

North East Centre for Autism – Aycliffe School

Cedar Drive, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham DL5 6UN

Inspection dates

5–7 March 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The school is well led. Since the last inspection leaders have made significant improvements which has enabled the school to grow. All aspects of the school's work are good, and leaders are ambitious for continued improvement.
- The school's curriculum is well designed to broaden pupils' knowledge and skills and develop their purpose for learning. School makes a significant contribution to pupils' achievement, especially their spiritual, moral, social, cultural and personal development.
- Relationships between staff and pupils are strong. Staff use a range of strategies to ensure that pupils are well cared for and kept safe.
- Governors know the school well and provide good support and challenge to school leaders. They are determined for all pupils to receive a high-quality education.
- Parents and carers are very positive about the school. They appreciate the nurturing ethos and the supportive staff.
- Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education. They receive effective guidance which supports them well in securing places in further education, training or independent living.
- Pupils make good progress from their starting points in English and mathematics. They make excellent progress in communication and independent living skills. However, teachers do not always sufficiently challenge pupils academically in the wider curriculum subjects.
- Individual pupils' attendance is significantly better than when they attended their previous schools. However, there are still a small cohort of pupils who do not attend school full-time.
- Staff provide appropriate support and guidance to help pupils learn how to manage their behaviour. However, a few pupils have not yet developed the confidence to appreciate the importance of education fully.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise expectations of what pupils, especially the most able pupils, can achieve academically, by:
 - increasing the levels of challenge and the range of qualifications on offer for pupils
 - ensuring that the same high standards that are in place for English and mathematics are embedded across the wider curriculum.
- Continue to enhance strategies to support pupils' behaviour and welfare, so that:
 - pupils' behaviour and attendance improve further and they become more effective when making choices
 - all staff are trained and supported to manage the needs of pupils effectively.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders and trustees are extremely passionate about providing a high-quality education for some of the most vulnerable pupils in society. They are successful in enabling many pupils to re-engage in education.
- Leaders know their school well. They accurately evaluate the school's effectiveness and identify appropriate priorities for further improvement. Regular support and challenge meetings ensure that information about pupils is used effectively to improve the provision for individuals.
- Leaders' close monitoring of pupils' personal development and well-being ensures that pupils are well cared for and make good progress in their learning. Progress in English and maths is well documented and reviewed.
- The curriculum is well designed, with a strong focus on developing pupils' learning in communication, independence, community awareness and work skills. Leaders have ensured that there is a strong focus on developing pupils' understanding of rights and responsibilities, which is echoed by the pupils' views. Part of the curriculum is delivered in the local community by skilled staff, which enables pupils to begin to overcome some of their barriers to school attendance. However, the range of qualifications on offer is not yet broad enough to match pupils' aspirations.
- Leaders regularly monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching. They use the findings from their monitoring processes effectively to improve the quality of teaching and inform training needs. Leaders give clear feedback to staff and set high expectations.
- Parents are extremely positive about the school. During the inspection, some parents met with the lead inspector to say how much the school had transformed their home lives. Pupils who were previously disengaged with education, lacked social skills and were very withdrawn are now attending school.
- Leaders ensure that pupils learn about British values and mutual respect. They do this through a comprehensive calendar of events which pupils help to organise, such as a nativity performance in a local church and a charity advent calendar. Pupils across this school value each other's differences and recognise each other's uniqueness.
- Leaders set high expectations for staff. They provide a wide range of professional development opportunities to ensure that staff fully understand pupils' needs. Staff are dedicated to supporting the pupils in their care, despite the challenges that pupils face. Some staff feel that leaders go 'above and beyond' in supporting staff well-being. However, a few staff do not yet feel sufficiently supported when dealing with challenging behaviours.
- The proprietor and leaders ensure that all the independent school standards are met.

Governance

- Senior leaders for the North East Autism Society and the trustees provide strong governance for the school. They talk passionately about the ethos and aims of the school to improve outcomes for pupils who have significant barriers to learning.

- Since the last inspection, trustees have developed a robust system for leaders to report to them on a monthly basis. This ensures that the proprietor and trustees have a good understanding of the school's strengths and priorities for development.
- Trustees demonstrate a strong commitment to the school and to pupils. They ensure that they have appropriate skills to check and support strategically the effectiveness of the school staff and leaders. Their determination to provide pupils with a safe and aspirational education is realised in the pupils' improving engagement with education.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders ensure that safeguarding arrangements are extremely robust and there is a strong culture of safeguarding right across the school. All staff understand what to do when issues arise that affect pupils' safety and welfare.
- Leaders ensure that staff training is up to date and responsive to pupils' special needs. There are regular high-quality updates for staff, so that they know how to respond to situations and are kept up to date with the most recent guidance. Leaders provide parents with regular newsletters which contain useful guidance about safeguarding.
- Leaders manage security arrangements at the school to protect pupils. The site is well maintained and risk assessments are detailed and appropriate. There is a very high ratio of staff to pupils, which enables staff to keep a close eye on pupils' well-being.
- Leaders continuously review their approaches to managing pupils' behaviour and safety. For example, there are detailed plans for each pupil which enable staff to respond as soon as possible to pupils becoming anxious or distressed.
- Leaders report any safeguarding concerns immediately to the relevant authorities and to the local authority safeguarding team. Leaders work extremely well with different agencies.
- All the independent school standards are met in relation to the suitability of staff, the welfare, health and safety of pupils and the school's premises. Leaders ensure that the safeguarding policy, which considers current government requirements, is available on the school's website or by request.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The quality of teaching is good. Teaching staff know pupils well, forge strong relationships and have a good understanding of pupils' needs. This results in a generally calm atmosphere, where pupils learn to trust staff and begin to enjoy learning.
- Teaching staff are highly reflective. Planning is largely effective, and learning activities are designed to encompass the interests and needs of individual pupils.
- Classroom spaces are well utilised to enable personalised lessons which encourage communication in a form most appropriate to the individual pupil. Staff use communication aids and resources skilfully to support some pupils to be able to move between activities and make choices for themselves. Teachers ensure that each classroom provides a safe learning environment where pupils can flourish.

- Some staff are extremely skilled at developing communication and interaction skills for pupils who would previously not engage in education at any level. Communication with pupils is generally good.
- Most lessons have specific objectives for each pupil, which enable teaching assistants to support them effectively. There is a very useful 'hierarchy of cues' which helps staff adapt the level of support given to pupils and encourages independence. Where this is fully embedded, pupils make stronger progress. A few staff still provide too much support for pupils on occasions.
- Teachers use appropriate assessments on a regular basis to track pupils' progress in English and mathematics from generally very low starting points. Staff are clear on what constitutes good progress in English and mathematics and take action to address any shortcomings. Targets are set every term and work is well matched to these targets. However, this thoroughness is not evident in other subjects, such as science or information technology. This means that for the more able pupils, expectations are not high enough and sometimes work is not sufficiently demanding.
- Staff encourage reading across the curriculum and pupils were keen to read aloud for the lead inspector. Pupils are encouraged to read a range of materials and younger pupils take books home.
- Independence and life skills are embedded into the curriculum at every opportunity. For example, pupils help staff complete health and safety checks on school vehicles. Staff proactively teach communication and social skills. Pupils state that they now have friends at school.
- Pupils spoken with said that they enjoyed school but are not always aware of what they need to learn next.
- Parents say that communication around learning is positive and they feel well supported. Parents also say that staff understand their child's needs very well.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils gain in confidence and self-esteem through learning about themselves and the community they live in. They are given a wide variety of opportunities to develop independent living skills, such as cooking simple meals, visiting local amenities and practising the use of functional skills, such as using money.
- The school has a nurturing atmosphere that is highly conducive to learning. Staff provide motivating and attractive learning environments which inspire pupils to learn. Comfortable, well-furnished areas provide pupils with spaces to take time out to reduce their anxieties and calm their behaviour.
- Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school. Those who spoke with the inspector praised the hard work of staff. Typically, parents think that staff go 'above and beyond the usual' to support their child's needs. Examples were given of staff supporting parents by teaching skills to pupils in the school day which could be transferred to the home

environment.

- Work experience placements are organised for older pupils as well as visits to a range of work places and colleges. Transition plans for older pupils support them and their families to consider and prepare for next steps. This includes advice from careers advisers. Leaders have developed a clear matrix of skills for pupils to learn, from early years to post-16, in order to be fully prepared for the next stage of their lives.
- Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe and feel empowered by their work about online safety. Respect is encouraged and rewarded with a range of personalised reward strategies. Staff promote clear messages about the impact of bullying and pupils learn to appreciate each other's differences.
- Pupils' attitudes to each other are very positive. They appreciate the friendships they develop in school. Pupils trust staff to deal effectively with the occasional use of derogatory language and say that staff help them resolve minor conflicts with other pupils.
- All pupils learn about their own health and well-being, with targets to help them prepare for adult lives, such as understanding about healthy food choices. This is a strength of the school.
- There is a very strong programme of events to support pupils' development of spiritual, moral, social and cultural knowledge. All classes take part in these events and take turns to lead on activities, which reinforces their mutual respect, such as creating messages of kindness during anti-bullying week.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils cooperate well and show caring and compassionate attitudes towards others. Pupils feel able to express their individuality, are respectful of each other and are taught to embrace diversity. For example, pupils have a good understanding of why people behave in different ways.
- The North East Autism Society has developed its own positive and proactive support package, which focuses on pupils developing awareness of their feelings through reflection and discussions. Over time, most pupils develop strategies to regulate their own behaviour, which improves their understanding of their own behaviour. There are strong support plans in place for pupils, developed in consultation with pupils and parents.
- The school works hard to re-engage pupils who have previously been out of education for a significant period of time. There have been a number of successes. Pupils and parents appreciate the nurturing approach and positive impact this has on pupils' attitudes to learning.
- However, there is a small minority of pupils who are not fully self-assured to appreciate the importance of education for their future aspirations. The behaviour and attendance of these pupils is not yet enabling them to fully take part in the education on offer and therefore limiting their progress.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- From generally low starting points, pupils make good progress in English and mathematics. They make excellent progress in the 'softer' skills of communication, independent living and community awareness. Parents appreciate the impact of these skills on their lives at home, such as pupils learning to use local buses and amenities.
- Most pupils achieve qualifications in English and mathematics which support them to access the next stage of their life in education, employment or training. However, there is not yet a broad enough range of qualifications on offer to support pupils with higher aspirations.
- Staff help pupils to choose appropriate books and encourage pupils to read frequently. Pupils use their functional reading skills across the curriculum.
- For most pupils, behaviour improves significantly over time and enables them to access learning which was previously thought out of reach.
- There are strong programmes in place to support pupils and their families in enabling pupils to move on to appropriate destinations, such as further education, training or independent living. The support offered to pupils to prepare them for their next steps is excellent.

Sixth form provision

Good

- The sixth-form provision is well led. Pupils make good progress and teaching is adapted to the needs of the pupils.
- Leaders provide pupils with a flexible curriculum which gives a broad range of experiences and a strong focus on developing confidence with social skills and independence skills.
- The school makes excellent use of the local community facilities so that pupils become increasingly involved in community events and enterprise projects, which develops work ethic and skills well.
- Pupils learn about keeping healthy and safe and say that they feel safe in school.
- Pupils are encouraged to visit a range of workplaces and colleges and take part in work experience placements. This helps them to make informed decisions about their next steps, for example sampling college courses and work placements in a care home for the elderly.
- Teachers provide pupils with a range of important learning skills for careers, which develops pupils' understanding of the wider world of work and independent living.
- The breadth of courses on offer does not yet match the aspirations of pupils. Expectations for the most able pupils are not high enough, as with pupils in other year groups.

School details

Unique reference number	139329
DfE registration number	840/6013
Inspection number	10061274

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	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	51
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	10
Number of part-time pupils	2
Proprietor	John Phillipson
Chair	Gavin Bestford
Headteacher	Nicola Brown
Annual fees (day pupils)	£22,620 to £84,072
Telephone number	01325 328090
Website	www.ne-as.org.uk
Email address	info@ne-as.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	26–28 April 2016

Information about this school

- Aycliffe School, the North East Centre for Autism, is a small school. It is one of two independent schools run by the North East Autism Society. It provides education for pupils with autism. The school opened in January 2013 and is registered for 60 pupils aged three to 19 years.
- There are currently 51 pupils on roll aged between five and 19.

- Pupils are divided into six classes, grouped according to their individual needs and stages of development. A group of pupils access the curriculum off-site, making use of local facilities to re-engage pupils with learning. These pupils are taught by school staff and are gradually integrated into the main school provision. A few pupils have agreed part-time packages while their particular needs are being addressed, with the intention of developing the programme to make it full-time.
- The school does not use any alternative education provision.
- Few pupils come from ethnic minority communities. Most pupils have an education, health and care plan. Pupils are funded from a number of local authorities. Currently this includes Stockton, Durham, North Yorkshire, Hartlepool, Middleborough, Darlington, Sunderland and Northumberland. The cost varies according to pupils' individual needs.
- The school was last inspected in April 2016, when it was judged to be good.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out over two and a half days, with a day of notice.
- The inspector observed learning in a range of lessons, jointly with either the principal or vice-principal.
- Discussions were held with the principal, vice-principal, a group of staff, parents, groups of pupils and the chief executive of the Society and one of the trustees.
- Responses from Parent View, staff questionnaires and pupil questionnaires were considered.
- The inspector checked the school's compliance with the independent school standards. A wide range of evidence and documents were viewed, including those regarding the welfare of pupils, statutory policies, information on the progress pupils make over time, and behaviour and attendance records.

Inspection team

Pauline Rowland, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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