

## St Mary's School and Sixth Form College (part of the Talking Trust)

Wrestwood Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex TN40 2LU

# Assurance visit

### Information about this residential special school

St Mary's School and Sixth Form College is a non-maintained special school which currently provides day and residential placements for children and young people between the ages of 7 and 19.

The school provides education for pupils who have communication and interaction difficulties associated with autism spectrum disorder. There is room for 40 children to attend the residential provision; 18 children were in the residential provision at the time of this visit.

**Visit dates:** 6 to 7 October 2020

**Previous inspection date:** 9 July 2019

**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**

Leaders, managers and staff have been particularly thoughtful in their approach to helping children to continue their education and provide them with emotional support during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, regular therapy sessions for children continued throughout the summer. As a result, families have felt well supported by the school during the COVID-19 pandemic. One parent said: 'Communication has been fantastic; my son has special educational needs and finds change very difficult.' She also said that the staff made her child's routine as normal as possible during the COVID-19 restrictions and this had helped him to cope well.

Children's views are listened to and acted upon. The staff regularly ask children to complete questionnaires about their care. Their wishes and suggestions result in changes and children understand that their views count. Children are consulted about plans made about them and the minutes of all children's meetings are translated into different communication formats so that these can be read by as many children as possible.

The after-school activity programme helps children to experience new things and supports their growth and development. Parents are positive about the range of activities offered and how these are tailored to developing their children's independence skills. Children remained active and occupied, despite the restrictions in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A wide range of professionals support children's care and development effectively. This has resulted in parents seeing real differences to their children's speech and increased confidence and emotional stability. The support from care staff and the wider professional network assists children to engage with their education and to be ready for learning.

Children's care plans address their immediate and long-term needs. Goals set for children during their residential stays link effectively to their local authority education, health and care plans. In one instance where a child was regularly scratching her arms as a coping mechanism, the support provided has assisted the child to stop this behaviour and begin to talk about the things that worry her.

### **The safety of children**

Children, parents and professionals were generally very positive about children's safety. Staff receive regular training about matters relating to safeguarding concerns

and changes to government guidance. The school produced a well-organised handbook to support staff's understanding of how to reduce risks during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Risk assessments are clear about the risks for children when they attend the school. The assessments provide clear guidance for staff about how to manage these risks. In practice, staff act on such concerns appropriately. Risks posed to children outside of school, such as concerns about a child's family life, are not documented within the school risk assessment. However, in practice, staff act on such concerns appropriately.

There are now good procedures in place to regularly review concerns for children's safety and welfare. Reporting systems differentiate between child protection concerns and welfare issues effectively, and any necessary actions are recorded and followed up. The head of care is alive to risk factors posed to children in the local area. This enables the school to respond to changes quickly and take action to keep children safe.

The local authority safeguarding teams were complimentary about the consultative way the school now works with them. One concern about staff practice, however, was not referred to the designated officer from the local authority. The local authority social worker was informed and was aware of the action taken to minimise the possibility of the concern reoccurring. Nevertheless, the school has not made sure that safeguarding protocols were followed on this occasion.

The number of complaints the school is responding to has decreased considerably over the year. Several parents spoke very positively about how open the school was to any issue that they raised. One parent's concerns had been investigated, but these had not been treated as a complaint. The parent was also not given details of how to escalate their concerns further if they wished to do so.

Staff manage children's behaviour well and place an emphasis on helping children to develop positive behaviour. As a result, there are very few incidents in the residential provision. No child has gone missing since the last inspection and there are low numbers of incidents and restraints. Several professionals and parents spoke positively about the changes to their children's behaviour. One social worker said that as a result of the support provided by staff at the school, a child: 'is less excitable, has gained more independence and is engaging with his peers better'.

## **Leaders and managers**

Leaders and managers have successfully improved how they have managed the residential provision. The residential provision works effectively alongside the education and therapy programmes to provide an integrated approach to supporting children's progress. Several parents praised the ways in which the principal and head of care had supported the school's development and enhanced the care of their child.

Leaders and managers have a strong vision for the school. They are clear about the progress that they have made, and the challenges which remain. Given the added pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is positive to note how well all staff have engaged in making child-focused improvements. One social worker said that she was very impressed about how child-focused all staff were. When she calls to arrange to speak to the child, in order not to disrupt his education and routines staff always check his schedule and ask her to fit in with this.

Monitoring and reviewing mechanisms have improved and are now well embedded in the everyday life of the school's residential provision. The breaches of national minimum standards and points of improvement from the last inspection are met.

Governors regularly review what is occurring when children stay overnight and provide constructive challenge and feedback to help improve the quality of care. Managers have improved the systems in place to check practice. For example, they complete spot checks on medication management and the head of care regularly reviews health and safety checks to make sure that they are being done as required.

The head of care completes a six-monthly report on how the residential provision meets the national minimum standards. This report includes lots of detail about the actions that are being taken to meet the standards. However, the report includes little about how she analyses and evaluates that these actions meet the standards.

Partnerships with other agencies that help drive improvements are well established. Social workers spoke positively about the availability of senior staff to attend children's reviews, the prompt responses to their requests for information and the quality of reports they receive.

Staff support is well managed and assists them to care for children well. Supervision has been regular throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Where staff were not able to work, supervision meetings continued to occur virtually. All staff had an annual appraisal recently and they have either gained or are completing a relevant qualification.

Staff spoke positively about the training they receive and report that they are proud of the way that they work together to make a difference to children. The strong focus on meeting children's needs was evident in the personal touches that parents discussed with inspectors. An example was the inventive way that the team supported young people when they leave the school. They ensured that the usual end-of-school celebrations for school leavers took place safely, despite the lockdown restrictions. This ensured that this important milestone in a young person's life was celebrated and memorable.

## **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 standard(s) for residential special schools:

- The school ensures that: arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of children at the school; such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State. (NMS 11)

In particular, leaders and managers must ensure that where a safeguarding concern relates to a member of staff, the designated officer from the local authority is consulted about what action is necessary.

### **Recommendations**

- Leaders and managers should ensure that if a concern is raised, that staff consider whether this constitutes a complaint. In addition, if leaders and managers do not treat a concern as a complaint, they should provide a written response to the person which includes the detail of how they can take their concerns further.
- Risk assessments should be reviewed to ensure that these fully cover all aspects of risks to children outside of the school environment.
- The six-monthly report that the head of care completes about compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools should include the evaluation and analysis of the impact of improvement actions.

## **Residential special school details**

**Unique reference number:** SC050390

**Principal:** Natalie Edwards

### **Inspectors**

Ruth Coler, Social Care Inspector  
Suzy Lemmy, Social Care Inspector  
Matt Nicholls, Social Care Inspector

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