

St Catherine's School

St. Catherine's School, Grove Road, Ventnor, Isle of Wight PO38 1TT

Assurance visit

Information about this residential special school

This is a non-maintained residential special school for students with speech, language and communication needs and associated conditions, including autism spectrum disorders and attention deficit disorders. The residential accommodation is currently provided in three houses on the St Catherine's School site. At the time of this inspection, there were 77 students, of whom 18 were accessing the residential provision. In addition, the school accommodates some students aged 19 and over in separate residential facilities.

Visit dates: 24 to 25 September 2020

Previous inspection date: 3 March 2020

Previous inspection judgement: Requires improvement to be good

Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

The care of children

Children speak fondly about staff, who they experience as being supportive and kind. They have been helped to navigate through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic both at home and while at school. One child said that although it was frustrating not being able to go to some of the places he had enjoyed previously, staff had helped him to appreciate why this was no longer safe and offered alternative activities for him to do.

Staff working in the residential houses were creative about supporting children during lockdown and took steps to help them keep in touch with their key workers. Staff know the children that they work with very well and have made good use of their relationships with them to support them to come back to school.

Staff responded to the needs of particular children who found the return to school more challenging. They worked remotely with one child who was anxious about the pandemic and who finds change difficult. By showing him videos of the changes that had been put in place and working with him to understand why these changes had been made, he was reassured, and this facilitated a smooth return to school.

Children's social and emotional needs are met in the residential provision. They are supported to make friendships, learn from each other and to celebrate occasions together. Children feel safe and they understand how to get help if something is worrying them. Older children at St Catherine's continue to be supported to develop their independence and social skills in creative ways that recognise their individual needs.

Children understand the role of the student council as a place where issues can be raised with school leaders. They also report that any issues raised will be taken seriously. Within residential houses, weekly meetings also enable children to give feedback and ask for change.

Complaints are responded to swiftly and children can raise their concerns directly with staff or through dedicated post boxes. The complaints form is easy to use with both written word and picture symbols to support children's individual communication styles. Governors' meetings with residential students are positive and allow children to share their ideas or concerns with senior leaders. Noticeboards in residential areas display key information in different communication styles for children to easily understand and access.

The health and emotional well-being of children are central to the residential experience. On-site nursing and therapies teams are particularly helpful in supporting those children where the current COVID-19 pandemic has increased their anxiety.

The safety of children

Since the last inspection, a great deal of work has been done to bolster the safety of children online. Information on how to keep safe online is displayed on noticeboards and in communal areas. This prompts children to question the validity of information that they see online. Children have class time dedicated to e-safety and they are given scenarios to consider to enhance their understanding of internet safety. However, due to a long absence of children from school and the complexities of accessing training during the COVID-19 restrictions, facilitating children's safe use of technology is still a work in progress. Staff have received some detailed and widely encompassing training on internet safety. However, considering their potential vulnerabilities, a greater sense of curiosity about children's use of social media is not fully embedded.

The senior leadership team has explored more robust protective systems for children's personal devices that are connected to the school Wi-Fi. A programme of testing a protective app is underway with sixth-form students. Younger children explain how staff monitor them while using internet-enabled games and devices that are not connected to the school Wi-Fi.

Recruitment and pre-employment checks are now much improved. The headteacher has effective oversight of the single central record. Any gaps in employment checks are promptly identified and addressed. This additional layer of scrutiny has led to an overall improvement in the information contained in this record. The updated policy details what information is to be held, but also lays out the process for reviewing current employees' Disclosure and Barring Service checks.

Children and parents are consistently positive about the residential provision. Parents report that they feel that their children are safe and well cared for. Children describe their experience of residential care as 'good' and are able to identify staff who they can speak to when they feel worried or upset.

Processes for reporting safeguarding and child protection concerns are clear, and the computerised reporting system aids the designated safeguarding lead to identify any trends or patterns in what would otherwise be deemed low-level behaviours or concerns.

Leaders and managers

The new headteacher was formally appointed for the summer term. The senior leadership team's response to the inspection in March 2020 has been swift and thoughtful. The action plan is thorough, covering all aspects of the identified

shortfalls and additional points for improvement. This demonstrates that leaders are committed to improving the service.

Many aspects of the service improvement plan have been completed. However, not all aspects are fully embedded in practice.

The building works have continued since the last inspection, with the areas most affected by the storm now made safe and remodeled. The works are continuing, and inspectors acknowledge that progress against the action plan has been hampered by the restrictions in response to COVID-19, exacerbated by some materials for building and repair works not being readily available both nationwide and particularly on the Isle of Wight. Two permanently employed care takers are working methodically through the smaller maintenance jobs identified by care staff, and all areas that children access are safe. However, the décor in the residential areas is not consistently to a good standard. For example, there is bare plaster on walls where repairs have been completed, and a section of mismatched carpet in a child's bedroom.

Increased monitoring and oversight by the governing body has had a positive impact on practice within the school. Governors talk passionately about the need to continue to improve the residential service and they have responded positively to the shortfalls identified at the previous inspection. Their increased presence, albeit virtually, has led to greater consultation with children and staff. The school governors provide constructive challenge to school leaders to further improve and develop the quality of care for children who use the residential setting. The school responded to the challenges of the pandemic with creativity. They worked in partnership with parents to meet the needs of children who were no longer able to access residential provision during lockdown. These bespoke arrangements enabled children to still access the support of the school throughout this period. In one example seen by inspectors, this enabled a child to really feel supported by the school, even though he could not stay there overnight.

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

Compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools

The school does not meet the following national minimum standards for residential special schools:

- 11.1 The school ensures that: arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of children at the school; and such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State.
- 13.1 The school's governing body and/or proprietor monitors the effectiveness of the leadership, management and delivery of the boarding and welfare provision in the school, and takes appropriate action where necessary.

Residential special school details

Unique reference number: SC012597

Headteacher: Sarah Thompson

Inspectors

Jennie Christopher, Social Care Inspector

Alexander Dignan, Her Majesty's Inspector - Social Care

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