

Inspection of Acorn Park School

Andrews Furlong, Mill Road, Banham, Norwich, Norfolk NR16 2HU

Inspection dates: 25–27 February 2020

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Inadequate

Behaviour and attitudes

Requires improvement

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

No

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils enjoy coming to school. They love the open spaces. They like tending the animals on the premises. Pupils value the small groups and friendly staff. They feel they are treated as individuals. Pupils say that staff and other pupils are accepting of each other. They all feel part of one community. Yet, despite these positives, the quality of education they receive is poor.

Most pupils behave well, some do not. A few pupils take too long to settle down to work. Some staff seem unwilling or unable to challenge these pupils' poor behaviour. Pupils do not like the frequent staff changes. They say that this makes learning more difficult. Newer staff do not always understand pupils' needs.

Pupils enjoy individual lessons in some subjects. However, staff do not have high enough expectations of what pupils can do. Some staff accept work of a poor quality and do not support pupils to do their best.

Pupils say they feel safe. Sometimes, a small number of pupils can be unkind. Staff resolve any problems quickly and effectively. Staff supervise pupils closely, meaning that incidents of bullying are rare.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Significant changes in leadership and staffing have been unsettling for pupils and staff. Both would like more stability. Staff have not been led well. Pupils have found it hard to cope with the lack of continuity.

Too many pupils do not achieve well because the curriculum is weak. There has been no real thought about how pupils will progress through subjects as they get older. Too often, pupils' learning focuses on completing tasks for that day. Activities do not build on what pupils have learned before, or what they will be learning in the future. As a result, a small minority of pupils lose interest in their work and behave in a way that disrupts the learning of others.

Reading has not been prioritised throughout the school. Leaders have failed to create and implement a strategy to promote reading through key stages 1 and 2. The teaching of phonics is not strong. Staff lack basic skills, such as the use of pure sounds. Pupils do not fully understand how to blend sounds so that they can pronounce words correctly. In other key stages, staff have clearly thought about what pupils need to learn. However, there are no clear schemes or plans in place to effectively link the work completed in the lower and upper schools.

Leaders' monitoring of the quality of education is superficial. Weaknesses have not been addressed quickly enough. Staff are well meaning. However, some lack essential subject knowledge and behaviour management skills. These staff do not plan learning that is matched to pupils' needs. They do not adapt activities based on what pupils know and can do. This is partly because there is no consistent method

in place for staff to assess how well pupils are doing. Consequently, too many staff are unable to deliver the curriculum properly.

Despite the lack of direction from leaders, a core group of staff have coped remarkably well. They provide a nurturing environment that helps pupils to develop both socially and emotionally. Their well-sequenced lessons ensure that pupils make good progress. In these subjects, pupils achieve well, as seen in the external qualifications they achieve. However, the overall quality of education pupils receive is too random. These hotspots of good practice do not mask the underlying weaknesses that exist in the school.

All pupils have an education, health and care (EHC plan). Some of the requirements listed in these plans, often the therapeutic provision, have not been met. The effectiveness of other interventions to support pupils is not evaluated well. Staff do not know which interventions are effective or why. New leaders are in the process of completing a full audit of this provision. The planned 'well-being' hub aims to ensure therapy teams are centrally located and on hand to meet pupils' needs.

Leaders provide a range of trips and visits that pupils enjoy. These help pupils to develop independent living skills. However, leaders have not always managed changes to pupils' timetables well. This can set pupils back socially and emotionally. It stops them from progressing as well as they should.

The members of the proprietorial body are aware of where weaknesses exist. They have overseen significant changes to the school's leadership. However, their previous monitoring had not highlighted the scale of the problems quickly enough. A new leadership team and chair of governors have been brought in very recently. They all bring a wealth of leadership skills and essential experience to the roles. Their assessment of the school's effectiveness is accurate. They have pinpointed failings and quickly established what needs to be done.

Leaders' plans to address these significant failings are comprehensive. They have been costed and shared with staff. Actions to improve are built around long-term, sustainable solutions. It is early days, but parental comments already highlight the positive changes their children have seen.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The new designated safeguarding staff have reviewed how the school deals with safeguarding issues and have acted rapidly to ensure that pupils are safe.

The designated leader has eradicated the poor-record keeping that had become evident in the school's previous practice. She has ensured that staff are now well trained and using the school's processes effectively. Referrals are timely, and records are maintained well. Staff are using the school's agreed processes rigorously and consistently to keep pupils safe.

Pupils spoken with during the inspection say that they feel safe. Most parents agree with this view. Processes for recruiting staff who are suitable to work with children are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve? (Information for the school and proprietor)

- There is little coherence across the curriculum, particularly between the primary and secondary phases. Pupils experience a disjointed series of lessons. Some pupils complete activities that are not well matched to their needs. Leaders need to develop curriculum plans that enable pupils to build effectively on what they have previously learned as they progress through the school.
- Leaders have not monitored the quality of education well enough. Some staff lack the essential subject knowledge to teach key concepts well. Pupils have gaps in their knowledge and do not make the progress they should. Leaders need to monitor teaching and learning more closely. They need to equip all staff with the skills and knowledge to deliver the curriculum effectively so that pupils achieve as well as they should.
- Staff do not follow a uniform approach to assessing how well pupils are doing. Leaders do not check pupils' progress over time. Leaders should introduce a system so that they can check, and adapt learning if necessary, to make sure that pupils make the progress they should.
- Some staff do not have consistently high enough expectations of how pupils should behave. These pupils do not settle to work quickly enough. Leaders should ensure all staff apply the behaviour policy so that pupils' behaviour is consistently good or better.
- Some pupils do not receive the therapy provision as listed in their EHC plans. This hampers their development. Leaders need to audit pupils' EHC plans and map provision to ensure all pupils' needs are fully met.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use Ofsted Parent View information when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education (DfE) has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you are the provider and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

School details

Unique reference number	135066
DfE registration number	926/6152
Local authority	Norfolk
Inspection number	10145438
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	6 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	82
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Acorn Care and Education
Chair	Nick Simpson
Headteacher	Wallace Robinson
Annual fees (day pupils)	£62,500
Telephone number	01953 888656
Website	www.acornpark.org.uk
Email address	admin@acornparkschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	9–11 May 2018

Information about this school

- The headteacher and executive headteacher at the time of the last inspection are no longer in post.
- A new head of service was appointed in December 2019.
- A new chair of governors was appointed in January 2020.
- A new head of education and deputy headteacher were appointed in February 2020, to take responsibility for pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities provision.
- Since the previous inspection, 42 education staff have left (including two therapists) and 43 new staff have been employed.
- The proprietors, Acorn Care and Education, are now managed by the Outcomes First Group.
- All pupils at the school have an EHC plan.
- Most pupils have a primary diagnosis of autism. Many have comorbidities.
- Admission to the school is via local authority placement.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The school was previously inspected in May 2018 and judged to be good. All of the independent school standards were met.
- The DfE commissioned Ofsted to carry out an early inspection due to serious complaints it had received about the school. Simultaneously, social care regulatory inspectors carried out an unannounced two-day inspection of the residential provision.

Information about this inspection

We carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school has failed to meet the independent school standards. These are the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- We did deep dives in reading, mathematics, art and history. We met with curriculum leaders, teachers and pupils, and looked at pupils' work in these subjects. We also spoke with pupils and staff about different aspects of the school.
- We had meetings with the head of service and other senior leaders, the chair of the governing body and the managing director of the group, and other staff in the school. We met with groups of pupils formally and also spoke to them informally

throughout the inspection. One inspector held telephone conversations with parents of pupils at the school.

- We scrutinised a range of information from the school, including leaders' self-evaluations, the school's development plan, and their behaviour, attendance and safeguarding records. We spoke to pupils, staff and the designated safeguarding lead about procedures to keep pupils safe.
- We took account of the 29 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and the 28 responses to the parental free-text facility. We also took note of the 41 responses to Ofsted's survey of staff's views, and the 16 responses to Ofsted's pupils' survey.

Inspection team

John Randall, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Joanna Pedlow

Ofsted Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school failed to meet the following 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(1)(b) the written policy, plans and schemes of work—
 - 2(1)(b)(i) take into account the ages, aptitudes and needs of all pupils, including those pupils with an EHC plan.
- 3 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the teaching at the school—
 - 3(a) enables pupils to acquire new knowledge and make good progress according to their ability so that they increase their understanding and develop their skills in the subjects taught;
 - 3(c) involves well planned lessons and effective teaching methods, activities and management of class time;
 - 3(d) shows a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensures that these are taken into account in the planning of lessons;
 - 3(e) demonstrates good knowledge and understanding of the subject matter being taught;
 - 3(g) demonstrates that a framework is in place to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly and use information from that assessment to plan teaching so that pupils can progress;
 - 3(h) utilises effective strategies for managing behaviour and encouraging pupils to act responsibly.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 9 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor promotes good behaviour amongst pupils by ensuring that—
 - 9(b) the policy is implemented effectively.

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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