

Acorn Cottage

Inspection dates

25–27 June 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Despite some improvements in leadership since the previous inspection, other aspects of leadership and management have declined.
- There is a lack of clarity between leaders and the proprietorial body about who is accountable for ensuring that the independent school standards are met. The school no longer meets all of the independent school standards.
- Leaders are not reviewing what their own information tells them about the impact of their work. As a result, they have an overgenerous view about the quality of leadership and management in the school.
- Statutory documentation is not completed to a consistently high standard.
- Leaders do not know enough about how well the curriculum is being implemented, especially whether the school is actively promoting the teaching of respect for people with protected characteristics.
- Leadership of assessment in the school is underdeveloped. Leaders do not know enough about where they need to intervene to ensure that pupils make even better progress.
- The school development plan lacks precision about how leaders will address areas for improvement meaningfully over time.
- School policies do not match the practice in the school, most notably, in the application of the complaints process, risk assessments and the development of the curriculum.

The school has the following strengths

- The proprietorial body has invested heavily in securing high-quality staffing.
- Teaching staff work collectively to provide effective, bespoke support to pupils, which ensures that personal development, behaviour and welfare are securely good.
- Teachers and support staff ensure that pupils access high-quality learning opportunities. Pupils progress well and secure highly appropriate post-16 destinations.
- The head of education, since his arrival, has implemented essential systems for monitoring the quality of teaching and appraisal for staff.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school must take action to meet the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and associated requirements. The details are listed in the full report.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the proprietorial body and leaders in collectively improving leadership and management and systematically reviewing and meeting the independent school standards
 - producing a school development plan that identifies how leaders will monitor the impact of improvement actions precisely over time
 - making sure that policies match the processes and systems in the school, most notably in the recording of complaints, in the application of risk assessments and in the curriculum offer
 - ensuring that all statutory documentation, such as educational, health and care (EHC) plans, reviews and personal education plans, is completed fully and appropriately
 - ensuring that there is comprehensive and well-identified coverage in the curriculum about the rights of individuals and groups who fall under the protected characteristics through The Equality Act 2010
 - reviewing school information, including assessment systems, to identify what aspects of leadership and management need improving.
- The school must meet the independent school standards, as set out in the annex of this report.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- There is a lack of clarity between leaders and the proprietorial body about their different roles and responsibilities in maintaining the independent school standards. Consequently, several of the standards that were met at the previous inspection are no longer met.
- Although there is a school development plan in place, this lacks precise milestones that pinpoint how and when leaders are going to address the numerous actions. For example, the proprietorial body is keen to implement a commercial reading system, but the plans do not specify how this will be achieved well over time.
- Leaders and the proprietorial body do not ensure that policies are routinely reflected in the practice in the school. Policies for the curriculum, risk assessment and complaints are not accurately reflected in the practice in the school. The inaccuracies lead to inconsistencies in the practice between leaders and staff. Leaders lack oversight of the management of this work.
- There are significant inconsistencies between sites about how complaints are being identified and recorded. While all concerns are dealt with effectively, there is no clarity about when these are being recorded as complaints. Weaknesses in practice mean that leaders or the proprietorial body are not provided with an accurate overview about how many complaints the school has received.
- Leaders' management and oversight of risk assessments lack rigour. While diligent staff update and improve risk assessments according to the needs of pupils, leaders are not routinely reviewing whether these are appropriate, or where leaders need to act to ensure that these risk assessments are enacted appropriately. Consequently, leaders do not know enough about whether these risk assessments are as effective as they should be.
- Leaders' monitoring of the curriculum is underdeveloped. Leaders were not aware that the school's plans and schemes of work do not match the school's recently updated curriculum policy. Additionally, leaders and the proprietorial body have not checked that there is precise coverage for the teaching of respect for those with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.
- On occasion, essential legal paperwork, such as annual reviews and PEPs, lack depth and detail about how the school is meeting pupils' needs. Leaders are not using the wealth of evidence that they have about pupils' learning and mental health needs to complete these documents consistently well.
- Despite weaknesses in leadership monitoring, pupils access a broad range of subjects that often lead to GCSE qualifications or other appropriate accreditations. The qualifications are in subjects such as mathematics, English, French, drama, history, geography, art and design, physical education, psychology and science. Staff's expertise often makes up for the lack of a formal programme, for example in physical education. Consequently, pupils receive good-quality provision on a daily basis and over time.
- The curriculum to support pupils' personal development is also well thought out. 'Nurture' lessons provided engaging material, in a sensitive and age-appropriate way, to help pupils understand about sex, healthy relationships and the development of their own bodies. 'Key-worker sessions' time provides bespoke one-to-one provision for pupils. This covers a

multitude of topics, including the rule of law, democracy, mental health and safety. Pupils are effusive in their praise of this provision.

- The head of school, since his arrival a year ago, has acted to address several areas of weakness identified in the previous inspection. He has implemented essential basic checks on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Staff now receive routine line management meetings, regular observations with feedback and appropriate appraisal. The head of school has also started to develop school-wide assessment systems that allow leaders to have a better overview about the progress that pupils make over time. This work is still in its infancy.
- The pace of improvement has been somewhat hampered by some staff absence. This has required the head of education to cover lessons. While this has secured a good-quality day-to-day diet for pupils, the head of education has not been able to act to develop strategic leadership across the sites as quickly as he would like.
- Where provision is best is in the day-to-day experience of pupils. This is owing to high-quality staff who support the learning, welfare and development needs of pupils diligently. These staff know pupils well, hold routine dialogue about how best to meet pupils' ongoing needs, develop assessment on the basis of their own expertise and ultimately ensure that pupils access and experience high-quality learning opportunities.

Governance

- The proprietorial body and the appointed directors provide governance to the school. The proprietors and directors visit the school routinely, engage positively with staff and pupils and know pupils well. Consequently, proprietors and directors have a broad understanding of the overarching strengths and weaknesses in the school's daily provision.
- The proprietors and directors are passionate about getting the right support for pupils. They are constantly looking for new and improved ways to enhance pupils' day-to-day experiences. For example, they are heavily involved in the post-16 guidance and opportunities available to pupils. The proprietors and directors have also invested significantly in the therapeutic support for pupils to meet their social, emotional and welfare needs.
- The proprietors and directors have recognised recently that the processes for reviewing some aspects of health and safety have not been as robust as they should be, such as a slow response to commissioning essential re-wiring work on one of the school sites. Leaders have acted urgently to address weaknesses in how they review and commission site-maintenance work.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders are keeping appropriate records about pupils' safety and well-being. They are using this information to work effectively with external agencies and local authorities.
- Risk assessments are in place both for visits and for individual pupils. Leaders are increasingly working with pupils to create and review risk assessments, so that pupils manage risks to themselves more effectively.

- The proprietorial body provides central logs of the checks made on fire safety, health and safety and general maintenance of the sites. Leaders have acted recently to ensure that these are centrally held and reviewed more systematically.
- Pupils generally arrive at the school requiring guidance about how to keep themselves safe. Leaders and staff work with individual pupils in a sensitive way to develop safer behaviours, both for themselves and towards others.
- The proprietorial body ensures that the single central record of the suitability of staff to work with pupils meets requirements. The records for staffing checks are well kept.
- The school's safeguarding policy is available on the school's website.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teachers demonstrate a thorough understanding of their subject and have clear expectations about what pupils should know and understand. Teachers use this knowledge well to plan activities and assessments over time. This enables pupils to develop knowledge, skills and understanding, and to apply their learning successfully over time.
- Teachers plan learning activities over time that help bridge the gaps in pupils' prior learning and understanding. Pupils' basic skills in literacy and numeracy improve quickly, so that they can access the wider curriculum more confidently. Pupils apply these skills appropriately to increasingly complex work.
- Positive relationships between staff and pupils mean that most classrooms are supportive learning environments. Pupils are very clear about what is expected of them. Poor behaviour is rare and is usually managed effectively. Most pupils make the most of their learning time and respond to staff instructions quickly and appropriately.
- In lessons, pupils state their opinions and views appropriately often and articulately. Pupils are not afraid to make mistakes in their learning and learn from them. Pupils confidently play an active role in their lessons. Pupils are particularly effusive about the opportunities to participate actively in the new psychology course on offer to them.
- Staff work hard, and effectively, to encourage reading in both the curriculum and during social time. Pupils have appropriate opportunities to read and discuss current news and non-fiction related to the curriculum. Leaders have identified that pupils reading fiction for pleasure is something that needs developing. They have purchased a commercial programme to facilitate this, but this work is still in its infancy.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs are being met on a daily basis by the diligent and hardworking staff. These staff work collaboratively to ensure that pupils receive truly holistic welfare support that meets their needs and considers their views meaningfully.

- Despite weaknesses in leaders' formal monitoring and mapping of the curriculum, staff routinely explore wider social issues related to democracy, mental health, the rule of law, bullying and much more. Teachers provide these opportunities through planning and discussion within the curriculum. Additionally, the 'key-worker sessions' allow pupils to discuss these issues in a one-to-one safe environment.
- Staff encourage pupils to use strategies to self-regulate their complex behaviours independently. A range of well-thought-out activities which focus pupils on their mental well-being and give opportunities for reflection ensure that pupils manage their emotions and behaviours confidently and independently. As a result, pupils feel well looked after by staff.
- The information, advice and guidance given to pupils about future careers and their post-16 destinations are of a high quality. These bespoke and ongoing programmes ensure that pupils receive a mix of good, relevant and up-to-date advice, including from an impartial careers adviser. Pupils are confident in their plans for the future, especially those pupils in key stage 4.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils enjoy their learning and arrive promptly to every session. Lessons start quickly and learning time is used efficiently. Pupils present work neatly, complete the activities set and are rightly proud of the work that they produce.
- Pupils behave well throughout the school day. Staff work collaboratively to support pupils to understand how to regulate their behaviour and re-engage positively with learning. As a result, pupils are confident, articulate, polite and well-mannered.
- Pupils value their education. Staff across both sites encourage pupils to understand the importance of good attendance. Over time, pupils' attendance and punctuality increase significantly as they come to value their education. Pupils engage with learning activities and apply their learning well to a range of tasks. They undertake work experience, homework, independent revision and sit examinations. From varied and often low starting points, the improvement in behaviour represents good progress in pupils' personal development during their time at the school.
- Pupils' behaviour during social times is very positive. Most engage with activities enthusiastically, share facilities cooperatively and engage in positive communication with other pupils and adults. Social times are calm and orderly periods in the school.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Many pupils join the school following extensive gaps in their educational experience. Many struggle to attend lessons routinely and have significant gaps in their knowledge and skills.
- Pupils make good academic progress. In 2018, as in previous years, Year 11 pupils achieved qualifications in a range of subjects, includes mathematics, English, history, art

and design, and individual sciences. These pupils went on to highly appropriate post-16 destinations, following bespoke and intensive careers guidance to support them.

- Current pupils are making strong progress across a range of subjects. This includes the study of subjects through commercial schemes and the introduction of qualifications in psychology. Pupils' work and engagement reflect strong progress in both the development of their knowledge and skills and in their attitudes to learning.
- Pupils read with increasing fluency, confidence and ability, particularly related to non-fiction texts across the curriculum. Reading fiction for pleasure is not as well developed as pupils' enthusiasm for reading non-fiction texts.
- As part of their studies, pupils access work-experience opportunities which are closely aligned to their aspirations and interests. These opportunities are supporting pupils well to prepare for their chosen post-16 destinations. Pupils are aspirational and confident about their future choices for when they leave the school. Consequently, they are well prepared for their next stages in education, training or employment.

School details

Unique reference number	130854
DfE registration number	935/6084
Inspection number	10056559

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	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number of pupils on the school roll	7
Number of part-time pupils	none
Proprietor	Care Focus Limited
Chair	Timothy Leigh
Headteacher	Gary Cotter
Annual fees (day pupils)	£60,424
Telephone number	01473 657030
Website	www.carefocus.co.uk
Email address	ninacampbell@carefocus.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	4–6 July 2017

Information about this school

- Acorn Cottage is a small independent special school owned by Care Focus Ltd. The school opened in 2005. The school acquired a second site in 2013.
- The school is registered with the Department for Education (DfE) to admit eight girls.
- The two proprietors of Care Focus Ltd, alongside two appointed directors, are responsible for governance at the school.
- All pupils have social, emotional and mental health needs. A few pupils have EHC plans.

- Although it has used alternative provision in the past, the school does not currently use any alternative provision.
- The school does not use supply staff.
- The head of education joined the school in April 2018 and is also the head of education at the other school owned by the same proprietorial body, Gable End.
- At the time of the inspection, the information on the DfE's 'Get information about schools' national website was incorrect in two aspects.
 - The name of the registered proprietor is incorrect.
 - The name of the head of education is incorrect.
- The school was previously inspected in July 2017, when it was judged requires improvement. All the independent school standards were met at that time.
- The school's previous inspection history:
 - The school's first standard inspection was in April 2006.
 - In May 2007, Ofsted was commissioned by the DfE to conduct an emergency inspection.
 - In April 2008, Ofsted was commissioned by the DfE to conduct an emergency inspection.
 - The second standard inspection of the school was conducted by Ofsted in February 2009. The quality of education was judged good. One of the independent school standards was not met for the premises and accommodation, and the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2002 were not met in respect of an accessibility plan.
 - The third standard inspection of the school was conducted by Ofsted in June 2012. The quality of education was judged good. All of the independent school standards were met.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed teaching, learning and assessment in the school. The inspector also scrutinised pupils' work.
- Meetings were held with school leaders and representatives from the proprietorial body.
- The inspector scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, school development plan, records relating to safeguarding pupils, physical intervention logs, risk assessments, pupil progress information and school policies and procedures.
- The inspector took account of three responses from Ofsted's online survey of staff.
- There were no responses from the online survey for parents and carers.
- There were no responses from pupils to Ofsted's online survey.
- The inspector spoke to pupils during social times as well as during lessons.
- The inspector considered the views of two local authorities who place pupils at the provision.

Inspection team

Kim Pigram, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 2(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if–
 - 2(1)(a) the proprietor ensures that a written policy on the curriculum, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, which provides for the matters specified in sub-paragraph (2) is drawn up and implemented effectively; and
 - 2(2)(d) personal, social, health and economic education which–
 - 2(2)(d)(ii) encourages respect for other people, paying particular regard to the protected characteristics set out in the 2010 Act.

Part 2. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

- 5 The standard about the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils at the school is met if the proprietor–
 - 5(b) ensures that principles are actively promoted which–
 - 5(b)(vi) encourage respect for other people, paying particular regard to the protected characteristics set out in the 2010 Act.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 16 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 16(a) the welfare of pupils at the school is safeguarded and promoted by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written risk assessment policy; and
 - 16(b) appropriate action is taken to reduce risks that are identified.

Part 6. Provision of information

- 32(1) The standard about the provision of information by the school is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 32(1)(b) the information specified in sub-paragraph (3) is made available to parents of pupils and parents of prospective pupils and, on request, to the Chief Inspector, the Secretary of State or an independent inspectorate;
 - 32(1)(i) where a pupil with an EHC plan wholly or partly funded by a local authority or other body through public funds is registered at the school, such information as may reasonably be required for the purpose of the annual review of the EHC plan is provided to the responsible local authority; and

- 32(3) The information specified in this sub-paragraph is–
 - 32(3)(f) details of the complaints procedure referred to in paragraph 33, and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year.

Part 7. Manner in which complaints are handled

- 33 The standard about the manner in which complaints are handled is met if the proprietor ensures that a complaints procedure is drawn up and effectively implemented which deals with the handling of complaints from parents of pupils and which–
 - 33(j) provides for a written record to be kept of all complaints that are made in accordance with sub-paragraph (e) and–
 - 33(j)(i) whether they are resolved following a formal procedure, or proceed to a panel hearing; and
 - 33(j)(ii) action taken by the school as a result of those complaints (regardless of whether they are upheld).

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school–
 - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently.

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