

Valence School

Valence School, Westerham Road, Westerham, Kent TN16 1QN

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

Valence School is a maintained residential special school. The school caters for pupils who have physical disabilities and/or complex medical needs. Currently 38 students, aged between 11 and 19 years, board. They live in six of the eight bungalows provided for residential care. Accommodation is situated within the grounds of the school. The residential provision was last inspected in September 2018.

Inspection dates: 28 to 30 January 2020

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The residential special school provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of previous inspection: 10 September 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children have a strong sense of self, their abilities and their independence. Children comment on how well they have progressed and attribute this to the school and to having the opportunity and time to learn for themselves. Children are aspirational in their plans for the future, including wanting to travel the world and giving speeches and lectures on the abilities of those with disabilities.

The use of individual organisers containing all plans, targets and goals for children is a positive aspect of the school's approach. This promotes genuine consistency in meeting children's needs across all aspects of the school day and into the residential provision. Children are learning descriptive language through games and they are discovering how to share, be with a peer group and maintain friendships. Children are stretched to learn to be as independent as possible, even when it would be easier and quicker for staff to undertake some tasks themselves. Staff work across the site to provide support for children's education, including helping children with revision. Children's views are central to all aspects of the residential provision. They were involved in the Halloween extravaganza, with costume and pumpkin-carving, and make decisions about daily aspects of their lives, such as changing meals and planning activities. Everything is used as a learning experience.

Children's transitions into the residential provision and moving on to adulthood are personalised to each child and demonstrate considerable flexibility. Plans to address all aspects of children's care and their health and accessibility needs are in place prior to them starting at the school. There is a swift response to any difficulties with children's supportive equipment or plans. Staff are skilled in calming parents' anxieties, while working alongside them. The school goes above and beyond to meet children's needs, including those who have left, continuing to arrange education, support and access to mobility vehicles. In addition, the residential provision has remained open over holidays to support a child when it was unsuitable for them to go home.

Many of the children require and receive care packages and support from a range of professional agencies. Some of these professionals are directly employed by the school, such as members of the therapy team. Individual arrangements are flexibly matched to the needs of the children through the delivery or oversight of a child's therapy in school and in the residential houses. Consequently, many necessary treatments are delivered without interrupting children's usual routines.

In other aspects, such as clinical medical appointments, recent changes mean that some of these are no longer being held on the school premises. Further changes in respect of the nursing input provided by the healthcare trust have added to the complexities of such arrangements. For some children, this has resulted in additional absences from school and the residential provision.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children are confident in their surroundings and comfortable with their peers and with the staff. All children identify someone they could go to if they were worried or upset, but they also know that they can contact senior leaders at any time. The school is not risk-averse and allows children to experience what their peers in the community do. This includes age-appropriate activities and accessing the internet and social media. Children are clear about how they would react if they were concerned about someone they met online.

Since the last inspection, leaders have focused on making improvements in staff members' knowledge, understanding and practice in safeguarding matters. This has been enhanced with the introduction of a new recording tool that is readily accessible to all staff. Those who were spoken to during the inspection were pleased that their individual responsibility for making decisions about concerns is now explicitly clear. One staff member said, 'If anything is on my mind about a child, it doesn't have to fit a box, I just report it, however seemingly small or insignificant.' Others said that they can go to senior leaders with a concern at any time.

The vice principal retains the overall responsibility for safeguarding as the school's designated safeguarding lead. Lessons have been learned from previous cases and this reflects the open learning culture of the leadership team. Many concerns that have been raised by staff relate to 'lower level' welfare concerns, which demonstrate that staff understand the importance and impact of all areas of a child's personal circumstances. There is strong joint working and, where appropriate, challenge with safeguarding partner agencies. This mechanism has been of particular interest to the safeguarding governors, who have dip-sampled and interrogated cases, to be satisfied that this process for mutual challenge is working well.

Risk assessments and planning for bungalow and bedroom allocation are clear. The processes includes the views of children, parents and staff about who would be best sharing with each other. The process also considers the practicalities of the wider group, ensuring privacy for medical procedures and allowing space for equipment and assistive aids. The risk assessments and plans remain under review throughout the year to ensure that they continue to be appropriate and meet children's needs. Children are confident that if there are conflicts within the groups the issues will be addressed.

Fire safety has been a significant focus since the last inspection. Individual evacuation plans in children's personal organisers and for the bungalows are noteworthy; they include different activities the children may be involved in and during which times of the day. Practice drills have clearly had the desired impact on children and staff; children know what to do and how to respond to the different types of alarm. Staff are positive about the training they have done for practice evacuations and say that they are confident in this. The evaluation of practice alarms also shows the continued desire to monitor and improve.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The senior leaders have focused on improving the quality of the residential provision and experiences of children. The vice principal is now embedded in her role, and many changes have been implemented with the help of the residential management team.

Staff feel very well supported and can access a senior manager at all times. Regular supervision focuses on the needs of the children and how staff are working to meet these needs. Records of these meetings are reflective and demonstrate that they provide a positive learning space. Training is tailored to the unique needs of the children whom staff provide care for. Staff meetings and information-sharing across teams is a particular strength. However, staff can be limited in the activities they can do when there are agency staff on shift and also due to lack of drivers. Ongoing recruitment has begun to take effect and the number of permanent full-time staff has significantly improved. Leaders recognise the importance of retaining staff and of ensuring that they are suitably trained and qualified.

Improved monitoring and governance provide added layers of appropriate challenge for the senior leadership team. Individual governors, with specific responsibilities for safeguarding and the residential provision, ask thoughtful questions during their visits. They seek to be convinced that positive changes are occurring, and that progress is being made. Parents are well represented on the governing body. Their involvement ensures that this essential perspective has a strong influence. Similarly, positive tensions exist among members of the senior leadership team. Differing views ensure that decisions are reached by considering all perspectives. This creates an open culture of challenge.

Leaders appreciate the impact of shift work, combined with the emotional challenges that the staff sometimes face. There is much personal investment by the staff in the positive and caring relationships that they develop with the children. Leaders recognise these challenges and, in response, are developing further a range of supportive measures that focus on staff's mental health and well-being.

In other aspects of staff management, including the oversight of serious concerns or conduct, leaders take swift action. This may include the use of disciplinary measures. It is clear to all that the expectations of the workforce are high.

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

Recommendations

- Continue to monitor staffing levels and turnover, in addition to ensuring that staff achieve a suitable level 3 qualification within prescribed timescales.
- Continue to develop how children's views are captured and recorded.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC041791

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Roland Gooding

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Inspectors

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