

Inspection of Acorn Wood

Watery Lane, Coton, Whitchurch, Shropshire SY13 3LR

Inspection dates: 1 to 3 March 2022

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Good**

Leadership and management **Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Not previously inspected

Does the school meet the independent school standards? **Yes**

What is it like to attend this school?

This is a small school with big ambitions for everyone. Set in beautiful countryside, pupils have lots of opportunities to connect with nature and learn outdoors. Every day is a new adventure. Pupils cannot wait to attend. This is significant for pupils who have not been to school for long periods.

Leaders and all staff want the very best for pupils. Pupils access a rich set of experiences, alongside a balanced academic curriculum. Pupils can express who they are and who they want to be. Pupils know it is 'ok' to be themselves.

Pupils settle in quickly and enjoy coming to school because they feel safe and happy. This helps them to engage well with their learning where they mostly display positive attitudes. Pupils are supported by staff who genuinely care about them and their futures. This is important for pupils who have experienced disruption to their learning.

Relationships are positive. Bullying is not tolerated. All staff know pupils well and take an interest in them as unique individuals. Teachers plan work to meet pupils' needs so that they can experience success. On rare occasions, this work could be more challenging to stretch pupils further.

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

Pupils arrive at the school having experienced disruption to their learning in the past. Pupils are disillusioned and are not consistently motivated to learn. Leaders and all staff recognise the challenges pupils face. They have designed a broad and balanced curriculum that meets the demands and expectations of the national curriculum.

The planning of the curriculum is largely underpinned by strong teacher subject knowledge. Teachers think carefully about what they need to teach and the order in which they need to teach it. Where this is done well, pupils engage positively with their learning. They learn new skills and knowledge that build on what they have been taught in the past. Pupils can recall key aspects of their learning. This is not yet the case across all subjects.

Teachers identify important knowledge and skills and make sure pupils regularly revisit these. For example, in literacy, where pupils are taught how to write instructions, they practise and revisit what they have learned across the curriculum. Pupils then apply instructions in practical lessons to secure their learning. At times, the planned learning does not consider the prior knowledge of pupils. In these few instances, pupils do not achieve as well as they could.

The school offers places to pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Teachers carefully adapt their plans to make sure the learning is accessible and meets pupils' needs. For example, in mathematics, where pupils are

more reluctant to learn, teachers have considered how they can embed content across the curriculum to encourage engagement alongside taught lessons.

Reading is given the highest priority. Teachers are working to develop a love of reading. There are daily opportunities for story time, as well as regular visits from the library bus. A phonics curriculum is in place, overseen by the lead teacher, who is skilled in teaching and assessing reading. Staff make sure that pupils' reading books match their phonics ability and ensure the content is appropriate. Pupils access a range of reading materials and can talk well about story plots and characters.

Where reading is taught well, pupils read aloud with confidence and expression. Pupils tackle challenging words using their phonics skills. However, where staff are not as skilled and their subject knowledge is less secure, there is a tendency to over support pupils, which does not develop their reading skills as effectively. Plans to train early career teachers are in place to make sure that all staff have the skills to support pupils with early reading.

Behaviour plans are rooted in neuroscience and the developing brain. Staff use this knowledge to support pupils. Core learning is supplemented with movement and sensory breaks to reduce anxieties and help pupils to manage their emotions. The plans are applied well and consistently. This helps pupils to self-regulate their behaviour and get ready to learn. As a result, pupils generally display positive attitudes toward their learning.

Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe. They learn about healthy minds and bodies, and healthy relationships. Teachers adapt lessons to respond to pupils' needs. This is essential given the backgrounds of the pupils and the need to support them with their social and emotional development.

Leaders are passionate about providing rich experiences for children who may not have access to them otherwise. They want pupils to be immersed in outdoor activity, connect with nature and understand how they can contribute to their own environment. The curriculum is enriched with trips to expand pupils' cultural awareness, including trips to the theatre and art galleries. Diversity is celebrated and embraced. Pupils know that people are individuals.

Governance and leadership of the school are overseen by the proprietor who is also the headteacher. She is aware of her responsibilities relating to the leadership and running of the school. The school meets all of the independent school standards and complies with the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The safeguarding policy is written with regard to current guidance issued by the Secretary of State. The school does not have a website. So, all policies are available upon request.

Leaders and all staff are appropriately trained and highly vigilant. They are aware of their safeguarding responsibilities and take them seriously. Robust processes to identify and record concerns are in place.

All staff know how to recognise signs of abuse, neglect and risk. Decisive action is taken where there are concerns about a child. Nothing is left to chance when it comes to child safety. Staff's suitability to work with children is thoroughly checked and recorded.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- On occasion, the delivery of the curriculum does not take into account what pupils already know and can do. Some staff do not have the required subject knowledge and expertise to make sure the work set for pupils is suitably demanding. This means that some pupils do not learn as much as they could. Leaders need to make sure that all staff have the skills, expertise and subject knowledge to ensure that the work set is suitably challenging for all pupils.
- Where staff are less experienced in teaching reading, they provide too much help to pupils when they are attempting to read unfamiliar words. As a result, pupils do not use their phonics skills to decode and sound out trickier words. Leaders need to make sure that staff are trained to teach phonics so that pupils become confident and fluent readers.

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

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School details

Unique reference number	148192
DfE registration number	893/6043
Local authority	Shropshire
Inspection number	10192417
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Shropshire Academy Learning Trust
Chair	Sarah Morgan
Headteacher	Sarah Morgan
Annual fees (day pupils)	£46,250
Telephone number	01948 838108
Website	None
Email address	sarahmorgan@shropshirealt.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Acorn Wood is a small, independent day school located in rural Shropshire. The school has three spacious learning areas, as well as outdoor spaces. The school does not make use of alternative provision.
- Places are available for pupils who have social and emotional difficulties, attachment difficulties and those who have experienced early childhood trauma. Pupils are referred to the school by several local authorities.
- The school was registered by the Department for Education in December 2020. This is the school's first standard inspection.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors 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 meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspector discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school leaders and has taken that into account in their evaluation.

- Meetings were held with the proprietor, who is also the headteacher, the head of school and teaching staff. The inspector also met with the chair of the educational board.
- The inspector carried out deep dives in English, reading, mathematics, science, and personal, social and health education (PSHE). For each deep dive, the inspector met with subject leaders to talk about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers and spoke to pupils about their work. Pupils' work was also sampled. Plans for the wider curriculum were also considered, including humanities.
- The inspector scrutinised the safeguarding policy and the school's safeguarding processes. A meeting was held with those responsible for safeguarding. The inspector met with all staff to speak about their understanding of safeguarding.
- Several key policies and documents were reviewed, including behaviour, anti-bullying, curriculum, complaints and health and safety. The inspector toured the school to check for compliance with the premises and accommodation part of the independent school standards.

The school's proposed change to the age range of pupils

The school has applied to the Department for Education (DfE) to make a 'material change' to its registration. At the DfE's request, we checked whether the school is likely to meet the relevant independent school standards if the DfE decides to approve the change. This part of the inspection was carried out under section 162(4) of the Education Act 2002.

- The outcome of this part of the inspection is: **the school is likely to meet the relevant independent school standards if the material change relating to the school provision is implemented.**
- The age range will be 5 to 16 should the material change be accepted.
- The school has carefully considered the curriculum rationale, policy and supporting plans to deliver learning across all subjects at key stage 4. Formal accreditation routes have been identified to enable pupils to access GCSEs and equivalent qualifications. Adaptations to relationships and sex education and the PSHE curriculum are planned to ensure the content is appropriate for older pupils and considers their differing needs. Plans for careers education include opportunities for work experience, college visits and impartial advice and guidance. The premises and accommodation are suitable for older pupils and meet requirements. Leaders and managers and those responsible for governance have a range of appropriate skills. They have relevant backgrounds spanning both secondary education and further education to ensure the provision is suitable for key stage 4 pupils. The standards are likely to be met should the DfE agree to the material change.

Inspection team

Melanie Callaghan-Lewis, lead inspector Ofsted Inspector

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