently increase their fluency and understanding as well as their ability to read critically.
- The teaching of mathematics has a strong and appropriate emphasis on developing pupils' core mathematical skills, in line with the school's stated aim that, 'the curriculum emphasises the need to acquire basic skills in literacy and numeracy.' However, there are too few opportunities for pupils to build on this by developing fluency, reason and problem-solving skills in mathematics. Teachers do not make sufficient use of resources to help pupils grasp tricky concepts. Furthermore, pupils have limited opportunities to apply their mathematical learning to everyday life situations. This hinders the progress pupils make in this subject.
- Pupils enjoy their personal, social, health and economic education lessons. Teachers tailor these closely to individual and group needs. Pupils listen attentively to each other, share their ideas willingly and are knowledgeable about the topics they have studied. As a result, pupils make good progress in this subject.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Staff help pupils to settle in quickly when they join the school. Staff get to know their pupils well. Staff help pupils to overcome some of their anxieties and fears around school and teachers. Staff help pupils to better regulate their own emotions, so that they are more able to cope day to day. Pupils report that they are happier, less anxious and more motivated to learn than prior to joining the school.
- Pupils describe this school as a haven when things go wrong in their lives. They trust

adults at school to give the help and support they need to sort things out, for example in getting pupils medical attention or helping to repair and rebuild relationships with parents.

- Moreover, staff make sure that pupils reflect on the impact of their negative behaviour on themselves and others. Pupils talked to me about positive decisions they had made to turn their lives around for the better.
- Staff make good use of the wealth of resources in the local area. The school takes advantage of the local leisure centres, a community-based farm and museums to enhance the curriculum. Moreover, visitors, such as the school nurse, are invited to talk to pupils in school. These opportunities help build pupils' confidence and competence in social situations.
- Pupils are encouraged to help others. They make deliveries of food parcels they have made up to a local shelter for homeless people. Also, pupils have taken part in national events, such as BBC Children in Need, to raise money for children's charities.
- The school takes good care of its most vulnerable pupils. Staff routinely go the extra mile. For example, staff will provide clothing and footwear for pupils, as well as making sure that they have breakfast if they need it. This helps these vulnerable pupils to cope better so that they stay in school.
- Teachers help the oldest pupils put together realistic plans for their next steps. Teachers help pupils choose suitable college courses or training opportunities. They support pupils to complete application forms and prepare for interviews. Furthermore, older pupils are encouraged to help out with jobs around school, such as washing up and preparing food, to develop their independent living skills.
- The school encourages pupils to be healthy. Pupils take part in physical activities at the local leisure centre, eat healthy lunches and know the risks associated with drugs and alcohol. Staff enlist the help of the school nurse and other professionals to help get key messages across to pupils.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Almost all pupils join the school with a history of poor attendance. Parents and pupils report that pupils enjoy coming to this school. Within a short space of time, almost all pupils significantly improve their attendance. As a result, most pupils are in school, on time, every day. The school's attendance officer follows up on all unexplained absences promptly. Staff work well with families and external partners when there are any issues with a pupil's attendance.
- Most pupils have a history of challenging behaviour. Almost all pupils have been excluded from their previous schools. However, the vast majority of pupils significantly improve their behaviour, over time, at this school. Staff are quick to identify any emerging issues and make sure that these are 'nipped in the bud'. Staff use a range of strategies to diffuse any tricky situations, including humour and distraction. As a result, serious incidents are rare, and the number of physical interventions has reduced considerably. Furthermore, no pupils have been permanently excluded since the previous inspection.
- Pupils who spoke with the inspector were adamant that bullying is rare at this school. They report that pupils generally treat each other and staff respectfully. Staff challenge

any derogatory or offensive language used by a small minority of the pupils. Teaching staff deliver lessons that allow pupils to discuss and debate their views around discrimination. For example, a key stage 4 group discussed the reasons why someone may be reluctant to tell people they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- This school is highly successful in re-engaging pupils who have a long history of educational failure. Almost all the pupils have been permanently excluded from their previous schools. Most have attended several schools prior to coming to Acorns. All pupils attending the school are disadvantaged by their social, emotional and mental health needs. Despite poor attendance and challenging behaviour in their previous settings, almost all pupils re-engage with education.
- Pupils commonly have considerable gaps in their academic knowledge and most have levels of attainment well below those expected for their age. Moreover, pupils are short of the skills essential to being successful learners. When they join the school, most pupils have poor self-esteem and lack resilience and motivation.
- From their starting points, pupils make progress academically and personally. All pupils improve their behaviour and attendance. Most of the time, pupils join in with lessons and complete the work set. However, pupils do not capitalise sufficiently on this good start as teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve lack ambition. As a result, pupils do not make up lost ground in their learning quickly enough.
- Older pupils work towards a range of externally accredited qualifications. Teachers balance well those qualifications reliant on end-of-course examinations with those that are portfolio based. The school offers qualifications that meet pupils' diverse interests, aptitudes and abilities. Pupils across the school complete portfolio-based programmes to accredit their learning across the curriculum, such as in sex and relationships education and animal care. Typically, all pupils gain recognised qualifications by the end of key stage 4.
- Over the past four years, all Year 11 pupils have moved on to education, employment or training. Work experience placements, visits to colleges and discussions with their teachers help pupils make well-informed decisions about their next steps.
- Some younger pupils are successful in returning to mainstream school. Leaders work closely with local authority officers, schools and families to make effective transition arrangements.
- Pupils are encouraged to find genres and authors whose books they enjoy reading. Younger pupils spend time reading daily. These pupils talk knowledgeably about the books they have read to their classmates and teachers. However, the school's most able pupils do not make sufficient gains in reading. There are not enough planned opportunities to help them develop their higher order reading skills so that they are able to confidently read more challenging texts.

School details

Unique reference number	131551
DfE registration number	356/6027
Inspection number	10067893

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	5 to 17
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	22
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Keys Group Limited
Chair	Nicola Kelly
Headteacher	Christopher Hampton
Annual fees (day pupils)	£38,805
Telephone number	0161 449 5820
Website	www.keyschildcare.co.uk/services/education/acorns
Email address	acornschool@keyschildcare.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	10–12 May 2016

Information about this school

- Acorns School is owned by Keys Group Limited. The group's director of education is the proprietary body's representative. Members of the proprietary group act in the capacity of a governing body. The group's director of education is the chair of the governing body.
- The school is registered with the DfE to meet the needs of up to 40 pupils between the ages of five and 17 years. There are no students in the sixth form currently.
- All the pupils have social, emotional and mental health needs. All the pupils on roll have an education, health and care plan.

- The school has a mobile population. Very few pupils join at the usual times, such as the start of Year 7, although most pupils remain at the school until the end of Year 11.
- All pupils speak English as their first language.
- The school's aim is to offer 'a holistic education that will provide pupils with learning opportunities, which target their specific individual education needs and nurture confident individuals and responsible citizens, who can lead safe and happy lives and who will make a positive contribution to society.'
- The headteacher has been in post for two years. He has worked at the school for nine years in total.
- The school was previously inspected in May 2016.
- No alternative provision is used by the school.
- The school makes use of local facilities, such as a leisure centre to provide physical education for pupils.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed teaching and learning across the school, including joint observations with the headteacher. The inspector checked work in a range of pupils' books and files.
- Discussions were held with senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers, representatives of the proprietor and the chair of the governing body.
- The inspector examined a wide range of documentation, including that relating to safeguarding, behaviour and attendance, the school's self-evaluation, and assessment information.
- The inspector spoke formally with pupils, as well as informally during the school day, and observed them during breaktimes.
- There were no responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey. The inspector spoke with the parents or carers of five pupils during the inspection.
- The inspector spoke with representatives of two local authorities that place pupils at the school.
- The inspector considered the five written and two online responses to Ofsted's staff survey. The inspector spoke formally with a group of staff.

Inspection team

Pippa Jackson Maitland, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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