West Heath School

West Heath School, Ashgrove Road, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 1SR

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

This is an independent co-educational residential special school, situated in Kent, for pupils with social, emotional, and mental health. The school provides places for day and boarding pupils between the ages of 10 and 20. The school offers residential placements Monday to Thursday during term time. The school has five boarding houses, which are located within the grounds of the school. These can accommodate up to 22 residential pupils. At the time of the inspection, there were 17 residential pupils.

The inspector only inspected the social care provision.

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: 1 to 3 February 2022

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	**Good**
How well children and young people are helped and protected	Good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Good

The residential special school provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of previous inspection: 14 January 2020

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children benefit from a sense of community. They share close relationships with staff and each other, and this helps them to make significant progress in their ability to socialise and communicate with others.

Committed staff support children to achieve to their full potential. Helping children to learn new skills and prepare for life away from school are priorities for staff. They know the children well and provide thoughtful support that is in line with students' abilities and willingness to learn. One parent said, 'Staff at boarding got [them] to do things we never thought [they] could do.'

Children make good use of the expansive outdoor space and the wide range of activities on offer to them. They have fun, make friends and enjoy trying out new things. Children's families are positive about their child's experiences in boarding accommodation. One parent said, 'Boarding has been [a] life changing experience for us, not just [for] our child'.

Children benefit from specialist support from the therapy team, whose members work closely with each other and with the residential staff. This ensures that the needs of the children are well understood, and that the support they receive is well informed and effective. One parent commented, 'I felt for the first time [that] there is a team around them that works closely – everyone works together.'

The children's bedrooms are not well presented or maintained. The arrangements in place to ensure that staff check and make sure that children's rooms are suitable are not effective. This detracts from an otherwise positive experience of nurture and care for children.

Students have been supported to be who they want to be without fear of discrimination. Children are educated and actively involved in learning about different cultures, identities, abilities, beliefs and celebrations. Students have recently set up a LGBT+ group. An ex-student attended a session and spoke about their gender identity. This gave the students a forum to safely explore the topic in a non-judgemental space.

Staff are thoughtful in the way they help children enter the residential provision. They work closely with parents and other professionals to make sure children's individual needs are fully understood and that these needs are compatible with the needs of the other children already in the residential provision.

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

Staff understand and apply the homes therapeutic approaches to care. This enables them to support children who are in crisis and to de-escalate situations that could lead to serious behaviour incidents. This has led to significant reductions in the use of physical restraint. Staff support children to learn coping strategies to manage their feelings and emotions in a way that reduces the risk of behaviour incidents occurring. The strategies staff use for promoting positive behaviour are clearly set out in behaviour plans so that staff, parents and children have a shared understanding and can work together to encourage positive behaviours.

Staff understand the vulnerabilities and risks that relate to each child. They have good insight into factors that may increase risks, and they have effective safety plans in place. This is an area of practice that has improved since the last inspection, and, as a result, children are safer.

Staff celebrate success and make sure that children's achievements are noticed and praised. Children respond well to this. For example, one child is now leading a healthier lifestyle, is exercising more and eating healthier foods.

Staff are alert to the risks that children may face in the community. They receive training to ensure that they understand how to support and educate children who may be at risk of exploitation. This has helped children to learn to make safer choices, and, as a result, children seldom go missing.

Children's complaints and concerns are generally well managed. If safeguarding concerns arise, the school consults with and informs the local authority designated officer (LADO) for safeguarding. Most safeguarding concerns are responded to quickly and in line with the school's safeguarding policy. However, on one occasion, this did not occur and an internal investigation took place before the LADO was alerted to the concern. This had the potential to undermine any independent investigation of the incident.

Improved health and safety monitoring of the premises has enabled children to access all areas safely. Staff and children are clear on their roles in monitoring and reporting any defects in the school's premises. And the school's swimming pool, which will add another valuable resource for children to enjoy, is nearing the end of a refurbishment.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Leaders in the school and boarding provision show ambition and strive for the best outcomes for children

When staff are recruited to the school, safer recruitment practice is mainly followed. However, there was one example where an employment candidate's reasons for leaving a previous workplace, and a gap in their employment, were not explored.

This was a missed opportunity to gather all available information about a new recruit in order to inform the decision to employ them. All other recruitment checks were completed to ensure that only staff who are of suitable character are employed to work in the school.

The school governors take a close interest in the well-being of children and provide effective scrutiny of care practice. They make good use of the recommendations in reports produced by the school's independent visitor in order to make improvements to the residential service.

Staff receive training in order to give them a good understanding of the therapeutic restorative approach to caring for the children. While daytime staff were positive about the support they receive from managers, this was not the case for night staff. The headteacher was aware of this, and plans are in place to improve the support available.

Leaders and managers know and understand the school's strengths and weaknesses, and they take decisive action. They make good use of the annual progress report and safeguarding development plans to identify areas for service development, and to identify clear actions for delivering improvements.

All of the shortfalls identified at the last inspection have been addressed. As a result, risk assessment records now identify risks and clear safety plans, the policy for the use of CCTV is clear, and there is clear accountability in the roles for maintaining the building. Visits by the independent visitor are now unannounced. Pupils' views are sought, championed and encouraged, and the annual progress report is clear.

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

Recommendations

- The school safeguarding policy for allegations against staff requires a review to ensure that staff are clear on what to do when an allegation is made.
- All members of the senior leadership team are fully aware of the school's policy on managing allegations against staff.
- All children's bedrooms are well maintained.
- Ensure that full checks are carried out to ensure that any gaps in employment history for new recruits are fully explored.

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: SC024063

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Ms Photini Bohacek

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Inspector

Matt Nicholls, Social Care Inspector

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