

Doucecroft School

Abbotts Lane, Eight Ash Green, Colchester, Essex CO6 3QL

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

Doucecroft is a co-educational day and residential special school for children and young people aged from three to 19 with autism spectrum disorder. The school is privately owned by Autism Anglia. It is situated in a small village on the outskirts of Colchester.

There are 61 pupils on roll, of whom three are residential. Residential pupils can board between Monday and Friday for up to four nights. The inspectors only inspected the social care provision at this school.

The residential provision is in one house, in the school grounds, which provides accommodation for children with autism spectrum disorder and learning disabilities.

The head of boarding has been in post since July 2021 and has a relevant qualification.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 8 to 10 February 2022

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: 15 May 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This is a good-quality residential provision that children enjoy and parents value highly. The staff provide care for a reduced number of children, in line with the school's plans to close the residential provision. There are currently three children, who stay for up to four nights per week. Children are provided with individualised support which enriches their overall experiences.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the staff provided children with exciting opportunities between the periods of lockdown. Trips to castles, theme parks, ice rinks and theatres are some of the wide range of meaningful activities. These experiences accommodated the children's specific interests. Activities have enhanced children's well-being during a difficult year in which important routines have been disrupted.

The experienced, committed and skilled staff team builds strong relationships with children. Alternative communication aids are used purposefully and to good effect. Interactions between the children and staff are extremely positive and filled with high regard and warmth. As a result, the children develop a sense of security and greatly improve their social and self-expression skills.

The children develop their independence in day-to-day living skills. Children participate in gardening, cooking and other household tasks. One child takes responsibility for waste disposal and recycling. The staff help the children to develop these skills using graduated prompting and planned techniques. The staff's tailored support is personalised to children's developmental stages and ensures that children are well prepared for adulthood.

Good communication and links with the school staff reduce barriers to children's learning. Staff help the children with their homework. This active support is in line with children's education plans and has ensured continuity during children's residential stays.

A trained health professional oversees the approach to children's healthcare. This includes specialised support to ensure that medication administration protocols are implemented smoothly. This has resulted in better medication stock audits which have reduced the number of medication errors.

Placement plans provide clear guidance for staff to meet children's educational, health, social and emotional needs. However, essential strategies to help children maintain their personal hygiene and care regimes during their stays are omitted in these plans. This could lead to inconsistencies in staff practice.

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

The staff provide high levels of supervision and maintain familiar and well-established routines. Visual schedules and social stories support children to reduce their worries about their day. This is an important factor for children who rely on rigid routines and clear expectations to help them to feel safe.

The staff are aware of their safeguarding responsibilities and have good knowledge of whistle-blowing procedures. When concerns arise, these are shared promptly with the local authority. Managers' investigations into staff practice concerns are carried out thoroughly and necessary action is taken. This provides assurances that there are suitable systems in place to safeguard children.

The staff successfully use proactive behaviour management strategies to handle situations that can increase children's anxiety. The staff have a good awareness of potential triggers and combine this with focused risk-reduction interventions for children. A dedicated emotional well-being team works well with the staff to provide a consistent and informed approach to children's care. Consequently, difficult incidents are managed well and their frequency has reduced.

Most risk assessments for children are detailed and individualised. However, there are some gaps and inconsistencies. One assessment does not include any written guidance for staff on how to manage a child's online safety. In another case, the assessment of hazards associated with a multi-purpose laundry room was contradictory. This does not sufficiently guide staff to reduce these potential risks.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The headteacher has worked hard to ensure that stability is maintained during the imminent closure of the residential provision. This has included the appointment of a qualified manager on a fixed-term contract to manage the period of change. Leaders and managers have remained professional and committed during this period. The staff have maintained a culture of enthusiasm and creativity which has led to very positive experiences for children.

Leaders and managers have addressed the two unmet standards raised at the last inspection. This has resulted in improved monitoring by governors and the increased effectiveness of complaints procedures.

Parents and social workers recognise the positive impact that the residential provision has had on children's lives and gave excellent feedback about the quality of care. This good feedback is provided despite parents' disappointment that the provision is due to close.

Parents are invited to share in activities and spend time with their children during their stays. This increased level of engagement gives children an opportunity to share their achievements and milestones with their loved ones.

The staff access well-developed training to equip them with the skills to meet the children's individual needs.

Staff say that they feel supported and benefit from regular one-to-one supervisions with the manager. However, despite being new to the post and handling a difficult situation in the closure of the provision, the residential manager has not had the same level of supervisory support from the senior leadership team.

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 for residential special schools:

- The school must produce a written placement plan, agreed as far as is practicable with the child, the child's parents/carers and any placing authority for the child. The plan must be regularly reviewed and amended as necessary to reflect significant changes in the child's needs or progress in his or her development. (NMS 21.1)

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that staff adhere to up-to-date risk assessment guidelines. Monitoring systems should identify and address gaps and contradictory guidance in these assessments.
- The registered person should ensure that all staff have regular supervision.

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: SC018010

Headteacher: Louise Parkinson

Type of school: Residential special school

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Inspectors

Mark Anderton, Social Care Inspector (lead)

Deirdra Keating, Social Care Inspector

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