

Acorn Cottage

Inspection dates

4 December 2019

Overall outcome

The school does not meet all of the independent school standards that were checked during this inspection

Main inspection findings

Part 1. Quality of education provided

Paragraph 2(1), 2(1)(a), 2(2)(d), 2(2)(d)(ii)

- The previous inspection found weaknesses in the implementation of the school's curriculum. The curriculum policy did not match the curriculum being provided to pupils. Leaders did not know enough about how well the curriculum was being implemented. There was not comprehensive and well-identified coverage in the curriculum about the rights of individuals who fall under the protected characteristics of The Equality Act 2010.
- The school's action plan to tackle these weaknesses was submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) in September 2019. This plan proposed to:
 - review and renew the curriculum policy so that it reflects accurately the curriculum being provided to pupils
 - review and amend all other policies in line with the new curriculum policy
 - ensure that there is due regard to The Equality Act 2010 in the curriculum policy
 - ensure that teachers' planning links to this curriculum policy.
- The proprietor and the head of education have made significant gains in improving the school's policy and procedures. Leaders, including governors, show an improved understanding of how well the curriculum is being implemented.
- There is a written policy on the curriculum that describes in detail what the school aims to provide for pupils. This includes a range of subjects taught up to GCSE level, additional therapies and a nurture programme to prepare pupils for life after they leave school.
- The curriculum is supported by appropriate schemes of work for each subject. These are generic schemes, common to both school sites operated by the proprietor. Leaders acknowledge that these schemes need adapting further to ensure that they meet the specific needs of all pupils attending this school.
- An appropriate scheme of work for personal, social and health education is taught through weekly lessons in citizenship. This subject is new, but pupils' books already

show that a range of topics have been studied in depth. Topics such as migration, asylum, prejudice, children's rights, stereotyping and discrimination ensure that pupils develop a firm understanding of the protected characteristics set out in The Equality Act 2010.

- This standard is now met.

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

Paragraph 5, 5(b) 5(b)(vi)

- The previous inspection found weaknesses in the implementation of the curriculum. The school did not actively promote the teaching of respect for people with protected characteristics.
- The school's action plan proposed to:
 - review and renew the curriculum policy
 - review and amend all other policies in line with the new curriculum policy
 - ensure that there is due regard to The Equality Act 2010 in the curriculum policy and implement a GCSE qualification to support this coverage.
- Leaders have taken steps to ensure that pupils learn to become active citizens and gain a wider understanding of the beliefs and cultures of people from different backgrounds.
- Weekly lessons in citizenship, humanities topics and regular conversation with their key workers and other pupils all help to broaden pupils' awareness of the lives of others. This adds significantly to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) understanding. For example, pupils have studied the composition of the local population to find out about patterns of human migration and the challenges this can present for communities.
- This standard is met.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Paragraph 16, 16(a), 16(b)

- The previous inspection found that the school's risk assessment procedures were not applied well enough. Leaders' management and oversight of risk assessment processes lacked rigour. Leaders did not routinely review whether risk assessments were appropriate or being enacted effectively. Leaders did not know if risk assessments were as effective as they should be.
- The school's action plan said leaders would revise the policy and procedures for risk assessment. This has not been fully carried out.
- There remain too many weaknesses in the school's risk assessment procedures. A written risk assessment policy is in place which is generic to all school settings run by the proprietor. It has not been adapted to match the different context of the school's two sites. Leaders were unable to show how the welfare of pupils is safeguarded and promoted by identifying hazards and minimising the risks they present.
- Statutory guidance provided by the Department for Education (DfE) requires all schools to have proper risk assessment across a range of their activities affecting pupils and to consider risk in relation to all activities which could place pupils in serious harm. Leaders have not ensured that this is in place. For example, the school's physical education

curriculum is taught off-site at a range of different settings. Travel to and from this facility, and managing possible incidents that could occur involving pupils, staff and members of the public have not been fully considered.

- Suitable personalised risk assessments for each pupil are in place. These include an initial assessment made as pupils join the school, arrangements to manage their behaviour, positive handling plans, and any further actions needed to support pupils' learning and welfare. Leaders have improved their oversight of these procedures. They ensure that personal risk assessments are reviewed regularly, and staff can make suitable amendments if they feel that pupils are unsafe.
- This standard remains not met.

Part 6. Provision of information

Paragraph 32(1), 32(1)(b), 32(1)(i), 32(3), 32(3)(f)

- The previous inspection found that the proprietor was not ensuring that all statutory information, such as education, health and care (EHC) plans, reviews and pupils' personal education plans, were completed fully. Not all information was shared with parents and carers, or local authorities.
- The school's action plan said that leaders would revise the school's procedures for completing EHC plans and share this information with parents and carers, and local authorities.
- Leaders have improved the way these procedures are managed. Assessments of the special educational need and/or disabilities of pupils and completing documentation to apply for additional support through an EHCP are completed satisfactorily. An application made this year for an EHC plan was successful and additional support has been secured. This information is shared fully at regular meetings with representatives of local authorities responsible for pupils attending the school.
- Pupils' personal education plans, including arrangements to manage their behaviour, are updated regularly to ensure that pupils' needs and interests are met. Scrutiny of these documents during the inspection confirmed that they are used effectively by leaders to review and record any changes needed.
- A complaints policy is in place. This includes clear guidance for making complaints and for managing complaints made by pupils, staff and from local authorities. This staged process includes appropriate timescales and guidance to follow if the complainant is not satisfied with the response from the proprietor. Key workers and an independent listener are available for pupils to share any concerns they may have. Leaders maintain a suitable record of complaints received.
- The school's safeguarding policy and procedures are up-to-date and shared on proprietors' website.
- This standard is met.

Part 7. Manner in which complaints are handled

Paragraph 33, 33(j), 33(j)(i), 33(j)(ii)

- The previous inspection found inconsistencies in the identification and recording of complaints. Concerns were dealt with effectively but there was a lack of clarity about how many complaints were received.
- The school's action plan said leaders would put in place new procedures for managing complaints.
- Leaders have improved the way they maintain a written record of complaints. The policy for making a complaint is clear and contains suitable timescales for responding to them. Concerns raised by pupils and one member of the local community this year have been recorded.
- However, procedures to follow up these complaints have not been carried out systematically to ensure that all of them are fully resolved. Sampling the complaints showed that one complaint has not been fully resolved. Although leaders feel this has been done, they were unable to present any evidence to show that this had been resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant.
- This standard remains unmet.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

Paragraph 34(1), 34(1)(a), 34(1)(b)

- At the time of the previous inspection, the proprietor was not ensuring that persons with leadership and management responsibilities were fulfilling their roles in meeting the independent school standards. This continues to be the case. Gains have been made in improving the quality of education including pupils' SMSC development, and in the provision of information. However, further work is needed to ensure that the welfare, health and safety of pupils and improve the manner in which complaints are handled.
- Too often, leaders remain unclear about their statutory obligations and the full extent of their responsibilities to maintain the independent school standards. For example, when the lead inspector pointed out weaknesses in the risk assessment processes in the school, leaders did not understand the extent of their personal responsibility to maintain these risk assessments.
- Governors are involved in the school's improvement planning. The proprietor can articulate well the work that has gone on since the last inspection to improve curriculum provision and strengthen policy and procedures.
- The head of education with the support of his governors has led improvements across both sites. He has put in place new procedures to monitor the progress made in securing improvements and ensure that more of the independent school standards are met. This is new this year and needs more time to become firmly established.
- The school was served a notice by the DfE in July 2019. A second notice was served by the DfE in September 2019 as its action plan was rejected. Information gained from evaluating the school's work has been used effectively to prepare a revised action plan. Plans are suitably prioritised and enables the head of education to evaluate and report to

governors on the progress being made in improving the school.

- Safeguarding is effective. Leaders ensure that all of the necessary checks are made when appointing new staff. The head of education is suitably trained to lead and manage the school's safeguarding arrangements. He and care leaders can demonstrate that they take appropriate action to keep very vulnerable pupils safe.
- However, records of safeguarding incidents are not well maintained. Current handwritten records are incomplete. This information is transferred to computerised records, which simply duplicates the workload of staff and does not provide a full overview of the actions taken to protect pupils.
- Attendance registers are not maintained well enough. The register is not monitored regularly to ensure that it is presented neatly and accurately.
- This standard is not met.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school does not meet the requirements of the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements that were checked during this inspection, as set out in the annex of this report. This included the standards and requirements that the school was judged to not comply with at the previous inspection. Not all of the standards and associated requirements were checked during this inspection.

The school does not meet the following independent school standards

Standards that were not met at the previous inspection and remain unmet at this inspection

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 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.

The school now meets the following requirements of the independent school standards

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 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.
- 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.

School details

Unique reference number	130854
DfE registration number	935/6084
Inspection number	10125339

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 status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
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
Head of Education	Mr 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 standard inspection	25–27 June 2019

Information about this school

- Acorn Cottage is a small independent special school operated by Care Focus Ltd. Two proprietors alongside two appointed directors are responsible for the governance of the school.
- The school is registered with the Department for Education (DfE) to admit up to eight girls. All pupils have social, emotional and mental health needs. Currently one pupil has an EHCP.
- Pupils are referred to the school by local authorities. Most pupils arrive having missed

significant periods of their schooling.

- The head of education is also the head of education of another school owned by the proprietor.
- The school uses one off-site specialist provision: Marketfield School, Elmstead Market, Essex.
- The school does not use supply staff.
- The school's first standard inspection was in April 2006.
- The school was inspected in July 2017 when it was judged 'requires improvement'. All the independent school standards were met at this time.
- The school was last inspected in full in June 2019. It was judged to require improvement. The quality of leadership and management was judged to require improvement. The quality of teaching, personal development, behaviour and welfare and outcomes were all judged to be good. Not all of the independent school standards were met.
- Following the inspection, the proprietor submitted an action plan to the Department for Education in September 2019. This plan was judged to be unacceptable.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out at the request of the registration authority for independent schools. The purpose of the inspection was to monitor the progress the school has made in meeting the independent school standards and other requirements that it was judged to not comply with at its previous inspection.
- The inspector visited both school sites with the head of education.
- He met with the head of education, other leaders and three governors.
- The inspector made brief visits to lesson on both sites to observe pupils at work.
- The inspector scrutinised the school's single central record, safeguarding policy and other safeguarding records, the school improvement plan, behaviour logs and attendance register.
- The inspector chatted informally with pupils during the day.

Inspection team

John Mitcheson, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

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